

Ministers reflect

Ed Vaizey



December 2016

Ed Vaizey – biographical details

Electoral History

2005 – present: Member of Parliament for Didcot and Wantage

Parliamentary Career

2014 – 2016: Minister of State for Digital and Culture

2010 – 2014: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries

Ed Vaizey was interviewed by Nicola Hughes on 8th December 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Could we start in 2010 when you first became a minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS]? I would be interested to hear how some of your previous experiences and shadowing helped you when you became a minister.

Ed Vaizey (EV): Well I knew the brief pretty well so I'd met a lot of the stakeholders who I was going to deal with as a minister. In that sense, it was good preparation. It was pretty seamless, you know, I wasn't doing one shadow job and then given a completely different job in government.

I knew the brief pretty well but my joke has always been that I would have been a much better opposition minister if I'd done three months in DCMS, because there's no substitute for going from lobbying hand-grenades at the government, based on what special interest groups tell you or what you read in the newspapers or what you think is politically advantageous, to actually seeing the policy options from a more objective point of view once you're in.

NH: What was your initial impression of the policy advice you were getting?

EV: Well I mean, there are two questions in there. In terms of the quality of advice I was offered, it was terrible in one sense, because I think if you're a new minister, what the Civil Service doesn't do - and certainly not DCMS in 2010, they may do now - is give you a proper pack of information. I was lucky in that I knew my brief very well but as a new minister coming in I should have got a three-page document that says, 'This is the Arts Council, this is what it does, these are its issues' or 'This is the broadband issue', and so on. I think I got terrible slides and flow charts and stuff that I guess the civil service thought was quite funky and modern, but didn't really illuminate anything. So, I think they are quite bad at briefing you on your landscape and your stakeholders - they could instead give you a pack and tell you to go away for a week, read it and come back to tell them what you want to do. I exaggerate, but you know what I mean.

The other thing they don't do, which the Institute for Government to a certain extent fills the hole on, is that they don't teach you about government. I mean, I still have no idea what the Civil Service grades mean; they don't give you an organogram of the organisation that you're going into. They give you no tutoring at all on being a minister.

NH: So how did you learn it?

EV: I didn't. I had to feel my way.

NH: So you knew the brief; you were getting your head round how to be a minister. What were your big priorities and how did you determine them?

EV: Well my priorities were determined by the situation we found ourselves in. The first thing is that as a spending department, albeit the smallest spending department, your priority is dictated by George Osborne's austerity budget. So, the only thing we could deal with was a sort of defensive handling of quite severe budget cuts: we were playing catch-up. Having said that, what Jeremy Hunt was very good at, probably based on his business background - and I have worked with four secretaries of state but I don't know how other people did it - was that he basically said: 'These are my five priorities'. He identified the Olympics, obviously; broadband; local television; I think tourism must have been up there. There were five priorities and he said 'That's what I'm going to do, all the rest I'll leave to my junior ministers'. That was a good approach, in one sense, because you absolutely knew what the Secretary of State was interested in. It was a bad approach in another sense, in that it made him, I think, come up

4 Ministers reflect

with too many initiatives in those areas and also it meant that, on broadband for example, I kind of assumed Jeremy was doing it when there were things that fell through the cracks that I should have probably picked up on. So, yes having said that, the real priority was dealing with George Osborne's cuts – but outside of that, Jeremy did have a clear sense of what he wanted to do.

NH: Talking about George Osborne and the Treasury, how did you find working with the Treasury and presenting a case to them for what should be protected?

EV: Well junior ministers don't get to go to the meetings with the Chief Secretary, which is frustrating. The permanent secretary and the secretary of state go to the meetings, but you obviously have meetings before that and you do a line-by-line analysis of where you can make savings. Out of that emerged relatively political issues. So, I discovered what I didn't know in opposition and only found out when I got to DCMS: that we were responsible for the funding of S4C, the Welsh language channel, which was £100m in our budget. So, I would have said that S4C fell much more squarely in the Wales Office purview and there was an element, when looking for savings from our budget, to ask why some of the budget couldn't come from the Wales office. And given the sensitivity surrounding its funding, if it was to be ring-fenced by Downing Street or the Treasury, then it seemed unfair for other organisations funded by DCMS to get extra cuts as a result. In the end, the BBC agreed to fund it, which was sensible, as a closer relationship with the BBC meant there was more opportunity for back office savings. But it was a line-by-line examination of where we could make savings and clearly politics comes into it.

NH: You had quite a few different secretaries of state in your time and there was movement within the junior ministerial team as well. How did you approach it every time the secretary of state changed? Were you able to just carry on doing what you were doing or was there a change of priority; how did you adapt to new leadership?

EV: Well, in some senses it was frustrating because each new secretary of state had to go on a learning curve and you'd seen it all before, so they were meeting exactly the same people and to a certain extent, we were coming into the meetings and hearing exactly the same thing which we'd heard a year ago. But it was always interesting. I found Maria Miller very good to work with. I had much more of a dialogue with Maria but that was partly based, I suspect, on the fact that I had been in the department for a while and knew the area, so she was prepared to heed my advice. I had a good relationship with Sajid Javid. Sajid is a kind of deal maker, so he got quite stuck into the broadband stuff and he liked holding the mobile phone companies to account and that kind of thing. Then John Whittingdale knew the brief back to front, so it was quite a nice partnership.

The other thing about the Treasury is that George Osborne did take an interest in quite a lot of our policy areas, so things like film tax credits, for example, were very much driven by George's interests. Having initially rejected extending tax credits to different parts of the creative industries, once he was convinced of the case we then took the ball and ran with it, so that was interesting. So, yes it's always frustrating in some ways to have a new secretary of state because you feel that you're starting at the bottom again, but it's also an interesting exercise if you're a constant in the department, to see how each new secretary of state runs with it. You've got to remember as well, some of them have priorities thrust upon them: Jeremy had his five priorities but then the whole News Corp thing [controversial takeover bid] came to dominate the department, then Maria had to deal with the fallout from the Leveson Inquiry plus equal marriage, which I thought she handled incredibly well. Maria's priorities were much more in the equalities arena, which I wasn't particularly involved with, so I had more leeway to work on my issues.

NH: Talk us through the day-to-day reality of the job. What would you spend a typical week doing as the Culture Minister?

EV: I did not manage my diary very well. I tended to meet a lot of people. In one sense that was very good, I like meeting people and I like hearing what's going on in the world. In some ways, it's a very,

very wide brief, you've got the whole of the cultural world. You can meet arts organisations ad infinitum; you've got the creative industries, so you've got within that 13 sectors that you have to deal with - the games industry, film, television; and then you have the telecoms industry, the mobile companies and the fixed line companies, so there's a lot of people to meet and talk with.

I do, slightly pompously, compare being a minister with being a member of the royal family. 50% of the job is meet, greet and be seen: turning up to an organisation, particularly if it's a small organisation, is quite a big deal. People think, you know, if a government minister has come to something, that's a vote of confidence, that's something they like. You make a lot of speeches. I wasn't clever enough to plan ahead and think 'I'm making this speech in two months' time, let's think about an announcement that I can make'. Secretaries of state were much better at doing that than I was.

I certainly felt that as a junior minister you are not a particularly valued member of your department. It is very clear from the get-go that the entire department revolves around the secretary of state and you've got to fight to have a say in policy or to own your own policy. But luckily for me (a) I'd been there a long time and (b) although DCMS is a small department, the policy range is very wide, so you have more chance to look after particular sectors with more autonomy than perhaps other junior ministers have.

NH: Yes. The other thing that secretaries of state have that junior ministers don't is special advisers; did you ever have much access to them?

EV: No. I mean, it depended on who the special advisers were. Jeremy Hunt had Adam Smith who was great. He, unfortunately, had to go. Nick King came in; he was superb and he worked through from Maria through to Sajid, so he was a constant. But I never really used the special advisers. I ended up getting a policy adviser just towards the end of my career, which made a big difference. I mean, I do think this whole debate about special advisers is slightly frustrating. I have nothing against civil servants; I think they are very high quality people and they give you very good advice and it may have been different in other departments but I never felt they had their own agenda or were trying to push me in one direction against another. They were simply saying: 'What do you want to do; how do we implement it; and what are the risks; what are the opportunities?' But you do, with a special adviser, have someone who is more in tune with you politically and thinks more widely about how you can make your policies have greater impact. So, I wouldn't have a problem with future governments employing more special advisers. I'm not saying there should be 100 special advisers in a department, but I think each minister should have a special adviser. I'm sure there are reasons against that; they might end up fighting each other. I certainly think this idea of having policy advisers, being able to bring in expert people from outside on a temporary contract to help turbo-charge a particular policy would be a very good thing. As I said, I benefitted from being a minister in the sense that I say, facetiously, I'd be a better opposition spokesman now – I'm now in Parliament, much more informed about the policy area, able to participate in debates. It should work in the same way in the Civil Service. If you bring people in from outside, say from the arts or from the creative industries they can then go back out into the real world with a much better understanding of how government works.

NH: So in the absence of having your own adviser up until that last period, where did you get political advice from; were you spending a lot of time in the House with political colleagues or did that drop off when you were doing departmental business?

EV: I think you get cut off from your parliamentary colleagues a lot, because you spend most of your days in the department or going to events that are associated with your department. You definitely lose touch with your parliamentary party. I had broadband in my portfolio, which is a very emotive issue with a lot of my colleagues; so I was in more of a defensive mode with my colleagues than I was engaged with them. DCMS' priorities, although they're important, are not very political – there were issues that blew up like News Corp and so on, but otherwise very few political issues. The arts cuts played in my sector but they didn't play in Parliament hugely. So yes, getting political advice is difficult.

6 Ministers reflect

NH: I was interested in what you were saying about going round doing lots of visits and speeches, working with external stakeholders. How do you make that meaningful? Do you have any examples where working with stakeholders helped you to develop a particular policy or where it made a difference versus sort of, doing the rounds?

EV: Well, some of it came from my time in opposition, so getting coding the national curriculum came from conversations I'd had in opposition with people including a guy called Ian Livingstone who was pushing this policy; it led me to commission a report by him, led to that recommendation, led to the Department for Education eventually adopting it. Preserving the film tax credit and pushing for the video games tax credit came very much from that sector. Tech policy, although a lot of tech policy was driven from Number 10, came from speaking to the sector. So yeah, engaging with stakeholders was good. I said in my recent lecture about culture that I felt the cultural world was much more about just being visible, it is a specific thing for that sector where the cultural world wants politicians to pay attention to them, but they don't engage in a policy debate beyond 'Give us more money'.

NH: Did you find that frustrating?

EV: Yes, it drove me mad.

NH: What would be your advice to them on how to do it better?

EV: Well I've written this lecture, I gave it at the end of October. They've got to be smarter about it; they've got to be more radical.

NH: Another thing we're interested in is crisis management; do you have any examples of where something unexpected happened in the department from outside that you had to deal with and how you went about that?

EV: No.

NH: It was just plain sailing all the way?!

EV: I just ran for the hills! I mean, one of the disadvantages of being a junior minister was that the department revolves around the secretary of state, but the advantage of being a junior minister was that when crises blew up, the secretary of state had to deal with it! [laughter]

I probably shouldn't overplay it but when the News Corp/Sky thing blew up, the only document that mentions me in all the thousands of documents that were published was an email from News Corp's Head of Corporate Affairs saying 'Why won't Ed Vaizey have a meeting with me' and my private secretary saying 'He won't meet anyone from News or Sky while this bid is under way, on any issue, even if it's unrelated'. When the News Corp bid came in, I sat in the first meeting with Jeremy where the officials outlined the process and I took a view that if two ministers were working on it, it would be a case of divide and rule that the various interested parties would try and pick either one of us off to claim one thing or the other about our views, so it was much easier if there was just one person responsible.

I mean, how does one deal with crises? In the tiny, tiny world of DCMS, we abolished the Film Council. The government had this 'bonfire of the quangos' and that's an example of policy making that was not as carefully thought through as perhaps it could have been. On the one hand, we needed to save money; on the other hand, we also wanted to reduce the number of quangos and there had been a lot of talk about merging the Film Council with the British Film Institute. We took the view we'd just do it and to a certain extent, it wasn't thought through, because there simply wasn't time. But credit to Jeremy, it would never have happened unless, at some point, somebody had said 'Let's just do it'. Long-term it turned out to be exactly the right thing to do, but at the time it caused, in our little world, a huge fuss. It was a gift to everyone who says the Tories are evil philistines and all these left-wing film people were

very happy to say ‘Well we told you what a Tory government was going to be like’. So I had to manage that crisis and again, by having good relationships which had been built up over my time in opposition, I was able to head off some of the stories that were being put out. There was one story that a particular film that was going to film in the UK was now going to be cancelled because of our decision to abolish the Film Council, but because I had good connections I was able to get to the studio and say what the true story was, and the true story was entirely separate. It had nothing to do with the Film Council. So we had to kill that story and the minute we killed that story actually, a lot of the resistance that had been building just crumpled, so that was a good example where having good strong relationships that you built up in opposition can come into play.

NH: You wouldn’t have been able to do that had you not shadowed the role?

EV: No. But similarly, two or three years into the role, I would have built up those relationships so if a crisis like that again erupted, you would be able to head it off.

NH: What about an example of a policy success; what is something that you’re really proud of?

EV: So, I think in terms of the Institute for Government, the biggest problem in government is working between departments and the only way departments work effectively together is on the basis of good personal relationships between ministers. In fact, one of the few times I ever met my fellow ministers was at Institute for Government meetings. So government has to do something about that. I think every minister should be in two departments, this should just be a rule, by and large that, particularly junior ministers to have some kind of link with another department. I was linked to BIS and I had a private secretary from BIS which made a big, big difference in knowing what BIS was up to and joining up policy.

A small success was to create music hubs. What I did there was, I got to Michael Gove who is a very close friend of mine and we got Darren Henley, who is now the Chief Executive of the Arts Council who was then the Head of Classic FM to do a report about music education and what we wanted within the Department of Education, which we got, was a ring-fencing of the money that goes to local authorities to fund their music services which would have been devolved to academies and would probably have fallen through the cracks. Now we have, I can’t remember what the sum is, £150m/£200m a year going into music education, which I think would have disappeared and that was a result of a good close personal relationship with Michael Gove and therefore the ability to persuade a department to help us. In all other respects, working with other departments was a complete and utter and total nightmare.

NH: That’s really interesting. You mentioned doing the joint Minister role and you thought that was a useful way of getting round departmental siloes. Some of the other ministers we’ve seen who have done that maybe found it a bit harder having two bosses and being split across two places, do you not find that?

EV: You always have a dominant department, so I was a DCMS Minister with a link to BIS. There are two ways of doing that: one is you can have a formal role in your other department which you can get your teeth into, which doesn’t really work, or you can effectively kind of snaffle some of your other department’s policies and bring them into your lead department. So when I was at BIS, things like smart cities and so on, to a certain extent, came over to DCMS. Provided you accept that’s the way and you don’t try and become two people, the advantage is that you’ve got a private secretary who can get stuff done because they know your other department and that you go to ministerial meetings of the other department and therefore have a feel for what that department is doing. So, that is the key reason why you do it. Seeing papers from another department is crucial. I had a brilliant private secretary from BIS when I first started who was prepared to kick butt and say ‘Actually, this guy is your minister and if he wants information on this issue, you’ve got to give it to him, because he’s your minister’ whereas usually

8 Ministers reflect

if you go to another department and ask for help with something they say: 'Get lost, we've got enough things going on ourselves.'

NH: Was there anything else that you found frustrating?

EV: Well I was only ever junior minister, so it's more interesting to ask a secretary of state what they found frustrating because, in theory, the frustration of a junior minister is that you're not the secretary of state, so you're one removed from making the big calls and you have to persuade the secretary of state and they may or may not persuade the prime minister or the chancellor. That's the frustration of being a junior minister. If you've got a clear idea of what you want to execute as a strategy, trying to get the other moving parts of government into line to make it happen is time consuming and frustrating.

NH: If you were advising another junior minister how to do that, how to persuade the secretary of state on a policy agenda, how to get the machine working for you, what would you advise them?

EV: I'd probably do it the other way round. I think if I was a secretary of state, I would do, broadly speaking, what Jeremy Hunt did and say: 'These are the areas I want to be my areas, the rest is up to you'. There's a quid pro quo there – as a junior minister I would say to Jeremy 'If I want something done in my area, you have to effectively rubber stamp it and give it your imprimatur, which certainly Jeremy did do on some things, such as digital radio, which helped a great deal. But it was harder to get him to pay attention when I wanted to move an area of policy that he hadn't identified as one of his priorities; that's not a criticism, it's understandable. I learnt a lot from Jeremy and if I ever got the chance to be a secretary of state, I would approach it with Jeremy's style. I would say 'These are my priorities, the rest is up to you' and the only thing I would emphasise is the need to make sure that having given a policy responsibility to a junior minister entirely, I recognise that that junior minister will still need my secretary of state heft on occasion.

NH: And did you feel a sense of being, with the other junior ministers, like a DCMS team?

EV: No. Again even within departments, you work in silos and again, it may be because DCMS has distinct categories: Hugh Robertson was doing the Olympics and he was sport, they weren't going to particularly overlap with what I was doing in culture and creative industries. Even with John Penrose doing tourism and heritage, there wasn't much cross-working. You would not see your colleagues for days.

NH: I just wanted to touch on a couple of more topical things in your last year. Did the move from coalition to single party government make a difference to you?

EV: Yes it did. I mean, we had Don Foster as a sort of Lib Dem link person in DCMS and I had a really close relationship with Don; we got on very, very well indeed. He was nothing but helpful to us and again, a bit like John Whittingdale, he was just someone who knew the brief; we were all passionate about it; he was very happy to help. I definitely felt a difference once we came into power because it just felt like you were just one team, regardless of how closely you worked with other ministers, it just felt like this was now one government; it just changed the tone, it felt like a change mood and a more effective government once we were one party.

NH: You obviously had the EU referendum and in John a Secretary of State who was a prominent leaver, how did the run-up to the referendum affect your work as a minister?

EV: It didn't. I mean, I just got on with the job and you know, with hindsight, I wished I had used my ministerial position more to stress for remain, not that I think it would have made a particular difference to the final result. We got through it with gallows humour, you know, I would take the mickey out of John and he would take the mickey out of me. It was a bit sensitive because John's Brexit stance was

quite out of kilter with how the sector felt, certainly in the creative industries and the culture industries, but broadly speaking, it wasn't a topic that we discussed. We did reach an agreement actually, that we wouldn't give interviews about the impact of Brexit and/or remain on our sectors. I did give one quote to one newspaper and they immediately went to John to get a quote from him to say there's a split in DCMS, so we decided not to play it too strongly in the media, in order to have harmonious relations in the department.

NH: Did the business of policy just continue as normal?

EV: Yes. I don't remember any memos about what Brexit means for our industries.

NH: Quite a lot of regulation around DCMS is EU-based, did you do much work with the EU and your European counterparts?

EV: The EU stuff impacts massively on telecoms and on audio-visual services: the TV and so on, so that's where the main issues were. Culture's less involved.

It's what made me more Europhile. I found it very useful. I understood the give and take that happened in Brussels; I understood why some countries wanted a regulation that was European-wide and why occasionally, it was a good thing to compromise on something that you wouldn't necessarily have introduced into your domestic legislation. Net neutrality is a good example, where I didn't want UK legislation but we eventually conceded a European regulation because the eastern states, the Baltic states, wanted net neutrality because they didn't want Russian internet service providers to block Baltic state content. I found it incredibly productive to spend time with my counterparts, particularly as Britain is regarded as a bit of a leader in these areas. I thought it was incredibly productive and that is something that this government is going to miss, big time.

NH: You've mentioned silos as being a problem, is there anything else that you would do to make government, as a whole, more effective?

EV: I mean, that's a huge topic but I would completely re-engineer government. I would abolish government departments, I would have government by task, you know, what do you want to achieve? We have a National Infrastructure Commission but we have a Department of Transport - we need some way of having a system that can prosecute the government's objectives where one can change things and a kind of back office that keeps things that you don't want to change ticking over. I don't know how to achieve that and I'm instinctively against endless upheavals and changes but for me, the silo problem is the biggest problem. I think Cabinet Committees don't particularly work very well. They are tick-boxy, tedious, and not proper forums for discussion, they're too big.

So, if you want to build the best infrastructure in the world, that involves building roads, railways, runways, digital infrastructure, there should be a core group of ministers who are tasked with making that happen, given the full resources of different government departments that can make it happen. That's much easier said than done, I know, but it struck me as really odd, for example, that the Department of Transport was in charge of getting wifi onto trains when all the expertise about doing that effectively rested in my department and being able to connect while you're on a train is just as important as being able to connect when you are at home in some ways; none of those policies were joined up. Similarly, the emergency services network wasn't joined up, so there were huge opportunities for synergies which were lost. It doesn't need to be a huge arrangement, government could, almost as an experiment, identify three priorities and set up proper, really meaningful task forces to get on with the job of delivering them and see if that can work.

NH: The last question is, thinking back over all of that, and given what you've already said about the limitations of the role, what would be the main pieces of advice you would give to a minister?

10 Ministers reflect

EV: A new minister should come in and say to their permanent secretary: 'I would like to have a meeting with you once a month, because I know you will just spend all your time sucking up to the secretary of state.'

NH: Did you do that?

EV: No. But I'd now say: 'Please have a meeting with me once a month to talk things through for an hour. Please, Secretary of State, have a meeting with your ministers that is inviolable, every Monday, that is never changed, just you and your ministers where you talk through things. Please, Secretary of State, have a list of your priorities and what you want to achieve. Please, Permanent Secretary, give me a nobby brief on the department's issues, a 101. Please give me a teach-in on the Civil Service and how it works. Please don't ask me to make any major decisions for two months.'

Citations

This archive is an open resource and we encourage you to quote from it. Please ensure that you cite the Institute for Government correctly:

- In publications (e.g. academic articles, research or policy papers) you can footnote or endnote the interview you are quoting from as follows:

Transcript, [Name of Interviewee], [Date of Interview], Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: [Web Address of Transcript], Accessed: [Download Date].

For example: Transcript, George Young, 21 July 2015, Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/george-young> . Accessed: 15 December 2015

- On social media, please hyperlink to the site: www.instituteforgovernment.co.uk/ministers-reflect
You can also use #ministersreflect and mention us @instituteforgov if you are quoting from the archive on Twitter.
- Journalists wishing to quote from the archive are free to do so, but we do ask that you mention the Institute for Government as a source and link to the archive in online articles. Please direct any media enquiries to nicole@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

The Institute for Government is here to act as a catalyst for better government.

The Institute is an independent charity founded in 2008 to help make government more effective.

- We carry out research, look into the big governance challenges of the day and find ways to help government improve, rethink and sometimes see things differently.
- We offer unique insights and advice from experienced people who know what it's like to be inside government both in the UK and overseas.
- We provide inspirational learning and development for senior policy makers.

We do this through seminars, workshops, talks or interesting connections that invigorate and provide fresh ideas.

We are well placed for senior members of all parties and the Civil Service to discuss the challenges of making government work; and to seek and exchange practical insights from the leading thinkers, practitioners, public servants, academics and opinion-formers.

Copies of all the interviews undertaken as part of this project are available at:

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect

© Institute for Government 2016

2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

Email: enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

@instituteforgov

The Institute is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England No. 6480524
Registered Charity No. 1123926