

# Ministers Reflect Estelle Morris



17 November 2021

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

1992–2005: Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley

2005 – present: Baroness Morris of Yardley

## Government career

1997–98: Parliamentary under secretary of state for school standards

1998–2001: Minister of state for school standards

2001–02: Secretary of state for education and skills

2003–05: Minister of state for the arts

**Baroness Morris was interviewed by Dr Catherine Haddon and Sam Freedman – both senior fellows at the Institute for Government – on 17 November 2021 for the IfG’s Ministers Reflect project. Dr Catherine Haddon leads the Institute’s professional development programme for ministers and opposition parties and Sam Freedman is an educationalist who previously worked at the Department for Education as a senior policy adviser to Michael Gove.**

Baroness Morris talks about her six years in the Department for Education, including her perspective as a former teacher and the shift to a targets-orientated culture. She also discusses what it was like returning to government as minister for the arts after her resignation as secretary of state for education.

Catherine Haddon (CH): So can we start by going back to May 1997, if you can send your mind back there? You were made parliamentary under secretary of state for school standards, had you shadowed the role?

Estelle Morris (EM): I had, maybe not in an exact title but I’d been part of David Blunkett’s opposition team [Blunkett became secretary of state for education and employment after the 1997 election].

CH: So was it a job you were expecting to go into?

EM: Yes – sort of. I think, originally, I’d been made an education whip... I can’t remember... anyway, David then invited me to his team, so I’d worked in his opposition team along with Stephen Byers, Peter Kilfoyle, Kim Howells, Andrew Smith, and one or two others. And I think we felt we were quite a cohesive team. And I knew David would have liked me to go into government with him. So I wasn’t sure – it wasn’t something I was absolutely expecting and we didn’t all move across – but the bulk of that team did move from opposition to government. I didn’t know what role I’d get but, if I got any role, I knew it would be with schools, so it wasn’t a total surprise, no.

CH: How did you find out? Who gave you the call?

EM: I’ve got two memories of this. I’ve got my memory of [being appointed] secretary of state which was fairly chaotic... anyway in 1997, I was rung by Tony [Blair]. I was rung by the prime minister, presumably the Friday after and I think he said, “Take the post and David will talk to you about it.” So there was no conversation beyond, “Do you want the job?”.

**CH:** And do you remember what your first day was like, going into the department for the first time?

**EM:** Yes, I do. I think it was the Monday, we weren't required until the Monday. There was a great amount of excitement but that, on reflection, feels fairly leisurely because, when you're secretary of state, you go in straight away, which is a different story. So I think it was the Monday. We were a tight team and I think that's the most important thing about those early days. It wasn't just the team that moved across, it was David's advisers as well. So he already had a very good and very strong group of advisers led by Conor Ryan and Sophie Linden. Then we were joined by Nick Pearce and Hilary Benn. That was characteristic of that period, of the first government, it was very strong and my feeling just was one of being part of the group and meeting the office. And I realised I was going to be working closely with Stephen Byers because he was minister of state at the time. I'd worked with him already.

I tell you one of the striking things I can recall – it was very strange to go to work and not to go to the Houses of Parliament. And it was something I found quite difficult, not difficult in the sense that it troubled me, but I really noticed that my place of work had changed. So to get to the House of Commons and see colleagues – the tea room, the chit, the chat, all that – was an effort. You had to book it in the diary, they had to know you were going, they had to know when to collect you and all that. I felt that was a big sign that, “You work with us now, you don't work with them”. I think that's a problem you've got to get in your head, and you've got to find a way through I remember thinking in those early days, there's a real risk that I will now become a 'person' of the DfEE [Department for Education and Employment] rather than a 'person' of parliament, and I'm essentially government and parliament.

I had a very marginal seat, so my staff were used to daily contact. I spent every weekend there, signing all the letters, reading all the letters. I would have been hands on anyway, but I was hands on because I didn't have a ministerial post and that was my job as an MP. So working out that new relationship with your constituency staff isn't easy. They feel squeezed out. They initially feel part of the excitement that their MP's a minister and then they just get squeezed out. This is pre-mobile phones you'll have to remember, so, if they wanted to phone me, they were ringing through the office. And I think they found that difficult, and I found it both difficult and troubling. But we established some rules, so anything in the diary Friday to Sunday was their job, and the rest was the department's and, if you wanted a bit of the other's time, you had to ask them. But the civil service, I think, understood that I was close to the constituency office, and it worked out alright.

And, together with moving away from colleagues, that was that. I had very much been part of the Birmingham MPs group. It was a big city, there were 11 of us. And most of them Labour. Three came in when I came in and we were a close group. We ate together, we talked together, we met together. I was out of all those meetings now. I didn't turn up to the West Midlands MPs group and so I missed that to begin with. I really missed

that. I thought, “I’ve got a different job, someone’s just given me a different job and I didn’t realise I’d be leaving the whole of the previous job behind”. So what you then do is you have to rebuild the bridges in a different way.

I think my lesson from that is, in the nicest way, the civil service aren’t bothered about that. They are not going to make it easy for you to do your constituency work or for you to spend time in the House of Commons because that doesn’t serve their interests – in the nicest way. They want your time. And they give you wonderful support, but their interest was to monopolise my time.

But it was meeting and greeting. There was a great feel of optimism. You had the feeling that people were pleased to see us. And we were, I feel with David, very, very well prepared. So David hit the road running. And it was straight into the action. And obviously the previous period of Conservative government had been very much dwindling down so I felt in the department, from the department’s point of view, that they were excited by that energy in the same way that the population were excited by a new government.

**CH: Did you have any preconceptions of what the DfEE as a department would be like and what the civil service were like there?**

**EM:** No, not really. No. I sort of knew in theory. My dad was a minister, years and years ago when I was a child, so it wasn’t completely alien. And obviously we’d seen the odd civil servant doing a bill, or things like that. I’m not sure I’d been in the building actually. I may have been in for a post-bill glass of wine. But I’m not sure I’d been in the building. I think I saw the civil service as potentially being administrators. I don’t think I’d really ever thought through their role in policy making and how crucial it is. And certainly, by the end of my first year, I remember thinking to myself, “Gosh, if I was young and at school again, running for the civil service is something I’d think about.” So I didn’t know a lot, but I think I had got it down as much more administrative than policy making.

**CH: Sam’s going to ask you about policy making but I’m keen to know how much you were involved in preparing any of the policies in opposition, because there was quite a lot of that going into government.**

**EM:** We were very involved in the abolition of the nursery voucher scheme, which Stephen and I took through as a bill before the first summer recess – so the first bill, a short bill. And then we’d done quite a bit on the assisted places scheme [which provided free or subsidised places to fee-paying schools for eligible children] because that was something that had to be dealt with straight away. And we’d done quite a bit on what our relationship with the private sector – private schools – and with selection would be. So those were our difficult areas that we had to have clear policies on.

But in terms of the longer-term thinking, we’d done a lot on the literacy and numeracy strategy, planning for the standards and effectiveness unit, talking to Michael Barber

[educationalist and then chief adviser to David Blunkett] in advance, knowing that we would bring in outsiders. David's a very inclusive leader, one of the most inclusive leaders I've worked with. We knew, I think – I'm not sure if we knew – that we were going to set up a big advisory body which was called the Standards Taskforce, but I'm not sure I talked to him about that beforehand. But we knew we were going to be 'standards not structures.' The other policy area that we had discussed was what to do about GM [grant-maintained] schools, which was also in that first list of key problems. That's my memory, there could be something really big that I missed.

**Sam Freedman (SF): How involved were you in designing the literacy and numeracy strategy with Michael Barber?**

**EM:** No, not [that involved]. We wanted it to be an education policy so in terms of researching the areas and coming forward with a strategy, it was mainly the work of the literacy and numeracy taskforces. I've always felt that we gave the taskforces a free hand on that and it was genuinely, "This is an education policy, go and find out what works and bring it back to us." I'm not saying there was no politics because there was. But I'd never been engaged in a philosophical, or even a pedagogical, debate about that. Whether Michael and David had, I don't know. But I'd always seen it as a genuine, honest attempt to find out what worked in the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

**SF: And what was it like working with Michael?**

**EM:** I enjoyed working with Michael very, very much at the DfEE. I enjoyed working with him less when he went to Downing Street. He's very easy to work with and he's passionate about education. We were a group who had very good relationships and I think that is important. Michael was seen as an absolutely key person. So what I can see could have happened is some of the ministers could have thought, "This man's got an awful lot of power." But I never sensed it. I certainly didn't think it myself.

And I remember, when we first arrived in the department, there was already a standards unit. It was a small group in the department and to watch that build up – and there were people that came in I knew like David Woods from Birmingham, Ralph Tabberer – to see those external figures coming in was such an important development. I mean, essentially, if you think about it, we'd made a decision that our political policies would essentially be educational policies. Looking back, I think that it was seen by teachers as a political policy rather than an education policy, which was a problem. Making clear that it was educationists who were involved in developing the policy was important and Michael was absolutely key to doing that.

**SF: One person who was sort of outside that camp was Chris Woodhead [then fead of Ofsted]. I am very curious because you must have found that challenging?**

**EM:** Oh yes, I did. He didn't like our approach and I always thought he was potentially a cause of dissent in what was a cohesive team. We thought that he would seek to relate directly to the prime minister if he didn't want to relate to us. I suspect he didn't like David's politics or approach to education and so what I think the strategy was, was to stop that happening.

**SF: Was there any discussion about removing him and trying to get a different inspector?**

**EM:** No, that was not on the agenda. We might have... some people might have wanted to. The teachers wanted to...

**SF: He was very unpopular obviously...**

**EM:** Very unpopular. Tony had committed us to keeping Chris Woodhead as the chief inspector when he was being interviewed on a Sunday morning programme, before the election. We had enough difficult issues without taking on those we were likely to lose. If we'd have got rid of Chris Woodhead, it's like if we'd have abolished grammar schools. We were fearful that that would define our first 12 months in office. And we were not going to let that happen. And Chris has a lot to offer. Educationally, he has a lot to offer, I just personally found it difficult to work with. And you couldn't trust what he was going to say. I think that was the real problem.

**SF: And then you became minister of state in July 1998. How did that change your role for a start? What issues did you take on?**

**EM:** Well, whereas we were a team of two and Stephen [Byers] was in charge, I was now working with Jacqui Smith and I was the more senior. Things did change because I became the person who the civil servants came to. Steve had responsibility for the literacy strategy, failing schools, finance. I had responsibility for Early Years and I was doing Excellence in Cities [which aimed to raise standards in urban schools], I was doing Education Action Zones [a scheme which partnered schools with private sponsorship], I was doing all that. When I became minister of state, I took on responsibility for some politically higher-profile policy areas and liaised more closely with David. I felt that I had extra responsibility on some of the key issues.

**SF: How did you feel as a former teacher? Obviously, teachers feel uncomfortable with the language of failing schools and underperformance, in a way that people didn't associate with the Labour administration.**

**EM:** Yeah, it had to be done. But I had to work it out myself. There's great strength in having been a teacher and going into the department. But there are great challenges as well, and it's not always easy to work out. I wanted to use those 18 years of inner-city

teaching experience, but I didn't want to be seen as the minister for teachers. Because I wasn't. That was not my job. And I'm absolutely sure that David and Tony didn't want me to do that.

I think, to be honest, I taught in an inner-city school that was a very good school. It was tough but it was good and it's still good. But in those five years since I had left teaching, I had seen some schools that shocked me. They weren't all like the school I taught at, so I wasn't blinded to the fact that there were some poor teachers and poor schools. There were poor teachers in my own school and there were times when my teaching was poor, that's the nature of the job. So I didn't have a problem in realising that improving the quality of teaching was very important.

What I didn't want, because I'd have lost all credibility, was teachers to think, "poacher turned gamekeeper, we thought she understood us". So what I think I always did, throughout all my time as a minister was to find other ways of telling teachers that you understand them and thanking them. It can't be through saying, "You want Chris Woodhead gone and he's gone". It can't be that. But I think that in every speech that I made and every visit, I tried to build up confidence between the teaching profession and myself. So my aim was to get to the stage where I could give them the difficult messages because they knew that I understood the job they did. That was where I wanted to be, that I could go and give difficult messages and teachers would listen to me. They, of course, have to be sensible policies as well!

**SF:** And how did you two, in that context, help schools manage that transition to a more target-oriented culture? Because they weren't used necessarily to thinking about monitoring performance and there was a lot of unhappiness about it at the time. It's obviously now become very normalised but, how do you feel about being part of making that shift?

**EM:** I think I did it then the same way I still do it now. I still talk to teachers. The problem with target-setting was the politics of it, not the education of it. And I still say to teachers that I have never known a head who goes in on the first day of the autumn term and says, "Well done on exceptional results last year. If you can do nearly as good next year I'll be really thrilled. They all talk about further improvement next year. I mean, if you think about it, it's the nature of teaching: a child achieves, and you say, "What can you do next?" It's not anti-teachers but politicians use it as a stick whereas essentially it's a natural part of teaching.

Another thing that politicians often do wrong is, when they set a target, they give the impression it's because things are failing. But no politician can set a more demanding target unless the previous target has been reached. You don't do that. You don't say, "We failed to reach last year's target, we're going to have a target that's even harder." No one does that. And if you can use that language to teachers, and say: "Look, this is how much



we've progressed, this is what you've done, we reckon by next year, we can do even better,' it might be a better approach.

The government was spending a lot more money on education and my attitude used to be, "I know there's a lot of pressure" – but I was only five, six years out of teaching at the time – "so that's the deal: you've got a prime minister who will give all his time, you're top of the government's agenda, you've never been more important, there's never been more money coming in but there's a cost for that and that cost is a much closer and more demanding relationship." I commented that if I had my time in teaching again, I would prefer to be high on the government's agenda.

**SF: ...which is a more common message. You said before that you started with this message of 'standards not structures' and then, as you progressed through the first term, structure started to come back into the conversation and you got academies introduced in 2000, and specialist schools as well...**

**EM:** Specialist schools, we'd always had.

**SF: The popular view is that was very driven by No.10. Did you feel that the DfEE played a role in shaping that or was that very much Andrew Adonis [at the time a constitutional and educational policy adviser] and Tony Blair saying, "This is what we want to do"?**

**EM:** Yes. To begin with. It was gradual, because we did Fresh Start [which aimed to improve educational standards]. It didn't quite work as you can't work miracles over the summer holidays, but you learn. And then we went on to the academies and there was tension but there was widespread support in the team for the early academies programme. The other thing you've not mentioned which was the parallel thing was the work we were doing with local authorities at the time, because really, I think from Tony's point of view, the academies were also an answer to failing local authorities.

**SF: I was going to come on to the fact that you privatised a number of local authorities.**

**EM:** Yeah, we did what we thought was right in each local authority... I am critical of No.10 over this. David, who obviously did the liaising, never had to go very far with it before 2001 in fairness, and he managed it. It was only with failing schools...

**SF: It was a very small number...**

**EM:** It was a very, very small number. And you'd been to these schools and everything you'd tried so far hadn't worked. You couldn't do nothing. So I saw it very much at that time as a measure for those schools and I didn't have a problem with that at all. And sometimes it was as a result of a failing local authority. But sometimes it wasn't. And sometimes we managed to turn the local authority around, like Hackney turned around. Hackney was the first one, then Islington, Dudley, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol. I spent a lot of time on this, and we did outsource – I think that's better than privatise. Hackney

had a different model. Liverpool appointed a new chief exec and a new director of education, and the service wasn't outsourced. So David and I had a very pragmatic view on local authorities because emotionally we'd both got a local authority background. So David was always wanting... we were always wanting to get the local authority thing right. I think Tony, left to his own devices...

**SF: ...would have sort of wanted to bypass them altogether?**

**EM:** Would have wanted to bypass them altogether.

**CH:** You mentioned early years quite a lot and it wasn't just your department, or even No.10 ...

**EM:** No, - ...

**CH:** Yes, Sure Start and some things in the Treasury – tax credits and so on. Sure Start, I think, was brought in by Tessa Jowell through the Department for Health before she then moved over to DfEE...

**EM:** I think it was Harriet [Harman] to begin with as well...

**CH:** Was it Harriet? Right.

**EM:** My first memory is being at a meeting with David and Harriet. But I'm sure Tessa was there as well I just can't remember, yep.

**CH:** How much was the department involved, then, in the development of the early years agenda? Was it the whole of government working together or was there tension?

**EM:** Yes, it was and there was tension. It's the best example of shared departmental working and I'm always told it's because they made a shared budget, that's what solved the problem. But the tension was that we wanted it as an educational initiative and the Treasury saw it as a way of getting women back to work and that was a conflict because... who looks after them? The amount of money you put in, the quality of what you provide, if it's going to be the best early years education, that requires something different than if it's going to be childminding. And yes, David did all that, but I was aware of that conflict.

**CH:** And did the Treasury have much influence over what else you were doing in education during that time?

**EM:** I had very, very little to do with them. I wouldn't have negotiated the budget or anything, no. I didn't feel they were trouble. I never got the impression, apart from that early years thing, that they were against what we were doing.

**CH:** We have mentioned the civil service a few times. What about Michael Bichard, permanent secretary at that time? Did you have much of a relationship with him or was that again mostly through David?

**EM:** I did, but not as much as David. I am very fond of Michael – excellent permanent secretary. Always felt... we never felt anything but that he was able, professional and wanting us to succeed. We knew he and David personally got on very well and that helped. I had a much closer relationship with David Normington, who I worked with when he was director-general of schools and who became permanent secretary shortly before the general election in 2001.

**CH:** Before the June 2001 reshuffle, straight after the election, did you have any idea that there were moves afoot that David would be moving on?

**EM:** We knew David was moving on.

**CH:** And did you think that anyone was looking at you? Was it a surprise?

**EM:** Yes, but I mean this is a real talk about, if you had your time again, this is where I would absolutely get my act together. I've got an exceptionally marginal seat and I could not – this is my problem; this is not blaming anyone else – but I really couldn't go into that election having in my mind that I was about to be secretary of state when I wasn't sure that I would even have a job. And part way through the election, there was a poll that said that I was likely to lose so one way of me protecting myself was not to think that I might get a ministerial post because that doubled disappointment.

And the other thing is, the answer to your question is, no, no one says to you... I knew David thought highly of me. I think David had said to me that he would like me to but no one else ever spoke to me. No one spoke to me about it during the election, although I think that a newspaper on the Saturday morning before the election said that I would be appointed so you are left guessing really.

I was going into the election just wanting to win the seat, which I did, and that was fine. But the biggest error, the biggest fault, is no one talks to you about what you need to begin to think about if you are appointed.

**CH:** And what are the things in retrospect that you wish you had thought about?

**EM:** Well, one thing that comes to mind is where to be when you get the phone call. I'd got a school visit the day after the election that had been in the diary since before the election. So it got to Thursday night, I was in bed very late and I was due at the school at nine o'clock. No one had contacted me and so I thought, "I don't want to seem as though I'm expecting the job, I'm not going down to London." I don't live in London. I lived in Birmingham.

Then I got a call the next afternoon from No.10 – asking me to go to see the prime minister. So I accepted but then had to get down to London. No.10 had wanted me to be there for the six o'clock news, which, of course, I couldn't do. I mean, after all that, I got down by half six and that was fine. But it's a measure of how no one thinks of preparing people as to how they can actually take the job.

I should have thought about were political advisers, absolutely that. That's what I was lacking: political advisers and junior ministers. And I would have welcomed the time to have spoken to David Normington about the staffing in the department. He was new. I was new. And we thought that was a great strength because we got on well, although I think that by the time I left, we both realised it was a weakness. Michael Barber had gone to No.10. David Normington's previous post as director of schools was still vacant. The political advisers had gone and David had taken the head of the press office to the Home Office. I'd given insufficient thought to those gaps which was a problem.

**CH: Did you have much of a conversation with the prime minister whenever you did get to London about the new direction of travel or changes?**

**EM** He said that there were two issues that had been raised during the general election that he particularly wanted address. One was the AS [level] difficulties with over-examining children and people during the sixth form, and the other was fees, university fees. Obviously, he said that these were for later discussions. Those were just things that were in his mind, I felt, from the general election campaign.

**SF: Who did you end up appointing as your advisers?**

**EM:** Will Cavendish and Chris Boffey. Neither of whom I knew before.

**SF: Were they suggested by another party?**

**EM:** Chris was suggested by Alastair [Campbell, Tony Blair's press secretary and director of communications]. And Will applied for the job. But where it's silly is, I know a lot of really good educationalists and I think where I made a mistake was I thought there was a type of person who was a political adviser and that didn't include the educationists I knew.

**SF: And then that first year was a pretty hectic year. You had the white paper in September, which started again pushing even more of a structures angle. What was the genesis of that white paper, what was your role?**

**EM:** It did. We wanted to move on to secondary. Two things come to mind: we wanted to move on to secondary reform because we'd not done a lot in the first term, and we felt that we'd done quite well with primary. And we were struggling to find an agenda here. I think part of the issue was that the pedagogy agenda – the standards not structures – really works in primary but it's much more difficult to transfer into secondary

because you've got subject areas. So the way we'd done things there didn't naturally move into secondary. And equally the reverse is true: no one particularly thinks messing about with the structure of primary schools is a sensible thing to do, whereas politicians, generation after generation, think that they can do it with secondary schools.

And the other thing which I think, which had actually been my major piece of work while I was a junior minister, was the green paper on teaching reform in 1998, which I had led. This was the reform of the teaching profession and a big policy area. By the time I got secretary of state, I had to hand the implementation over to the minister of state, which is always a shame because I really liked that. But a lot of the stuff now that's taken for granted in schools – leadership teams, assistant teachers, advanced schoolteachers, bursars, classroom assistants – all came from that green paper – performance related, performance rewards, the lot.

**SF: There was a big increase in non-teaching staff in schools...**

**EM:** That was the thrust of it.

**SF: And then you had the Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) issue. And you had to manage that one. How did that come about and were you conscious of it growing as a problem?**

**EM:** Yeah, I was. I'd had nothing to do with it when I was a junior minister because it was on the employment side. It was clearly going wrong, but the Treasury did not want to drop it. It was their project – they did not want to drop it. And it came to the point where I was going to the select committee on something other than ILAs that morning, but we wanted to say we were stopping it. I didn't see how we could get through the select committee meeting with just saying, "We're carrying on doing it". And the Treasury were not happy.

**SF: Why were they so committed to it? Because, as you say, it was pretty obviously not working.**

**EM:** I think they just wanted to reform it, and we felt that it couldn't be reformed. I think that was the difference. I think we felt it had to be started again but the Treasury were absolutely not happy about it. I think I said to Gordon [Brown]: "Well, it's me who's got to go into the select committee, to have to make a statement at the start of the select committee."

**CH: As secretary of state, had your relationship with the Treasury very much changed? Were you much more involved?**

**EM:** Yes. It changes completely. You're much more involved because it's more politics and less education, I think. That's why David and I were a really good team: David's an excellent politician and I am more knowledgeable about education than he is. The secretary of state role seems to be more outward looking from the department, so it's

managing that relationship with No.10. I began to go to Treasury meetings and things like that. Yes, all that. **CH: And, just building on that, did you reflect on how David had done the job? You talked about him being a very good team leader, very inclusive and so forth. How did you go about building your ministerial team? You said you hadn't thought a lot about junior ministers but, the team you ended up with, how did you find that?**

**EM:** I think that building teams is important to me, so I think I did that. They'd reconfigured the department as well. We'd lost employment, so it was a smaller department. We'd lost two ministers of state and only had two political advisers.

**SF: You still had universities at that point?**

**EM:** We still had universities, yeah, and we still had skills. I mean... a lot of new people, so building relationships, new civil servants to deal with. I think one of the things I knew that No.10 wanted me to do was to get the relationship with the teaching profession onto a steadier footing than it was. So there was a bit of... what I was trying to do was more collaborative – more collaborative working.

**CH: Well, a different way of putting it is, do you remember how much your day to day changed from being minister of state to secretary of state?**

**EM:** Yes, I do. I remember when the red box arrived at the weekends. "It's really weird", I thought, "there's less in it, but it's more difficult". I realised that when the red box arrived, there were far fewer [papers], but they were more 'difficult' – every one of them I needed a break for a cup of coffee! Whereas I seemed to be sent more papers when I was minister of state, but I got through them more quickly.

So I think that sums up the difference in the job. You have got your trackers and your delivery programmes and what's behind but, to be honest, you're copied into them, they're not for you to decide. They are going to a minister of state, and I wouldn't want to change that. And you only got them when there was a problem. So I did find that it was more strategic – education and its relationship with other parts of government – that's what I'd say. Whereas, when I was a junior minister, it was education not as it related to other parts of government. I only went to these as a junior minister – I did a lot of these cross-departmental cabinet committees, which I think are not a good structure. I'm never sure what they've achieved. But the relationships with the departments at secretary of state level were far more real. And far more competitive.

**SF: And then obviously in the summer of 2002, you had the A levels difficulty and the re-grading. I went through a problem with A level results myself when I was in the DfE in 2012, and then obviously we had another version in 2020. Did you feel you knew it was coming, were you ready for it? Were you prepared?**

**EM:** No.

**SF: It just sort of landed on you?**

**EM:** No, genuinely didn't know about it until whichever head teacher from the school started to complain about his results. And I can remember it quite clearly because you don't get many weekends off and I'd got my nieces down in London. I remember hearing about it on the news. So there was no inkling that would happen. Nothing we'd done had caused it to happen. So there was no way that we would have known it was happening. The only way we might have known it is that we had two civil servants who attended QCA [the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority] meetings on our behalf, as is the proper thing to do, but they had not come back and given any indication that trouble was brewing. So it absolutely came as a shock.

**SF: And how did the fallout from it affect you? And the process of going through it?**

**EM:** I found it difficult. Partly because it took us ages to work out what had happened. We genuinely did not know what had happened. So that took ages to sort out. Then the relationship between Bill Stubbs [the QCA chairman] and the department dramatically broke down. That wasn't helpful. And I suspect, in retrospect, that... I always think with that, we ended up solving the problem very efficiently. I think there were fewer than the fingers on one hand of students whose university places were adversely affected. And, when you compare that with what happened last year, there's no comparison. I don't think about it now, but I think we dealt with the problem successfully, but we didn't deal with the politics of it successfully. And that's my fault because I was meant to be in charge of the politics. I think our lack of experience showed at that point, that's the way I'd say it.

**SF: These things do come round fairly regularly. Every decade it seems we have an A level problem. What would your advice be now to a minister who got the phone call the day before the results came out saying, "We've got a problem."?**

**EM:** Face it up, which I think I did. I did more interviews than I can remember, and No.10 were exceptionally supportive, exceptionally supportive. I would just say do the public-facing thing. Explain what you're doing, do all the interviews, explain, explain, explain, but make sure you've got really good people finding out what happened. That's the main thing. Don't try to do the public facing thing not knowing what the real problem is. You've got to be honest.

And that's what's difficult, to go out on the *Today* programme and say, "I don't know what's caused it, we're looking at it". That might manage for one day. It doesn't manage for two and yet you can't find out the answers to the problem in two [days]. So there's a mismatch between doing the job properly and not coming up with a superficial answer to get you through the *Today* programme. I think we did it properly and we didn't get an answer until the end of September, beginning of October. But I think we did it well. I think the evidence shows that. But I think the price we paid for that was that it was too much

time to allow a head of steam to build up about an inept government department and we didn't pop that balloon. We didn't get that right. I didn't get that right.

**CH: And you touched on it a bit there, but how did you find your relationship with the press overall?**

**EM:** I'd had a very good relationship with the press, but I found it difficult in that period. David had encouraged me to do a lot of media work as a junior opposition spokesperson and as junior minister. It's not that I don't like the media. And I think we had a lot of specialist education journalists at that time which you don't get as much now – there was Mike Baker, good people. And my relationship with them had always been good. I didn't like it because I felt that I was giving straight answers to the questions but the underlying politics on this issue were difficult.

But I suppose one of the turning points for me personally was when my family members, were approached. I do understand that this happens, but I found it difficult. And what you've got to do is just tough it out. I know that. And I didn't only find it difficult to tough it out, I didn't want to tough it out. It took the joy of the job away. In retrospect, I do realise that it was small compared to other things that happen. I completely understand that. I completely agree with it. But my reaction to it was that I didn't like it very much, whereas I think some people are much better at throwing it off.

**CH: Yes, because looking back, it feels like there was a series of things which started to turn...**

**EM:** Nothing goes right at that point...

**CH: No, exactly. You had the National Union of Teachers (NUT) Conference in March 2002 [when Morris was booed by teachers].**

**EM:** Oh, that was alright.

**CH: Was it?**

**EM:** If I get a bad time there, that's not seen as a problem.

**CH: Right. So your relationship with the teachers was still good?**

**EM:** No, the NUT conference was a misery. They are not, however, the teaching profession. In fact, Charles Clarke [secretary of state for education and skills 2002–04], on the basis of my last speech at the NUT conference, didn't go to an NUT meeting. He said: "If that's how you treat our people, no". Politically, however, it wasn't damaging. That was down as a success, believe it or not. It was just a miserable experience. I don't mind that.



**CH:** Yeah. And then there was also the criminal records checks issue, when many teachers had not been checked before the start of the school year...

**EM:** Criminal records checks, yeah. I was on holiday at the time.

**CH:** Yes, and you said you didn't know...

**EM:** I did it by phone and, by the time I got back, the wrong decision had been taken. I should have reversed it then, and I didn't.

**CH:** How much did all of this then contribute to your eventual decision to resign?

**EM:** I think, eventually, it means that you lose confidence.

**CH:** And was it the difference between minister of state and secretary of state?

**EM:** Yes. I think, yes. I think... yes. I remember saying to Tony when I said I want to go – I said, "I'm a really good minister of state but I don't like this as much". And we should be able to say that. But there is a hierarchy and I understand that. I'm exceptionally glad I've had the opportunity to do the cabinet, but I was much better at, and more happy in, the minister of state role. Not because it was more junior but because it was a delivery job: you actually do the things.

**CH:** When you said that you were going to resign, did they try and change your mind? And do you think there's more that either No.10 or the system generally can do to support secretaries of state to stay in the job?

**EM:** I'd go back to that summer; I'd go back to having got the job. I think that was the point at which our collective lack of experience as a department showed through. I think it's the fact that it was understaffed, both on the political side and the civil service side. I may be wrong, and I don't want to criticise the people in the post – they were really good – but we were an exceptionally inexperienced department all round at that point. With somebody more experienced that might have been alright – and I'm not disengaging my own responsibility from that – but I think in order to deal with the problem then, I would do something different a year before. I think that's what I'm saying. I don't blame No.10. No, I'm not... Tony was always available. I think he's great.

**CH:** Did he try and change your mind?

**EM:** He told me to go away and think about it. And I spoke to Alastair. But the fact that I made an appointment to go and see him, to say, "I'm not sure I want this job", shows that I'd made my mind up. And they can't afford wasted days on that. A lot of people in the department were desperate for me to change my mind, but I just needed the space.

**CH: And in the time that you had off, what did you do? Did they give you breathing space?**

**EM:** Breathing space. Reconnected, did a lot more constituency work, reflected on what had happened, tried to put it into perspective, tried to get, yeah – a bit like a football player with an injury trying to get themselves back on the boat. I didn't find it easy though.

**CH: And did you want to come back into a ministerial post?**

**EM:** No, never even dreamt of it. Never dreamt of it, no.

**CH: How did you find coming back as minister of state for the arts?**

**EM:** [I] wasn't sure I wanted to take it. Tessa [Jowell], secretary of state for culture, media and sport 2001–07] wanted me to do it because we got on very well. [I] wasn't sure I wanted to take it, wasn't my area. But I think I knew. I talked to David Putnam [a former film producer and member of the House of Lords] who was a really good friend of mine, and he said, "Take it. It will give you a focus." That sounds really selfish and I'm really conscious of that. But it did give me a focus. It did get me back on track, and I loved it. But without him, I wouldn't have taken it, I would have said no.

**CH: Now for a couple of reflective questions. Firstly, you're now in the House of Lords. How has your experience in government helped you in terms of what you've been doing in the years since?**

**EM:** It's been invaluable. The House of Lords is really weird. When you [Sam] and Michael [Gove] were in the department, sometimes you came forward with a change in legislation and most of us there would know why that legislation had been put in in the first place. But departments have no historic memory. And suddenly we say, "Look, that's great, but you're recreating the problem that it was initially trying to solve. You need to do something different." And ministers in the Lords can change their minds quietly and we just wanted it changed. So having that wisdom and experience really helps to make the law better. It absolutely does. For all the Lords' weaknesses, I'm under no doubt that we are really good amenders of legislation.

Although I make fewer speeches at teacher conferences, I really only address one topic and that is the relationship between politics and education. I try to explain to them the journey since 1988 how essentially politics and education should have been on the same side and why they've not been. To try to give them some understanding of why politicians make it so difficult for them and why the relationship between the two is bad.

**SF:** One of the reflective questions I wanted to ask was, has the fact that you've done a lot of work in education since your time in the department changed your mind at all about anything you did in the department? So I'm just thinking, obviously academies were a small thing then but have now become such a big thing.

**EM:** I wouldn't have taken the road that you [Sam] did, or Tony did, on academies. I think it's been the biggest waste of time, money, energy, political resource, goodwill. It goes, basically, 2012, the Tories go for standalone academies. Utter disaster. In 2002, my problem with the Adonis approach would be that you'd get fragmented schools that didn't hold together, that didn't learn from each other. So 10 years of ignoring that, and then you get standalone academies. Then, in 2014, the Tory government eventually realises that schools are fragmented, they're not showing good practice, they're isolated from each other, there's no room to hide. That was evident to anyone from 2000, and I get really cross that no one listened.

So what they tried to do, having fragmented the system, is try to build it up again into multi-academy trusts. That's where we are now. It's been an utter waste of time. What the Labour Party academy programme did was to take a school that was bottom of the pile, like a kid who was bottom of the pile, and said, "Come on, we are going to work with you to change this. We'll provide more money, the status, there will be a lot of people supporting you including the prime minister, you've got all these people helping you." We were growing their confidence and their capacity to improve. That's why the local authority could have been one of those partners. It didn't matter, and that's why it worked with the early academies. I never thought that it was model for the school system of this country. And I think we've paid a huge price for trying to make it happen.

**CH:** What is the achievement you're most proud of?

**EM:** Teacher workforce reform. Partly because I think that was the occasion where I best brought together my experience as a teacher and my job as a politician. I'm immensely proud. And I'm not saying it's perfect and it's had to have further work. But if I go back to that green paper, I still recognise it when I go in schools. I feel the job's worthwhile actually when I do see that.

**CH:** And as a final question, what advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be effective in office? And is there any particular advice you'd give to female ministers around navigating that?

**EM:** Yeah. I'd say it's about being brave, because essentially the things I complain didn't happen, I should have done more about. So be brave, build your links. And the other bit of advice would be, never, ever assume that anyone else is coping much better than you. They're probably struggling just as much as you but don't actually tell you about it. And I think that, when we all talk retrospectively now, everyone struggles a bit in politics. No one talks about it, and I think, for women, they're far more likely to want to talk about it

and solve the problem that way rather than blustering through. And politics isn't a great environment for people who work like that. I would also say to them that it is a great job, make the most of it and follow your instinct.

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**Institute for Government**  
**2 Carlton Gardens, London SW1Y 5AA**  
**United Kingdom**

Tel: **+44 (0) 20 7747 0400**  
Fax: **+44 (0) 20 7766 0700**