

# Ministers Reflect

## Gavin Barwell



9 December 2019

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2010–17: Conservative MP for Croydon Central

## Government career

2017–19: Chief of staff, Number 10

2016–17: Minister of state for housing and planning, MHCLG

2016–17: Minister of state for London, MHCLG

2013–16: Government whip

**Gavin Barwell was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Catherine Haddon on 9 December 2019 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

Gavin Barwell discusses his time as housing minister and his work with Theresa May as her chief of staff following the 2017 general election. He also reflects on the benefits of working as a special adviser and a whip before becoming a minister.

Gavin Barwell spoke in more detail about his time as chief of staff at an Institute for Government event in January 2020. You can watch the event [on our website](#).

**Tim Durrant (TD):** Let’s start by talking about when you first entered government as a minister, you became minister of state for housing and planning and minister for London, at what was then DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government].

**Gavin Barwell (GB):** I did a job before that, so the first two years when I was in government, I was a whip. I came in as a junior whip, then a sort of mid-rank whip, and then I was number three in the Whips’ Office and I was responsible for day-to-day management of the [House of Commons] chamber, making sure that we won the votes, but also overseeing the huge effort that goes into ensuring that ministers are well supported by their colleagues in the chamber.

**Catherine Haddon (CH):** Does being a whip first help you with being a minister later on?

**GB:** Yes. I think if I were prime minister, I would try to get as many policy ministers as possible to be whips first, and I would also encourage a little bit more of an interchange between them. The reality is most MPs want to be a policy minister, they want to take decisions to improve their constituency and the country as a whole, and they’re less enthusiastic about being whips because they haven’t got policy responsibility and they don’t get to speak in the House. But actually understanding how Parliament works, I think, is crucial in two ways to being a policy minister. The first, the obvious one, is that quite often you may have to get legislation through the House [of Commons] and understanding how that process actually works behind the scenes makes that a lot easier. Secondly, just on a political level, understanding the sort of mood of the House and how and what the House wants from ministers and how it expects ministers to handle different situations helps you a lot as well. So, I found the time in the Whips’ Office incredibly interesting and rewarding and I think it did help me when I went on to be a policy minister afterwards.

**TD:** On that policy minister role, what was your first day like? How did you find out about the job?

**GB:** It was quite a prolonged reshuffle, I think. Theresa [May] had taken over, the leadership election had been cut short – obviously there had been an expectation that

there would be quite a long contest between her and Andrea Leadsom and then Andrea had withdrawn – and so I think they'd had to put a government together quicker than they had anticipated they were going to have to do. There were a couple of things that happened, foreign policy issues that I can't remember now off the top of my head, that meant the reshuffle got paused a couple of times. So, it's quite a nerve-racking time, if you're a minister! I always used to say when I was in Number 10 when we did reshuffles, the easiest ones were when you brought in a backbench MP and made them a minister for the first time, because they knew by the fact that they'd been called to Number 10 that it had to be good news. Whereas every reshuffle after that, you can either just be left, not get a call at all and just stay where you are, or you go down or you go up, and you don't know when the call comes what it's going to be. But the first time, you know where you stand. I think in the end my wife was fed up of me being grumpy around the house waiting for this call and sent me out into the garden to do some work. So, I was half way up a tree cutting down a branch when Theresa May actually called me, and I had the conversation in the boughs of this tree, which is slightly bizarre!

**TD: Did she give you any sort of directions as to what she wanted you to focus on in the role?**

**GB:** Only briefly. Actually, the minister for London thing came a little bit later down the line, the job originally given to me was minister of state for housing and planning. She was very clear that she wanted housing moved up the political agenda, and she wanted in particular to tackle the housing crisis and put together a white paper to address that. So, that was the initial brief. I think she referred to homelessness as well, although that wasn't actually my portfolio, there was another minister, Marcus Jones, who was responsible for policy on homelessness, who I worked with. To be fair to her, she had to go through 60 or 70 calls, so it was probably a three- or four-minute conversation, which gave me a clear steer on what the number one priority was, but no more than that.

**TD: When you arrived in the department, what was it like?**

**GB:** Well, actually, I got a call from my private secretary, shortly after the prime minister spoke to me, and we had [departmental] questions on the Monday. So that is a proper baptism of fire. I think they dispatched some initial briefing to me, and then when I turned up, I was greeted by this – and I don't mean to be rude, because a lot of hard work had gone into it – sort of ludicrous lever arch file, with 170 different dividers in it, which was totally unusable [*laughter*]. This is my point about having been a whip, you know what works in the House. The first few hours were literally just pretty much all about that preparation. I think I had a chat with the secretary of state, Saj [Sajid Javid], because he was new in as well, but other than that it was pretty much all devoted to getting ourselves ready for oral questions as the initial focus.

**TD: And how did those first questions go?**

**GB:** One of the things I would say to any new minister is that the thing to do if you don't know something is to just say "I don't know the answer to that yet, but I'll get back to you," because the House is quite generous – they know you're new in, they don't expect you to be an expert at that point. You're better being honest if you don't know an answer than trying to pretend you do and saying something silly. In a way, people have it harder if they have questions after a week, or a week and a half, because then they'll expect you to know a bit more, but you've actually only had a week, which is not really a long time to get into a subject.

**TD: What was working with Sajid Javid and the rest of the ministerial team in DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] like?**

**GB:** I found Saj a fantastic boss and secretary of state, and I was very lucky in that I think we had a common view about the need to get more housing built, and that we were going to have to slightly push and challenge some of our colleagues to do that. I think within the Conservative parliamentary party you had a span of views, from people who shared our view that this was a crisis essentially and had to be addressed, and others who, perfectly understandably, were getting a lot of pressure about the scale of development from constituents and were a little bit more reticent about it as an issue.

So, I think we were both of the same mind, and that helps a lot. To me, it was the perfect relationship, because he wanted to go out there and evangelise and make the big, in-principle argument, and he was always very happy whenever he was doing any detailed policy work to have me in the room. So, it felt like we were working the two of us as a team. I think, without ascribing blame to anyone, he had a difficult relationship with Anna Soubry at BEIS [Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, where Javid was secretary of state 2015–16] before, where she'd been a minister of state but attending Cabinet, and so felt that she had a little more space of her own as a result. I was very clear with him that I'd never go round the back to Number 10, I'd work through him, and so we had a great relationship, and worked really well together – he was like the perfect boss essentially, so I was very lucky.

**TD: What about with the other ministers in the team?**

**GB:** Yeah, so Marcus Jones [parliamentary under-secretary of state at DCLG, 2015–18] was the minister who dealt with homelessness, and he's a very solid citizen, top guy, so that was a good relationship as well. Then Andy Percy [parliamentary under-secretary of state at DCLG, 2016–17] was doing the devolution, Northern Powerhouse agenda, and Nick Bourne was the Lords minister, but he was more focused on community relations, community cohesion, that sort of thing, so it was probably Saj and Marcus that I was working closely with, but it was a good team.

**TD: What about the department? What were your impressions of the officials?**

**GB:** I am a big fan of our civil service. I had worked years previously in the sort of predecessor department, the old Department of the Environment, I was a special adviser there in my early to mid-20s. The permanent secretary at DCLG, Melanie Dawes, had done a really good job over the 18 months preceding when I got there. I think the department had got a little bit demoralised, it was an unprotected department within the spending reviews of that period, so she'd brought in some really good people from the Cabinet Office and from the Treasury to bolster up the department, give it more self-confidence to hold its own in the internal debate with the Treasury. There were some very good officials, I thought it was a really good blend, because you had some people like Sally Randall [then director of social housing at DCLG] who was working on affordable housing and had worked in that area most of her career and had a real passion for it, but you'd also got some really good people from other departments who'd been brought in and had strengthened the intellectual heft of the department. I thought the quality of the team that I was working with was very, very good.

**TD: You also took on the minister for London job. How did your two roles work together, and how much of a role was it?**

**GB:** It wasn't a huge role. I think the feeling was the government needed somebody to be a) a media spokesman for the government in London, but b) a sort of interface with the mayor, because the mayor would write to every minister and some would engage and some wouldn't get back to him, and I think he was sometimes getting frustrated with that. I think the prime minister thought having someone who is both able to put out our side of the story in London, now that we don't have a Conservative running the mayoralty, and is also able to be an interface with the mayor would work well. Housing was one of the key things he [Sadiq Khan] was interested in talking to the government about, and I was a London MP, so I expect those were the two factors that drove that appointment.

I think it worked well for the period that I was doing it. Obviously we're from two different political parties, but I found Sadiq someone who you could strike a deal with. The main thing that we did in my particular policy area during that time is we arrived at a financial settlement for London for affordable housing, which gave him most of what he wanted and got most of the things that we wanted as well. And he was very generous about it, he went out and said "This is the best settlement that London's ever had," and that was very useful to me in the House, defending against pressure from opposition MPs. I think we got on well and it was a sensible idea. I think the period where we haven't had one was probably a mistake, I think it's useful, and the government's going to have to think more generally, now that you've got more of these mayoralties, about how it interfaces with them.

**TD: Do you think that is a useful model for where central government is of a different colour to devolved government?**

**GB:** Yeah, I mean, by my nature, I am not very tribalist and my view was, people had elected a Labour mayor, and at a national level, the Conservatives hadn't won an outright majority but clearly we were the largest party and the only party capable of forming a government, one that could command a majority in the House. People put us there and would expect us to work together as grownups, and that involves compromises and I found there was a willingness on both sides to try and find some stuff where we could move things forward together.

**TD: In housing, you worked with local authorities, you worked with the private sector – how did you find that world?**

**GB:** The first thing that happens when you come in as a minister is you get this sort of induction programme, where you'll get the lead official for a particular bit of the policy area who will come up and say to you: "Right, this is what we're doing at the moment in this area, these are the challenges, these are the criticisms that are being made of the government, this is the stuff we've got in the pipeline." Partly to get the initial feedback from ministers about what they want to prioritise and what they don't, but really to get you read in on it. And then once you've had those internal meetings, they then begin to bring in the major external stakeholders. So, in the housing portfolio, that would be the National Housing Federation, which is the collective body of housing associations, the main private house builders, and then you've got bodies representing smaller builders and local councils, both because of their planning authority role but also because they're often increasingly wanting to get back into building houses themselves.

One of the things that slightly surprised me about it was, I felt, that housing policy had got into this weird position where it was a choice between whether you were either pro private house builders or you were pro affordable housing. I just wanted everybody to build more houses, so the kind of message I tried to strike in these initial meetings was "Look, you're all allies in the job that the prime minister has given us, to get housebuilding in this country nearly doubled, and we need all of you to do more, so you're all our allies and we want to work with you to get this done." For whatever reason, those relations hadn't been in the right place previously, because there had been a perception that the government was just interested in home ownership and not in other bits of the policy agenda.

**TD: What about other bits of government thinking about homeownership or housing generally?**

**GB:** So, this has been my main critique, right? That the thing is that it's completely dysfunctional. We'd come in, I think it would have been July [2016], when the reshuffle was done, and the white paper was eventually published just after Christmas. It was

meant to be published before, but it was eventually published just after Christmas. But the process of putting it together was incredibly difficult and it felt to me completely byzantine. What happens is you get to the point where you've got a text – the secretary of state and I had worked with our officials, through constant new iterations, to get it into the place where we wanted it – and you've got something you can send out to people and say: "Right, here's a first cut of it, what does everyone think?" And then people write letters back. I remember quite near the end, when we were down to maybe five or six bits that everyone was arguing about, there was one occasion when I was in on a Sunday and these two letters came in almost simultaneously, one from the Treasury, one from Number 10, telling us to change the same paragraph in diametrically opposite directions. So, what are you meant to do?

One of the problems with housing policy is that MHCLG [DCLG was renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2018] doesn't own some of the most important levers. So, there's a whole load of market interventions, Help to Buy being the obvious example, but also some of the housing guarantees, and stamp duty, that are HMT [Her Majesty's Treasury] policy leads, and then there's a whole heap of money being spent by DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] on housing benefit, which I always felt could be spent more productively than it was being spent. But you don't control those policy areas. And certainly, with regard to the Treasury, they have officials who are effectively man-marking each department. And I was like "Well, why can't we just invite them to my meeting, why can't we get them in the room," and then say "If we've got a difference of opinion, let's argue it out and work out what our position is," rather than this slightly weird system where we send something out and then I have to sit and wait until they write me a letter back saying what they think about it.

It worked a little bit better with Number 10. Sajid got into a slightly difficult relationship with Number 10 over green belt issues, and there was a little bit of briefing back and forth, so I ended up in a position of being the go-between. Nick Timothy [Theresa May's then co-chief of staff] had a real interest in housing policy and I found him excellent, because you could go and see him and say, "Look, this is where we want to go," and he would give you the prime minister's view. You could argue with him, you could change his mind if you won the argument, but also, really importantly, if he said to you, "Right, that's a deal, we'll go with that," Number 10 would then stick by his word. You then wrote in with the agreed form of words, and you'd get an okay back.

In terms of what a minister wants from a key prime ministerial adviser in that situation, he absolutely had it: he had an interest in the issue, he had a mind to engage in the argument, and he had the authority to then, if he did a deal with you, carry that deal through. So, that worked well with Number 10. It was harder with the Treasury, because I couldn't ever actually get face-to-face with the officials who were giving the advice to the chancellor, to say to them: "What is the problem here and what's your answer?" So,



I think that the departmentalisation of government is sometimes frustrating to ministers because it's not easy to unpick the policy differences.

**TD: Were there any major unexpected challenges you faced in that role?**

**GB:** No, but a few weeks after I left the role there was the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower. I will probably be asked to give evidence to the second phase of the inquiry, but what we've had out from the first phase already tells us that there were materials on that building that the government believe should not be on any buildings. And not just that building, we know that there's a whole number of high-rise buildings that have got these materials, so there's clearly been some kind of systemic failure in building control.

**CH: Grenfell occurred quite soon after you had moved over to working as chief of staff. Did knowing the sector, knowing the policy brief, and knowing what your successor ought to be thinking about help your ability to advise the prime minister on Grenfell? Because it was a very difficult area for central government to respond to, given it was something that obviously involved local government as well.**

**GB:** I think we collectively failed the prime minister by not getting her to visit the site on the first day. And she said this herself publicly, she bitterly regretted that she didn't do that. She spent a huge amount of time with survivors afterwards, building up a relationship with them. I don't know if you saw, for example, there was a statement in the House a few weeks before prorogation on the first phase of the Grenfell Inquiry, she spoke very movingly and got a great reception from a lot of the survivors' groups. She has, over time, been able to build up a relationship with them. But the failure to go on that first day was a huge mistake which made the government's job of responding to a terrible tragedy even more difficult.

On the policy side, not just on that issue but more generally on housing, it was clearly an area where I had expertise because I had done the job, but on Grenfell I faced criticism because I had been the housing minister until just a few weeks before and the initial policy challenge was profound. I can remember talking to an official in DCLG who was the expert in this area, and it had begun to become apparent that this material was on the building, which in his mind should not have been on any high-rise building, and then it was a question of "Well, how quickly can we find out how many other buildings that material is on?" And also, if you take the time to read the report, the first stage of the Grenfell review, it is apparent that the cladding was absolutely a critical issue, but it wasn't the only one. This official said to me: "This can't happen unless there's three or four things that have all gone wrong together." There was a huge initial challenge, not just because you had to try and address the needs of that community and people who had been traumatised and left without a home, but also because of the wider implications for the buildings all across the country that could have this kind of cladding.

**CH:** You were a parliamentary private secretary to Greg Clark [minister of state for decentralisation in DCLG, 2010–12] and Michael Gove [secretary of state for education, 2010–14] during the coalition government. Not a lot of people know about what that role involves – what was it like for you?

**GB:** I think they're very personal relationships, and the job that you are doing depends a lot on the minister that you're working for. So, I had two quite different experiences – both of them very positive from my point of view, but quite different. The first thing to say is that the PPS [parliamentary private secretary] role tends to be the first thing you do when you're moved up from being a backbencher and maybe the prime minister has a view to making you a minister at some point – the PPS role is like a stepping stone to that. In terms of what you're meant to get out of it, it's a sort of learning experience, you see a senior minister at work, what they do and how they do it, and you learn from that so that when you then get a ministerial job what's going on doesn't come as a complete surprise.

With Greg [Clark], he had this interesting role, I think his title was minister for cities and decentralisation or something like that, and it spanned a number of government departments, so that he had a foot in the Treasury and a foot in DCLG, and a bit in the Cabinet Office, and I think there was a bit in BEIS. It was spread over several different bits, and as a result, what he really wanted was someone that could actually support him on some of the policy work. I think, in that sense, I was luckier than most PPSs in that I got an insight into some of that policy work and attended policy meetings. When I did the job for Michael [Gove], as secretary of state for education, that was a more traditional version of the job, where what you basically are is a set of parliamentary eyes and ears for the Cabinet minister. You are trying to get them feedback from your own colleagues and also sometimes from opposition MPs about particular issues that are causing concern over in the House. You're also trying to ensure that they're well supported by colleagues on your side when they appear in Parliament, whether it's department questions, or an opposition day debate or a piece of legislation that they're bringing forward. You're part of the parliamentary operation, supporting the minister, and I think some ministers are better than others at understanding how important those PPS roles can be.

One of the things that I found is that when I'd had this whips job where I was in charge of the [House of Commons] chamber operation, pretty much anyone on our side, and sometimes even opposition MPs, would come up to you, because they knew you would know when the vote was coming and what it was about, and say "What's this vote about?" and you'd be the go-to expert on that. And then, I found I'd only been housing minister for about four or five weeks, and people were still coming up to me and saying "What's this one about?" and I'd go "I haven't got a clue, I just turned up here five minutes ago, I don't know what we're voting on!"

So, when you are a minister and you're really immersed in your work, particularly if you're preparing something big like a white paper, and you're spending all hours on your area

of government policy, it's really helpful to have someone saying to you, "Well, this is what's going on in Parliament," and "these are the other issues that are bubbling away", because, you're quite removed from Parliament, you spend most of your working life in the department. If you're not careful you can slightly lose touch with what colleagues are thinking, what the House as a whole is thinking and the wider political debate. I think ministers who use their PPS well use them as a source of parliamentary intelligence, not just about the things that their department is responsible for, but more generally about what's going on, what the mood of the House is.

**CH: Does anyone give you any support or guidance on what's involved in being a whip or PPS, and on how to be effective in those roles?**

**GB:** No. I suppose with both of them you observe those you've seen do it before you. Greg Hands was the Treasury PPS when I first started, and he was very good at organising events for colleagues, you know getting people before the chancellor, and then people would reciprocate, so if he said "This is an important event, I want everyone there," because he looked after people well, people would come. He was a good role model on how to do the PPS job well.

I think I had three different whips before I went into the Whips' Office, so you at least saw how your whip interacted with you as an MP. I mean, I would say a modern whips' office should have two main functions. One function is basically about the chamber, so obviously bottom line what the prime minister expects the Whips' Office to do is to win the votes, but also to make sure that there's a good and slick government operation in the chamber day to day. The second side of it is what in the commercial world you'd call your personnel department. How well do you know your MPs? What are their ambitions? What are they looking to do for the next few years? And sometimes they'll get into trouble, either with political difficulties of one kind or another or with things in their personal lives that affect how they are at work. Anne Milton was, during my last year in the Whips' Office, the deputy chief whip [2015–17], and I think she really advanced significantly how the Conservative Whips' Office dealt with the parliamentary party from a sort of HR point of view.

And the two functions are interlinked. If you read stories of whipping in the '50s and '60s, it sounds like there was a lot of barking orders at people and intimidation, and that doesn't work today. If you try and treat people like that, they're not going to do anything for you. What I found was you wanted to develop a good personal relationship with the MPs you were responsible for, and generally if you treated them well, and you cut them a bit of slack, then they would respond – broadly speaking, in life, people do behave to you as you behave to them! You have a flock, as a whip, that's the term we use on the Conservative side anyway, so you have about 20 Conservative MPs that you're responsible for.

Some people just go in and do one stint [as a whip], but because I did three stints, my flock gradually evolved over time, and got more and more full of what, from the government's point of view, were quite difficult people, for one reason or another – they were rebels, or they weren't very reliable at turning out to vote – and you had to find out what the problem was from their point of view, and understand where they were coming from. You might think "Well, I'm never going to achieve perfection here, but can I get us into a better situation?" And that was all about interpersonal skills and getting to know these people. And you could work with some people and not others, you know? Some people you manage to hit it off with and find a way, others you don't.

**CH: And does it help that you had a previous career in and around CCHQ [Conservative Central Headquarters], as a special adviser and so forth, you were quite immersed in the party in all of that? If you're coming in fresh as a minister, these stories of you know whips as an MP, is that helpful?**

**GB:** Yeah, I mean, obviously if you know people it helps. If you know everyone in the parliamentary party, and I did because of the jobs I'd done before, that's got to give you a good head start. And, certainly the last stint I did [in the Whips' Office], I was the number three person, I did the induction for the 2015 intake of MPs and I did a sort of daily briefing for them every morning. So, they came into work every morning and I'd say right, this is what's on today, these are the times we're going to need you for votes, here is the thing today we'd be most keen for you to help out on. I think if you spoke to anyone from that intake, they were still coming six or eight months later when they knew the procedure, you know they could have perfectly well worked out what was going to happen from the order paper by that point, so people valued that.

I think like in anything in life, it's personal... I mean, I think the reason that I love politics, is to me it's the interaction between ideas and people. Yes, it's about ideology and what do you want to do for the country, but you can't do those things unless you can persuade people to vote for you. And then you're in a very weird dynamic in a parliamentary party, with people who are your team mates, but they're also your rivals for the top jobs. How you form relationships with them and how you form relationships with the civil servants when you go into a department, when you're trying to get the bureaucracy to do what you want to do, that's the thing that I find interesting about politics. There are these two different things, and it's one of the reasons it's so tough, because it's very rare to find people with all of the skills required.

**TD:** From a bigger picture point of view, you were involved in government in one form or another for a number of years: as a special adviser before 1997; a whip during the coalition government; a minister in the majority government after 2015; and then as chief of staff in the post-2017 minority government. How did those different parliamentary arithmetics affect how government did things?

**GB:** So, I was a special adviser, 1995 to 1997, at the end of John Major's government. And that was obviously an incredibly tough period for two reasons. First of all, the government's majority, although it was notionally a majority government, had pretty much disappeared by the end of that Parliament. And it was also tired, you know the Conservatives had been in government, no political party likes to admit this, but we'd just been in too long. It was tired and there was the European issue that has proved so difficult for the Conservative Party, the Maastricht [Treaty] process and after that, that's the first period where Europe had probably become very difficult. So, for all of those reasons, that was not an easy period at all.

The coalition, I think, was probably the easiest of the four. The only difficult thing really about the coalition government was getting agreement in the Quad [the senior decision-making body, consisting of David Cameron, [Nick Clegg](#), George Osborne and Danny Alexander]. Now, I was too junior in that period to be witness to any of those particular policy arguments. But I think once that group of four people had come to a view about what they wanted to do, the coalition actually had very good parliamentary arithmetic in the House of Commons.

I never got round the top table for that government, but towards the end of the coalition government I was reasonably senior in the Whips' Office. One of the things that its strong parliamentary position allowed, is that sometimes, if we had an issue which a section of the Conservative Party or a section of the Liberal Democrats were uncomfortable with what the Quad had decided, you could sort of let people not be present [in the Commons], because you didn't need everyone to vote for it in order to get it through. So, as whips, you could sometimes be a bit sensitive about what you're asking people on particular votes, everyone was conscious that another election was coming up. So, I would say the coalition period from the simple test of once the government had decided what it wants to do, how easy is it to get that through Parliament, was the easiest. Now, obviously it's not easy having two parties work together, although I think history will probably judge it was easier than a lot of people thought it might be.

The Conservative majority government, under first David Cameron and then Theresa May, between 2015 and 2017, I think initially was very easy. Labour were crestfallen after the 2015 election, very few people in the Conservative Party had expected to win, so there was as real sort of air of "wow". But as soon as you got into preparing for the referendum [on EU membership], it obviously became more difficult, and then post-referendum, the prime minister and chancellor left the government, and there were some big personnel changes. I think of that period from July [2016] when Theresa became

prime minister through to the 2017 election, again in a strong political tradition, she was doing incredibly well in the polls in that period. To a degree, you know, British politics, not quite to the same extent, follows the American principle that the stronger the prime minister's political standing in the country, the stronger their standing in the party and in Parliament as well.

Then, post-2017, when we were a minority government, it was incredibly difficult, the whole period. I mean, I would say, we probably had a period of about six months where it felt like we were, if not in control, at least in a reasonable position and I would say that was from Christmas 2017, when we got the Joint Report agreed [between the UK and the EU on potential arrangements for the Irish border]. And then, in the March [2018] European Council, we got the implementation period agreed. I think Theresa was seen to handle both the attempted assassination of the Skripals by the Russian state and the Syria intervention on chemical weapons very well, and those issues played to her natural strengths. I suppose that was the period also when the first rumblings of the anti-Semitism crisis that's absorbed the Labour Party were seen. So, we probably had a six-month period there, where you felt okay, we're getting back into a stronger political position. And then really from [the meeting in] Chequers [the country residence of the prime minister], from the resignation of David Davis and Boris Johnson onwards [in July 2018], it was just incredibly difficult after that.

**CH: Let's go to the beginning then of that time. Talk to us about how you became chief of staff.**

**GB:** I don't really know, obviously I wasn't in the room for the crucial conversations. My result [in the 2017 general election] was declared about five or six o'clock in the morning I would have thought, on the Friday morning. At that point, you'd obviously been up for about 24 hours, so I went home, got some sleep, got up probably mid-afternoon on the Friday and had hundreds of text messages which were a mixture of friends saying sorry and broadcasters saying come and tell us what you think about Theresa May's campaign. And so, I thought I'm not going to say anything today. Let's think on it overnight.

I then did two broadcasts on the Saturday morning. And as I came out of, well, shortly after I did the second interview, I got a call from the Number 10 switchboard saying the prime minister wanted to talk to me. And so, I sort of assumed she was phoning round the people who lost their seats to say commiserations and that's how she started, and then she asked me if I wanted to be her chief of staff, so, it was a sort of surreal thing. And then I started getting text messages saying "I was going to text you to say sorry, but now I hear..." so it was very strange.

**CH:** Did you have a sense of what you wanted to do? Did she have a sense of what she wanted to do differently obviously? She had two departing staff who had, shall we say, a reputation around Whitehall [Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, former chiefs of staff to Theresa May]. Did you have a sense of her wanting to do anything differently?

**GB:** Well, the first thing I would say is that – this is going to sound incredibly naïve – but the scale of that reputation came as a real shock to me. Because, I'd been absorbed in doing the job of housing minister and then absorbed in the ultimately futile attempt to hold my seat, I probably wasn't as up on Westminster gossip as I should have been. I didn't really know Fiona very well, but I knew...as I said to you earlier on, when we were talking about housing policy, I'd worked with Nick on housing policy and found him first class. So, when I came in, obviously I was aware that there was sort of a backlash against them because of the election result and they were sort of carrying the can as it were for that. But I was actually surprised in the conversations I had with ministers in those first couple of days at how upset some of them were with the way that they had behaved, because it was counter to my own experience of Nick.

In terms of the PM, as I said she called me up on the Saturday and offered me the role, and I went down to see her that day, she was in her constituency, and we had a long conversation, because, the thing I was really worried about, was that the person who is the prime minister's chief of staff has normally known them for a long time before they're chief of staff.

And as I was subsequently to discover, a big part of the role is to speak for the prime minister, because people can't get to the prime minister, they can get to you. So, people will come to you and say: "I'm thinking of doing this, would the prime minister be okay with that?" So, you have to know the prime minister's mind in order to do the job properly. So, I thought, well, look, I need to go and see her, and really understand what it is she wants to do now and why she thinks the election has gone wrong. Because although I'd been an MP with her, I didn't know her that well.

**CH:** That was always something that was talked about in terms of Theresa May, as to whether or not backbenchers, whether MPs, or even ministers, can get to know her and how she operates.

**GB:** Yeah, so she would say herself, she's not clubbable, she doesn't spend her time as MP wandering round all of the Westminster bars, socialising with MPs all the time, but you know, I think that, for me, when I was her minister, that wasn't a problem at all. But as chief of staff, I needed to understand what she thought, so we probably had like a three- or four-hour conversation, where we went through things in depth. We started off talking about the election, I wanted to understand why she thought it had gone wrong, and she had a similar view to me which was good, because starting on the same page about what you think the problems were [was important].



But then, I sort of talked to her about what are the things that she'd done that I was really proud of and what were the things that she'd said that I disagreed with, as a way of trying to find out what she really thought about some of these things, and so I could understand her properly. And I put a lot of weight on that first conversation. I think it was really important for building a relationship, between the two of us because the person has to trust you and to be able to share with you privately, when it's just the two of you in the room, what they're thinking, fearing, hoping for whatever, and you've got to have that kind of close relationship. Obviously, I was conscious that a lot of people had said "Oh, she's really shy and difficult to get to know," but that wasn't my personal experience of her.

**CH: What are the different roles then of a chief of staff because, to many people, it's a very behind-the-scenes role. They get, as you say, a lot of the blame for Number 10 and how it operates, but how much control do they have over how it all works?**

**GB:** So, the first thing that I'd say is, even I, who had worked in politics at all levels for a long period of time, was surprised when I actually did the job, just how important the job is and just how much the person doing the job sees relative to senior ministers. In terms of the role, I would say there are seven bits to it. The first is the obvious thing, you are the prime minister's most senior political adviser. So, there are definitely moments when it's just you and them in the room and you're talking to them about what to do in a particularly difficult situation. You manage the other political advisers, the ones in Downing Street very closely and the ones elsewhere in the government a bit. It's a slightly weird situation, the prime minister appoints all the special advisers but, obviously, if you're the special adviser to the chancellor, your prime loyalty is going to be to the chancellor, so you work on a dotted line through to Number 10.

You then work really closely with the prime minister's principal private secretary, the most senior civil servant in Downing Street, to run the building. And I think that is about setting the tone, essentially, because Number 10 is always going to be an incredibly stressful and difficult place to work, but you can at least make sure it's a fun place to work and, for whatever reason, when I came in that wasn't the atmosphere. And so, I worked quite hard to try and create the right sort of environment, essentially.

You then have a role working with the wider team of private secretaries to try to get the government machine to do what the prime minister wants. And my experience of that, I think I'm right in saying there was a row about Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell [Tony Blair's press secretary and chief of staff respectively] being given the power to direct civil servants. My experience of that is it's completely unnecessary, I think civil servants will look at the person doing the job that I did and ask themselves two questions. Does this person know the prime minister's mind? And is this person reporting what the prime minister wants or their own personal views? And as long as they think that you're behaving with integrity, and that you have influence and understand the prime minister's mind, then if you say the prime minister would like you to do this, then they'll do it. You



don't need the power to direct them – as long as they think you are speaking for the prime minister, then that's fine.

I was thinking about the sort of single anecdote that I think captures the job. Someone bought me a book when I started the job, which I think is a brilliant book for anyone who's interested in politics, called *The Gatekeepers*. It's the history of the Office of Chief of Staff to the President of the United States. And there is a chapter on each chief of staff and it's done very fairly because it sort of describes what the outside world thought of this chief of staff, and then it gives that chief of staff the chance to respond to some of the criticisms that some people have made, and then at the end, asks them for one piece of advice. And one of them said something at the end of one of these chapters, that really struck a chord with me, which was as chief of staff, the important word is staff, not chief, because loads of people are going to come to you for decisions because they can't get to the prime minister. And so, it's very easy to start to believe that you're an important person, but actually, you're there to serve the prime minister, you're a member of the prime minister's staff. And the thing I probably found hardest about it was, I'd gone from having a voice of my own, and being a participant in the political debate, to a job which was far more at the centre and far more influential in one sense, but one where you didn't have a voice, you were there to get the prime minister's bidding done across government.

And then very quickly, the final three things I would say, there's a gatekeeper role, so you sit right outside the prime minister's office, and to a degree, along with the rest of the private office, you have control over who gets in and who doesn't get in. You see nearly everything the prime minister sees, different chiefs of staff will have different levels of security clearance, I suspect, but you see nearly everything that the prime minister sees. And you can go to pretty much any meeting that the prime minister is having with anyone. I would say, you know 80 or 90% of the things the prime minister did, I was sitting in the room, with her for those. And then finally, I spent quite a lot of time sort of brokering deals with other ministers. Now that might be different had I done it in the first year of her premiership, because I suspect that the point when I came in she wasn't in the same position of political authority within the government that she was in that first year, because of the election result. So, there was quite a lot of bartering to try and get things through, and often I was the go-between, between her and a key minister.

**TD: You obviously left Number 10 when Theresa May stood down as prime minister. What was that process like, that transition?**

**GB:** You know, it's obviously not easy. I think that we had it a lot easier than our predecessors working for David Cameron, because they had the referendum result and then a very quick decision from the prime minister, that was it and done. Whereas, we probably had a seven- or eight-week period from when Theresa announced that she'd decided that she was going to stand down as leader of the Conservative Party to actually leaving as prime minister. And actually, I think you can argue that two or three of the

things that we did during that period were quite big, you know, the net zero policy announcement [on carbon emissions] for example.

Also, in a way, and it's a slightly strange thing to say, that eight weeks was a very fulfilling bit of the job. We couldn't do anything more on Brexit. I mean, the reason I think it had come to the end of the road was because we couldn't get the Brexit deal through and clearly someone else had to come in and have a go at doing that. So, if you like, it was the only period of the job where you didn't have Brexit dominating and could say okay, we've got eight weeks, within the realms of possibility, what can we get done in eight weeks? And the answer was quite a lot; actually, you know, it was a really interesting period of the job.

The last day, I think in a way, is almost harder on the civil servants than it is on us. We knew it was coming, and the basic rules are that the prime minister goes outside the building and gives her final remarks and gets in the car to go to the palace and you all go outside to watch her, and then you go back in the building and you've got to be out in 10 minutes, because the next lot are coming in. But we all knew that was the situation, I think it was harder for officials who were saying goodbye to us, and I do feel that we built up a real team relationship between the political team and the civil servants during that period. So, there were a lot of sad people there but, for myself actually, you know, what I found difficult was getting to the point where the PM said I'm going to stand down as leader of the party, that was the difficult day for me. And actually, I had time then to adjust to the fact that we were leaving Narnia.

**CH: What achievement are you most proud of from your time in office, whether as a minister or as chief of staff?**

**GB:** It's difficult to pick between the two. I think, as housing minister, I'm very proud of the white paper that we produced. You know, I think it is a viable long-term strategy to get housebuilding up to the levels that we need in this country to tackle the housing crisis that we face and I only wish I'd had more time in the job so I could have overseen its implementation as well as its production.

As chief of staff, obviously you can't get around the frustration of not being able to deliver the Brexit deal that the prime minister negotiated. You know, obviously, 80 or 90% of what Boris Johnson has now is Theresa's deal, but it's very frustrating that we weren't able to get that through. The two things I'd probably pick out from domestic policy would be, the NHS long-term plan and the net zero announcement on carbon emissions. And on foreign policy, I think the way that we responded to the attempted murder of the Skripal family in Salisbury and built an international coalition to hold the Russian government to account. I think we can be very proud of that.

**CH:** And what advice would you give to a new minister on how to be most effective in office?

**GB:** That's a tough question. I think I would pick out three things. First of all, don't ignore Parliament. You know, your ability to get things done depends on Parliament supporting the agenda that you're pursuing, so make sure you're spending sufficient time in Parliament, not just with your own colleagues but with the opposition as well. That will pay dividends for you. Secondly, building alliances within your sector. I think, ultimately if you are a minister, particularly if you're a domestic minister and you're delivering a key public service, you are reliant on thousands of people across this country, working with your agenda to get that done, and time spend building those alliances stands you in good stead. And thirdly you're going to have an amazing team of civil servants, don't regard them as somehow obstructing or trying to stop your agenda, persuade them of what you want to do, give them a clear vision and a clear policy decisions, and there are some great people there that will help you achieve what you want to achieve.

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