

Ministers reflect

Gregory Barker

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Biographical details

Electoral history

2015-present: Conservative Member of the House of Lords

2001-2015: Member of Parliament for Bexhill and Battle

Parliamentary career

2010-2014: Minister of State for Energy and Climate Change

2008-2010: Shadow Minister for Energy and Climate Change

2005-2008: Shadow Spokesperson for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Gregory Barker (GB) was interviewed by Nicola Hughes (NH) and William Lord (WL) on 13th November 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project

Nicola Hughes (NH): So if we can start back in 2010 when you first became a minister, can you talk us through your experience of coming into government and what that was like?

Gregory Barker (GB): I had been very fortunate in that I had had effectively the same brief for nearly five years. Initially I was the Shadow Environment Minister and then when the new Department [of Energy & Climate Change (DECC)] was created and that environment brief included climate change, I moved across and became the Shadow Climate Change Minister. So I had the benefit of being able to shadow and track the brief that I took on for a very considerable amount of time.

But I also came to the job with a very clear idea of policies that I wanted to pursue having basically been instrumental in putting the whole policy suite together. It was a surprise to find myself working for a Lib Dem Secretary of State but on the other hand, Chris Huhne, who was my initial boss, had come to that brief probably slightly surprised to be in government, [and] had held the Home Office brief. So although Chris was certainly knowledgeable and had a previous interest in this area, he hadn't been expecting to deliver this in government.

But that did mean that I had a clearer idea of what I wanted to do compared to many ministers that suddenly find they have an unexpected posting. And also it wasn't just for me a subject about which I'd made myself useful and thought about, it was something about which I was genuinely passionate and thoughtful about and cared a great deal about. [That is] not to say that other people don't care about their briefs, but it was something that was particularly important to me. So the opportunity to serve in government in that role, which doesn't always happen, was extremely fortunate and valuable.

It also meant though it created an interesting dynamic with a department that was only two years old, where many of the officials hadn't been working on these issues as long as I had. And although most of the officials that I dealt with had a very good in-depth knowledge of their particular area, even if they hadn't been working on it very long, often the broader context in which it sat, or the wider impact that it might have was often not particularly appreciated. Some officials were fantastic in really engaging with me as a minister that had clear views on things, and for others it was clearly something that they were either puzzled by or didn't particularly welcome. But on the whole I had a really good relationship with most of my officials, or at least I thought so! It also meant that it was quite a challenge for my private office because there was a lot more two-way traffic than perhaps was always the case. And learning to use a private office was a challenge.

NH: I was going to ask about that – you were saying you knew the policy area, you knew what you wanted to do, what about the more day-to-day aspects of the job of being a minister? Was there anything that surprised you about the role, as such?

GB: Well it didn't surprise me because if you are interested in politics you read generally and specifically about what the role may or may not involve, so it wasn't a shock. I don't think anything can quite prepare you, if you haven't done it before, for the deluge of demands that are made on your time. I don't think anything quite prepares you for the variety of papers that come to you and initially it is quite overwhelming and you have a sense of 'gosh, this is really important', but then I think over time you realise that you are just part of a much bigger pipe that things come through. You learn on the job effectively how to be effective in a better way to intervene.

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But it would have been useful to have a walk through from someone even if it had been saying, 'Here is a typical three-page briefing on a subject, this is the way you can most constructively contribute'. Because I've got a nasty feeling that a lot of feedback given was invariably 'tick' when something was good or 'scrawled all over' when it was bad. I tended to push very quickly to see my official and discuss what I wanted. Although that tended to clog up my diary and make meetings, I always found it much more productive, certainly [it was] useful for me to be able to talk to people about it and be able to question them, rather than enter into: 'put it into the box, make a comment, take it out of the box, read it at midnight or at six o'clock in the morning, scrawl on it, have a question, see it again the following midnight, no that's not what I meant, please do this'. I find that quite frustrating rather than just getting something done.

So we tended to have more face-to-face meetings with officials. The challenge then became to convince officials that actually a five-minute meeting or a quick pop-in was actually useful and just because you had a meeting it didn't have to last a certain period to be a respectable meeting time. And I found it slightly frustrating that you couldn't just, I still don't know why, you can't just call people up and just say 'what about this' as you would do in a company.

NH: Couldn't because of the hierarchy?

GB: Yeah. It always flusters some of them. I remember one time saying, 'Oh, why don't we just pop down there?' I occasionally did just to put the cat among the pigeons. I think that sort of hierarchy isn't particularly helpful. It's a bit weird actually.

William Lord (WL): You mentioned some of the challenges with getting to grips with the role of being a minister when you first came in. Do you think there'd be some value to having some kind of formal structured training for ministers before they come in?

GB: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. And I think that would also feed through to a more uniform way that submissions are written because they were quite different, people had very different styles and so on and obviously there's a very personal taste there. But I think in order to be professional, the more standardised the format can be [the better]. And also more emphasis on effectively summarising the salient points, which was very variable through submissions, would be helpful. When you got a really good one you really knew it.

NH: So you shadowed and knew the area, you went in with some priorities. What were the key things that you wanted to achieve?

GB: Well, for me, I guess I probably had three main areas. One was, although if I start to unpick it more will fall out, but decentralised energy, particularly clean decentralised energy, so driving the deployment of solar, hydro, CHP [combined heat and power] networks, and other renewables. Then pushing a much greater emphasis on energy efficiency through a range of measures, but particularly through the introduction of a programme called the Green Deal.

The thing that ironically, that I had played the largest part in actually creating in policy terms, we didn't actually end up leading on in government which was the Green Investment Bank [GIB]. It had been my idea in opposition. I had pitched that directly, it was quite late in the day, had pitched it directly to the Chancellor after the policy process had effectively finished in the autumn before the general election. Got the green light. I'd handpicked the commission that I set up in opposition to basically come forward with the proposals for the GIB and was heavily involved in setting the remit and steering the group. But although DECC had a joint trigger and that policy came under me, it was ultimately BIS [Department for Business, Innovation & Skills] that was the primary driver of that.

WL: And what would you say were the main factors that contributed to the Green Investment Bank being a successful policy project?

GB: Well, the people. We got very good people hired to drive it forward so the success of the policy must be the outcome. And we were very lucky in the board, particularly were lucky in the Chief Executive, Shaun Kingsbury, and the team that they were able to put around him. I think they pretty early on grasped what the purpose was. It had a very clear purpose which was to address market failure, to mobilise private capital, to jump start new markets but not to be a source of ongoing subsidy to support lame duck projects, to give soft loans. So the fact that it was very clear from the get-go that it was going to be driven by people with a private sector, commercial mindset.

And when I set up the Green Investment Bank Commission, although this was an idea which had percolated amongst the environmental NGOs and with people with a very political and third sector background, I deliberately populated the Commission with people whose backgrounds were in the financial sector, had records of achievement in very significant institutions. It was chaired by Bob Wigley, who had been the CEO of Merrill Lynch, and [appointed] other people who were rapaciously commercial and they helped frame the ethos I think of the institution and that I think really shaped it. So getting the right ethos at the beginning and then the right people in place too.

And then there were lots of bumps along the road, lots of intra-government battles. BIS were quite keen at one point that it would become an enduring institution and it just became another fund. There was quite a bit of resistance in the Treasury to it as well at a sort of institutional level and all these required a fair degree of political capital.

WL: And did Number 10 have a role at all?

GB: Number 10 was certainly helpful. And I was very fortunate during my time as a minister that I had built up during my time in opposition and also during my time as a new MP, a good relationship with David Cameron both personally but also professionally and as a political ally. So there were times when I was able to cash in some of that political capital with a direct appeal to the Prime Minister.

I like to think that the judgement calls that I made were basically sensible, and would have got the same decision had it been A.N. Other minister, but undoubtedly that sort of access helped. I used that very rarely. If anything, I was slightly reticent about bothering too often. I think there were other ministers who probably were doing that on a more regular basis, but I always had that in the back of my mind. And to the Prime Minister's great credit, I think on each of the occasions where I may have invoked or appealed to him he came down on the right side of the argument.

NH: And a slightly broader question; we talked a bit about policy, but what do you see as the main roles and duties of a minister?

GB: To set and deliver the political agenda. I think there's a degree of tension in the Civil Service between those whose job it is to deliver. I found it very, very frustrating in government the extent to which I was hampered from delivering my agenda by the way in which the department was run. And it got a lot better, but initially I found it dysfunctional and inconsistent in the way in which practices were applied and the extent to which ministerial input was either welcome or blocked.

NH: Inconsistent between different teams?

GB: Inconsistent on different issues really. In some areas they would be helpful, the Permanent Secretary or the senior officials would be helpful. In others they would be implacably blocking and I've

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subsequently discovered all these tales about senior officials going out of their way to stop ministers' clear wishes being implemented were true.

NH: Why do you think that was?

GB: Because other officials told me that's what was happening.

NH: I mean why do you think there was this attitude of blocking in some cases and helping in others?

GB: That's a very good question. I think perhaps because it's not clear what the responsibilities of ministers are, and our great unwritten constitution and the dividing line between management and policy responsibility. I felt that as minister it was very clear that I carried the can for policy, but it was very frustrating, particularly as someone that had had a partially commercial background, that I would be responsible for something if it went wrong, but often I wasn't responsible or I didn't have the power to really ensure that it was delivered effectively. By which I mean, I had little say over the resource or the naming of particular individuals who were responsible for delivering that policy.

DECC's a small department. We didn't have a huge internal budget. The effectiveness of the individuals who were charged with carrying out my policy was critical to the policy. And whether or not they were on my wavelength would be critical to the extent to which, not just be on my wavelength but also just competent, and there were some really outstanding officials who, maybe I wouldn't describe as being on my wavelength politically necessarily but understood what I wanted to do. [They] got it and then were very good at implementation. But there were a number of policy areas – renewable heat and also in the area of solar – where I basically wasn't given the resource, was over deployed in other areas or the way of working was, I considered, archaic, or that the individuals who were charged with developing that policy were obstructive or just incompetent.

I found it extraordinary that I would never be consulted. I can't remember any time in which a senior official would come to me and ask for feedback. It would always be left to complaints and then complaints weren't welcome. There'd be endless internal assessments, people always off on reviews or courses or internal meetings. But they never actually stopped to think well actually is the customer, if that's what the minister is, actually happy with this? It was all far too much internal process and not coming to the minister and saying, 'Are you satisfied with what you're getting?' That was seen as interference in the management of the office.

In certain cases, ultimately I had to push to get changes made where things weren't happening. And the changes turned out to be effective. For example, when I came into the department the first thing I said was, 'We've got to get a grip on the feed-in tariff system. It's ineffective and the budget is in danger of being blown by a huge deployment that's coming down the line.' And the department was in total denial about it because the statistics that they relied on were the deployment statistics, which were lodged with Ofgem [the energy regulator]. We got them six months after deployment had taken place and I was getting, you might call it anecdotal, but good intelligence from the City, from investors, from the industry – where I had very good connections – that there was clearly a gold rush going on where people were taking advantage of a fixed feed-in tariff at a time of fast falling prices which meant that returns that should have been single digit were actually super-double digit.

But the department was totally blind because they didn't take this technology seriously, didn't think it had a particular role. It wasn't a priority for them. They didn't have the process in place, or the process had been put in place very recently under the last government which was in the last few months, and so as far as they were concerned that was job done. And it was only really when the whole thing was blowing up that they panicked and listened to me. But I and my colleague Charles Hendry had several

months of banging our heads against the wall and pushing for the individual, the senior official who was responsible for that and was basically being very unhelpful, to be moved. It all had to be ‘managed’ rather than discussed openly, clearly, and in a professional way. It was all rather behind the scenes and I think very unsatisfactory.

In the end, finally, much later than should have been the case, we got a fantastic team in place. Really outstanding officials – someone who was seconded from BIS, a senior director and two... I think one might have been already in DECC but on secondment from the Treasury, or the Cabinet Office, I’m not quite sure, someone who was a fast-streamer in DECC. Really great team. They worked very closely with me and we really cracked it and came up with a much, much better system in a very difficult climate by that time. We were having to make very dramatic decisions.

But even then the department at the senior level went from total denial that this was happening to blind terror and a wish to close down the scheme. And my intent had always been to reform the scheme, to make it sustainable to spread the budget as far as it would go so we’d get maximum deployment. But they didn’t take it at all seriously; they thought their judgement was better.

NH: If you think more about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how did you spend your time? What did a typical day look like? If there is such a thing!

GB: A lot of time in meetings. But also got to meet some really interesting and exciting people that I wouldn’t have done otherwise. It’s difficult...what would my typical day be? When I look back now at a typical diary card I’m amazed at the amount of stuff that is crammed in. I know that my senior private secretaries, and I was extremely well served in that respect, constantly tried to carve out [time], we’d always aim for thinking time or time to be political, which I know everyone says is important, and it is and there should be more of that, but in practice, invariably things are crowded into my diary not least because I was my own worst enemy in wanting to see people, wanting to discuss things face-to-face, having ideas and that generated activity rather than just passively waiting for things to come to me. And as a result I was furiously busy but I loved it, and I was very lucky with the people that I worked with.

WL: Did Parliament have a role in your day-to-day activities as well?

GB: Yes. Well obviously I still had to be there voting and often in the middle of the afternoon the bell would go and I’d have to go and support. Some poor person who’d had to wait six months to finally get to see the minister and five minutes into the meeting the bell would go and I’d run out the door. So it’s a slightly odd way to run a country.

But yes, I did make an effort to spend time in the Chamber and also keep my political antennae alive by being part of dining clubs or policy groups, particularly with the new intake of MPs and spend time with the team and things. And that sort of informal networking, which can sound like sloping off, actually was extremely valuable because if you lose the confidence of your colleagues, even simply fail to explain what you are doing, even if you are doing a great job, you can just become politically impotent and you’re dead in the water.

NH: And what about your constituency?

GB: Yes. I was very lucky that I had been a Member of Parliament for nearly ten years by the time I became a minister so I had a very good team in place. I knew my constituency back to front. I was very lucky I had a super constituency team that knew how I worked [and] I knew how they worked. They worked extremely well, so we were able to keep the ball rolling even if during the week I wasn’t very available to them. But on Fridays and at the weekends, I would get there and they’d know exactly what my priorities were, or what I’d want to see or what I’d judge to be important. I managed to keep that up.

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WL: When it came to the department, do you feel that you had enough, or any, support when it came to politics? Would you have appreciated some kind of political support?

GB: Absolutely. I feel quite strongly about this actually that the role of special advisers has been greatly maligned. Partly because everyone thinks that a special adviser simply spends their time on the phone briefing about their colleagues and spinning to the lobby.

I had relatively little engagement with the media and I probably didn't need any, and I wouldn't have needed any more engagement with the media, but not having somebody who was tasked to work on policy directly to me, until the last 18 months of my term in office was a huge mistake.

We tried to have a specialist adviser and it ended in tears, partly because the department didn't like the fact that the person actually was an expert and was able to challenge independently some of the advice that I was getting. But it would be much, much better if I had somebody who was reporting to me, that I had trust in, that understood my mind-set, that had technical knowledge that I didn't have and was capable of going into more detail in a way that I wouldn't be able to as a second set of eyes.

I did have two very good senior private secretaries that tried to do that role to a degree, but it's not the same and I think having somebody in my private office who would be there to troubleshoot, who had a degree of technical expertise that I could say, 'I've got this submission, I'm not sure about it. Could you have a look at this? Could you make sure that they come back. I'm off on a trade mission to Africa next week, while I'm away could you talk to the officials? You know what my priorities are.' I'm not just not sure that they really grasped it and that person just wasn't there for the most critical part of my time in government.

There was this commitment when we came into government to reduce the number of spads [special advisers] and it was a totally huge error. Particularly where you have an area like DECC that is quite technical and specialist, I think [you must] ensure that you have proper, efficient, professional delivery of policy, but through a prism that reflects the values of the minister, and reflects their priorities.

I was never happy with the Civil Service process for following through on projects. I kept asking and it became an endless battle, 'where is my worksheet that would tell me what I've commissioned and where things stand?' And it was always too much trouble, they just relied on the fact that I would comment on something and it would be thrown back into the system. And then they'd say, 'Oh, we have a chaser system.' But it was all very amorphous and I constantly asked, 'I want to see a summary so I can keep track of a weekly report or whatever that shows what I've done, what's come in and when it's expected back and whether it has or not.' And there was never a system in place that I thought was sufficiently robust or professional that allowed me to monitor my own progress.

WL: Was there any interaction with the special advisers of the Secretary of State?

GB: I actually had a very good working relationship with both my secretaries of state and their special advisers actually. There was a slight creative tension at times, but we both knew the score. So I didn't take direction from the spads, from the Secretary of State's Lib Dem spads, [on] anything political, that was clear. If anything I probably had more licence than I would have done under a Conservative secretary of state.

WL: So on the whole, how did you find working under a secretary of state from a different party?

GB: Well I didn't have anything to compare it with. I thought we had a very functional relationship most of the time. And it got perhaps difficult... I would have liked to have spent more time with the Secretary

of State, particularly my second Secretary of State, Ed Davey; we were always meaning to get together more than we actually did. But I think the pressures as we got closer towards the election, although I came out nine months before the election, even then they were starting to take their toll.

But overall I found it worked very well. I think particularly with Chris Huhne, the extent to which that was projected outside the department I think is questionable because I think we worked very coherently in the department. I don't think that necessarily was the case in the Cabinet or in Cabinet committees, where I think there was maybe slightly less of a collegiate approach, but I wasn't part of that so I couldn't really say.

WL: Were there any occasions where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department that you had to deal with?

GB: Yes, I sat on COBRA [crisis response committee – 'Cabinet Office Briefing Room A'] committees for hostage situations of oil workers in a refinery in Libya, but that didn't fall to me, I was one of several rather than having primary responsibility for that. And also with flooding issues there was a DECC input on floods. But more often than not the crisis would be a financial crisis, i.e. we'd realise that either a piece of legislation was not fit for purpose and could be exploited, or [there was] a loophole that maybe would, financially, if not ruin us, be highly disadvantageous and a threat to a budget.

Dealing with cutting the solar tariffs the first time round had very much an atmosphere of crisis about it, as we knew that there was millions running out of the scheme as a result. A failure to put in place proper checks in the first place. So, in a crisis I thought the department worked pretty well actually. It brought out the best in people. They were very good at that.

WL: And so when one of these crises hit the department how would you deal with it? What would be your first response?

GB: Well they were all quite different in nature so there wasn't a standard response... but I think having a small team that meets regularly with clear lines of communication, regular updates; that's the key I think to sorting any crisis.

NH: You mentioned COBRA and working with other departments. How in general did you find cross-Whitehall working?

GB: Very mixed. A lot of it depended on the personality of the ministers. Where I had a good personal or political relationship with them it was infinitely better. Occasionally I might not have known the minister particularly well, but there was a clear alignment of ambition or outcome and that worked well, but it was very variable. Certainly it was much more helpful to be able to pick up the phone or have a word in the lobby if there was a problem with somebody that you knew well. I don't underestimate the value of personal relationships.

NH: Rather than formal mechanisms?

GB: Yes. I mean, by the time it got elevated to me invariably the formal mechanisms hadn't worked.

NH: I think you've probably mentioned a few of these already, but was there anything you found particularly frustrating about being a minister?

GB: Yes, not being able to pick my own people for important policy work or have any input into them. Or, where there was a role, the fact that it would all be done with a 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' approach. The previous Permanent Secretary famously, when we were discussing one such appointment, sent out the private secretary so there wouldn't be a note of the meeting, or 'put down your pad while we do this',

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which I found very frustrating. And, the fact that everyone was prepared to be very rigid in sticking to the system when it suited them, but there was always that sort of 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' flexibility if it didn't. But that was totally in the gift really of the senior civil servants and I think that's wrong and I think there needs to be... if ministers are going to be held accountable for the delivery of policy, which is absolutely right that they should be, then I think we need to recognise that the management of that policy is a critical part of its delivery.

You wouldn't expect a CEO of a new large company to come in and be told that it's up to them to deliver better returns for shareholders, but you can't change any staff or you can't mess with any of the senior appointments on the Board or the people in the marketing department or the people in produce development. You've got to work with everyone there and accept their way of doing things.

Now, I'm not in favour of fundamentally changing the nature of the Civil Service, I think the non-partisan nature of the Civil Service is terrific. But there are some myths, for example that they are the holders of institutional wisdom. I found the fact that the civil servants changed so frequently really frustrating and that the assumption, or presumption, was always that they had the wisdom and the knowledge. Sometimes that was the case, you had people who were stuck in the same place who were really thoughtful, but quite often you'll get someone who was good and then they'd be gone six months later and somebody else would be starting all over again.

I particularly found that frustrating in the private office. I was very lucky during my time [that] I only had two senior private secretaries, but the carousel of junior private secretaries who were coming through to get experience and then launch into somewhere else that was quite... I felt like I was a training officer or something. It was frustrating when you had so much going on. Also a number of times I'd have to ask all sorts of follow-up questions to get to an answer that should have been clear. For example, with the RHI, which was a policy that is fundamentally very difficult, heat being a much more complex issue to deal with than...

NH: Sorry, what's RHI?

GB: The Renewable Heat Initiative. So basically what we were trying to do is encourage, through the use of subsidy schemes, the deployment of renewable heat. So heat from biomass, or solar thermal, or ground source or air source heat pumps rather than just burning fossil fuels. And it's much more difficult because you don't want to, if you over-incentivise people to generate renewable electricity, they just pump the spare electricity they don't need into the grid and that's great and it just adds to the national grid. If you over-incentivise people to produce heat they don't need, that heat just goes up the chimney or out the window, nine times out of ten it can't be usefully used elsewhere. And actually measuring what people use in terms of heat and what the optimum level of heating is, [that] is much more subjective than electricity use. The technologies themselves are also more complex. So that was a very difficult policy area in itself.

But there were things that were very, very slow. Consistently missing targets for policy formulation and delivery and I would say, 'If you haven't got the people, let me know' or they'd complain about cuts and then it would turn out that although they had, say, 14 people assigned to the team that actually only eight of the seats were filled even though they had 14 budgeted for. But I didn't know this until I went down on to the floor and asked. It was things like that where you were kept in the dark as to why things aren't being delivered and some of the people who were there [were] put under enormous stress as a result. Ministers can be, I'm sure I was, extremely demanding to work for, but if you don't know the context of the people... I assume that they've got a fully operational [team], and fully resourced as agreed to in the departmental budget section there. And the fact that they don't is not communicated to me – that is quite frustrating.

But overall, it's not having somebody to support you and be a reminder [that] 'this is what your initial goals were, these schemes are working well, being received well by your colleagues, you need to follow this up, you haven't made a speech on this area, you ought to prioritise that'. Also to be someone that you can talk to about 'how do you think that meeting went? Do you think they're being reasonable or unreasonable?' Or to tell me that 'maybe you're being unreasonable in expecting this to be done', or 'maybe this is a good area to compromise on' or 'no, stand firm on this, Greg, you should be pushing, this was a clear political commitment.' You know, having that extra person rather than just a voice in your head is really helpful.

But as I say, the most important thing is to be able to pick something out of your box and say, 'I'd really like a second pair of eyes on this, could you look?' and particularly someone that understands where I'm coming from. 'Could you please look at that?' and... just not having that was very challenging.

NH: And how would you define an effective minister?

GB: By outcome. I think there are different ways of working. I think that's part of the problem. Some people do like everything on paper. Some people relish very thick documents. I like things in very sharp summaries and salient points. I like to be able to thrash things out with people so that's, to a degree, a matter of personal choice. It's whether or not you can gain the confidence of the officials that you work with and work effectively with them, getting the best out of them as well as getting the best for you and making them feel valued and engaged and part of the process. But ultimately it's the outcomes so that must be 'was a policy any good? Did it work?'

NH: And which is the outcome that you are most proud of?

GB: Probably the reform of the feed-in tariffs. Deployment per se of clean energy and the proliferation of a range of technologies was important to me, it was the thing I first wrote about in 2006 and it exceeded my wildest hopes. When I came in as a minister, it was 40 megawatts of solar, when I left there, [it] was 6 gigawatts. We had 20,000 or so people who had panels on their roofs, when I left, it was three quarters of a million. This was transformational stuff at a time when I was able to bring in and reform a system at my prompting that brought financial discipline and rigour to the system. So that's probably my biggest, that and the Green Investment Bank.

The thing that was the biggest disappointment was the Green Deal. It was a policy which wasn't the policy option that I had favoured in opposition. I had come up with my own brand of the Green Deal. I mean, I supported the policy, but it wasn't something that I had cooked up from inception. It was cooked up by the then Shadow Secretary of State's office. I'd had input into it and they'd opted for a different version of what we subsequently put in place. And in a number of the key areas I was overruled by the Secretary of State. The two single most important ones: I wanted a street-by-street roll out using all of the subsidy pot to be targeted on the fuel poor and on a municipal street-by-street roll out. In the end, less than half of it was allocated to that pot and the rest was on a free market basis, which meant that a lot of it went to subsidise larger homes which was effective from a carbon point of view, but I didn't think achieved the on-the-ground take up that we need to see.

I was generally, as a rule, more 'Stalinist' we used to say in the department. Although my background was from the market, I understood its limitations as well. And also I very quickly realised that in order for the Green Deal to be a success, you needed to harness the energy that there was, or the momentum that there was behind the solar sector. And we needed to marry those two things together and I wanted the Green Deal to be able to finance solar panels. That was consistently blocked on advice of officials and the Secretary of State sided with officials. Had that happened I think you would have seen a far greater take up of Green Deal finance and the market would have developed at much, much greater speed, or just developed. That didn't happen and the finance element of it has since been discontinued which I

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think was probably the right decision. The building blocks are still there, but the new Government has now got to think of a new narrative that will pull together the various elements of energy efficiency.

NH: Are there any tips, key pieces of advice that you would give to a minister starting out for the first time now?

GB: Trust your own judgement. Invariably my gut instinct was invariably the right choice. Listening to other people's point of view [is] very, very important but you are there to take political judgements and never be afraid to take a political judgement on a policy area.

Make sure that you keep communicating that both up and down, so keep open that at whatever level you are, make sure you keep Downing Street in the loop. Don't wait to be asked. If anything, in hindsight I wish I'd done that more. I should have engaged Downing Street more, not less. And also, make sure you are engaging your colleagues. I was quite good at that, but I could have been better.

NH: Do you mean your ministerial colleagues?

GB: No, my colleagues in Parliament. I placed quite a lot on listening to what the Whips said but you can't do enough of that. And remember you are there to drive a political agenda not just to respond efficiently to submissions in your box. And also to focus – it's very easy to get swamped by the range of things that come through your box. Really important to be very, very focused. If I think now, do I wish I could have done more things? No, I wish I had focused even more on my key deliverable legacy projects. Oh, enjoy it, that's the other thing!

WL: Is there anything that we haven't asked you that you would like to add at all?

GB: The key thing is I think the need for transparency and certainty around what ministers are entitled to do and not to do. I think that means they should have a legitimate way of saying that they don't believe a junior official or a senior official is pulling their weight, or effectively driving through their minister's policy priority. And sometimes it could be quite a junior official that was the policy block and the thing is, as a minister, you do get to see a wide spectrum of departments, and as I say there are some really, really good people. And conversely, it was on the RHI [that] we were going to have a disaster with; it had been totally overlooked, the way in which we formulated the budget and had been miscalculated and it was a junior official, very bright chap, that spotted this and basically saved the departmental bacon early on. So I very quickly got to know that, yeah, you had your senior officials that you trusted and wanted their attention on your project, but also listen to some of the junior people around the table because often they are the brightest eyes and ears.

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