INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Ministers Reflect
Harriet Harman

19 May 2017

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

1997 – present: Member for Camberwell and Peckham

1982–97: Member for Peckham

Government career

2015: Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition

2011–15: Shadow Deputy Prime Minister; Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

2010–11: Shadow Secretary of State for International Development

2010: Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition

2007–10: Leader of the House of Commons and Lord Privy Seal; Minister for Women and Equalities

2007: Minister of State (Ministry of Justice)

2005–07: Minister of State (Department of Constitutional Affairs)

2001–05: Solicitor General (Law Officers)

1997–98: Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women

1996–97: Shadow Secretary of State for Social Security

1995–96: Shadow Secretary of State for Health

1994–95: Shadow Secretary of State for Employment

1992–94: Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury

1987–92: Shadow Spokesperson (Health)

1984–87: Shadow Minister (Health)

Harriet Harman was interviewed by Daniel Thornton on 19 May 2017 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Harriet Harman reflects on the shock of entering government after her 15 years in opposition, how she learnt to be a better minister and on the machismo of Parliament. She explains how government started to pay attention to the women and equality agenda and her pride in seeing real change in attitudes and laws.

Daniel Thornton (DT): What do you recall of the preparation you had for government in 2015?

Harriet Harman (HH): You [Institute for Government] came along to help us ready ourselves for government in 2015. The discussion was excellent, it was just the election result was not so great. I don't blame you for that.

What was good about that preparation is that, for somebody who had been in government before, it was people saying, "This is how you will find things different, this is how you will have to adjust your thinking, this is how the civil service has changed, this is what used to be in-house, which is now done outside of house." So it was very good and I felt that it contrasted massively with other training courses, because I felt that it was trying to work out, from our starting point, where we wanted to go and where we needed to go, rather than having an assumption of what is a good minister and telling us how to be it.

DT: So it took account of the changes that had happened in the civil service?

HH: Yes. It was facilitating and answering our questions, rather than telling us how to do it. Really, the people who have got to decide how to do it, when they are elected, are those ministers. That is their job. But it is incredibly important to have people there to discuss what might be the difficulties in terms of what you face and what might be the opportunities. We were presented with a sort of fossilised model of government. And we were New Labour, New Britain. We weren't going to be doing things in the way the Callaghan Government had done it. So, yes, I wish the Institute for Government had been invented before '97. Who knows, I might have not made such a mess of my period in the Cabinet.

One of the things I asked in 2015 was: if we get into government, will you be there to discuss with new ministers, or indeed old ministers, what is going on in their department and help with problem solving? Because once we were in government in '97, there wasn't anybody to discuss how you were getting on or what your problems might be in a dispassionate way. Everybody else has got a massive vested interest and so you couldn't discuss with anybody. I think a completely neutral, facilitating body, for when people are in government, would be absolutely invaluable. As I say, the Institute for Government said you would do that, but the only problem was we didn't get into government. So we were not able to avail ourselves of those continuing support services.

DT: We certainly do provide that support to governments of whichever stripe and individual ministers and groups of ministers and so on.

HH: When I got into difficulty with the lone parent benefit cut in the past, before we had been in government, my main soulmates for talking about problems were Tony [Blair] and Gordon [Brown]. Well, Tony was the Prime Minister now and Gordon was the Chancellor, and the idea of saying, "I've got really stuck with this one," was impossible. No doubt Gordon would have advanced his cuts by an extra few billion, seeing my fragility and weakness, and Tony would have brought forward the moment I was sacked. Having a group that is knowledgeable and informed, who you can talk to about what is going on, would have helped. You have to command the confidence and sustain the confidence of your department. You can't really turn round to the permanent secretary and the head of your private office and say, "Actually, I haven't a clue what I am doing, this is going to go from bad to worse." So you can't discuss it with them either.

I think it was Patricia Hewitt, when she was the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who set up a sort of life coaching facility. That was actually quite problematic, because it was like women ministers somehow need coaching; men don't, because they are the real thing and know how to do it. It implied that the women were all useless. But having somebody who is there for you and completely confidential, I think makes very good sense.

DT: For all ministers?

HH: For all ministers. But you [the Institute for Government] are it. It is there now.

DT: That is great to hear. Rewinding to '97, in addition to having some sort of support from the Institute for Government, had we been around, what else do you think you could have done to prepare better for government?

HH: I think that it is a bit odd that you don't know what job you are going to do, until you are actually told by the Prime Minister. I know that creates for a marvellous drama, with everyone walking up and down Downing Street and everybody speculating in the press, "Ooh, who is going to get this job." But if you are coming from opposition – and we had been in opposition since 1979 – the idea that you are surprised by the department you are getting is a mistake. I think when the Prime Minister is Leader of the Opposition, they need to tell the people who are going to be in their Cabinet, were they to be elected, what job they are going to be doing and then they can then prepare.

I did, at least, go to the department I was shadowing, but I didn't know I was going to. Chris Smith [former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport] didn't go to the department he was shadowing and I discovered before he did, because my driver said, "There is Chris Smith's driver, Chris Smith thinks he is going to X department, but actually he is going to Y department." That is absolutely stupid. If you are going to be secretary of state, in a government department, in the Cabinet, it is nice for the media to have a surprise, but it is more important for you to be able to prepare.

I couldn't really prepare because I didn't know what department I was going to be in. I was very busy campaigning and thought, after losing so many elections, probably we never would be in government. Indeed, I might well not have been in that department. Frank Field [MP for Birkenhead] then subsequently told me that Tony Blair had wanted me to go to Food and Farming, with Frank going into the Department of Social Security. But Gordon had vetoed Frank so I would end up in it. To cut a long story short, I think the Leader of the Opposition should decide in advance – it doesn't have to be years in advance – who will be the Cabinet ministers, to enable them to prepare properly, rather than have a big surprise. So that is one of the things that could have been done.

DT: Are there other things?

HH: I think once you know what department you are going into, you can be much more focused. I had my discussion with the permanent secretary to facilitate her in the interim. There were a number of big projects, operational projects, computer contracts, all sorts of things, and she wanted to know whether to go ahead with them or whether they would all be rolled back. That is fair enough but that didn't help me at all. All it did is make me shake in my shoes thinking, "Blimey, I haven't a clue whether I want these huge computer projects to go ahead or not. I don't know anything about them – we are in opposition, I have just been going round urging people to vote Labour." So the discussions that are held between the top of the civil service and the shadow secretaries of state could be much better focused on helping the shadow secretary of state understand what they are going to be doing, but only if they know which job they are going to be doing. Otherwise it is kind of relatively pointless.

I think the other thing is that all secretaries of state ought to be together in one building. When you are all in opposition, you are all on one corridor, all working really closely together and that facilitates decision making. Then once you get into government, you're all separately locked up in different departments and that interferes with the momentum of government. There is a lot of discussion amongst your previous ministerial memoirs, and indeed this comes out in Patricia Hewitt's one, that it takes a long time to do everything. One of the reasons things take so long is because it takes so long for ministers to get agreement, because we are all separated in different departments. So much time is wasted and so much money is wasted with the friction between different departments. I think it would make a difference if ministers were working together rather than in warring baronetcies.

There was, originally, the suggestion that we should take over the Treasury building, next to Number 10. I can't remember how many ministers were supposed to be there, but all secretaries of state. I think that should have happened. The whole establishment is for single departments but there is virtually no policy which is a single department policy. One department will have the lead but it will need other departments, whether it is local government, whether it is the Treasury. They are all completely interconnected. The machinery of government, the way it is set up, works against governance in that respect.

DT: You talk, in your book, about some of the challenges of working across government. I think as Solicitor General you refer to a Cabinet committee that you sat on and John Denham [then junior minister at the Home Office] chaired. Can you talk a bit about your experience of that – did that committee help to get things done across government or was it just part of the formal machinery?

HH: There couldn't have been a bigger contrast between my experience of being a Secretary of State in 1997 and my experience of being Solicitor General in 2001. I had gone through such a learning curve. By 2001, I knew exactly what I needed to do and what I should not be doing, which was the opposite of '97. I knew I wanted to change the way we dealt with domestic violence and sexual offences, so I knew that the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's department were going to be very important indeed. Local government was going to be very important, because they have refuge responsibilities. So I knew we needed a cross-government committee, in order to bring it all together, including the Department of [for] Education and Department of Health, because they need to be spotting injuries and reporting them.

So I suggested that we have a cross-government committee. I knew that it needed to be one of the so-called big beasts chairing it. I knew one of the big departments needed to chair it because if it was chaired by me, the big departments would just take no notice, even if I knew all about it and knew what needed to be done. I put my faith in John Denham [at the Home Office] doing it. It was a bit counterintuitive to let somebody chair a committee that I had argued to be set up and I was the driving force behind. But that is how it needed to be done for anything to happen. And that meant a whole load of other changes cascaded down, via that committee. It was the forum where all these things were brought and discussed.

DT: And it was a formal Cabinet sub-committee, was it?

HH: I can't remember what it was. I think it is still in existence, but it was just called the cross-departmental committee on domestic violence. But it did work very well and it was serviced by the Home Office.

DT: From your ministerial experiences, how did you help to set priorities in the department? Taking '97, you had two roles, Secretary of State DSS [Department of Social Security] and you had the first Women Minister brief as well. How did you decide what your priorities should be and how did you then communicate that to the system?

HH: Well, I didn't know I was going to be Minister for Women and Equalities. I was literally in my department [DSS], which I hadn't known I was going to be Secretary of State for, and then suddenly my private office came in and said, "Oh, by the way, you're the person in the Cabinet responsible for women and equalities as well. There is this Women and Equalities Office, located in some other department, and they will be coming over here."

It was all a bit of a scramble and I think they felt from the outset "this Secretary of State has got enough on her plate anyway," what with trying to keep within impossible

spending restraints laid down by the previous Conservative Government which we had committed to. It felt to me like their way of dealing with it, protecting me, was preventing me from engaging in it at all in order not to be distracted from my 'main' job. In fact, it just meant I had to do everything myself, because I did have a responsibility and a big commitment to do the women and equality stuff. But the department was holding it at bay, so it made it five times more work for me.

I think one of the problems with my first incarnation as Secretary of State, was the departmental division was wrong. Our view was that the best welfare is work; that people want a hand up, rather than a hand out; work for those who can, security for those who can't. Our whole approach was that – as was the case for Peckham – it was completely wrong to have two separate offices: one which was the benefit office and the other which was the Jobcentre. My department was the Department for Social Security and work was based in the Department of [for] Education. It was very difficult to try and bring forward that agenda, most notably with lone parents, when getting them into work was supposedly in David Blunkett's Department for Education. It was right down at the bottom of his agenda, because the top of his agenda was schools and employment was a bit of an appendix there. But for me, in my Department of Social Security, work was absolutely crucial because if people weren't working, they were on benefits. Subsequently, the departments did get sorted out. But that is one of my alibis for not succeeding.

I have got loads of alibis for why I didn't succeed in my first period of office, but I really learned, the hard way, by 2001. By that time, I was an absolutely cracking minister, because I had had the opportunity to get it wrong and learn how to get it right. But I would rather have had the Institute for Government helping me advance, and at the time.

DT: It seems like you encountered some resistance from the civil service, in terms of the women and equality agenda. They weren't immediately embracing that agenda in the DSS.

HH: It wasn't just the DSS. The whole of government looked down on it. If you were bright, intelligent, going somewhere of worth to government, then you were in the Foreign Office or the Treasury or Number 10 or the Home Office. Who would want to go to the Women and Equality Unit? Only people who couldn't hack it elsewhere. But our sense was this was incredibly important. It was really part of the renewal of Britain that government would deliver for women, as well as men, and public policy would understand women's lives. It was incredibly transformative and important. But within the civil service, it was regarded as just something to be pushed around. Instead of working out that it was really at the heart of a lot of what we wanted to do, it was just regarded as an annoyance. My own department regarded it as something I needed to be protected from.

DT: Would you say that attitudes have changed over the years? Or would you say that still exists in the civil service, to a large degree?

HH: I think it changed beyond all recognition. I reunited with the world of being Minister for Women and Equality in 2007. Ten years later, I was back in that same seat. At that point, there were a whole load of civil servants who were committed to it. They actually wanted to go into it – they weren't just people who had been pushed out of other government departments. There were a whole load of special advisers who were committed to that agenda and who had worked their way up the system. There were a whole load of women ministers in other government departments – every department had ministers at senior and junior level. The whole structure of government had evolved so much. It was still a battle, but on even terms – the champions were there, in the Women and Equality Unit, amongst the special advisers and in other government departments, amongst the women ministers. So our side was well tooled-up compared to what we were like in '97 because, of course, it hadn't really been doing anything under the Conservatives.

DT: Across all the different things you did as a minister, which achievement are you proudest of?

HH: The work in relation to women, both on domestic violence and on childcare, which is about balancing work and home and about women's representation. People will find it impossible to recognise or to remember that the attitudes to domestic violence before '97 were "Well, if he hit her, he is doing his job being head of the household, keeping his wife in order." There was this sense that the job of the husband was to keep the wife in order. The women's movement had a completely different view.

It was about taking that view into government – if a man hits his wife, it is an assault, every bit as much as if he is walking down the street and hits somebody. It was quite a vanguard list. There were people in the Crown Prosecution Service who agreed with that, there were people in the police (a minority), there were all the voluntary organisation. But they didn't have a champion in government. To be able to be the champion in government, to be part of that attitudinal change that we wanted, but also implement new laws, new organisations, new ways of doing things, was genuinely rewarding. It became conventional wisdom and accepted and is still the case. It has not been turned back, at all.

Then there was childcare, which when I was first in government was only seen by David Blunkett's department, which was the Department for Education. They had responsibility for children and childcare, as pre-school education, but it was all about education. Whereas for women who are working, their children need to be safe, happy and developing and we have got a responsibility to help with that, if we want them to be working in the private sector and the public services. Therefore, childcare is about women at work as well as about child development.

It was incredible to see the rolling out of all the Sure Start children's centres, all the nurseries, the child tax credits, in my own constituency. Previously, you could only get a

nursery place if you beat your child. If you were unsafe as a mother, were a threat to your child, a nursery place was yours. Otherwise they are your kids, you have them, you look after them. That whole transforming of the responsibility of public policy to support families where the mother is working and not at home looking after the children, was very epic, I think.

Then there was the whole thing about changing things so that it wasn't just men making all the decisions and men being at the top of everything. When I was first in Parliament, the Maternity Services Advisory Committee were all men. I did an audit of all the advisory committees of government and they were all men with just one woman here or there. But the Maternity Services was the one that stuck in my mind. So it was basically challenging the idea that it was alright for men to be deciding everything and trying to argue that there needs to be a balanced team of men and women and it must be discrimination, if women weren't to have a say on everything. Because the men weren't that much greater than the women.

DT: Focusing on childcare – how did you go about gathering evidence to decide what the best way of proceeding was? How did you settle on building Sure Starts rather than subsidising through vouchers or whatever the other policy options might be?

HH: Basically, when I was first Minister for Women and Equality, we decided that my three priorities were going to be childcare, domestic violence and women's representation. But it was the Department of [for] Education that had the responsibility for childcare. I was having to triangulate my work through them. Alan Howarth [then Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department for Education and Employment], who had previously been a Tory MP, was the minister in the operational department. He had never had any connection with the women's movement or the demand for childcare or nurseries. It was very difficult.

There was good progress when Tessa Jowell was appointed to head a group to develop the Sure Start Centre idea. Then of course Margaret Hodge – who had been a local council leader in Islington, part of the women's movement, very involved in childcare – ultimately became the minister in the Department for Education responsible for childcare and then she started rolling it all out. So I was really trying to get it into other departments to try and get them to do things about it. I was never operationally responsible for it. Except, ironically, after I had been sacked, I became chair of the Early Years Development Partnership in my own constituency. All the money was coming down, we were rolling it all down in my own constituency, so I had an operational responsibility at a local level to see how bloody well it was working. It was cracking, it was really fantastic. So I had a different perspective on that.

Another time I had a different perspective was when I was on a jury. I think it was probably in 2011, and blow me down, the first case, at Southwark Crown Court, was a rape case. I thought, well, I am going to be challenged by the defence council, they will see me sitting there and say, "I am not having her on the jury." But they didn't. It was the rape of a prostitute and I thought blimey, bearing in mind all I have said about the

sex trade and everything, I can't believe that I am going to be on this jury. But there I was. I saw it all laid out. The woman was able to give her evidence behind a screen, she had been to a sexual assault referral centre, there was a specially trained barrister from the prosecution, the judge was all whiskered up and knew what should and shouldn't be done.

It was unbelievable to actually sit on the jury and see. I know not all cases go so brilliantly, but this was a random sample, so to speak. It all worked how I would have dreamt it would work in practice. Then they were found guilty, much to their absolute astonishment, because they thought, "Well, it is a prostitute, we can rape her." They were found guilty and then the judge absolutely threw the book at them on sentencing as well. It was fantastic to see, from the other side, how it had all changed.

DT: Picking a policy area where you were operationally responsible, I'm interested in the policy-making process and how you made a decision about what the best way to proceed was.

HH: Let's think of the example of sentencing in homicide cases. Basically, if you kill somebody and you intend to kill them, that is murder. Unless, in those days, it was domestic violence whereby you could say, "It is not murder, it was her fault because she provoked me." This is the provocation defence. And then the judge would feel terribly sorry for the defendant, because he had been so horribly provoked by the wife, who was having an affair and generally being awful to him and not putting his dinner on the table. So he would get a manslaughter conviction and then he would probably get a suspended sentence and walk out of court.

I started off getting a cluster of cases together – I was Solicitor General – to take to the Court of Appeal and argue that these were unduly lenient sentences. One of the things the Attorney General and the Solicitor General have a power to do is refer sentences to the Court of Appeal, if you think they had been unduly lenient. I got together three of the most egregious cases, I mean, absolutely terrible – one had been murdered because she had said to her husband that she had feelings for the karate instructor, and then he murdered her. So I took these cases to the Court of Appeal and the judges said, "We can see what you are going on about, but actually the law needs to change."

So then there were two departments involved: one was the Home Office and the other is the Lord Chancellor's Department which became the Ministry of Justice. I discussed with the Secretaries of State and said, "I think we need to change the law here. We need to abolish provocation defence." They said, "But what if she is being really terrible to him? What if she has really nagged him? What if she is shagging somebody else?" I said, "This doesn't justify murder, whatever happens, we are moving beyond that." So I had quite a lot of persuading to do internally.

I was helped by the fact that in Scotland, the new Solicitor General, Elish Angiolini, who was the first solicitor who had been in that role and the first woman, was very well respected. They had the infidelity defence in Scotland. I teamed up with her. I went to Scotland a lot to talk about cases with her and how we would, together, change the law,

because it is devolved in Scotland. If they were going to be doing it in Scotland at the same time as we were doing it in England, it may have felt more like it was the sensible, mainstream thing to do. Elish was very credible on the prosecution side and Vera Baird, who by this time had got into the House of Commons, was a QC [Queen's Counsel] who was very well respected on the defence side.

So we all worked together to persuade our colleagues that we needed to abolish this provocation defence. But we didn't get it abolished until 2009. I had stated that it should be abolished in 1997, having been protesting about it since the 1980s. But that is because I needed to persuade my colleagues. It wasn't anything that the civil service were doing, dragging their feet, I just had to keep nagging and getting more and more senior in the system. Once I was Deputy Leader it was easier to push things forward.

DT: So that helped in the period up to 2009, that you could engage at a more senior level, with more authority, because you were Deputy Leader of the [Labour] Party?

HH: Yes. One of the things that is disappointing about being a minister is if you have an idea for something thoroughly good to do, nobody throws the door open and says, "Blimey, that is a good idea, let's all help you do it." No, you have to toil away, the sweat has to pop off your brow, you have to fight your way through brambles. I can't believe there isn't a better way of doing it. Especially because the things that I argued for, like the Equality Act [2010], are now regarded by everybody as a sensible and righteous thing to do. Yet every single department argued that the duties not to discriminate would be far too onerous on local government. The Department of Health would say, "Unless we can carry on discriminating against older people, it would be far too expensive, so we can't possibly do that." I mean, literally every department had a reason why they couldn't do it. And it turned out actually they could. But it took such a long time.

DT: Were there groups outside government who helped to generate evidence or argue your case? Was it part of wider alliance?

HH: There were. But it is quite odd that if you have been elected and you are in government with your colleagues, you have to rely on outside organisations to persuade your own colleagues with whom you have been working for more than 20 years. But yes, the idea that there is a sort of slightly menacing, hovering group of voluntary organisations and other interest groups outside who are on your side, is quite important.

I had such a sense of team commitment in 1997 that I wouldn't have dreamed of using anybody outside government to pressurise my colleagues. By 2007, that was my first thought: how do we actually mobilise the outside world to pressurise my colleagues to help get things to happen? But by that time, the outside organisations had become so much a part and parcel of working with the Government that their radical instincts had become a bit dulled. They weren't quite subversive enough. They were a bit too compliant. I had to try and whisk them all up in order to get them to put pressure on my colleagues, for us to make radical change.

DT: You were more radical than they were?

HH: I was. I kept saying to them, "What do you want?" And they would be going, "Oh, what is happening now?" And I would reply, "No, what do we want for progress?" And eventually I encapsulated it by saying to them, "What are your unreasonable demands? Make your unreasonable demands, because today's unreasonably demand is tomorrow's conventional wisdom." But it took quite a while to get them to think outside the box. There is a sort of self-censoring, a chilling effect of outside organisations that think "what are we likely to get?" rather than "what do we want? What should happen?" I think it is much better if the outside organisations have some open-mindedness rather than second-guessing what they can get through.

DT: Can we turn to Parliament, because obviously you have experienced PMQs [Prime Minister's Questions], you have been Leader of the House and you have done many, many parliamentary questions from different perspectives. What would be your advice to a new MP or, indeed, a new minister on how to handle questions and operate in Parliament?

HH: I think the attitude that you go into questions with as a minister, from your department with your civil servants sitting there, is: how can you thwack down the backbenchers that are asking you questions so that they don't annoy you or cause you difficulty. Questions really ought to be seen as an opportunity to listen to what the Opposition say and to listen to what your own side is saying. Many of the things that have gone wrong have been predicted by back benchers. I think there is a bit of machismo – "I told him where to get off, I told her where to get off," or "I knew a number that she didn't know and I was able to zap him or her with that number."

I think there is too much of an adversarial approach to Parliament from the civil service, seeing Parliament as an obstacle, something that is there to be a problem when you try and get your legislation through. I think they should have embraced more the notion that you are putting it into the public domain in Parliament and actually, Parliament can improve it, and select committees can improve it, instead of driving the business of the House through. Often, backbenchers on one or the other side will be right and the warning signs won't have been listened to. And then you go back to the department and they say "Minister, you really put them in their place." It's short-term gratification, but we should be listening more.

DT: So that is the civil service getting into a kind of combative spirit. But how should ministers be handling these things? They should listen more, that is part of what you are saying. But I mean particularly Prime Minister's Questions, I remember in Number 10, the preparation that went into it…

HH: Did you do preparation for me for Prime Minister's Questions?

DT: No. I was out of Number 10 by then.

HH: You didn't have that happy opportunity.

DT: We had John Prescott as Deputy Prime Minister.

HH: Oh, right. He did that very well. I had James Bowler. My goodness me, how grateful I was for the preparation that they did. It was absolutely remarkable. You have to be able to answer a question, from any side of the House, on anything, past, present or future, in any part of the world. It is like an exam where there is no curriculum, the curriculum is everything. That is quite daunting, but they were really brilliant in the way that James and his team prepared me. With Prime Minister's Questions, you are for that moment the leader, so you have simply got to prevail. It is not an opportunity for listening. It is combat.

I think other ministers' questions, ministers ought to be nice to everybody, not too clever by half, and listening. Prime Minister's Questions, I am afraid, is mortal combat. You have got to be the last person standing and you have got to have your side cheering and the other side crestfallen. That is just how it is at the moment. Anybody who has tried to be 'no more Punch and Judy', which was David Cameron's line, and Tony Blair saying he was going to do it differently, it just doesn't work. I hope one day that it does, but for the moment you have just got to slay the Leader of the Opposition and vice versa. Once it comes to questions from backbenchers, you can be a bit more relaxed and interested, but you have got to deal with the combat to begin with.

DT: In terms of your preparation, were you cramming facts about government, getting key stats in your head? Or was it a matter of preparing yourself for potential lines of attack?

HH: It is all of that. James came in with a huge pair of files, with intimidating flags all the way down the side for each subject. It could be any subject under the sun – what has the Government done in the past, what is the Government planning to do, what are the problems, what have other people said about them – and you have to be on top of it.

I was quite amazed, when I used to watch David Cameron doing Prime Minister's Questions, that he used to make up the facts. I never had that kind of born to rule bravado, the idea that you could just make up a fact and say it as Prime Minister. I used to think actually, you'd better be right on the facts. I had quite an abused and scared period in government, so I didn't feel I could airily throw out a whole load of facts that were wrong.

As Ayesha Hazarika, my special adviser, used to say: you have got to be match fit. I think that's something they use for sportspersons or boxers or something. You have got to be absolutely the person who knows most, who is concentrating most, who has got most political energy, who has got the most conviction and, in my case, make up, clothes as well. Tall order really.

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