

# Ministers Reflect Hazel Blears



29 November 2021

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

1997–2015: MP for Salford (MP for Salford and Eccles, 2010–15)

## Government career

2001–03: Parliamentary under secretary of state at the Department of Health (including minister for public health, 2002–03)

2003–06: Minister of state for policing, security, and community safety at the Home Office

2006–07: Minister without portfolio at the Cabinet Office, and Labour Party chair

2007–09: Secretary of state for communities and local government

**Hazel Blears was interviewed by Dr Catherine Haddon and Paeony Tingay on 29 November 2021 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.**

**Hazel Blears talks about her political journey to becoming secretary of state for communities and local government. She reflects on the optimism in the country when Labour entered government in 1997, the importance of working as a PPS before becoming a minister, and her time as minister for policing during the 7/7 terrorist attacks.**

Catherine Haddon (CH): So if you could cast your mind back first to 1997, you were first elected as an MP that year, even though you'd stood previously. Can you tell us a bit about election night and what those first few days were like for you? What was it like to be a new MP coming in after that landslide?

Hazel Blears (HB): It was obviously an incredibly exciting situation to find yourself in. But if I just cast my mind back a little bit further than that, I'd been a candidate in an unwinnable seat in 1987 in Tatton against Neil Hamilton [the Conservative candidate], who had a 26,000 Tory majority. And that was my first 'bleeding', if you like, as a parliamentary candidate. It was a great experience. I had absolutely no chance of even denting his majority, I don't think, but it was a great experience.

And then I fought a marginal seat in Bury South in 1992 and everybody thought we were going to win that. We had four recounts, and I lost by 400 votes on the fourth recount at 4 am. So four has never been my lucky number! And that was absolutely devastating because I'd had to give up my day job because I worked in local government as a lawyer. And so, on that morning, I had no parliamentary seat, I wasn't an MP, I had no job to go to, and it was all kind of devastation – not just for me, but for the Labour Party as a whole. Because, I think, in 1992, everybody thought we would get over the line and we would actually have a Labour government. So I will never forget that particular time.

And I remember very well walking home from the count at probably about 4:30 am, and we'd arranged a big party. Everybody thought we were going to win, which was slightly premature. And I said to my mum, who was just the most amazing woman, "Mum, I'm not sure I can do this – go back to this place and have a big party and drinks and everything." And she said to me, "Hazel, do you know how steel is tempered?" And I thought, "What is my mother on about?" She said to me, "It gets heated to a really high temperature and then it gets plunged into icy cold water and its edge is sharper. Hazel, you have just been tempered." And it was just enough to get me to the point where I could hold my head up high, go back to the party, console all my party workers, give them all a hug and say, "It'll be okay next time."

Following that, I was lucky enough to get selected for my home seat, which was Salford. It was a very safe Labour seat, so I didn't have to go through all that again. Being tempered

once is probably enough for any human being to experience in their lives! So when we did win in 1997, it was the culmination of a long journey. It wasn't a matter of being selected for a safe seat straight off. And so, for me, it was even more special. I'd been a candidate three times. It was a long, hard road with loads and loads of campaigns. But, at that point, to see the results coming in and knowing we would have a Labour government, was one of the high points of my life, even now looking back. And it wasn't about winning, particularly. I mean, that was great, but it was about having the chance to make change. Because being in opposition, you can criticise the other side all you like, but you never have the chance to make the changes for the things that you believe in and the people you want to represent. So it was the culmination of that journey, and it was amazing. And we did have a big party. We went back, we had the pies [laughs], and the celebration and all of that.

And so it was a joyful time. I think it was a time of optimism, not just for the candidates who'd become members of parliament, but for the country. Because everybody had been through a long, hard slog – a long, hard time – and it was time for a change. And people were just coming up to me in the supermarket, putting their arms around me, and giving me a hug – complete strangers saying, “We're so glad, we're so glad.” And obviously, I'd come from a Labour city, in Salford, where I'd been a councillor for eight years, and trying to implement policy when you have a Conservative government and you're in local government, was a nightmare. You couldn't get anything done. You didn't have enough money for schools and for the health service. We still had schools with outside toilets in Salford in 1997. Unbelievable now, but that was the state of affairs.

So getting a Labour government... I don't know... it was like a total sigh of relief by the community, by everybody involved in politics. And it was a new beginning. I know it sounds corny now but, when we woke up that day, it was just like, “Oh my goodness!” And the first few days when I went to London, my husband came with me. And he's lived in Salford for a long time. And we were just like two children really, walking up and down where all the government offices were and going into the House and signing in as an MP. You just never, ever forget that moment. It was a privilege and a great day to be alive, really.

**CH: And there was, at that time, a record number of new women MPs as well – obviously still a long way away from any kind of parity – but what was it like being one of those new women MPs at that time? What was the atmosphere like in and around the Houses of Parliament? And how was the induction?**

**HB:** I think the atmosphere reflected the atmosphere in the country. It was joyful. We were really thankful and grateful to the people who had voted and made the change happen. I think we were all very conscious that it wasn't down to us as individuals, or even as a party. But actually, the people had spoken, and they'd made it very, very clear that they wanted change. So, I think, as well as it being an amazing time, it was a time of great responsibility. I know there was Tony [Blair]'s “A new dawn has broken” [his victory

speech] and all of that, but I felt a personal sense of responsibility, as I am sure did many, many of my colleagues. This was a chance, having been out of office for so long, actually to do some stuff and make a difference. And if we didn't step up and do it well, and make sure that it really did make a difference, then in some ways we were betraying the trust of all those people who had said they wanted change. So I think there was joy but there was also a sense of responsibility around all of that.

It was great to be with so many women. I've got a photograph now of us stood outside on the College Green having our picture taken as women MPs. And it was a massive, massive change for us to be... to be seen. We were in the flesh, and we were real. I think we did change the atmosphere of the place. I wasn't there before but some of the few women who were there had said it was a very masculine place to be. Being one of those – and I'm not going to say 'Blair babes'... I've never felt like a babe in my life [*laughs*] – but being one of those New Labour women was an amazing opportunity.

**CH: And you were then given the role of parliamentary private secretary to Alan Milburn in the Department of Health, when he was minister of state there.**

**HB:** Let me say this to you, I've never been given anything in my life [*laughs*]. Well, first of all, I actually spent a couple of years as a member of John Prescott's campaign team. I became a campaign co-ordinator, so that was great. I say that with a sense of irony. I'd spent 12 years campaigning, and what do I get? I get to be in John Prescott's campaign team from day one, while other people were being appointed to all kinds of things. Anyway, I absolutely did my job. I am a great campaigner. I was a great campaigner. But there's a danger in parliament that you get put into a pigeonhole. And I'd never lived in London. I wasn't part of a political set. I'd always lived in Salford, in my constituency, and it's a very different situation. You see some people coming into parliament who've already got loads of connections, already people who are going to be ministers, were already on that track. And then there were others like myself who basically didn't have any friends in influential places, so it was a harder track.

So I'd done the campaigning role, done all of that, and then Alan asked me to be his PPS [parliamentary private secretary] in 1998, and I was absolutely delighted. That was probably a more pivotal moment for me than being appointed to some of the ministerial jobs later on. Because until you get a foot in the door, then you've got no chance of making any progress. So actually, being Alan's PPS was a great opportunity. I've been forever grateful to him; we're still in touch. And I learnt a lot. I do think, sometimes, when you just get a senior position straight off, you don't go through that kind of 'apprenticeship' – I'd call it – being a PPS. Because you're around, you're in the ministerial meetings. You don't necessarily see a lot of confidential papers, but you get to know the rhythm of government. And you're constantly with your 'principal', bag-carrying – quite literally – sometimes.

But the politics as well was really interesting. Because after health questions [the regular question sessions in the House of Commons for the Department of Health], Alan and I used to go into the tearoom. And Alan would always have a wander around, congratulate people on their excellent questions, do the chatting up. He was a bit like royalty; he never carried any money. So I used to have to buy the tea and the cakes, which was fine. And I would organise meetings for Alan with other members of parliament, just so that he could keep in touch and would know what the issues were. So there was that intelligence-gathering role, and being in quite a lot of the meetings.

And then, when Alan moved to the Treasury as chief secretary, then he took me with him as his PPS. So then I got to know quite a bit about the Treasury: how it worked, how it didn't work. Obviously, there were some strong relationships in the Treasury at the time, shall we say, so it was fascinating to be part of that as well. So I would never have been without it, actually. I think it stood me in good stead. And I think people who just get into senior ministerial office without having come through that process perhaps miss out a bit.

**Paeony Tingay (PT):** So you then got your first proper ministerial role in 2001, when you were made parliamentary under secretary of state in the Department of Health. How did you find out about that appointment and what was the conversation like?

**HB:** [*Laughs*] It was the last call of the reshuffle. Absolutely the last call. And I'd been sat in my constituency office, not quite sleeping there – but the previous day and all that day. And I knew that basically all the jobs had gone, so there was nothing left for me. Everything I'd done had always been slightly uphill work. So it was the last call of the day, and I was appointed by the prime minister, and you're just so, so delighted. And honoured. It is an honour to be asked to be part of an administration whose policy programme you support 150%. And you're desperate to be able to implement some of the changes for the people you represent. And representing Salford, which had a whole range of health problems and deprivation and inequality... the prospect of being able to make a difference is something that drives all of us, I think. Certainly, it has driven me. So I'd basically given up hope of the phone call and was just about to go home and make the tea and then I got one.

**CH:** Presumably you were expecting them to phone you at the constituency office? Because I assume you didn't have a mobile phone or any such thing at that point.

**HB:** Yes, I'd stayed in the constituency office all day. And Margaret who worked with me – Margaret was with me for a long, long time – kept looking over at me each time the phone went. She was very, very protective [*laughs*]. I think she would personally have done somebody an injury if they hadn't rung me at that point.

**PT: So then, do you remember what your first day was like, actually starting in the role, and how you found it?**

**HB:** Yes, I do. I remember going into Richmond House, which is where the Department of Health was at that time. I obviously knew Alan very well. I think John Hutton [minister of state for health] was with us as well at the time. It was a kind of double act with Alan and John. And Nigel Crisp became the permanent secretary. I received an incredibly warm welcome. I had two civil servants in the office. One of them had been there quite a long time and was quite familiar with how things were done and the other one was a bit like me, a bit of a newbie – a young man, very keen. And they were absolutely lovely. And they said to me, “Minister...”. And I think that was the first time I’d been called “minister”. I think I was looking behind me, thinking, “Who are they talking to?” But they did actually say to me, “Your life will now change.” And they were very direct about that, in terms of, “Your life won’t be your own. You’ll be working every hour that God sends.”

But also, “You will be representing Her Majesty’s Government”. And that was a very serious undertaking. So they gave me a really respectful but serious introduction to the changes that I could expect, to go from not just being a member of parliament, but actually representing the government and representing the country. And it felt like a big responsibility, but one that I was absolutely looking forward to carrying. And I would say that the civil servants, certainly at the health department, even though I was the most junior minister, treated me as if I was somebody very important in the scheme of things. And I wasn’t important because I was Hazel Blears, I was important because I was a minister at the Department of Health and speaking for all those people who use the NHS or who are employed in the health service. I think it’s quite a big distinction to make: that it’s not about you, it’s about the office you hold.

**PT: And had you discussed your priorities going in?**

**HB:** When you’re the most junior minister in the department, I’m afraid it doesn’t run on your priorities [*laughs*]. It runs on the programme that they’ve been conducting, and the changes you want to make. And obviously the secretary of state and minister of state have quite a big say in what you want to go forward. As the junior health minister at that time, I was responsible for opticians, pharmacists, dentists, and I think podiatrists as well. So I looked after all the bits of your body that didn’t necessarily end up in hospital. I think they were called ‘allied health professionals’. And I loved it, because it meant that you had to go out, and you had to work with all the professional organisations that represented dentists, opticians, pharmacists etc. And I don’t think that they’d ever been properly valued as key components of the NHS. They looked after bits of your body and therefore they were always like slight add-ons. It was your eyes, it was your teeth, it was your feet. It wasn’t the big stuff around the NHS. And yet those things could make as big a difference to people’s quality of life and wellbeing as some of the big operations. There was a sense that the big surgeons and those people were more important. And yet, for

most people's health experience, they rely on the dentist, the optician, their GP, and all of that.

So I was delighted to be able to try and, not just raise their profile, but raise their importance in terms of the core offer that the NHS could make. And particularly in terms of prevention rather than treatment – partly because of the community that I represent – it's much better not to get ill than to have to go into hospital and be cured. And obviously, people's access to healthy food – that kind of thing – is just as important as whatever the NHS decides to do to you. So I really enjoyed it.

That first post I held I won the annual award for the highest number of adjournment debates done by any government minister [*laughs*]. So I did the ones at the end of the sitting at half past 10, I did the ones in the afternoon, I did every single adjournment debate you can imagine. And I loved it. It was great training because you were in the House, you were debating. There might only be two of you – the person who'd brought forward the adjournment debate, and you as the minister – but, nevertheless, you developed that ability to become familiar with the atmosphere of the House.

And if you got it wrong as the most junior minister, it didn't really matter. People forgave you because you were learning. So each time you got something wrong, you were determined you wouldn't do it again. But you also then got to know the opposition MPs, and your own MPs, who were coming forward with their adjournment debates. So you got to know your colleagues on both sides of the House in a really good way, because they wanted you, as the minister, to give them a good response that they could go back to their constituents with and say, "I raised this in an adjournment debate and asked these questions and the minister said this." And so, it enabled me to make a lot of relationships across the House, which later on stands you in good stead.

**CH: You mentioned that you had a good relationship with Alan at that time and you'd worked with him closely for a long while. How did you find him as secretary of state? And what was it like being part of a ministerial team for the first time?**

**HB:** He was actually very good. He was very inclusive. He would chair the ministerial meetings that we would have every week to look at priorities. I liked it because he was very focused on change, because he'd waited quite a long time to get in there and make some change. But he was always focused as well on the politics, on what he was doing and how it would play. So he had a very good strategic brain to look at: what is the immediate thing now, and how would you take that forward? What more would you want to do if you had more money, and you were able to do it? So he was always thinking ahead and thinking about the progress that we could make. Very inclusive with the team, willing to accept suggestions from me as the most junior minister, all the way through. Alan and John Hutton actually worked well together. They shared a flat, I think, so they were very close. And that was a good relationship, I think, because John as well – who I also keep in touch with – was a really good person at executing, making things happen,



and delivering on the large scale. And so that, together with Alan's strategic approach about what he wanted to achieve, and then a couple of us as basically the hands-on, doing a lot of the work – as a team, it worked really well, it was great. Tessa [Jowell], a minister of state in the Department of Health] had been there as public health minister. She was amazing and Sure Start was one of the best programmes of the Labour government.

**CH: There was a focus on waiting times and a big push on health in that second term. And then things like foundation trusts were being developed. What do you remember about the wider policies of the department at the time?**

**HB:** I think the big imperative when we first came in was to get the NHS back on its feet. I think there was a real sense that it had deteriorated. Waiting times were far too long, there was a lack of capacity in the system, a lot of the people working in the NHS were demoralised and exhausted... some parallels with today in some ways because of events that have happened. And so, it felt like an ailing patient. You had to get it back on its feet, and nurture it, and actually show some appreciation and love to the people working in it. Because again, I think staff morale was very low. So there were two things really. One was to do the mechanics and change the system to get the capacity and get the waiting lists down. The second was to raise the morale of people working in the service, because that would be the key quality indicator about the experience that people would have there.

And it was all NHS, NHS, and, looking back, I think the social care aspect of what was happening didn't receive the same kind of attention. Even now, we're reaping some of the lessons of that time, that perhaps, if there'd been more investment in keeping people well at home, then the drive to get more capacity into hospitals would have perhaps not been as hard. I think it was a very medicalised approach. And I say that because, afterwards, I was public health minister, after Tessa. But Tessa was in there really pushing the public health agenda, which was much more about self-care, about trying to keep people well: health, wellbeing, mental health, and all the stuff that Tessa did on Sure Start [an initiative which aimed to give children the best start in life], on families, on keeping them together.

And in a way, she was a very powerful woman, Tessa. And a very close friend of mine. And I don't think that perhaps her voice was heard as strongly as it ought to have been. And it's easy to say that in retrospect, but it did feel a bit like there was a sort of macho agenda of numbers. And inevitably, the press' eyes are on you, and it's waiting lists and times. Your star is still going up and then you've been in there for 18 months and the question becomes, what are you doing? It's got to be coming down. But those hard indicators, I think, are not necessarily the best indicators of people's health and quality of life. And I think we've learned a lot about that over the last 15 to 20 years, that we need to do things differently. And actually, stopping people being ill is, for me, the best indicator: the prevention indicator. And those were very underdeveloped at the time.

**CH:** And from your perspective, how much of an interest did No.10 and the prime minister take on health? The Prime Minister's Delivery Unit had launched and that was starting to get going – did you get a sense of how much pressure that was putting on Alan?

**HB:** The prime minister was very, very focused on health, and understandably so, because it was in such a dire position. People had a huge appetite for change and improvement. And also, there was going to be a lot of investment, and making sure that that investment was going to deliver on the things that really mattered to communities. No.10 were absolutely focused on delivery, and remained so all the time under Tony Blair's watch. You didn't get away with anything with the prime minister. And he introduced what I used to call 'grip meetings'. Later on, when I was the police minister, I had the doubtful pleasure of going to grip meetings with the prime minister.

And Michael Barber [then Blair's chief adviser on delivery], when he was in the Delivery Unit, used to do quadrant examples. He'd have one quadrant which would be high risk, and another one which was low risk – low risk, low impact – and then medium risk, and all of that. And when you got into the quadrant, which was high impact, that's where you wanted to be. But that kind of intellectual analysis around delivery targets I found really helpful. I found it stimulating. I found it exciting. Because as a minister, you could look at that, you could weigh it up and you could say, "Right, I'm going to put my foot down a bit harder here... and maybe this can wait a bit... because actually this is the biggest impact that I will make for the health and wellbeing of the community." So I really enjoyed it. It wasn't about what do I want to do just politically, for the optics, and how it's going to be seen, but actually about driving fundamental systems-change that, in the end, would stand the test of time. When you'd long gone, then hopefully you're leaving some kind of legacy in a system that's going to work better.

**CH:** Speaking of legacies, you launched the 5 A Day campaign, didn't you?

**HB:** Yes, obviously building on other people's great work by the time I got there. But we did 5 A Day, and it's something that's lasted. So when I see the little symbol in the supermarket, I think it is possible to make some lasting change

And I finished off Tessa's work in banning tobacco advertising, which was slightly controversial [*laughs*] with the motor racing industry. But, never mind, we did that. And again, that's something that has stood the test of time, and has hopefully saved a lot of lives in the interim.

**PT:** You mentioned earlier that you then became the policing minister, which was a minister of state role in the Home Office under David Blunkett, in 2003. Were you expecting to receive that promotion?

**HB:** No, I wasn't actually. On the day, I was asked to go into No.10. And when you get made a very junior minister, you don't go into No.10; the prime minister might ring you

up but doesn't really know who you are on the list. When you get asked to go into No.10, at that point, you know that something nice is going to happen, because he wouldn't normally have you in to do something not nice. And so, and I'll never forget this, I walked down the road and I got into No.10, and Hilary Armstrong, who was chief whip, said to me, "You're going to love this, Hazel." And I had no idea what it was going to be, but she said, "You're going to love this."

And I walked through, and the prime minister said to me, "Hazel, we'd like you to be the police minister." Well, do you know, it was kind of my dream job. I lived in Salford – I represented Salford – and I had some of the biggest organised crime groups and gangsters in my constituency. I had antisocial behaviour running riot over my estates. I had good, decent, hardworking, law-abiding people being intimidated by some of the worst people you've ever imagined. And they're going to make me the police minister. And I am 4'11" and most of these constables are 6'6" *[laughs]*. It was amazing.

**PT: A couple of years later, the home secretary John Reid labelled the Home Office "not fit for purpose". So what was your experience of the Home Office? And were those problems evident to you then?**

**HB:** Not really, no. No. I didn't see that. Those words, "not fit for purpose", are legendary words in government. So when I got there, one of the civil servants who'd been with me at health actually came over to the Home Office with me, and he was just as amazing as he was in health. And again, he said to me, "The first time you came, your life was going to change. That was nothing in comparison to what's going to happen now." *[laughs]* And he was right.

And so I always found the civil servants, again really, incredibly helpful. They want you to succeed, because if you fail, they fail. So I think anybody who comes into government and wants to be at war with the civil service is cutting off their nose to spite their face, basically. Because the civil servants want you to do well, irrespective of your politics. They want you to manage well. They want you to be able to handle all of their stakeholders really well. They want you to build relationships. Because they know that if you do all that work, you're going to make more progress in the policy objectives. Whereas if you're kind of anti- what they're doing from day one, then it's just going to be a fight every step of the way. You need to work as a team. So the civil service, for me, they were always a great back-up. The other thing I liked about the Home Office was that you had quite a lot of secondees in. So I had these police officers at various different ranks seconded into the Home Office, bringing their frontline experience. So it wasn't just all about data. You then got the discursive part of what would work, as well as the data analysis. I found them incredibly professional. And it was the best job in everything that I did.

**CH: What was it like working with David Blunkett? How did he compare as secretary of state?**

**HB:** I'd known David longer than I'd known Alan. I really only got to know Alan when I came to parliament, but I'd known David because he was a very influential figure in local government. So when I was a city councillor, I knew David quite well. He'd come up with a very similar background to mine: a working-class community. He'd had hardships in his life. He understood the problems facing working-class communities. As did Alan. Alan was in a similar kind of vein as well. David was always very forthright. He said what he wanted, and he was very clear about it. He could occasionally be irascible, but who would blame him? He had this massive empire to bestride in the Home Office, because it is big and it's complex, and he was dealing with everything from immigration to drugs to policing. Such a wide area. It was almost like running the government being the home secretary. It's the next most testing job, I think, in government. But what David also did, a bit like Alan, was he gave you your head. So he would be very open to your ideas. You'd have a ministerial meeting, and the ministerial meetings were bigger, but with a very similar kind of ethos to them. You come in, you share ideas. It wasn't just like being accountable to your boss, there was a collegiate sense of a shared mission about what you were doing, which I always found really encouraging.

I was basically given leeway in the police part of what I did. And some of those characters who were chief constables, they were running massive organisations. They were very powerful. The vast majority of them were very powerful men. And they were faced with, as I say, quite a small woman [*laughs*]. But it wasn't my power; my power was exercised on behalf of Her Majesty's Government. Again, it didn't matter who I was or what I looked like. But, I don't know, I think they liked me. Because I've always worked really hard, so I went to everything. I visited every force. I got to know their officers. I got to know the middle cadre, which in an organisation are the people who make things happen. It's not the bosses, it's not the juniors, it's that middle cadre: the chief superintendents and all of those people. I did all the conferences for them; I visited police stations, communities, and organisations all the time; and I got to know all of them over that three-year period. So it was a very intense period.

And we also did the antisocial behaviour agenda, which was so close to my heart. I worked with Louise Casey [then the head of the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit] on the Respect campaign. We travelled the country calling out antisocial behaviour. We did controversial legislation with antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs), which were a mix of civil and criminal powers brought together, almost for the first time in the British legal system, I think. So you had a civil order with an antisocial behaviour order, and so you only had to get to a balance of probabilities test. And yet, if you breached the civil order, you committed a criminal offence. It tipped you over into the criminal part of the justice system. And so, I am a lawyer – or I was a lawyer – and so the arguments that I had with the legal profession in, in their terms, “corrupting the law” by having a civil order that's then enforced in the

criminal setting, were legion. Absolutely legion. And I loved it. I loved the intellectual challenge, to be able to talk to the QCs and say, “No, I’m afraid you’re wrong. It’s perfectly legitimate to legislate in this way... because it’s the law.” You know, it’s been through parliament, and we’ve legislated to make this happen. And again, in the constituency, I had massive amounts of antisocial behaviour, where gangs had basically become the overlords of particular estates, and it was their word that was the law. And that was wrong. So bringing in the whole antisocial behaviour, Respect agenda, being on the side of decent, hardworking people, and really going for the ones who were the villains, it appealed to me – because it was important. But it was great because it was real life that was happening out on the streets. Drugs, violence, gang warfare, immigrants being exploited, all of that – what better agenda could you have than to clean up the streets?

And one of the things that I am most proud of is that I banned handguns in this country. And it was a big step. I had all of the shooting lobby come to see me. They brought their guns. They showed me their guns and how beautiful they were. And the mayor of Chicago came to see me, and he said, “Hazel, if I could do something similar in Chicago, I would be saving hundreds of lives every week and I’d be undermining the criminals and I’d be making my city a safer place to live.” And he said, “I envy you so much, that you’ve been able to do that.” So that was, again, a fantastic opportunity.

And later on, when I was at the Home Office, David gave me the extra brief of security – the counter-terrorism brief. And then, I was the counter-terrorism minister at the time of 7/7 [7 July 2005 London bombings], when Charles [Clarke, at the time the home secretary] was there, and that was... another life-changing experience, shall we say.

**PT: How was that, being in the Home Office at that time?**

**HB:** Well, by sheer coincidence, a couple of weeks previously, we’d exercised a major terrorist attack, and Charles and I had exercised the ministers’ role as to what we would need to do in those circumstances. And then, I think it was only three or four weeks later that 7/7 happened. I think I’d just arrived at the department that morning. I was in my office, and it came on the television – Sky News and everything. And that was it then, nothing else existed for us apart from that. And our major role right at the outset was the one that we’d kind of practised, and that was about reassuring the public, doing the media, and responding immediately. I mean, obviously supporting the police and all of that as well, but there was that sense of shock for the nation: how is this happening in our country? And I think the biggest shock was, why do people who have been educated and grown up in Britain hate us and our values so much that they’re prepared not just to kill other people but to kill themselves? And that was the big almost existential question about, how does it happen that young people grow up and are prepared to do this kind of thing? I think it was a real sense of proper shock. People were in shock.

**CH:** So that was a huge moment for the country and, although the government had obviously been thinking a lot more about security since 9/11, did it lead to some big changes in the department?

**HB:** Yes, it did. And one of the very first things the prime minister did was basically get us all together, the Home Office and other departments as well. And the prime minister, because he was a great prime minister, just knew what to do from both the public's perspective and from government's perspective. So what he wanted to do was to bring in some very visible measures so that people would see not just that something must be done, but that government was taking this incredibly seriously. So, he wanted some legislative measures around all of that, and he then also wanted some organisational changes, in the way that departments could work together to tackle this. Even looking right across to the health department, mental health issues would obviously be in play in relation to what was happening.

And then he said to me, "And, Hazel, I think that we need to really strengthen our relationships with the Muslim community. So for the next six months. I want you to go to every community in Britain where there is a substantial Muslim population, I want you to meet with people and I want you to understand much more about their culture and their priorities, particularly for their own young people." Their own young people were at risk. And so he sent me off around the country to do that, and that was a very big part of my life.

**CH:** Then in May 2006, you were promoted to the cabinet as Labour Party chair. What conversation did you have with Blair then about the move?

**HB:** Hmm... I think I was disappointed really, because when I first came to parliament, I did my campaigning. You know, I started off in John Prescott's campaign team. I am a really, really good campaigner, and I connect with people. I'm good at all of that. And actually, my very good friend, Ian McCartney was the Labour Party chair, so it was a very, very difficult moment for me. And there was a bit of me that just felt – and I wouldn't say this about the prime minister – but there was a kind of... not quite intellectual snobbery, but, you know, working-class woman, great campaigner, in touch with the trade unions, because that was my background. It was almost putting you into a bit of a pigeonhole. And so I just felt, I suppose, that I'd earned my stripes. And I didn't necessarily expect to be in the cabinet. I didn't. But it almost felt like a bit of a step backwards. And that's absolutely no comment on the party. The party is really important. If you don't have a great party, you don't get elected, and you can't do all the things you want to do. But I've always been a party person.

Anyway, you do what the prime minister asks you to do. And so, I then spent another year, year and a half, going to party meetings, rallying the troops, reorganising the party as well to a large extent, working with the trade unions – which was always challenging, but I had some great colleagues in the trade unions. And I don't blame him in a way for

appointing me, because the trade union relationships that I had were really valuable and really important at what was quite a difficult time for the government. So I was probably the right person, it just didn't always feel like it [*laughs*]. So I did all that, and my poor husband had to come and eat more dinners going to constituency events to sell raffle tickets, yet again. So, yeah, interesting times. Oh, and then there was the deputy leadership campaign [after John Prescott resigned] and all of that, which actually was quite good for me, because it gave me a platform, which I think subsequently led to my appointment as secretary of state. So actually, that was very well worthwhile.

**PT: ...which moves nicely on to June 2007, which was when you were made secretary of state for communities and local government. Was that a role you were expecting to receive?**

**HB:** No, not really. As I say, I didn't have any great expectations of the cabinet. It was, I suppose, the next logical role. I think it was quite generous actually, of Gordon Brown, because he'd seen how people performed in the deputy leadership campaign, and I actually came last. But I wasn't surprised [to have come last] because I was 'the Blairite candidate' and politics were shifting quite fast at that point. But, nevertheless, as chair of the party, I had hosted party conference, which actually took place in Salford at the Lowry centre. And it was a great success doing it up in the north for one of the first times. And so I think he'd been impressed.

And in a way, secretary of state for communities was absolutely my forte because I'd kind of majored on empowering communities. I'd written a pamphlet, 'Communities In Control', that then became a white paper about empowering local people to take control of their own lives. It's very trendy these days, you know! Danny Kruger [a Conservative MP], who I know quite well, he's obviously a great fan of this, as is Michael Gove [the secretary of state for levelling up, housing and communities]. So some of it has stayed around, which is fantastic. And so, well, it was two years of my life, so it wasn't a long period, but it was great to be... not the boss, but actually to be somebody who was making the decisions and the strategy, holding my own ministerial meetings with my colleagues, all of that is really... I suppose it's the pinnacle, really, of any political progress. So I was delighted to have had the opportunity to do it.

**PT: You mentioned that Gordon Brown became prime minister at that point. What was your relationship with him like and how did you find that transition in leadership?**

**HB:** Like most of us, I think it took some adjusting to, because it was a very different style. I do think that, in retrospect, Gordon had a lot of challenges to face. Because we'd been in power for a significant period of time. There wasn't a honeymoon, and, in a way, I think Gordon was a bit like me. He'd been beavering away in various things and the honeymoon was well and truly over. And so it was a time when there wasn't much resource around to be able to spend, to do things. We'd had the terrorism attack and the mood of the nation was different: it was more nervous. You then get the feeling of it being time for

change. So all of those factors make it a very different way of being. If you think about the Labour years, you had the first years which were joy – elysian fields almost in political terms. Then you had the middle bit, which is roll your sleeves up, change the system, really make a difference. And then you had the end bit, and I think it was quite hard to be towards that end.

**CH: Another topic of the time was the balance of power between central and local governments. How difficult was it to devolve power? There were lots of different experiments over the course of the Blair government years, so what did you take on, and what were your priorities during your time there?**

**HB:** One of the reasons that I was really pleased to be secretary of state for communities was because I'd been a local councillor. I'd been a local councillor for eight years in Salford. I'd worked my way up from my very first job as a chair of the cultural services committee of Salford city council, which in later years was amazing because we got the Lowry centre, we did MediaCity, we brought all of that to the city. And in a way, we used the power of culture and arts to drive economic regeneration. You look across the country now, what are the places that have done surprising regenerations? You had the V&A in Dundee, you had Hull having been City of Culture, which transformed it dramatically, and we were going through all of that.

So having been a councillor, having driven regeneration, and then to be basically looking after local government, was fabulous for me. I knew most of the people in local government. I knew most of the leaders. I'd already got some personal relationships. So I didn't have to spend the time doing all that at the beginning because, when I went to talk to the local government conferences, they all knew me, they knew my record, and I had credibility because I'd been a councillor and I knew what it was like. I knew how tough it was when you didn't have a lot of money to spend, and you were trying to meet this vast array of demands on you from your own local community. So I could exchange with them, I worked with them, and I like to think that I was well respected... and some of them might support that [*laughs*]. But no, it was the right job for me actually, and in the time that I was there, I really enjoyed it.

The other thing that it gave me the opportunity to do was to work very closely with Jacqui Smith [then the home secretary] on the Prevent [terrorism] agenda. The Prevent agenda was basically mine in the communities department, and then there was a bit of shuffling around and moving it over to the Home Office. But the Prevent agenda, for me, was life changing, absolutely life changing. Because it wasn't about, if you like, dealing with terrorism, it was about, how do we give our young people enough protective skills to be able to resist the lure of the extremists? And how do we take on the extremists really hard? So you could use hard and soft power in combination actually, to combat, again, an existential threat to this country – which unfortunately is still there – but, nevertheless, involve your communities in that and involve your local councillors in all of that. Because this is where the problem was. It wasn't susceptible to top-down central government



edict. You had to get into those communities, talk to women in the Muslim communities who had no idea what their children were accessing online, on computers. They didn't even know how to switch the computer on, let alone the material that people were being exposed to. So working with all of that, again intellectually challenging, but absolutely vital for the country's mission.

**CH:** So that speaks to issues around joined-up government, because obviously that was about bringing together different parts of Whitehall, but also, beyond that, thinking about how the different levels of government would work together. How easy was that? How tough was that? The idea of trying different methods to improve joined up government was certainly a theme throughout the Blair years. Were there some particular successes that you remember, or some particular impediments that you found really frustrating?

**HB:** I think it was really hard to do, and I don't think it was done particularly well. I think it's a cultural thing. When you're in central government, you're used to being the more powerful partner, because you have the money. And therefore it's not a lack of respect. It's the same around devolution and the metro mayors and all of this that's happening now. I think, culturally, the centre finds it really hard to let go. And a bit of why that is [is] because they're accountable for the delivery, and they'll be measured, like we were in those grip meetings: how many robberies have you stopped? How much street crime etc.?

So the centre has a huge incentive to hold onto power because once you let it go, and if the delivery doesn't happen, you've got no levers, or very few levers, to make it happen. And so, I think, probably if we're going to get the most out of the public money that we spend, then we need a whole fresh look at those structures, the relationships, how much can we devolve? And then honest discussion about what you're not going to devolve because it has to remain at the centre. But you have to prove the case that it has to remain at the centre, not just say it because you are the centre. I think there was a lot of that that went on. You know, it was almost like pulling teeth to try and get things away from the centre. And again, it's not because of bad motives, it's actually, if it fails, then the consequences are quite serious.

And I'm not sure that government is terribly good at risk. In companies you have your risk register. You say, "What's my appetite for risk? Where do the decisions lie that reflect my appetite and the risk that's likely to happen?" I think government needs a much better management of risk appetite and a risk register and what's likely to happen, because if you do all that, you're prepared for it. Whereas if somebody just says to you, "I want £10 billion in order to tackle terrorism in, I don't know, Yorkshire and the Humber", well, no wonder the centre goes, "Whoa!" But they need to work it out, that actually if I devolve this, my chances of tackling that extremism there will be much greater than if I keep this to myself. So it's, what is my appetite? And I don't think that government, as a whole, is

very good at that. I would really like to see some work done with ministers on managing risk appetite.

**CH:** You've talked a bit about your first experience of being in cabinet under the Blair years, and then obviously you were there as secretary of state under Brown, which was a very different time to when you first came into power in 1997, and then obviously there was the financial crash. So what did you notice about how cabinet was operating? How were you operating as a ministerial team? And what was the role of the prime minister in all of that?

**HB:** It makes me feel, even now, very sorry for the prime minister – very sorry for Gordon Brown, at this point. Amazing what you can do in hindsight... I think you've spent all that time wanting, for the good of the country, to be able to exercise decisions at the highest level, and then you have the financial crash. I was on the cabinet committee for managing the financial crash, and I don't think – and I would include myself in this – that people really knew what to do. I think it was an emotional crash as well as a financial crash. And so you'd got the economy going completely belly up and, at the same time, ministers are people, and they're facing all of this. So finding the emotional reserves to be able to deal with this massive crisis, I think, was quite hard. Because again, it wasn't susceptible to the usual levers, because the usual levers are spending money and actually you've got the reverse going on here. You haven't got the ability to do that, so you have to be more creative.

I think sometimes government lacks creativity. I do some work at the moment with a scientific organisation, and we've been talking about STEM subjects. So they recruit people with science, technology, engineering, or maths. I am persuading them to start to recruit arts and creatives as part of the mix. So you'll still have your scientists, but you'll have a musician, you'll have a dancer, or whatever. And I just think, in cabinet, maybe some more thought should be given to the mix and blend of skills, qualities and talents that each person brings to the table. I noticed from previous interviews that you've [the IfG] has done, that one former minister [[Ben Bradshaw](#)] talked about a Myers Briggs test, which I found absolutely fascinating. The only time I've done Myers Briggs is when I was in government as well. But that blend... nowadays we'd talk about it as thought diversity, wouldn't we? Companies will tell you, when they've got thought diversity, they're much more successful than when they don't have it. And I do think there was something around that financial crash which exposed perhaps the lack of some of those skills.

I came up with a slogan at one of the meetings, and it was "Real Help Now". And it had a man in a manhole and another person reaching out with a hand to lift this person out of the manhole. And it was "Real Help Now". And I think we did use quite a bit of that. But that's the bit I felt was missing: the ability to connect with the country over something massive and potentially cataclysmic and reassure the country. And actually, Gordon did put in place the mortgage relief help, the stuff like that, which would reassure the people.

But, at that point, I don't think we had the messaging ability that we had in the early years, when we were absolutely brilliant at messaging. I don't think we had that.

**CH: If we then just finally touch on your decision to resign in June 2009. What was behind that?**

**HB:** I think just finding myself in a situation which was utterly intolerable, that I couldn't go out of my front door, that I'd been besieged by people for weeks on end for something which was – it's easy to say this – entirely unjustified in those terms. I have my view, other people will have their view. But you just get to a point in your life and you think, "Well, you know, it's time to go." So I think that's where I was.

**CH: And you apologised shortly after for resigning just before the European and local elections. Looking back on that now, was it just the case that you couldn't think beyond the immediate of what you were going through?**

**HB:** Yes. I didn't draw up a list for and against, what would I do, was this logical, is this rational, how much weight would I give to this factor and how much to that factor? It wasn't those circumstances. You were around, you remember how hysterical the whole situation was, not just for me, but for a whole range of people. And obviously my husband has been an amazing support to me throughout my political life. But I just thought, "enough is enough".

**PT: Moving onto a couple of reflective questions, what would you say is the achievement you are most proud of from your time in office?**

**HB:** I am torn really between the banning of handguns and the Prevent policy. I suppose they're two sides of the same coin, aren't they? One is a very physical thing to do: you can't get a gun. And the other one is about hearts and minds and persuading people. And in a way, that slightly sums up my own character. I like to do things and get things done, but actually I am really interested in people's motivations and the emotional things that affect people's behaviour.

**PT: And finally, what advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be most effective in office?**

**HB:** I would say that the biggest thing is time. Find some time. And it will be impossible. All the time that I was in government, I think I slept maybe six hours a night if I was lucky. When I came home at weekends, I would have two boxes on a weekend. The postman would bring them at nine o'clock. I'd work through seven hours. Michael [Halsall, Hazel Blear's husband] would bring a glass of wine at six o'clock. The postman came at six o'clock and took the boxes. Boxes every night. I probably worked 18 hours a day for 10 years. I remember thinking I went out three times in the evening in all the time I was in parliament. I went to Ronnie Scott's twice, and once to the ballet. And the rest of the

times, when you went out, you went out to events where you made a speech. But that wasn't going out.

And I think it would be about making time to cultivate relationships, because it's relationships that will stand you in good stead at the end of the day. Whether it's civil servants, whether it's your own ministers, whether it's backbenchers, your community. That takes time and effort. And I would say, find some time, if you possibly can, to reflect on the big decisions. Because I do think sometimes the ministerial red box is – they don't do it deliberately – but the box is a weapon [*laughs*]. I always did my box, I was a very assiduous minister, but my private office in the Home Office knew when I was getting tired, and towards the bottom of the box they would put in Maltesers just to give me that extra push to do the last bit. And sometimes, the papers are mixed up. You get the really big things at the bottom, which is ridiculous. I used to say to them, "Put the big things at the top and then, if I don't get to 'what colour should the toilets be?', then it doesn't really matter."

And so I would say, just find some time to reflect properly on the big decisions that you're going to make. Relationships, time, and don't forget... you can't forget your constituency because those are the people who vote for you and rely on you for help. But that's the bit that the civil service never sees, that it takes your time to go on a Saturday morning, to knock on doors, to see your constituents. And it's a message for the civil service, really: you don't own us, our constituents own us because they've given us the honour and privilege of representing them. And that's as important to British democracy as any kind of ministerial system, in my view.

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