INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

# Ministers reflect

Hugo Swire

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# Hugo Swire – biographical details

## Electoral History

2001 – present: Member of Parliament for East Devon

## Parliamentary Career

2012-2016: Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
2010-2012: Minister of State for Northern Ireland

*Hugo Swire was interviewed by Ines Stelk and Nicola Hughes on 13th December 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.*

**Ines Stelk (IS): If you think back to when you first went into office – so 2010 into the Northern Ireland Office – what was your experience of coming in as a minister like?**

**Hugo Swire (HS):** Well, I remember vividly where I was when I'd been a Shadow Minister and Shadow Secretary of State until about 2007 when David [Cameron] removed me. Anecdotally, the rumour at the time or the story at the time was that I'd said something about free museum entry charges. The truth of the matter was I think he'd been told by Steve Hilton [former Cameron adviser], probably, that he should change the image and get rid of people like me. But I mean, I was a very close supporter of his and one of the first people to back him along with Greg Barker, and a very good friend of his. So I kind of knew that if we won – which we sort of did if you can call the coalition winning in 2010 – then I would get something. But nonetheless when it comes, it's a surprise. I was in a shop in London and I think my wife was trying on something and I got the call from Number 10 and he asked me if I would go to the Northern Ireland Office.

I had been on the Northern Ireland Defence Select Committee for a few years, in about 2003 to 2005, so I knew Northern Ireland a bit and I said 'I would be delighted and honoured to go'. So I then rang up Owen Paterson who had been made Secretary of State and I got through to Owen and he said 'Yes, yes, hello Hugo, what can I do for you? I'm just on my way to Northern Ireland, I'm in a bit of a hurry' and I said 'Well, I'm just ringing to say when do you expect to see me in Northern Ireland?', he said 'What do you mean?' I said 'Well, I've just been made Minister of State in Northern Ireland.' He said 'Well, no one's told me!' [laughter] So that's government! He said it was good and we went over and that's when that began.

We had an extremely good relationship with each other, it worked rather well. We were very different personalities – I used to say in sort of riding terms, if he saw a five bar gate he'd ride straight at it, probably break it in half, but he'd still be in the horse riding on to the next one; I on the other hand would by then have checked the horse and looked for other ways round it! So it actually worked very well, the combination of the two of us. I think I then was the first minister ever to say that I was going to Hillsborough Castle [official residence in Northern Ireland], with Owen, and we rattled around there. We were there at different times and we had a really good two and a half years or whatever it was. But our offices there were in Stormont House, which is the old Speaker's House which is below Stormont Castle where the First and the Deputy First Minister are. There's absolutely nothing to prepare you for any of this at all.

I mean, you think when you're suddenly told you're going to be chairman of the board of a company, chances are you either worked for the company or in the industry, but there's absolutely no preparation in the case of becoming a minister. One minute you're not a minister, the next minute you've got people saying 'Minister, sign this, sign that.' And both my departments were different to departments like Energy, for instance, which had a lot of legislation. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO] doesn't have any legislation, Northern Ireland because of the devolution has precious little legislation, so I was never really in a department with a heavy House of Commons load.

**IS: You mentioned that you can never be fully prepared for the role. What kind of support was available to you?**

**HS:** I had a very good team, a very nice team in Northern Ireland. We didn't have a permanent under-secretary, we had a Northern Ireland Director, I got along with her perfectly well. Of course in Northern Ireland it's very different, in a way I suppose it's like being a minister with security – you have quite heavy security there, so as well as your private office you have the guys who look after you. You can form

a very strong team there. I suppose unlike other departments, it's split - you're in Northern Ireland and half your staff is there and half your staff is back in London. In those days our offices were in Thames House, just round the corner.

**IS: How did you find that, having your staff split?**

**HS:** Owen and I never sat down and said 'Someone's got to be here, you're here, I should be there'. We didn't work it like that, we just sort of came and went. And of course you then triangulate between the House of Commons, Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office in London and then your constituency, which was quite easy for me, because there's a direct flight from Exeter airport to Belfast. So I was able to do that. But there was no rhyme or reason to it. Obviously we were here in Parliament for Northern Ireland questions and so forth, but I tried to be as much in Northern Ireland as I could, because I thought that was what the job was about and people wanted to see you there. Although a lot is devolved, you know, it's very strange that you are still responsible for national security and other aspects which take up quite a lot of time.

**IS: You'd been in opposition for a few years, but was there anything that surprised you about the role of a minister?**

**HS:** We'd been in opposition for nine years, since 2001. No, I think everything just slipped into place really. There were certainly people in the Northern Ireland office who were slow to come to terms with the fact that they now had a Conservative/Liberal Democrat government to deal with and their default position was sort of Labour – but in a sense you'd expect that wouldn't you? Labour had been in power since 1997. And there were people who took a different view to us about the balance you need to strike between Sinn Féin and the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] and so forth. That was a running issue really, but we had an extremely good special adviser, or at least the secretary of state did, Jonathan Caine, now Baron Caine, who provided incredible support and continuity and was invaluable.

**IS: And so when you came into the Northern Ireland Office, how did you set your priorities and what were your biggest priorities for the department?**

**HS:** Well, I think there was the day-to-day stuff that you have to do as a minister, there's a lot of things to do with 'who can carry a personal weapon', endless appeals. This is the security side, which is the main side. Owen concentrated on trying to get corporation tax devolved in Northern Ireland, we were successful at the end of the day.

I was trying to do a lot of outreach with the harder-to-reach communities, so I spent a lot of the time on the quite rough estates with some of the loyalists and I wanted to show that I wasn't afraid to go and talk with these quite intimidating people, so I did – I tried to get out of Belfast as much as possible. I had a map in the outer office of Northern Ireland with pins in as to where I'd been. So I'd come in and I'd say 'Look, why haven't we been here?' So we'd try and arrange trips there so that I was seen around a bit really. But you are in a strange position in Northern Ireland, because you are not one of the devolved ministers. You do not have day-to-day responsibility, and yet you have ultimate responsibility for quite a lot. It's a diplomatic role more than a political role.

**IS: Thinking about those priorities, you mentioned outreach and corporation tax, how did you communicate those to your department?**

**HS:** Well the Northern Ireland Office is an extremely small department and I think we had, in my case, a very open, easy relationship and I keep in touch with my private office from those days, we all became friendly and all liked each other and it was good fun. We just tried to have some fun as well. Northern Ireland can be quite difficult at times so I just tried to make the whole thing quite fun and enjoyable and I think we succeeded in doing that.

**IS: Then thinking about when you moved to the Foreign Office, how was coming into the Foreign Office?**

**HS:** Well, the Prime Minister rang me on the train – at that point I could hardly hear what he was saying! – but of course that was very different indeed. Except that I think they created too many ministers of state at the time and they needed to find another slot for someone, so it was rather uncertain. I kept on ringing up the Foreign Office saying 'When shall I come round?' and they were sort of holding me off, because I think there was a problem. When I arrived there, it was a totally different beast to Northern Ireland. I mean the infrastructure, the grandeur - it was chalk and cheese, actually. And it was extraordinarily impressive. The Foreign Office is a deeply impressive department and they always say that if ministers go to other departments from the Foreign Office, other than probably the Ministry of Defence [MoD], they are always shocked and appalled by the standards they encounter from the Civil Service and I can well believe that. Treasury, MoD probably and the Foreign Office are the best departments I think.

Also the workload was much higher at the Foreign Office, because of course Northern Ireland's pretty thin, frankly. You had a box, a lot of security stuff. But of course, if you are a minister with responsibility as I was for really two thirds of the world – I did the Falklands, Central America, North America and then rather curiously Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic and Guatemala and Belize, that part of the world and then Asia, everywhere from India and Nepal down to Asia Pacific, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Japan, Mongolia, the Koreas and so forth and then Australasia and then the Pacific. That's quite a lot of cables coming in overnight, as they say. A lot more work and a lot of meetings, and a lot of travel. I travelled, I think in four and a half years or whatever it was, more than any other minister. I went to places I'd never heard of and certainly they'd never heard of me. And I think by getting out there and trying to forge these relationships, we did achieve something and I think that's become even more important. In the previous government, the foreign ministers did not travel any way like the same way as we did. I think we had more visits to Brazil – there was some statistic that we visited as much in six months as they had in ten years. We really did travel a lot and that's how diplomacy works, actually. It's getting to know people. And it's very interesting, once you've met someone on the circuit, there's a sort of club, there's an empathy there and it makes it much easier then to discuss different things or to get a message over or to find out what's really going on.

**IS: Do you think that was possible because you had a bigger ministerial team or was it a matter of your priorities that you wanted to achieve?**

**HS:** I think both. Not only do you have a much bigger team in the Foreign Office, you've got the private office, but you also then have all the other parts of that, all the different departments within the Foreign Office and then of course when you go anywhere, you are the minister for that country so you are greeted by the High Commissioner or the Ambassador and you've got all their team of course. So you've got plenty of infrastructure.

**IS: Given the vastness of your brief, how did you get on top of it?**

**HS:** I worked quite hard for that. Again, it was legislation-light. We didn't legislate in the Foreign Office, it was a non-legislative department on the whole. But there was a lot going on, because always in some part of the world there was something going wrong. I didn't have the intensity of the Middle East brief, so I didn't have Syria, I didn't have Libya, I didn't have Iran and all that, but there were on-going problems around the world. It was a huge privilege. Fantastic privilege. I had very good people around me.

I changed my private office a bit. They used to come as sort of fast-track into the office and just as you were getting them where you wanted them, they were spinning out into other places. I used to say I was very sorry to lose all of them really, they all became good friends. But I would say 'It's a Swire incubator'

– they came into the private office, worked for me, and I got them going and then off they went out to become the ambassadors of tomorrow.

**IS: Just to touch on your experience of being reshuffled, did you see that was coming?**

**HS:** Oh yes. I had a good relationship with the people at Number 10 so I tended to know. Still, when it came, you never know because nothing is ever for certain in politics and, you know, the Prime Minister himself can promise you one thing and then say 'Sorry, I've had to give it to someone else.'

**Nicola Hughes (NH): Had you dropped hints about where it was you wanted to go?**

**HS:** I'm a close friend with David Cameron, we had on-going discussions. He felt that I would be a good fit in the Foreign Office and I like to think he was right. If that doesn't sound too pompous, which I'm sure it does! [laughter]

**IS: Did that make a difference then to your experience, knowing roughly which post you'd get?**

**HS:** No, I didn't actually know until it happened to be honest – I didn't go out and buy a globe and work out where places were. I knew I was going to get something I would like – that I think was the phrase.

**IS: OK then based on your experience in these departments, how would you describe the main roles and duties of a minister?**

**HS:** The main duties of a minister in the Foreign Office really are to get on top of the brief, to get to know more about the countries and I think ultimately to know more than your officials do. I mean, it was the same in the private office. And to support your officials, because I always used to say the private office, you know, they've got stuff coming in from every other department and they're like a filtration system. What they put in your box is only the top of what they've had to deal with. So they used to get unbelievably frustrated from, frankly, the quality of some of the work they were getting from within the Foreign Office: sloppy letters, badly asked questions, late questions, wrong information, all that. Because I said 'I believe what you tell me, don't tell me something and I then make a speech or a comment and then say "Sorry Minister, that wasn't quite right", because that's not how it's going to work.' So they were like a sort of sieve really. And I was very diligent with my box. Some ministers do the trick of only doing their boxes in the office and that narrows down what goes into the box, because all the civil servants want to go home. But I didn't do that, I used to take the box away and do it that way. And we'd travel a lot, so there was a lot of dead time covered.

**IS: You mentioned that you had quite a large ministerial team at the Foreign Office. How did you establish good working relationships with your secretary of state and other ministers?**

**HS:** I had two at FCO, I had William Hague and Philip Hammond, both of whom I had a good relationship with. I had a very good relationship with William Hague's special advisers in Arminka Helic and Chloe Dalton, so if I ever had a problem I just went to them.

With Philip, by that stage, I think I was pretty much let alone to do the role. It all sounds terribly self-aggrandising and pompous this, so I apologise, but the parts of the world which I was responsible for were the non-immediately demanding parts - they were demanding, like North Korea for instance, but they weren't the day-to-day demanding problems. So I took the view that the Foreign Secretary could really only concentrate on some issues, and it was always on issues like Syria and I saw my job to support Pax Britannica in my parts of the world. I saw my job to keep the lid on as it were, my part of the world so that the Foreign Secretary could concentrate on the immediate demands. I think broadly both William and Philip came to recognise that I could do that, and so therefore I was pretty much left alone.

How did I run my own office? I had a morning meeting at nine o'clock every morning with the team and maybe a press officer came and they'd each go through the stories relating to their geographic area and then we'd go through what we're going to do in the day and my diary, so we all knew what was going on.

**NH: And talking about more day-to-day stuff – I was reading one of your blogs earlier, which was quite interesting on balancing the ministerial and the constituency work?**

**HS:** Well, yes. The problem in the Foreign Office is that things had slid and they'd changed the way people got advanced in the Foreign Office and I tried to persuade both Simon Fraser, who was the PUS [Permanent Under-Secretary] and then his successor Simon McDonald, that actually the private offices should be – to use that word again – the incubators for the best and the brightest and that really no one who hadn't served in a private office should be considered as a fast tracker. And conversely those who had served in the private office and served well should be regarded as a special cadre who were going to be the leaders of tomorrow. I tell you why I think that, because I think it's probably true in all departments, there is a perennial problem and challenge trying to communicate to officials, some of whom are very old and some of whom have been around for a long time, what the myriad demands on a minister are. I used to make this pointy about Parliament, which is so important: correspondence, answering questions and going to see parliamentarians on committees and so forth, is vital. You know, as ministers in our country we derive our mandate as MPs, as MPs we derive our mandate from our constituents, but ultimately we are drawn from Parliament and responsible to Parliament. The lack of understanding of Parliament, even in the Foreign Office, was woeful.

**NH: Do you mean the lack of understanding of parliamentary procedures?**

**HS:** Yes. Just what Parliament was – because they're sitting over there in their ivory tower and this may as well be a million miles away! So I used to talk to all these groups, they used to come over here or I'd see them in the Foreign Office, I was always open to talk to officials about being a minister and being an MP, there was a lot of that. I was always trying to persuade them to come over and just sit in question time to see what we had to do.

It's an irreconcilable job being a minister, because you've got your department's responsibilities, you've got your parliamentary responsibilities, you've probably got travel on top of that, you've then got your parliamentary office saying 'Am I ever going to see you? You've got three months of correspondence to catch up on.' You've got then your constituency saying 'We haven't seen you for years', and then you've got your family, if you have a family, saying 'Hello, remember us? Where do we fit into all this?' And so you're doing this the entire time. You're quite tired and you're dropping a ball somewhere – which is why you need this extraordinary support and infrastructure. So for instance the biggest demand, the biggest bug bear and the biggest challenge was the diary, which was planned way ahead. I used to have my wife come in sometimes, Sue [House of Commons office] would come over, my diary secretary would be there and they'd literally be bidding for bits of me! [laughter] And it was a nightmare, because you were trying to keep everyone calm, because Sue would say 'Well, it's fine, I'll just tell them you're not going to see them for another six months' and then my wife would say 'That's fine if you want to miss one of our daughters' birthdays and you're in Guatemala' and then my diary secretary would say 'Remember, you have promised you're going here.' So there were all these tensions. And I think unless you're part of that it's very difficult to understand the different demands!

**NH: Yeah. And when you're faced with all these competing demands, how did you prioritise between them and do you think – now, in retrospect – any one area suffered?**

**HS:** Yes. I suppose a lot of people say this, I was a minister from 2010 to 2016, was I as diligent a father to my two daughters who were away at school during that time? No. It's just, you know, I'm afraid sports days and school plays become victims to being a minister, that's just the way it is. It was interesting trying to communicate this to other ministerial colleagues on the global circuit, because of course a fair

majority of countries have a completely different system to us: you become a member of the executive and you resign as a member of the legislature. So a lot of these other ministers were absolutely flabbergasted that I had to fly back, because we had Foreign Office questions in two days – they didn't understand it! They would occasionally go to their parliaments – it varied around the world – but a lot of them certainly didn't have the constituency responsibility that we did.

**NH: That's interesting. Another thing that we're interested in is crisis management and how ministers deal with it when something unexpected happens and blows the diary out of the water. Could you think of an example or a time when something came out of the blue and how you dealt with it?**

**HS:** Yes I can – and it was ghastly! I'd just been with the Prime Minister on a prime ministerial trip to India and I'd just got back from India and Mr Modi, who is now the Prime Minister, was signing a big oil and gas concession with British Gas in Gujarat of which he was Chief Minister, and he refused to sign it because he was trying to rehabilitate himself before the election, because a lot of countries had refused to see him because of the [2002 Gujarat] riots and his alleged part in them.

So he rather cleverly said he wouldn't preside over the signing of this gas deal between Tanzania and Gujarat without a British minister being there. I thought Modi had a chance of winning, so I said 'Yes, I'd certainly go' – it was a $20 billion deal. So literally I'd just come back from India that day, then I think I had two Westminster Hall debates, the first was a half an hour one on Bangladesh or something, and then I was told there was going to be another one at 2:30 in the afternoon on probably the Rohingya in Burma, and then I was going to fly back to India that night. I was completely calm, I knew my stuff. I went to the first questions or debate and then came back to the office. There were people in the outer office I didn't recognise, and long, white faces in the office itself, as if there'd been a death.

So Fergus, my unbelievable Private Secretary – the Rolls Royce amongst Skodas – came in and shut the door behind him which I found unusual, I always had the door open. He said 'Minister, slight problem', I said 'What?' and he said 'There's an Urgent Question being granted to Bill Cash [Conservative MP] on the Prime Minister's non-attendance of the most recent European Council.' I said 'Well, fine, what's that got to do with me?' and he said 'Well, you're going to have to do it.' I said 'That's not how it works. I've got the debate this afternoon and then I'm going to India, and I don't do Europe.' And he said 'Well Minister, you are the duty minister.' So I said 'Well, where's Mr Lidington [then Europe Minister]?' – he was in Prague or something and there was no-one else, they insisted. I said 'But Bill Cash has spent the last 50 years going through every clause of every bill in Europe, I don't understand even how the process works, I don't do Europe!' He said 'I've got the team outside, Minister, they're going to brief you.' I said "Well, how long have I got?' and he said "You've got 45 minutes.' So I had to go from zero to hero! I really did not understand and they were all cross, because the Prime Minister normally after a European Council would report back to Parliament and he hadn't on this occasion. So it was a nightmare, waking up in the middle of the night thinking you've got a maths exam the next morning and you hadn't studied the maths. It was that all over again – something I thought I'd left behind!

They came in, I sat there and I said "Look, let's just start from the beginning, as if I know nothing, because I don't.' They were unbelievably calm with me, very, very calm, they'd obviously been told by Fergus 'Just keep him calm, we'll get through', so they were very softly spoken, you know, 'Brussels is in Belgium, Minister, that's Strasbourg…' [laughter]

I got up to speak in Parliament and first of all I was wrongly briefed by my officials about how to start, I said 'I'd like to make a statement on Brussels' and the Speaker got up and said 'He's not making a statement, he's responding to an Urgent Question', or something really unnecessary. So I thought 'Oh god, this is already going horribly, horribly wrong.' I responded to the Urgent Question and then the questions started coming in thick and fast. The most disobliging ones were from John Redwood [Conservative MP] who at one point said 'Was the minister at the European Council?', knowing full well

that I wasn't. I said 'No, of course I wasn't at it.' Howls of derision from my own people! You know, they knew, having been ministers, that this poor mug had been put in at the last minute. That was absolutely hideous, really. I don't think I was particularly distinguished, but it wasn't too bad. It was the most awful moment, being told I had a very, very short time to do this, on a subject I really was not on top of.

I think what it identified was a fault which I then tried to deal with within the Foreign Office, which was that we all very much operated within our siloes. Although the private offices met and talked to each other, the ministers never did. And we still never did, but I tried to instigate a system whereby we vaguely knew what was going on with other parts of the world just in case we had to answer an Urgent Question, or do a debate, because we were the duty minister. I started doing – which was one of the most useful things I did for the Foreign Secretary – every week, a sort of situation report, a couple of lines on what I was doing and where there were problems. I tried to get the other ministers to do something similar, so at least he had a much better idea; he's getting so much official paperwork but nothing from ministers. To actually have the ministers just saying, for instance 'Burma – travelling there next week, problem with the Rohingya, seeing Aung San Suu Kyi, I will report back.' And then 'Argentina – good progress on this', so that he could just flick through it very quickly; I think that was very useful.

I'd try and meet the other ministers if they did it as well, so I knew vaguely what was going on. But there was no forum – we were hopeless as ministers, we never had time, because we were travelling or busy, to sit down with each other. We always said 'Let's all have dinner' and all that and we never did, so it was quite disconnected in that respect.

**NH: That's a very interesting example. A few people have told us that the speaker is getting more and more likely to grant urgent questions.**

**HS:** Well, that's right, exactly. That was the other thing, with William Hague we had quite formal meetings, I think once a week on a Wednesday, when we did precisely this, really. And with Philip Hammond they became far less structured and less frequent.

**NH: Just to finish that story off, did you then have to put off the thing in India or did you get to India in time?**

**HS:** No. I then came back in an absolutely shattered state and did my Westminster Hall debate on some other subject and went to India where I drowned my sorrows in business class! [laughter]

**NH: Very sensible!**

**HS:** By the way, being a minister – particularly in the Foreign Office – you are in a heightened state of alert, there was always bound to be a crisis somewhere and I lived in perpetual fear of dropping a ball. And I think that's probably the same across government.

**NH: OK, moving away from crises then, what is the thing that you are most proud of? What's the achievement or the policy that you worked on, that you look back on and you think is your best achievement?**

**HS:** I'm proud that I think we helped put the Foreign Office and the UK back on the map. I was the first British minister to go to Cuba in ten years, the Americans then opened up - almost on the back of that. I was the first British minister in history ever to go to Bhutan, for what that's worth. But I did go and foster better relations with my part of the world, which is what I was meant to do. And I took some principle positions on the Rohingya in Burma, the shrinkage of democratic space in the Maldives, the situation in Nepal and so forth.

Where I think there is a problem in the Foreign Office and it was always my hope that one day this would be achieved – I used to tease David about this, but he was so proud of it that he would never do anything about it, but Theresa May on the other hand may one day – is that it really is crazy to have DfID [Department for International Development] outside of the Foreign Office. One of the things I was always trying to do was to try and promote the idea that when you leave Dover or Heathrow, British space abroad comes under the FCO. Too often I would go somewhere and ask 'Who was there from the UK?' and you'd have the British Embassy, the British High Commission and then somewhere else you'd have DfID with their staff on different terms, the European External Action Service would be there… Then you'd discover there were people there from the MoD and people from the Department of Energy and Climate Change – you suddenly find you had tonnes of people in these places, none of whom were dealing with each other. My view was one HMG, one UK: they should all report to the ambassador. They should all be on similar terms so there's no jealousy, and they ideally should all be on the same compound. There was huge resistance from DfID particularly to that. But it's absolutely ridiculous when the Foreign Office costs less than we pay in winter fuel payments. I mean, it really costs very, very little and we've got more diplomats and embassies than ever before. But the funding is not there, the funding is all with DfID and so forth and so I think it's absolutely crazy for them not to bring DfID back into the Foreign Office. It would be loathed by all the NGOs who have been helping themselves to millions a year, as we now see and read. It's a badly organised department and it's got so much money it doesn't know what to do with it. It should be within the FCO. There should be complete alignment between Britain's foreign policy objectives and our aid objectives. They should run in parallel. They do not need to be independent of one another.

**NH: Which other departments did you work with? I suppose there's trade…?**

**HS:** Trade a lot, because I did commercial diplomacy, so I worked very closely with what was then UKTI [UK Trade & Investment]. And I was on the GREAT campaign board and things like that. So that was very much part of what I did, and I did Islamic finance and so forth. A lot of the job of what I was doing abroad was trade, always taking trade people there, opening British offices, and promoting British trade was a huge part. And of course the Trade Minister was also in the Foreign Office, so were trade envoys and so forth. But it should all be really brought together.

**NH: As you said, a lot of the role is essentially diplomacy and meeting foreign embassies and so on, when you were trying to start a policy position on something, what was the process behind that? Would there be Number 10 involvement, did you work things out with the secretary of state or what?**

**HS:** Yeah, you'd put it up to the secretary of state. The problem is that really since Margaret Thatcher and Charles Powell [her foreign policy adviser], Number 10 think they run foreign policy. And Number 10 don't run foreign policy because they can't. Number 10 run US/UK relations, of course they do – I mean, the relationship there is between the White House and Number 10. But Number 10 simply can't run foreign policy. Whenever they did try and run it, they'd get it wrong, I think because they didn't have the time or the resource. So there was a constant frustration and what you used to get were these people, I used to call them the 'teenage scribblers'. You get these young officials seconded to Number 10 – I won't mention any names – from other departments, who suddenly become grander than the Prime Minister. They all end up getting infused by the power of Number 10. So suddenly they'd say 'Minister' – this would happen frequently – 'Oh Minister, Number 10 don't want that' and I'd say 'Hang on, who at Number 10?  Number 10 is a building! So who at Number 10? Is it coming from the Prime Minister? In which case – fine. Is it coming from Ed Llewellyn or Kate Fall [senior advisers], in which case I will ring them, but who at Number 10?' And invariably it was some teenage scribbler giving themselves huge power. I used to check – because, you know, Kate Fall is a very close friend of ours and we see her socially, and David too – and I would very often check with Kate and she's say 'No, that's not what he means'. Because somebody had put themselves in a position whereby they were speaking with great authority without any rhyme or reason at all.

So there was one guy I actually had into my office and we were quite formal in the Foreign Office and he was rather informal and I had to give him an interview - without coffee! - and he got better after that. But that's the problem. I understand it's much, much worse now where you've got a complete clamp down on ministers being able to put one foot in front of the other without either Fiona Hill or Nick Timothy [Chiefs of Staff for Theresa May] getting involved. I think it's much worse now. I think it's terrible – to say nothing of the undermining of the Foreign Secretary, but anyway, that's not my problem.

And then what's so funny is these guys then go back to being number three on the desk in DfID or wherever they've come from and they lose all their glory and power. I said to one, one day, I said 'What were you doing before you came to Number 10?' – 'Oh, I was so-and-so', I said 'Well, you've got to go back, just be careful.' It's a very good maxim, 'Be nice to people on the way up, because you meet them on the way down.' But this cloak of Number 10, it was very tiresome whenever they interfered, actually. I mean, either trust your ministers to get on and do it and if they're doing it day in, day out they should have a feel for it, or sack them. But don't always think you know better than them, because you don't.

**NH: Was there anything else that you found frustrating?**

**HS:** That was very frustrating. If I felt it, just think what others felt!

**NH: Yes. Was there anything else or any other ways that you would look to improve?**

**HS:** I think policy changes – when you made speeches on something and had taken a position only to be told 'Well, actually this isn't what we're going to do any more.' And there's a burning smell of rubber as you do a U-turn. It is tiresome but inevitable, I suppose.

**NH: And again, that would be from Number 10, or from the department, or…?**

**HS:** It would be Number 10, or the Treasury. The Treasury of course run everything as far as they're concerned. But no, I think the Foreign Office is an institution which we can and should be proud of. It's not perfect in any way and can become isolated in a sense, but on the whole there are some extremely good people.

**NH: Did you notice a difference in the way government was run or the way things felt when you moved from a coalition to a single-party government?**

**HS:** Well, I think it was much easier, because we didn't have to listen to the Lib Dems whinging on about whatever they were whinging on about – compulsory sandals or tofu for lunch or whatever. No, I got on perfectly well with them, in fact in the Foreign Office we didn't have a Lib Dem. There was a man, a nice old duffer – absolutely useless – in the Lords, he was their Foreign Office spokesman, so we didn't have a Liberal Democrat in the Foreign Office, nor did we in Northern Ireland. But in Cabinet Sub-Committees, you came across them. Some of them were perfectly alright, but it was much easier to get on and do what we actually wanted to do without them.

**NH: So you felt that things were quicker?**

**HS:** Yes. Certainly that would have been the experience at Number 10, where everything had to take them into account, tell them all about it the whole time. I mean others will disagree and I know it's fashionable now to deride the Cameron years – but I think that's because it's so recent – but I think through the prism of history in years to come, people will look back and say coalition wasn't Britain's finest hour, but it was certainly served the purpose. People forget where we were in 2010 very, very quickly! The financial, economic precipice we were on. And we pulled ourselves back and away from that in 2010 and that clearly was the view of the electorate in 2015 and what has happened since has been like being in some kind of slow car crash movie. We're still stunned. You know, here we are, we're half

way through 2016, things have moved so much – we've had Brexit, the Prime Minister's gone, Theresa May's come, we've got Donald Trump.

**NH: Yes, it's been quite a year!**

**HS:** Quite a year – I shall be toasting 2017, I can tell you! And for those of us who were very much part of the David Cameron project and team, it's been interesting.

**NH: You mentioned Brexit, how did the referendum affect your work – the run-up to it, the campaign?**

**HS:** Well, I mean I was absolutely outraged by some of the claims being made by some of my colleagues and some of the messages being given, particularly in the diaspora press here in the UK where certainly Bangladeshis and Indians and so forth were being effectively told by some people that post-Brexit it would be much easier to bring over their extended families, because we wouldn't have all these dreadful Europeans. I thought that was absolutely scandalous and outrageous. So I made a speech at Chatham House on why it wasn't a binary choice between the Commonwealth and the EU.

I said right from the beginning of the campaign, if this becomes a debate about immigration, then it's lost – and I was a remainer. I was a Eurosceptic remainer. But I believed that we could have got something pretty close to what we wanted by remaining in. I'm quite prepared to say I was wrong, but I think let's just wait and see where we do end up first. But now I'm absolutely convinced we should get on and do it. I'm probably a Hammondite rather than a Jenkinite in so much as I would want to do what was in the best economic interest of this country, even if it required compromises along the way. But I said to Martha Kearney on the World at One programme shortly afterwards 'There is a fault line in government and a fault line in Cabinet between those who just want a hard Brexit and to start again and those who take a more measured view', and that's a fault line which I think we've seen on a daily basis reveal itself. So I was pretty sickened by some of the comments made by some of my colleagues about what life was going to be like after Brexit.

**NH: Did it feel like ministerial life in your role could carry on as usual?**

**HS:** No there was complete paralysis, it became almost impossible! I mean I travelled a lot during that time and wherever I was going I was asked what was going on, and I think people wanted to know. But back here it was almost impossible. You can't have half your Cabinet saying one thing and the other half saying something else and still try and have something resembling normal governance. It was ridiculous. Whether or not David himself – as some have suggested he should have – could have stood back from the whole argument and said 'Look, I've made my views clear, I'm not taking any part in the debate' I don't know. I think that would have been very difficult for him, actually. I think people wanted the Prime Minister to lead and he led and he lost. The rest, as they say, is history.

**IS: OK and to wrap up, what advice would you give to a new minister coming into office?**

**HS:** I think the absolute key advice is to get a good private secretary and don't necessarily accept the private secretary either you inherit or you're given. This happened to me when I inherited a private secretary and we got on perfectly well, but I think she and I probably weren't ideologically very similar, she was very cautious and politically correct, shall we say, and health-and-safety-ish – and anyway she was moving on. There was the most wonderful Sir Humphrey moment of my ministerial career to date, which was the job interview. The interview for the new private secretary was absolutely classic Foreign Office stuff. Just to remind you that I'd always been saying that the Foreign Office, private office should be the incubator for people going on, as it always used to be, so I was expecting when they advertised for a new private secretary for me that I would have some of the greatest high fliers in the Foreign Office coming through, and alas that was not the case. I think some were put off by the overtime and the work – because it is much harder work in the private office than in other departments – and so I was

presented with one candidate. This candidate was extremely good but very similar to the one I'd just parted company with. Well, I hadn't parted, she'd gone off. So I said to the Foreign Secretary's Principal Private Secretary, I said 'Well, where are the others?' and "Oh Minister, this is really the only candidate, she's very, very good, we really recommend her', I said "No, I think I'd like a choice and to me, call me old-fashioned, but a choice is more than one person!' So – 'Oh, we'll go away and think again.' So about two weeks later with me getting rather impatient, he comes back to see me again. 'Minister' he said 'I think we've got a solution you're going to like here' and I said 'So what's that then?' – he said 'Mr Simmonds' – who was then a minister – 'is also looking for a new private secretary and we haven't had much luck there either, but we've got a very good candidate there and what I think the best solution would be as you're the Minister of State and Mr Simmonds is a Parliament Under-Secretary of State, you should interview both the candidates and then you should choose the one you like and he can have the other one.' I said 'So in that way you get both your candidates in place' – 'Oh, it's not like that Minister' – 'Well, it sounds or looks awfully like that to me.' I said 'I don't consider that a choice either – go away and think again.'

And I went downstairs and happened to run into someone who I'd spotted and met in Rangoon a year previously and spotted as a really good guy, I said 'Oh, you're back here Fergus, are you?', he said 'Yes, I am' and he looked terribly young, Fergus. I said 'Oh you must come and work in my private office sometime', thinking he'd come in as an assistant private secretary, and he said 'Oh, yes.' And he went away and saw this job was up and applied for it. So I then called the private secretary back in and said 'Fergus Eckersley has applied – you can now put 100 people in front of me and I'll go through the motions, but I can tell you this is my private secretary' – and he was absolutely fantastic. But I had to source him myself. And had I not run into him in the corridor I would not have had one of the most wonderful private secretaries.

So that was very frustrating – that the system had decided that these two were going there, so my advice to a minister is 'Don't put up with that bullshit.' And just be alert to the fact that they'll always be trying something on. Not necessarily in a malicious way, but just that they will always be trying something on and it's your job to have someone very close to you who can spot it. I think politically I was never particularly partisan as a minister, because I never had a special adviser, and some ministers did and I never really saw the need to, because I thought the job I was doing in the Foreign Office really should be in the best interests of the country not necessarily party political, so I didn't' really push a political agenda. So my advice would be to an incoming minister, get the team around you you're happy with and if you're not happy with your team, change them.

**IS: Is there anything else you wish we'd asked you and that we haven't covered and you'd like to share with us?**

**HS:** I'd say to anyone who's a minister: it's a tremendous privilege and it comes to an end – so enjoy it!

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