INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Ministers reflect

Jack Straw

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Jack Straw – biographical details

Electoral History

1979-2015: Member of Parliament for Blackburn

Parliamentary Career

May 2010 - Sept 2010: Shadow Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Shadow Lord Chancellor

2007-2010: Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

2006-2007: Leader of the House of Commons

2006-2007: Lord Privy Seal

2001-2006: Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

1997-2001: Home Secretary

1994-1997: Shadow Home Secretary

1992-1994: Shadow Minister for Local Government and Housing

1987-1992: Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Science

Jack Straw was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Peter Riddell on 3rd May 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): If we can think back to when you first started as a minister, in 1997, can you remember what the experience of coming into government for the first time was like?

Jack Straw (JS): I can remember exactly. Going to Number 10, being told by Tony Blair that I was going to be Home Secretary, which I was anticipating, but he was… from his body language he expected me to be more grateful. I was very, very grateful. I can remember going outside into the lobby of Number 10. My two children had been spirited in the back door of Number 10, which was completely improper but anyway they were there, so Will and Charlotte were in the lobby of the Cabinet room. Then Tony came out. He knew the kids very well, so they had a conversation. He said 'I've just made your Dad Home Secretary', and they were then taken off by somebody or other and went home. I was bundled into the very smelly armoured Jaguar, which I was told Mrs Thatcher had used and it was pretty decrepit by the time I got it, and taken off to Queen Anne's Gate, which at that stage was the headquarters of the Home Office, through the litter-strewn quadrangle of this 1970s building and went up in the ministerial lift. I was met at the door by Richard Wilson who was the Permanent Secretary, later Cabinet Secretary, and Ken Sutton who was the Private Secretary and we went upstairs. I knew Richard anyway and in terms of 'was I wide-eyed?', less so I think than many of my colleagues for two reasons. One was that I'd worked in government in the 1970s as a special adviser in two departments and the second was that I was, and am, married to somebody who was in the civil service. Although Alice, my wife, was extremely careful, and so was I, to maintain the Chinese wall about what exactly she was doing – because she was in some very sensitive jobs – if you are living day by day with someone who is in government for all that time you osmotically absorb how the system works and the balance between civil servants and officials.

So we went upstairs. I said hello to the private office and was then given four folders of the next week, the next fortnight, the next month, the next four months which had been partly based on the manifesto and partly on things which had arisen, and Richard Wilson took me to the window and it was a bright, May day, it was May the 3rd 1997, and he said, 'What can you see in the sky Jack?', and I said 'A clear blue sky' he said 'Yes, it's a very dangerous moment! At any moment in this department an exocet will come out of nowhere and land just there and you have to deal with it because this is the Home Office'. So I then worked through the briefs for incoming minsters, prepared by one Claire Sumner, who is now the Chief of Staff to the Director General of the BBC and did various other jobs in between, and worked out what we should do next.

NH: Home Secretary is obviously a pretty big job. How did you get your head round not just the policy briefings but how to shape and actually do the role?

JS: Well it is a big job and indeed the department was about 80% bigger in those days than it is today, because it took in the prison service, the probation service, all sorts of things like horse racing and gambling and a host of constitutional issues as well as its core business, although terrorism was less on the agenda then. Thankfully we were at an interlude of terrorism then between Irish terrorism and Islamic terrorism. How did I get my brain round it? I was familiar with the subject, I'd worked as a lawyer, I'd always taken an interest in these subjects, and crucially, for the three years before that I was Shadow Home Secretary; we had worked incessantly and very thoroughly on a whole range of reforms that I wanted to introduce. I've said this before but it was intellectually the most stimulating period of my time in politics and a very, very good team of people. We took no bullshit; we worked this stuff through because that was the environment that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had set for us in those final years of opposition. We'd stress-tested the material and the officials in the Home Office had had this material for at least six months. So I knew what I wanted to do. We'd also had to go through a prioritisation for the manifesto which set out what the key things were, what could wait for a year or so. So it was very clear.

Peter Riddell (PR): You worked as a special adviser with Barbara Castle and Peter Shore, you were married to Alice; but how prepared were you after 18 years in opposition for actually being a Secretary of State? In policy terms, alright you talked to Richard Wilson,

you'd done all the access talks, but in terms of, particularly with your whole team, for the actual fact of it's not talking, it's doing?

JS: I was as prepared as I think I could have been. The thing that I believe that no one can know until they are faced with it is whether they can make decisions. And not just one decision, with the luxury of a day to think about it, but a box full of decisions and another box full. I'm sure there are ways of testing that, but certainly in the British system prospective ministers are not tested for that. And that leads to there being an assumption that if you've been good in opposition you're likely to be good in government. Whereas the skills needed for the two are often very different. You and I can think of quite a number of examples of people who were brilliant in opposition but simply froze in the headlights in government. Equally, I was OK in opposition and survived, notwithstanding one or two disasters which you'll remember…

PR: Indeed…!

JS: But I always believed that I would be better in government. I'd had some experience of decision-making on this scale. At the ridiculously precocious age of 26 I found myself as Deputy Leader of the Inner London Education Authority, and I'd been President of the National Union of Students at a very heady time where you had to make loads of decisions in the public eye. So I thought I would be alright, but you don't know until you are presented with a set of papers; you've got to think about how this fits in with your party approach, what the public are expecting of you, and how it squares with the facts as you're presented. As it turned out I discovered I could do it.

NH: We'll come back to some of the things you did at the Home Office, but I'm interested in your reflections of different departments; you moved from the Home Office then to the Foreign Office, Leader [of the House] and then later to Ministry of Justice. What was that like going from Home Office to Foreign Office? And how did you get your head round that quite different role and new brief?

JS: Well in the three of the four jobs I did I was very familiar with the subject matter and really they were different aspects of the same set of dossiers. So Home Office, Leader of the House which I did for a year, and [the] Ministry of Justice were about home affairs and indeed when I was Leader of the House Tony Blair gave me two particular dossiers, party funding and House of Lords reform, which I carried on with in Justice. So I just knew those subjects pretty intimately and how the system operated. In all three of them, but particularly in Home Office and Justice, there was a lot of legislation. I've got a good brain for legislation and I could handle all of that.

The Foreign Office: getting [the job] was literally a shock because I had turned up in Downing Street in early June, the day after the election, expecting to be given John Prescott's job, which was a big one of housing, local government, transport, the regions all of that stuff [as Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions]. And Prescott thought I'd get that job as well and he had phoned me the day before to have a harmonious transfer. I didn't know that Tony had decided he wanted to move Robin Cook [then Foreign Secretary] so I turned up expecting the conversation to be about Prescott's job and Tony said to me, 'I'm not giving you Prescott's job, I'm sending you to the Foreign Office' and an expletive popped out of my mouth and he said 'Do you not want the job?' and I said 'No, no I would like the job, thanks very much, just a bit surprised!'

I'd had no formal preparation for foreign policy except for two things. One which was that I'd had a lot of experience of EU negotiations as Home Secretary and we'd had the EU Presidency and I assumed that I'd by all accounts done that fine. That had permeated back to Number 10. The second thing, as it turned out, that one most needed to be a Foreign Secretary was a good understanding of European and international history. Well, that's just been a continuing life interest of mine.

But after I got the job I contacted Douglas Hurd, a predecessor of mine who was a friend, and still is, asked him to come in, to tell me how to do the job, and asked him for a reading list. Which he duly produced the next day, and to my relief I'd read most of the books on the reading list. I hadn't read [Henry] Kissinger on Diplomacy, I then read Kissinger on Diplomacy and discovered that the good parts of Kissinger on Diplomacy were about the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia. Actually the less good parts of it were his contemporary description of diplomacy, but I am a quick learner. But even

so, whereas in the Home Office I was blessed with very good press to begin with, which gave me a lot of confidence, in the Foreign Office for the first six months, there was quite a lot of back-biting: 'can this man do this job?' No particular reason except that there were other people who would have liked the job and were smarting that I had it. And then come the beginning of 2002, there was a crisis between India and Pakistan and I did know an awful lot about the origins about the Kashmir issue between the two. And at that point people said, 'OK, you can do the job'.

PR: And of course wasn't 9/11 in between?

JS: I was hit by 9/11 in between and indeed, and that was, well the most profound shock to the system. If I look back at the travel plans for me as Foreign Secretary when I got into the office which was in early June 2001, and then what actually happened, the idea that I would be making endless trips to Afghanistan or to Iraq was not on the agenda at all. But that's what happened.

NH: How did the departments themselves compare? In terms of the things they were doing, the people, the culture?

JS: At one level the rhythm of the departments was very similar, in terms of what the private office [is] there for, the decision making machine for ministers, and in both departments there was a degree of what I call secretary-of-state-worship. So everything was focused on the secretary of state.

At the Home Office, when I first got there, when I went out, I spotted this the first day I was there, when I went into the private office, everybody stood up! I thought maybe it's just the first day and then I went out again about half an hour later to get some paperclips or something, and they all stood up so I had to say to them 'You don't have to stand up, please don't stand up, that's not the way I want to do things.' But they would always call me 'Home Secretary' and in the Foreign Office, 'Foreign Secretary'. There was a great woman, Hilary Jackson, who became my Private Secretary and I said to her after a while, I said 'Look Hilary, not in public or in front of anybody else, but in private why don't you call me Jack and I'll call you Hilary.' So we went through the phase of her, as I teased her, calling me Grunt! At one level formality helps, and I think overfamiliarity is a really, really bad idea because your roles are different, and also, though I was very lucky in this respect, you don't know how long you are going to be there.

Culturally, the Home Office thought it was a cut above most other government departments, it had some bright people in it. What was striking when I got to the Foreign Office was that the quantum mass of really bright people was higher than in the Home Office. And also, they're a different breed in this respect, is that they're much more political with a small 'p' because when members of the diplomatic service are abroad, they are representing the government of the day publicly, in a way that no home civil service official does.

But also Nicola, there was, as I say in terms of the rhythm, there was this profound difference that in the Home Office I was being asked to make decisions, binary decisions, 'Are we going to do this, are we going to do that?', and they were decisions by me, they were in respect of 'Do we deport this person, do we declare them persona non grata, do I put a telephone tap on or don't I, do I give them a warrant or don't I, do I do this, do I do that?' These were straightforward exercises of the power of the state at the rough end of the power of the state, which is the Home Office because ultimately it's about the state being able to lay hands on people. However carefully it is covered up, that's its job. And there was lots of legislation too, changing the rules.

In the Foreign Office there are internal decisions of that kind that you are making, but a lot of the time you are asked for a steer about how we should deal with another country, or agreement about a negotiating brief. You are trying to influence events which are happening elsewhere with actors who aren't open to you, you can't get the House of Commons to say 'we're not going to do this, we're going to do that' in the Foreign Office, it's not the way it works. That is a very big distinction in terms of the nature of most of the decisions you are asked to take.

PR: One thing that's come up quite a lot in our interviews is that people talk a lot about their private offices, but not much about permanent secretaries. You had some quite strong permanent secretaries, some you knew very well. This came up in some of our discussions, that people weren't talking about their permanent secretaries, it's funny. I

remember Gus O'Donnell [former Cabinet Secretary] saying 'ah but the secretary of state has most of the contact with their private offices, only if there is a problem does the permanent secretary come in'.

JS: Yeah. Well, different departments are different. So the Home Office, I knew Richard Wilson anyway, my wife had worked for him when she was at the Treasury. He was coming towards the end of his period at the Home Office and wanted to become Cabinet Secretary; after quite a short familiarity with him I thought he would make a very good cabinet secretary. I had quite a lot to do with him. But I had more to do day by day with the deputy secretaries or the under-secretaries who were responsible for particular subject areas.

I then was given a choice by the civil service commissioner, well I insisted on a choice, over his successor and I was presented with three candidates who I interviewed and chose David Omand and he and I worked extremely closely together. So I saw a lot of David, partly because many of the problems we had in the Home Office were operational ones. Like the passport system collapsing, or the equally awful Siemens computer system for the immigration and nationality department, that collapsed too. And grungy things inside the prison service. My view was it was pretty difficult to be a home secretary unless you are willing to get involved in the operational stuff. So I had a lot to do with him and a very, very good relationship with him until he very sadly, if you remember, fell ill. And then John Gieve came in for a period, we didn't overlap for that long. And a guy called John Warne who was the Deputy Secretary for Security was the interim.

In the Foreign Office it was different. I mean, sorry about this thing about friends, I knew quite a lot of people who were in the Foreign Office, but I knew only two people very well as personal friends. One was David Manning who I think, was already a diplomatic adviser to the Prime Minister when I got there or very quickly thereafter, he had been at NATO and Israel. Then John Kerr was the Permanent Secretary and I had quite a lot to do with John but he was on his last six months, and by the time I got there, Michael Jay had already been appointed as Perm Sec to take over from John in January '02. I remember Tony asking me, I think when I was appointed, did I mind and I said 'absolutely fine'.

Now this was a very close relationship, Michael and his wife Sylvia were long-standing family friends. That made things much easier in many respects, but it also meant that we had to be careful to ensure that our relationship in the office was strictly professional. But the other thing about the Foreign Office is that the senior operational official is not the Permanent Secretary, or PUS [Permanent Under-Secretary] as it's known, but the Political Director. It's a misnomer as a title because it's not a political appointment and there's also the Deputy Secretary or Director General. Anyway, that bod is virtually the Deputy Foreign Secretary. So I spent more time with the Political Director than any other official. It started off being a guy called Emyr Jones-Parry whom I then appointed to the UN. After that it was Peter Ricketts who's just retired as our Ambassador to Paris but became the Permanent Secretary in between, and then it was John Sawers. So they would be the people I'd go round the world with, [doing] really complicated and difficult negotiations in the thick of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and stuff like that, then separately you would spend a lot of time with the Director General and the Director Europe on European stuff. So those are the key officials.

PR: You mentioned junior ministers, and the difficulty [of] being a junior minister, can you elucidate?

JS: Well I think that talking to junior ministers, it's very clear to me that what their life is like depends almost entirely on their relationship with their secretary of state. And a lot of junior ministers complain that they have not much to do with their secretary of state, they don't know quite what they are expected to do except they know that what they have to do is deal with the dross like endless adjournment debate, lots of official ministerial correspondence, and visits that nobody else wants to do.

I don't know whether junior ministers of mine complained of that, but what I tried to do was to involve them in the team. Key to that was having a Monday lunchtime meeting where they came and also the special advisers and the people from the party and from Number 10. We sat round the table, went through the business for the week, and also I used to talk to them. I mean sometimes they were a bit… it was horses for courses, and one or two you had to be careful about, because they would rather be getting

your job and I used to say to them 'calm down!' You'd find that they were few and far between, particularly by the time I was at the Foreign Office, but even at the Home Office [it was OK].

In the Home Office [there was] a colleague, George Howarth MP, who worked for me for two years. He was and is a very close personal pal, so I just gave him a whole [area of responsibility], he was a parly sec [Parliamentary Under-Secretary] but he likes horse racing so I gave him all the stuff that went off to the DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport] and a lot of other stuff and just said 'Get on with it, come and see me if you ever need a steer'. He had a great time. Similarly with Mike O'Brien on other areas, I tried to give them stuff and say to them that I trusted them about whether they came to me. Sometimes, in the Ministry of Justice, it was a bit tricky.

Anyway just to finish off about the permanent secretary position, in the Ministry of Justice it was Alex Allen to begin with but he became ill and then again I saw three candidates and appointed Suma Chakrabarti, who is slightly 'marmite' with people but I judged, I think I was right about this, that given the fact there were two chunks of departments who had to be bolted together it probably needed someone like Suma. I saw a fair amount of him.

NH: I suppose different ministers take different views on how actively they get involved with the management of the department, what did you see as being the perm sec's role versus your role?

JS: Well I don't think you could do a job as a minister effectively unless you take an interest in the detail as well as the grand strategy. This used to be a subject of some teasing between Tony Blair and me because he used to say 'You've got to look at the big picture' and I used to say 'Yes Tony, that's true, but if you look at the big picture you'll find they are made up of very little brush strokes. And if you get them in the wrong place the picture doesn't work.' Or to an analogy more in my favour, I would say that the difference between German cars and British cars in the 1970s wasn't the big picture, British cars looked very nice; it was the fact that on the Friday afternoon British cars weren't bolted together properly. And the other thing is that if things go wrong operationally, you won't see the officials for dust. I mean you will, it doesn't mean they are abandoning you, but you're the bloke in the frame. So in the Home Office nobody really minded me getting involved in the operational stuff.

There was a bit of resentment in the Foreign Office because I was involved in it but I was unapologetic about it. Why? Well because for example in October 2002 I was in bed, in the rather fine bed in Chevening [the Foreign Secretary's official residence], I was woken up on Sunday morning to discover that a very large number, it turned out to be 33 in the end, of British citizens had been killed in a terrorist bomb in Bali. And our response was inadequate. This was an operational response but we, the response centre wasn't properly operating, we didn't have virtual teams to move in for things like that, the place was very complacent and guess who was in the firing line for that: J. Straw. So I think you've got to take an interest in these things. There was a bit of tension between Suma and me, but we're grown up and I thought that, as I say, I was fully entitled to get involved in the operation. I was always extremely careful not to interfere with permanent secretaries' discretion over appointments. You had much more discretion as Secretary of State over appointments in the Foreign Office, just by tradition, than you did at the Home Office, or in the inland civil service. But anyway that was my view.

PR: What about the balance of how you allocated your time, I accept in your Home Secretary job and the other three jobs there's a big contrast. One of the issues that's come up, again and again in interviews has been how people allocate their time. Particularly between the House and Department, and in some respects the constituency: I well know you did your bit going up there and what you did in Blackburn. How consciously did you, when you became Home Secretary think about allocating your time?

JS: I was very conscious about the need to spend time in the Commons. So I didn't have my diary packed out with lunch appointments, I mean partly because I wanted to keep my weight down…

PR: Yes, a lot of us try and don't succeed. Anyway. [laughter]

JS: And I went to the gym in the Commons. A long time before it was trendy! Both because I needed the exercise but also because the locker room is a great place for gossip and stuff amongst a particular

cross section of members who keep themselves fit. I used to have lunch in the tea room regularly and in those days, before they changed the hours, I was around, particularly when I was even when I was Foreign Secretary, if I was in the UK, I would make sure I'd be in the House one evening a week. It wasn't much fun being married to me, I don't think. But I thought that was absolutely essential because I was really conscious of the fact that whilst my position at Blackburn, unless something absolutely extraordinary happened, was there as long as I wanted it - and as it turned out I was a minister for the whole of government – my position as a minister could come to an end at any moment.

In fact, I think one of the reasons why it didn't was precisely because I was conscious of the fact that it could. So I never, ever regretted spending time in the Commons. I used to pick things up and I'd have a little red book - which I still have - and people would raise things with me on both sides, and I'd scribble them down and I'd get back to the office and I'd pull out the page and say will you get on with that and it made a phenomenal difference. And you'd find things out.

In terms of managing my time if you talked to Alice, she would say that from time to time, the private office would get on to her and say 'We've got to get a grip of Jack's diary,' so there'd be a diary meeting, not a crisis management meeting but we'd have a serious discussion about handling my diary. I didn't terribly like dealing with diary things, if you talk to Nicole [formerly a private secretary to Straw] I think she'd say I wasn't a nightmare, but I used to spend too long thinking about whether I should do some particular engagement, I should have been slightly more ruthless about that.

In terms of getting through the work, I was very clear about that. One other thing I'd say in terms of how can you be a minister, you need to be able to look at a set of papers and come to a decision there and then, or be very clear about why you are sending the papers back and always record your views on the papers, so it's clear. I tried to think ahead, so we'd have strategy meetings about what was going to come up and prepare speeches properly, but not spend an inordinate amount of time on speeches, because except for the one to the UN General Assembly, and ones on the Iraq war and so on, the difference between me spending three hours and six hours wasn't a great deal in terms of output for me to spend three hours on and waste it.

PR: What about, and this particularly applies when you were Home Secretary, and to a certain extent in the Foreign Office, when something totally unexpected hit, how did you handle that? I know a couple of phone calls between you and I, I think it was when you had come back from either Pakistan or India and you were woken up when you'd told the private office not to do that, and it was the men stuck in Dover?

JS: Well actually what happened there was this. I remember it acutely, it was a Sunday. Alice and I went out cycling around the lanes of West Oxfordshire, we've got a house out there. We'd stopped by a pub called the Swan at Swinbrook, which overlooks the river Windrush. There I was in my Lycra. One of the detectives, Garry, came to me out from the van – they used to trail me. He said 'Boss, you've got to take a call' and this was about the fact that the English [football] fans had rioted in Charleroi and the Belgian government had arrested 1,000 people and they wanted us to take them back again. So I had to get on the phone to the Ministry of Defence, because they couldn't find any other bugger to do it, to ask them to lay on three Tri-Stars to get these bloody people back. And I'm doing all this in my Lycra shorts! So anyway, got that sorted and then was woken up in the early hours of the morning to say 58 poor souls had been found dead in the back of a lorry at Dover. So what you have to know about these situations is to understand that you've got to get on top of the issue straight away and not mess around. Crises will always get worse if you are not seen to be taking control immediately. So I had a sort of crisis-mode, which I think sometimes used to take people by surprise, because normally I think I'm fairly relaxed. I did my best to be well mannered with people all the time, but I was absolutely clear about things, about what had to happen and what you had to do and you had to get on top of it.

So to take another example, on the 29th of August 2007, I was asleep, I got phoned by the private office at about 6.30am to say that the Prison Officers Association [POA] had just embarked on a one-day strike, that day, without any notice to us, they kept it completely secret. So we had 80,000 prisoners being taken hostage by the Prison Officers [Association].

By that stage I had been ten years a Minister and knew what to do. I made some phone calls straight away to Alex Allen, to the private office and to the head of the prison service, making sure they were on

top of it. I then had a visit to some court somewhere in London, I decided to do it because I judged that we wouldn't know precisely what was going on for a couple of hours and I might as well carry on normally and we'd give the telly some wall paper. I then got to the office and went into overdrive. I'd already told them to instruct lawyers to take an injunction out against the POA, and be very tough with them. Then I got to the office and by that stage the prisoners in Lancaster Farms, which is a youth offenders' institution and they are most difficult to handle, these are basically young thugs, who are out of control - they burnt down a wing because the prison officers weren't there. It was just outrageous what the POA did. Anyway, we just went into overdrive, I got hold of the president of the POA, said to him we were going to take them to court that day and they better back off. We then got an injunction against them and explained that there weren't going to be any concessions and we got there, they backed off. In between Gordon [Brown] got word of what I was doing and I had to go and talk to him for ten minutes and tell him that it was all okay, I was handling it and you just have to, just handle these things.

PR: How, in these instances, how good were the civil service?

JS: They were very good. The prison service knows what to do in a situation like that and they are very well skilled, they are well exercised, they got a gold command set up straight away. And so they were very, very good. I mean these are bods who are governor grade bods who have had a lifetime's experience of handling prisoners, which is quite difficult, and prison officers which is extremely difficult. You didn't leave it for half an hour, you just got on with it and got on top of it that day, never mind what else is going on, you dealt with that, because you had to.

PR: Particularly when you were Home Secretary and at [the Ministry of] Justice, what were the major achievements, and how did you achieve them?

JS: Well the major thing, in terms of the manifesto was to say we were going to get crime down, going to reform the youth justice system, going to provide remedies for people who were subject to antisocial behaviour. Going to improve the way the police operated, try to speed up the courts of justice. For most of those, there were metrics and they could be measured.

But there were other things, for instance, which weren't in the manifesto, [like] the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry, which now looks completely obvious in retrospect and fortunately it's not been subject to a further enquiry on an enquiry, unlike poor Peter Taylor's enquiry into Hillsborough. And that wasn't in the manifesto, I decided, in fact before the election, I'd like to do it. There was quite a tussle for three months to get it going and then I got it going. You may remember that the Lawrence family had been persuaded that Sir William McPherson was not an appropriate appointment [to lead the enquiry] so I had to keep them onside and explain that this was the only show in town. And got through it and then crucially decided, the most important decision I made on that was to set up a mechanism for implementing what McPherson had recommended and one other thing, which I learnt quite quickly, is if you want to do something and you're not sure that the department or institution wants to do it, then what you have to do is set up a series of meetings; in the Lawrence case it was every month.

I can give you another example where I had them every two weeks and so gradually the department gets the impression that you are really serious about them. The second case was on social impact bonds which was an idea from Ronnie Cohen [Sir Ronald Cohen, businessman and social investor] and it was new and no one was quite sure how it was going to operate. I wasn't quite sure how it was going to operate, but I thought that it was really important to give it a fair wind and also because there was an election coming up to show that we, the Labour government, were as interested in this as Conservatives, because it was something the Conservatives would be interested in, wouldn't they? And there was quite a lot of working without enthusiasm from officials, I felt they had other things on their agenda. So I just put in meetings every two weeks and after a while we got the scheme started.

PR: What about relations with Number 10?

JS: My relationship with Number 10? Right! Well in all three actually, all four jobs... In the Home Office, I mean, bear in mind at that stage my relationship with Tony was very close, he had every reason to trust me and vice-versa. I was doing the job that he was primed for. He'd approved of my approach to this, so he trusted my judgement on it. With some exceptions, basically he left me to get on with it and I made sure I did. Liz Lloyd was the point person in the policy unit, political policy unit, in Number 10, I

got [her] into all the meetings, I saw no reason [why not], I just thought they should see stuff. Alastair Campbell [then Director of Communications and Strategy for Tony Blair] - a friend of mine - I had a robust relationship with him. I mean he tried to interfere with me over whether Mike Tyson should be banned from coming to the UK or not. That sort of stuff. It was a very, very difficult decision to make but each way in the end I decided we shouldn't. We couldn't ban him, it turned out that although he had a conviction for rape, his manager, Don King, had a conviction for murder and he'd been coming in and out the country. Alastair got involved in stuff he shouldn't have done. I think if I'd not been as confident as I was, I would have felt quite intimidated by it, but I didn't. Tony used to, if there was something really, really tricky coming on… I remember one morning I was on the Today programme, we had an ISDN box at home, so I'd been getting keyed up to do this at ten past eight and Tony would come on the phone at ten to eight to take me through my lines! I used to have to say to him, 'Tony you just have to trust me', because it would just raise the blood pressure.

At the Foreign Office obviously it was different. If you become foreign secretary, and this must be true for any combination of foreign secretary and prime minister these days, I think it was ever thus, you've got to accept that the head of government is going to take a close interest in foreign policy and the closer you get to war, the closer will be their interest. Tony was famously in the lead, but for Afghanistan the decision was made anyway; there was no argument about whether we invaded Afghanistan after the Taliban had refused to give us access to the Al Qaeda network there. With Iraq obviously Tony was in the lead on that. But I absolutely was not out of the loop at all on that and was able, as I suspect the Chilcot Inquiry will show, to make my contributions and in the end came to view that the war was justified.

On some stuff Tony left me to it. So on India, Pakistan, bear in mind that was the key international issue in the first six months of 2002, not Iraq, he left me to it. On Iran, interestingly it was De Villepan, Fischer [then French and German Foreign Secretaries] and my idea to start these EU-3 negotiations. And Tony was a bit reluctant about it. I remember being on holiday, the Foreign Office had installed a fax machine in our gite in the South West of France and I had to keep having to push back on the changes he was making to the letter we were brokering with the Iranians. So there were… we were negotiating the terms of an exchange of letters. Tony did leave Iran to me thereafter although I think much later on it was one of the reasons I think he felt uncomfortable about me and got me to move. Having David Manning [then Diplomatic Adviser to Tony Blair] there in Number 10 was terrific, because he and I were close friends and we completely trusted each other.

Leader of the House was a different job, there you've got to handle all the whips. And as for Justice, Gordon, I mean he left me to it basically. There was constitutional stuff, which of course he was very keen on to begin with if you remember his July 2nd 2007 agenda. He might well have pursued that had it not been for the financial crisis. But he knew I knew all about this area and that I was on top of it.

PR: Different thing, special advisers. You'd been one. You always valued yours?

JS: I did. I had, on the political side I only had two, Ed Owen who I'd recruited in opposition in early 1993, he was with me for 12 years, and then as it turned out his best mate, Mark Davies was with me until, from '05 to '10. Then on the policy side, I always had one doing politics/ media and the other doing policy, so I had Norman Warner and then Justin Russell who subsequently converted and became a career civil servant. In the Foreign Office I had Michael Williams, now Lord Williams, and a chap called Malcolm Chandler who is now at RUSI [the foreign affairs think-tank]. In the Ministry, Leader of the House and Ministry of Justice, I had Mark Davies and a guy called Declan McHugh.

PR: Thanks to me.

JS: Thanks to you. Indeed. You recommended him. So and they were all very good and I didn't really need to tell them this, but I established very clear rules for them, that they weren't to go round politicking, that they had to respect the civil service and all the rest of it. Anyway, that's what they did. I think they were extremely good and they worked very well with the private office.

NH: Thinking about that whole period of 1997 to 2010, it's often seen as a time of quite big change in Whitehall; introducing PSAs and targets and things like that. What were the big changes that you observed in government over that time?

JS: We did have all that bloody stuff! So I mean some of the stuff, I'd been slightly dismissive of Number 10 but there were bilaterals on a fairly regular basis, particularly on the Home Office stuff with Tony, where he would try and put my feet in the fire for example on the performance of the immigration service or were we cutting crime. I used to sometimes get irritated by it, but actually it was perfectly sensible. For example he said to me, one time, 'I want you to get car crime and burglary down by 30%' and I think I said to him 'would you like me to produce a new plan for pushing water uphill?' but anyway when I got back and talked to the office and talked to people about it I thought we could do it and we did. But that idea would certainly not have come from me, it came from Number 10 and we got on with it. On the PSAs and stuff, I frankly found them a bit of a bore.

NH: Was there anything you found particularly frustrating about being a minister or any ideas you might have about how Whitehall and government can be more effective?

JS: I'm sure I did. Well there were things I found frustrating, I mean, inevitably because you are running very large organisations. A sort of gratuitous incompetence I would find frustrating. So things where people say they're going to do them, and then they don't do them. If people tried hard to do something and didn't quite work out - well OK. I mean I remember the time Ann Widdecombe [then a Conservative MP] was running a pretty effective campaign against me and the stars having been in the right place for 18 months, do you remember that first 18 months?

PR: Yes, yes.

JS: …everybody thought I could walk on water and The Economist wrote me up as the coming man and all that stuff. And then we had a series of disasters because suddenly the Lawrence Report got leaked and I had to put an injunction on the Sunday Telegraph…

But that was the one thing I really worried about Number 10, their leaking. And I was worried about them leaking the Lawrence Report and the reason I knew it was Number 10 was we'd held back the full report, gave them a synopsis and it was the synopsis that got leaked. Anyway, it wouldn't have been leaked from my department. But that was a problem. So anyway, there was a whole series of things [that] had been going wrong. Ann Widdecombe was running this campaign of fortnightly supply day debates against me, you know 'part 52 about why Straw is incompetent'. And the drill was you'd put down an amendment so that the motion, in her name, would be 'This House believes that Straw is incompetent', but we'd amend to delete everything after 'House' and insert 'Straw's wonderful' but then say why. And this one motion which Widdecombe had put down was about criminal justice, I think. And I drafted the amendment, gave it to the office. In those days the Commons' Order Paper came through the door the next morning, or the cops brought it round when they came to collect me. I looked through it and I thought this is the amendment to the motion that we had two weeks ago! So this is going to be a really easy, the charge that Straw's incompetent and we can't even put out the correct amendment, I was speechless. I saw this and I knew it had been a complete fuck-up. And everybody said they were very sorry. So at the beginning of the debate I had to withdraw my amendment, and I made a joke of it saying it was business as usual or something.

PR: What about relations with the Treasury?

JS: Treasury, they were tricky. I felt that Gordon [Brown] had a sort of, a slightly Manichean view of the world about departments he wanted to favour and departments he didn't. Which was I think in retrospect something to do with… well they were departments that Tony favoured. I was, and I remain, concerned about the lack of scrutiny of money that went to aid budget. I am perfectly in favour of some sensible increase in aid, but not the way it was handled, nor coming to the Foreign Office, the fact that Tony allowed DfID [Department for International Development] to be completely detached from the mainstream of UK foreign policy. Why is the British tax payer paying this money? I knew enough about negotiating with the Treasury to know that you had to take it to the wire. Alice [Perkins] had been Director of Public Spending. So that's what I used to do. You always get an extra £20 million if you're difficult. But all three of the departments, they weren't regarded as sexy by the Treasury. So there wasn't money coming down from heaven.

NH: And what did you observe about cross-departmental working, especially in [the Ministry of] Justice - you had quite a cross-cutting agenda?

JS: Well it remains very difficult to do that, because the departments are so strong. And also, I don't know whether there's an answer to this, but a critical part of the constitutional architecture of our system is that individual secretaries of state are responsible for what happens in their department. And you are. These things are done in your name. That makes the departments very strong but trying to work across government much more difficult, and that of course is compounded by inherent rivalry between ministers. And even, Nicola, if ministers were given a contract and told they were there for four years or something, I think it would still be inherently difficult. It might be much, much easier if you had a presidential system where the ministers were officials, it might be, but if you look at the American system you're still going to get people jockeying for positon. So it's difficult. I think we got better at it over the years.

NH: Just through knowing each other better?

JS: Yes and also the system getting better. I think greater collaboration at an official level as well. But I think it's an inherent problem. There are strengths in the British government system, which is that ministers are personally accountable and so are their permanent secretaries, there's lots of advantages of that. There are disadvantages too, that's one of them.

NH: So we usually ask people at this juncture how you would define an effective minister. I'm interested in your broad reflections on that, but also specifically if there are things you think make an effective Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Justice Secretary?

JS: An effective minister. Having an individual who knows what they want to do: you're not just a place-holder, you've got to be very clear about that. Then you can be much more explicit about what you want to do in any area of domestic policy, compared with foreign policy which I'll come on to in a moment. And then be capable of using the machine to produce and to implement the best possible decisions. You've got to have the constitutional, the personal constitutional makeup, to be able to take decisions, inevitably on inadequate information. Inevitably about things that are going to happen in the future, so they are uncertain. To make the best decisions and then to move on, and to accept that some of the decisions will not be correct in retrospect. But that is life and they wouldn't be correct if you sat on them for another two weeks or so.

To recognise, just to repeat the point, the critical importance of implementing what you're doing, so the old story about policy and operations, the testimony of policy is how it operates, and trying to get follow through that is not just about a press notice or an interview on the Today programme or one minute 35 seconds on the ten o'clock news. It is about what happens down the line.

NH: If I can just push you on that slightly, because a lot of the ministers we speak to say that but do you have any examples of how as a secretary of state you can ensure it happens?

JS: Yes. I've given you an example in respect of the Lawrence enquiry, because I was very conscious of the fact that if I didn't do that, a fairly reluctant sort of Whitehall you know - the Lawrence Report would go the way of the Scarman Inquiry [on the Brixton Riots], fine reports shoved on the shelf. But you've got to keep progress chasing and you've got to know. So I did do a lot of that in all sorts of areas. And in fairness what Number 10 were doing as they got better at it, was actually progress chasing you, so you progress chased...

PR: Michael Barber's [Number 10 delivery specialist] processes?

JS: Yeah, yeah. I thought, in the Immigration Service for example, I thought it was really helpful because the Immigration Service was almost impenetrable when I got there. I mean it's ten miles down the road in Croydon, very, very strong culture and they felt beleaguered, and sort of penetrating it [was hard] they had a monopoly supply of information about what you could do. So having Mike Barber's people come in was very helpful.

In the Foreign Office what you do is different, so on any dossier you've got to say what you want to do and work out where your alliances are and so on. Sometimes you'll drum and manage events, other times you are trying to create history as well as managing it. In terms of managing events for a peaceful outcome, a good example is how we and the Americans handled the Kashmir dispute. It was actually us, as much as the Americans. And in terms of, if you like, making history the best example is the EU-3 negotiations on Iran, which 12 years later produced a result, I was really pleased about that because we got it going.

PR: Just finally, what advice would you give to a minister entering government for the first time?

JS: Well if they happen to have read a lot of political history and biography, you've got to have an understanding about what's happened before in order to know what may happen in the future. To pay attention to the House of Commons, not do what a lot of my colleagues did which was to disappear into the red box, in their ministerial suite of rooms, only to reappear when they got sacked. To pay attention to the detail: I mean have a big picture, but pay attention to the detail, don't sit on papers, turn them over. And go to the gym. Seriously Peter, for me if I'd not taken exercise throughout the period I wouldn't have coped as well as I did in government. Especially in the Foreign Office where the pressure was the greatest.

PR: And you were ill a couple of times in the Foreign Office weren't you?

JS: I had bronchitis.

PR: That was 2002, wasn't it? It was during the Afghanistan period.

JS: I had two bouts of being ill, both for about a week. The worst time was when I'd been to Afghanistan, it was the week I think of the David Kelly [the weapons expert] death. So I went to, like you do, I went to Afghanistan and then I took the plane to Kandahar. And I had lunch in the governor's palace in Kandahar and then we took the plane to Baghdad, like you do, caught a plane I think to Basra and then to Baghdad and then I think we went to Beirut. Then I realised on the way back I was getting the most intense food poisoning. And I remember I had to make a statement outside Number 10, I said 'Well, you're going to have to get me a little podium' and I went out there and read this thing, thinking I'm going to fall over in a minute and then the private office said to be 'I think you need to be in bed for a bit', which is why I never went to the Hutton Enquiry. And then I had pneumonia for about a week, yeah. It was a very unhealthy lifestyle.

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