Ministers Reflect James Brokenshire

24 September 2019

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2005–10: Conservative MP for Hornchurch

2010 – present: Conservative MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup

Government career

2010–11: Parliamentary under secretary for crime reduction (Home Office)

2011–14: Parliamentary under secretary for crime and security (Home Office)

2014–16: Minister of state for security and immigration (Home Office)

2016–18: Secretary of state for Northern Ireland

2018–19: Secretary of state for housing, communities and local government

James Brokenshire was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Alice Lilly on 24 September 2019 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

James Brokenshire considers his nine years in government, including working at the Home Office for six years, working with the Northern Irish political parties against the backdrop of Brexit and the support available to ministers diagnosed with serious illness.

Tim Durrant (TD): Can we start by talking about when you first entered government? You were appointed as a minister, parliamentary under secretary at the Home Office, after the 2010 election. What was the first day like? What was the conversation you had with the prime minister?

James Brokenshire (JB): Well, I was the last appointment to David Cameron's government. All of the ministerial appointments had been done and I was critically looking at the Home Office line-up, having shadowed the role for about four years prior to becoming a minister, and thinking, "the department looks a little bit light, it looks as if it's a minister short." I remember getting a call late in the afternoon, where my secretary came dashing into the office and said, "we've got Downing Street on the phone. They want to talk to you." So I quizzically took the call and, in those inimitable terms, the switchboard operator at Number 10 said, "good afternoon, Mr Brokenshire, the prime minister would like to talk to you," as you do, and there's a follow-on story to tell about that on another occasion, as well.

So, I spoke to David Cameron. He said he wanted me to join the government and if I spoke to Theresa May, as the then Home Secretary, then we'd be able to take things from there. I put the phone down, spoke to Linda, my PA, and said, "do we have Theresa's telephone number anywhere?" We managed to make contact, so that's the first initiative test passed. Then talking to the home secretary's private secretary and arranging to go around the corner to Marsham Street [Home Office HQ] where I was greeted by Sir David Normington, the then permanent secretary, to welcome me to the Home Office and to say that my team were waiting for me. Now, there's a question of whether that was a positive thing, or whether there was a sense of what that actually meant.

So, this is the first interface with the civil service in that way – they have a readiness, that desire to get you up to speed and to work with you in a very positive way. I suppose those first few days are always a complete blur when you're meeting so many different people, you're understanding the set-up of the department. And let's not forget, when you're in opposition, whilst you think you sort of understand how government works, it's only when you're really on the other side that the magical thing, that is a submission [a piece of written advice from civil servants], suddenly becomes real to you. And the volume of submissions, and the way in which the civil service seeks to get you to make the decisions that you need to make to advance your agenda.

Now, I suppose I had the advantage, because I had shadowed the role that I was going into as minister for crime prevention, I knew the subject matter, and indeed had been shadowing the ministers on the other side when I was a shadow minister to the then Home Office ministers. And so, I knew the legislation, knew the issues, knew a lot of the stakeholders behind the scenes. In that sense, it wasn't like going to something where I was having this completely new learning curve, and so I knew in part what I wanted to do already on a number of different issues. Because, in essence, I helped shape some of the policy on antisocial behaviour and on drugs, and on alcohol, which were some of the things that I was going into. But nonetheless, the department is still vast. You have to be prepared for some of the more operational stuff that just gets thrown at you.

And whilst you think you know it, even as a frontbench [opposition] spokesman, to then go in on the other side and think, "oh, now I sort of get it." It's only when you're there, sitting behind the desk, making the decisions, answering the questions, really doing the job, that however much you can be prepared on the policy side, it's still the functional, operational side of working with directors general (DGs) and the structure in the senior civil service to set out an agenda [that you need to learn]. And equally, the civil servants will be understandably taking their lead from their secretary of state, and therefore thinking, "is this something we want to work with?" Or, is this someone that may have their agenda, but does this really align with what the secretary of state, in my case the Home Secretary, actually wants to achieve? And you need to understand that dynamic.

TD: What kind of support did you get from the civil servants in getting up to speed on the functional side of things, rather than the policy side of things?

JB: Well, first up, you're sort of given a manual. This thick wadge of papers that take you through where we are and all of the policy issues. In essence, who some of the key people are. And there's a book that indeed the Institute for Government produces on how to be a minister, that is equally tucked away with all of your other papers, which I have to confess, I did not read as assiduously as I probably should. And that is an admission to tell here, but I think that's because you don't have a lot of time. That once you're in, it's sort of bang, away you go.

There is just that eagerness, understandably for the civil service, who have been looking at this and want to understand what the thinking is, and all of a sudden, they want to do stuff. And there's lots of people that you need to see, internally, all the internal meetings. And part of the challenge of being a minister as well is not allowing your diary simply to get hoovered up with lots of meetings with internal partners, your civil servants, the different teams. It's important to use those well to get your agenda advanced. But the risk is that all just gets flooded out. You look at your diary and, you know, internal meeting after internal meeting after internal meeting. I think the message that stuck with me from my preliminary sessions with the Institute for Government is don't lose all of your external contacts with all of those external stakeholders.

Now, that's tricky because you're then meeting them in a different capacity, and you don't want to freelance and it's right that the system isn't blind-sided by something that you've said in an off-the-cuff comment to an organisation. But it is important that you don't lose those connections. You have to work with your private office to ensure that there is that balance between, on the one hand, your desire to advance your policy, make those connections, inform your thinking; and on the other, the understandable, though I think well-intentioned, desire of the civil service machine to get you to do stuff and to make decisions. But that may be their priorities on sequencing, rather than your priorities. And trying to understand that it's not that there is any malice or anything like that, I don't see it in those terms. But rather the alignment of different preferences and priorities. You may have some civil servants who have a very clear view on what policies should be or the process that you need to take, and trying to identify who those people are and to, you know, underline what your preferences and agenda are

Again, it's a question of not working against. It's always been my view on that. It's always been about working with. I think that sometimes you get problems in departments where people actively try to plough their own furrow, almost notwithstanding the civil service machine. Yes, there are different ways of doing it, but I've always found it's more constructive and positive to view it as one team, yes with our different responsibilities, our different outlook, but ultimately trying to achieve the same goal.

TD: You mentioned that you'd been to a seminar with the Institute for Government in opposition. What kind of things did you cover, and how useful was it for actually becoming a minister?

JB: I think it gave some pointers. This is trying to think back to about 10 years ago, which seems quite a while ago now! I think trying to distil down some of those key messages on, as I say, not losing your external contacts and that need for external view and challenge to supplement the advice that you'll be receiving from your civil servants. A really important point. Again, some of those structural things on the working of government, the relationship between different parts of the government machinery. So, the Cabinet Office, Downing Street and the role of the Treasury in particular, and the influences that those three have relative to each other, and relative to your department.

I think some of that understanding of what you're not likely to get from the cut and thrust of political debate, what you're not likely to get, even sitting in a bill committee, understanding the nuance of a particular statute that is coming through. And there's the other side of government, not the legal or parliamentary side of government, but the functional, operational side and how you get things done. I think it's giving you a sense that there's a whole piece that you haven't seen that will change your outlook. That will give you a sense of, "crikey, I didn't know there was that much to do." Which is hidden from you. It's hidden from gaze.

So, it's to try and give a sense of just the pressures that you'll be under. The need for leadership and swift decision making in a number of different cases. I think some of those things were touched on. And it is that case of when you then sit behind a desk and take a deep breath and think, oh crikey I sort of now start to get it. It's only when you really live it and work it that however much I think the briefing and the discussion doesn't really give you that full sense until you're sitting behind the desk, but nonetheless helpful to give a taster. But yes, I think it's impossible to convey the all-encompassing aspects of it until you're within it.

TD: Can I ask what your relationship was like with other ministers? Obviously, Theresa May was the Home Secretary. When you joined the Home Office, you were in coalition, so you were working with Lib Dems as well. And then presumably you worked with other departmental ministers as well?

JB: Yes. I think in those early days there was a desire to get on and get stuff done. I recall that time as being very collaborative. Actually, given that we were in coalition, one might say surprisingly collaborative. So, we had our team, the regular team meetings that you have departmentally. I think that's important to give that viewpoint, that perspective.

There's some really interesting, really thoughtful people that we had on the team, people like Dame Pauline Neville-Jones [former minister of state for security and counter-terrorism]. And I didn't appreciate at the time that I would then be taking on her job in 12 months and [needed] to understand her knowledge of the security and intelligence agencies. Pauline was a Lords minister, but clearly there was business in the Commons as well. With Nick Herbert as policing minister, and Damian Green as immigration minister, you know, they had quite big, chunky roles in their own right. Equally, with both of them, Nick had effectively designed the concept of police and crime commissioners when we were in opposition. Damian had set the net migration target in opposition. So, two people there with great knowledge and expertise and understanding of their subject matter. Indeed, some of the work that I'd done on crime prevention, and then Lynne Featherstone [then Liberal Democrat minister for crime and security and minister for women and equalities] coming in with her strong experience on equality issues, as well.

So, I think there was a real mutual respect and recognition of the work that each of us had done. Indeed, Lynne and I had been on bill committees together in opposition when we would find a common cause on different things to hold the government to account. And therefore, yes, coalition is a challenging beast, but then you work through that with the workings of things like the Quad [the decision-making body heading the coalition government, made up of David Cameron, George Osborne, Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander], as was, and the structures that were designed to be able to deal with and respond to the problems and the differences and the road blocks that you inevitably hit.

But actually, the coalition agreement, the principles that were set out there worked, I think, pretty well. And you look back on that time, where everybody said, "oh, we'll give

it six months," or whatever, and actually, because I think that it was well constructed, and because there was that understanding between David Cameron and Nick Clegg who were able to resolve issues as between themselves, and that was important on a number of occasions, it worked. So that was, I think, a positive time that I look back on and going into government and how we literally did hit the ground running. And I think it was also, not a challenge for the civil servants, but whereas you'd have some advice that would come to you, we would say, "well, do you know what? I don't agree with that because of X, Y and Z." So, because we'd had the time in opposition to formulate our thoughts and really get underneath the bonnet, know the law. Not that the civil service were taken aback, but they got quite a lot of, well, challenges shall I say? To say, "look, this doesn't work because of this. I want this done this particular way."

And in some ways, the civil service, understandably, has to guide a minister who may be new and fresh to a brief. They didn't have that with us, because we sort of knew it. Equally, I look back, and spending six years in one department and really knowing the Home Office almost inside out, there were those moments where, towards the end, you've had a piece of advice, or a civil servant would sort of suggest to you a particular course of action and you're saying, "well, we did try that a few years ago and it didn't work." And it was role reversal that you don't really expect. Where normally you'd expect the retained knowledge of the civil service to give you that. I think that was the one surprise, that going in you think that the officials have been there forever and a day, whereas actually the turnover within a department, within individual roles, is quite swift.

And there can be criticism: are ministers in their jobs for too short a period of time? I think there's an argument that the same could be said of the civil service, about civil servants not being in the roles for a long enough period of time to be able to really appreciate and have that retained knowledge that needs to be almost like passed down from one person to the next person to the next. So that we don't remake mistakes or we can get as good as advice to deal with a new environment, a new challenge that presents itself. And I think that came as a bit of a surprise to me.

TD: You mentioned you did two different parliamentary under secretary jobs, and you were also minister of state for security and immigration. So, was there a step change when you moved through the different ranks? And particularly on immigration, how did that net migration target affect the work of the department?

JB: I moved into security and counter-terrorism and did that role for four years, so from 2011 through to just after the 2015 general election. That was sort of a sharp learning curve, and whilst I'd done some work on cyber, and whilst I'd covered some of the work for [Dame] Pauline [Neville-] in the Commons, when we needed to deal with Commons business on security and counter-terrorism, just that understanding of that world, the oversight of the security and intelligence agencies, as well as the international aspects to this, which are hugely relevant. Understanding how to deal with hypersensitive material, the nature of intelligence briefings, a whole new world that few people outside of that

world have the opportunity to get to see and understand, and I had the privilege of doing that for four years.

What I then had in, I think it was February 2014, was when Mark Harper stood down as immigration minister, getting the call again from the Number 10 switchboard, David Cameron on the phone. This time I wasn't at my office, I was having my hair cut! So, having to take a call in the barber's chair, if you can picture the scene. The pictures that people paint of people strolling down Whitehall and down Downing Street, that wasn't generally my experience because these calls come at odd moments when you least expect it. But equally, then I took on both roles for a period of time. So, I was minister for immigration and security, and I remember coming into the department where everybody gave me these rather quizzical looks and said, "oh, immigration *and* security? Good luck with that one."

And talking to Mark Sedwill [then permanent secretary to the Home Office] in his office and saying, "okay, so I have oversight responsibility for now about two-thirds of the department," and the other, I think three or four ministers, then had the other third. That was a huge challenge. When you do immigration, and security does this to a certain extent as well, you are making some decisions over individuals' lives, and that's the operational side to what you do as a minister, that it isn't simply the policy or the legislation. You'll be making decisions over whether someone may be subject to quite invasive measures to disrupt and control potential terrorist activity.

That then moves onto the immigration side where, in essence, you have this slew of casework that comes, where again you're being presented with individual cases where you have to make assessments and judgements as to what to do in relation to them. As well as the operational side of the border, the Passport Office, and we had a few issues with that. It was an incredibly pressured time where we were also rolling out exit checks at the border. I remember Oliver Letwin, who took this sort of non-exec type role in the Cabinet Office, saying, "well, you do know James that if we screw this up this will cost us the election!".

So, I went to Oliver, "yes, I do know that and you don't need to tell me that." So, you know, the pressures are thinking that this would create all of these queues at the border and just at the time when it was being introduced, which was something like April 2015, so about a month before the election. The programmes that you practically have to put in place, that being one of them, the introduction of the SIS2, the Schengen Information System database, on being able to screen people at the borders, that was another programme that was literally coming in at the same time. So, you need project management skills to manage all of that, as well as the day-to-day issues of… whether that be legislation you're taking through, then plus the individual decisions that you're having to make. It certainly gave me a good understanding of, I suppose, homeland security, to fuse all those bits together. And then bolting the National Crime Agency into all of this well.

It was an incredible but unbelievably pressured time and so, yes, the workload was extraordinary. You'd have days where we would have piles, literally piles of MPs' letters that you would have put onto your desk to get through and trying to equally use that as intelligence where things might be going wrong. Because actually, that was sometimes a good way of discerning whether there was something that was not quite right, and often that was your best way of finding out if there were problems in the system. It's a lagging indicator which is a problem for you, and so understanding how to manage risk, but actually some of the MPs' letters being quite instructive and quite helpful, to ask questions to your officials and say, "well, I've a couple of these. Is there something here that we're not seeing?" I would say that that, where it can seem like a bit of a challenge replying to all these MPs' letters et cetera, but in a number of circumstances, they can be quite useful in terms of telling you something that you might not see.

In terms of the net migration target, that was something that was set in manifesto pledges et cetera, and obviously you look towards how you meet the overall aspects of this. I think what I would say is that we viewed this as a… sort of a need for a broader review of, not just what we did, but what you do across government. Actually, this was as much about skills and how you equip your workforce here to meet the needs of the changing economy. Indeed, what you do with your welfare system. So, whilst you can say, "okay, well, that's a Home Office responsibility," actually, there was recognition, that this was about, you know, I would describe it as a sustainable system. Where there are pressures if you have increasing growth linked to migration, where we need people to come to this country to support our economy to meet those skills needs. But knowing that the speed and rate of change causes you challenges and tensions in growing, fast-moving communities, and therefore how to manage that. And so, some people tried to distil it down, saying, "oh it was just this sort of blunt target." Yes, of course that was there, but I think we did view this in a much broader horizon, and the recognition, which is why I think there were the PM-led initiatives on trying to draw things together across Whitehall. Indeed, I think we continue to see that, rightly, on a range of policy agendas. And the fact that you as a department, you as a minister, need to work with other colleagues across Whitehall. And yes, it's not just about setting up... sometimes you'd have these rather pointless inter-ministerial groups where everybody would get together. With the right leadership, the right chairing, you could much better alignment of where the policy intent needed to be.

Alice Lilly (AL): Jumping ahead to July 2016, you become secretary of state for Northern Ireland. Again, what was the process of appointment like there? Was it another call from the Number 10 switchboard?

JB: No, that was the walk down Downing Street to meet the prime minister and to be asked if I would take on the role of being Northern Ireland secretary. So, again, different – this time I was around the cabinet table. And yes, the immediacy of that role is that, whereas then, I'd been a minister for, you know, a good six years by that stage and had

done a lot of quite pressured, quite challenging and extraordinarily difficult stuff, all of that still doesn't quite prepare you again for that further step up, or for the glare and the scrutiny and the attention that you have as the secretary of state.

One of the practical things is that in that role you have close protection. And immediately, you come out of that room [in Downing Street] and one of the first people you meet is your close protection team. Therefore, that's quite suddenly life changing. I remember, I think when Theresa Villiers was appointed as Northern Ireland secretary, she cycled into Downing Street, but then went back out in the black BMW afterwards. And it literally, at that moment, all changes. And it's almost like your whole way of life changes at that point.

So that's quite a shock to the system on thinking… trying to think through all the implications of all of that. I think the other part of being Northern Ireland secretary that isn't necessarily appreciated in Whitehall fully, or in Great Britain, is the level of media scrutiny that you have in Northern Ireland. That you go out and you will have two TV camera crews, radio interviewers and photographers who will literally go to everything that you do. Which again is very different from probably any other role that you would have, I think, outside of one of the roles of chancellor or prime minister or perhaps home secretary.

It's very, very intense when you're in Northern Ireland. Equally, the subtlety and the nuance that you always have to be so conscious of in the events that you do and literally the words that you choose. I remember then, and I think this holds true, that the best piece of advice when you become Northern Ireland secretary, is to get yourself a history book and read it. Because that history remains very pertinent and very relevant to the affairs and events of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland to this day. So, it is quite a big shift, quite a big change. And I went from this massive department, the Home Office, to a smaller, bijou department in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). [The NIO is] a much, much smaller team, where literally you would know every single official, whether at Stormont House [in Belfast], or at Horse Guards [in London], so a very big change. And the type of issues that you're dealing with, the relationships that you have to form, very different skillsets. It is about working with so many different people and understanding the dynamics and the tensions and the opportunities, as between all of them.

So, yes, a lot to get to grips with very, very rapidly. And there is an expectation of you setting out what your agenda is within a short few days, when you're still thinking through precisely what you want to do and what the right approach should be. I think that's always a challenge when you take on a role. There is that expectation, you know, perhaps unreasonably, that you will set out in detail, "this is precisely what we're going to do," even though you may not have had a huge amount of exposure to some of the quite detailed policy issues that you're confronting.

Now, of course, as security minister, I'd been across to Northern Ireland on a number of different occasions and therefore understood some of the security implications and

issues that were relevant. And so, in some ways, that equipped me well on that front. But it was, I suppose, the political dynamic, and also the view that people in Northern Ireland take to the secretary of state. That it is a role where there is still an element of deference that the secretary of state has in Northern Ireland, which, you know, I was very struck about.

I did a press conference with David Davis [then secretary of state for exiting the EU] fairly early on about some of the Brexit issues and I remember, even the press saying, "Mr Davis, we'd like to ask you about X, Y, Z," and after that, to me, "secretary of state, we'd like to ask you A, B and C." And that context, the history, the relationship, the role of the secretary of state. That's what makes it, I think, a very special and a unique role that has so many facets to it. That again, getting up to speed, fully appreciating some of the relevance, the subtlety, the context of all of this is just so important to make a success of it.

AL: You mentioned the difficulty of getting up to speed and establishing your priorities quickly. When you came into the role, how did you go about the process of setting those priorities? And how did those shift over time, given the political circumstances in Northern Ireland?

JB: When you come in as a minister or secretary of state in an established government, so as contrasted to right at the start where you're a new party coming into government, there is a lot that has already been set for you. There's a framework, there are policy objectives, ideals. You need to get up to speed with what has already been set, and therefore actually, what are you able to alter and change, where the scope for that is, and where you think the priorities need to lie. I think that's where the briefing that you get from the civil service is absolutely pivotal. But it's still that need to go out and see and meet as many people as you possibly can in that opening period. So that was what I did. I set up some round tables, particularly with business and community, to try and really confirm for myself that where we'd taken a particular stance, that actually that still held true and that that was right. Yes, to set out the broader policy issues on political stability, on dealing with the issues of the past, of ensuring that we manage effectively for Northern Ireland the issues of Brexit. Those sorts of things set themselves and respecting the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and Stormont House [Agreement], and how we would then implement the Stormont House Agreement, knowing that there were some unfinished bits to that.

So, certainly, the framework is, in that role, sort of set for you. And in Northern Ireland, the challenge is almost not doing stuff than doing stuff, because of the nature of devolution and not wanting to unsettle the governmental architecture that's in place there. So that is understanding what the role really is and the limits and boundaries to it. But equally, where you do need to intercede and where you do need to make points and hold people to account. So that delicate balance to be struck in that way. Obviously, that then shifted quite markedly with the collapse of the devolved government and everything

that that brought with it. So, inevitably, that became the main focus, the main issue and the long days, the long hours that we spent talking to the parties trying to get things back to where they need to be, and sadly that still remains relevant today.

AL: How would you characterise the relationships you had with the different political parties in Northern Ireland, particularly after the collapse of power-sharing; and also with the government in Dublin?

JB: I think the… you know, the challenges how… that ebbs and flows. And equally, some of the quiet things, the conversations that you have behind the scenes, that rightly don't make their way into the public domain, and the need to respect, that sense of confidence to be able to form the ideas, to try to get an agreement between the different parties. There is always an innate tension between the set-up of devolution itself with the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party], Sinn Féin and the way in which they have to work together as the two main parties from each tradition.

But equally, the role of the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party], the Alliance [Party], the UUP [Ulster Unionist Party], and how in some ways the focus when devolution was up and running on the two main parties, but as things altered, things changed, that the need to ensure that all parties were really engaged. And that the way in which the other parties had such a crucial role to play, to actually put pressure on the ostensibly larger parties to try and get them into a framework where you could see the space for where devolution could be re-established.

And so, it is very personal. You get to know people very, very well and also the US dynamic to this, as well, from a Northern Ireland context, where what happens and the influence of some of the Friends of Ireland Caucus in the US, on Capitol Hill, actually the relevance to that. Understanding that dynamic and building those relationships with people who have trod this road before. People like [United States special envoy] George Mitchell. And [President] Bill Clinton [who were both involved in the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement]. Who still have a huge interest and passion to see that all of the hard work that they put in supporting the UK government, supporting the Irish governments to come to this position of the three-stranded approach with the political settlement on the island of Ireland, that that holds, that that sticks, that that is effective.

So yes, also, I think [it is important to] have good relationships with Irish ministers too, and I still hold those today. That, yes, you need to use those boundaries of the three-stranded approach [as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement] to underline where people may be straying into territory that they shouldn't be straying into, respective of the three strands. But nonetheless, that sense of shared endeavour that both the UK and Irish governments have in seeing devolution restored. And therefore, the need that you have as Northern Ireland secretary to have a strong and effective relationship with the Irish foreign minister. A good personal rapport and understanding between the two of you.

So there's a lot of work, a lot of time is spent on that, albeit that because of the talks process you do spend quite a lot of time together, sometimes waiting around, not always as productively as you might wish, and those long hours cooped up in Parliament Buildings at Stormont do spring to mind. But you do form, I think, relationships and an understanding between people in a slightly deeper way, perhaps, than you see in other bits of government. But that actually matters, that's important, and that's how you get things done. Which is why I was so pained to have to stand down when I did, because quite literally we were going to re-establish the talks process on something like 6 January 2018, and I had my cancer diagnosis on 2 January. And knowing that I couldn't follow that through and then having to come to the decision that we just couldn't start this.

And Simon Coveney [Irish minister for foreign affairs and trade] and I had all these plans to have the symbolism of walking across the Peace Bridge [in Derry/Londonderry] and knowing how important a sense of symbolism can be in the politics of Ireland. So, I felt a sort of frustration, knowing that whoever would take over, that it would take time to form those relationships. That does sort of pain me and why it still feels, even today, as unfinished business.

AL: Do ministers have a good understanding of devolution before being appointed or do they have to get up to speed quickly?

JB: I think that there has not been a universally good understanding in Westminster of the subtlety and the, I think, significance of some of the issues pertinent to Northern Ireland for some time. Indeed, as Northern Ireland secretary, it was one of those cases of a lot of people come up and say, "really wish you well, you're doing a great job, just as long as I don't have to get involved." It's that sort of contrast. And when I became housing secretary, everybody wants to talk to you. As Northern Ireland secretary, not that many people wanted to talk to you – at least not in parliament. There's a good understanding in Whitehall, and equally I'd garnered a good understanding through my work while I was Home Office minister and had taken a particular and keen interest in the issues surrounding Northern Ireland. But I wouldn't say that is universally the case, and that cuts across on all sides.

Equally, from a media perspective, as well, where you'd be dealing with people being knee-capped, people having pipe bombs put on their cars on a fairly regular basis, and it not, in the slightest way, making the news across the rest of the UK. Whereas if those events had taken place in any other part of the country, they'd have been top of the news. And that's why I think there's a collective issue on how we view issues across our United Kingdom and why I argue for a new sense of, I would use the term unionism with a lower case 'u' here, if I can, on how we have policies and approach as the UK government that touch all parts of our United Kingdom. There is a sense that with devolution, that the UK government might get pushed back and the need to ensure that whilst, yes, respecting and recognising the devolved settlement, the roles of the governments within each of

the different parts of our United Kingdom, the firm and continuing role for the United Kingdom government.

And that this isn't something that you can almost like devolve and forget. I think there is a mindset that almost takes that approach. I think that's profoundly wrong. And while there is a challenge for the UK government to ensure that it, respectfully and appropriately, still continues to set out its case, its view, its role, its function within those reserved or non-devolved areas of policy. And I don't agree that somehow there shouldn't be visits or people from other departments coming to play that role within the devolved areas.

There is, I think, a tension there that we all need to recognise. And of course, parties with a nationalist agenda are absolutely entitled to their view in a democracy. Nonetheless, that inevitably creates a tension – the question is how we manage that going forward. And this is why I think there needs to be a bigger, different conversation around all of this that is… that recognises properly and appropriately how we look at place, how that defines our identity, in a much more localised way, almost from the town or the street or the community, and how that builds up through different parts of governmental structures.

But ultimately there is a key role that the UK government has to play, as much on the streets or the town or the community, as much as at that top level, and understanding how all that fits together. I think there's a need for us to rethink our approach to dealing with that. So, yes, I think that sort of… that sometimes the lack of surfacing of what's going on in Northern Ireland doesn't necessarily fully inform, either the political or wider debate, as to what's actually happening there. I think that you can look to that as perhaps explaining some of the surprise that appears when things happen in Northern Ireland or the island of Ireland, where actually, if you're there, if you're seeing it, if you're living it, if you're part of it, you absolutely recognise it.

AL: As well as trying to get power-sharing back up and running, Brexit was becoming an increasingly important issue for Northern Ireland. What are your reflections on that and what was your role, in the Brexit process, as Northern Ireland secretary?

JB: Clearly the negotiations on Brexit were and are led by the prime minister and the Brexit secretary and the Cabinet Office structures at the centre of Whitehall, and you need to do it in that way. But there were certainly moments where we, you know, fed in our thoughts, our ideas. Indeed, I insisted I was a member of all the relevant cabinet committees. Equally, [we fed in] the feedback and concerns that were expressed within Northern Ireland on the impact of Brexit, on what the pertinent factors were on what the implications would be for businesses trading north and south, equally cross-Ireland issues such as the single electricity market. And again, really pushing the centre and BEIS [the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy] to recognise the importance and significance of what this would mean on the island of Ireland, and for Northern

Ireland in particular. [That was] as well as the technical and legal issues pertinent to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement that had to be recognised and respected as part of any other agreement we would make. So, there was certainly input in that way. I went to see Monsieur [Michel] Barnier [the EU's chief Brexit negotiator] on one occasion, and also made that connection with our MEPs and the dynamic in Brussels, both from the [European] Parliament and the Commission standpoint.

[It was also my role] to try to make some points to the Irish government, whilst fully recognising that that was not negotiation, as the negotiations were to be conducted between the European Union and the United Kingdom. But nonetheless trying to give a sense to others as to why things mattered. Why we were leaving the single market and the customs union. Going down to Dublin to try and talk to people there about Brexit, where clearly there was a lot of… almost verging on despair in those early days. So, there was certainly a role that I had to play. And to try and help with some of the challenges pre… well, in December 2017, where we had the communication that was published at that time, setting out some of the framework for the subsequent negotiations. That was quite a fraught and hectic period, and you will remember the sort of week that we had where the prime minister went out [to Brussels], the agreement wasn't acceptable [to the DUP], and having to work through to get things into a place that people could broadly acknowledge or accept.

I know we didn't get all the way there with cross-community and cross-party support, but nonetheless I was working to support the prime minister in getting that into a slightly different and better space than we had been a few days earlier. It's difficult, you're not in the frame of the direct negotiations. Obviously, you're providing input advice, equally helping to shape some of this too, and making sure there is a good appreciation of the significance of the issues that are there politically, but also practically. In terms of the operation of the border, some of the crime and security aspects to this, as well as the legal challenges that do exist, where Northern Ireland is quite a litigious environment and therefore understanding the propensity for judicial reviews and other legal challenges.

So [there was] quite a lot that we did need to feed in and why, as I say, one of the earliest things I did was to set out an advisory panel with businesses to really get from them, to do visits, to understand the different sectors. Agriculture, in particular, which is the area that both Ireland and Northern Ireland rely on significantly for a number of aspects of their economies. But [the job was about] really trying to give a sense of what the mood was, how that then plays into the broader politics, and ensuring that the Whitehall machine really got, when we were saying that things were an issue, that they really were an issue, and was given the priority that they needed to hold.

AL: You've already touched on the fact that you had to leave government for a few months due to illness, and your personal frustrations around that. Do you feel that any more could be done to give practical support to ministers if they do need to take time off for personal reasons or for ill health? Or did you feel that you were able to get the support you needed, both when you left office and came back into it?

JB: I was very lucky in having a prime minister who was hugely supportive and really personally very helpful when I was going through my challenges with my health. It's quite strange when you're going through some diagnostics that you're not quite sure what the end result is going to be, and the people that you tell are your close loved ones and the prime minister. That is a strange and interesting dynamic! But that was what happened. I remember on the evening that we were in the final throes of the December 2017 communication. The prime minister was literally flying out that night to go back to [President] Juncker, back to Brussels to effectively conclude that. And I had a conversation with her, saying, "well, I'm really sorry but I can't do the media round in the morning because I'm going to have a bronchoscopy," which is where they literally shove a camera down into your chest to have a poke around down there. And [I was] saying, "I'm going to be a little bit sedated, so I may not be the best of mood and the best ability to answer the tough questions that no doubt we'll get from the media."

And Theresa said, "well, for goodness sake, you've got to put your health first. It's the most important thing. So, don't worry about that, we'll have that covered." But equally, as I didn't quite know what I was dealing with there, [we had to consider] how to try to do that in a way which then of itself doesn't create lots of question like, "well, what's going on?" So there was the personal challenges of managing some of that and, you know, I felt I did have that support, but information that understandably was quite personal, quite private, how to deal with that appropriately, and to know that that would be protected.

So that was a challenge, and then at other stages I was saying, "oh, do you know I've got to go," and, "sorry, I can't go to cabinet, I need to go and have a PET scan," which is where they inject you with some radioactive dye and they put you in a CT-type scanner and all this sort of stuff. And Theresa again would say, "oh, don't worry about that, keep me posted," so I was just giving the prime minister the latest update on my different health process through the NHS!

I think the only thing I would observe is because of the nature of the job, it's very difficult to take a leave of absence. I felt in the role that I had it was just impossible. I think we all came to that conclusion, [that it would be impossible] for me to say, "I'm going to take a leave of absence because I've got a health issue," and that someone would temporarily step into the role. Now, I think we have subsequently seen some examples of where that has taken place, and I think that there has been some reflection.

And I remember talking to people like Sue Gray [former director general of the Cabinet Office Propriety and Ethics Team] and others at that time, where there was that sense that if you were a senior civil servant you'd have sick leave to deal with cancer treatment or whatever. Whereas as a minister, particularly as a secretary of state, that's really difficult. So, in essence, having to resign, having to do all the sort of… do all this very publicly, not quite knowing what the future may hold. So that's a difficult challenge and I don't think there are any easy solutions. There may be some roles in government that are easier to solve on that than others, so if you're in a big department, you've got a stronger ministerial team that you can work with. I effectively had one minister and one shared Lords minister working with me, and so it's really difficult to build that resilience into some of the smaller departments. I think there is a challenge there and how to work that through, it can only be looked at on an individual case, but it's tough.

And I think it is an area that we might all reflect on a bit further. I think there has been some further reflection. But I was very lucky to be able to bounce back from pretty significant surgery as quickly as I did, and to have a prime minister who invited me back into government as housing secretary. Albeit again that was another phone call when I was doing a visit to a business in my local area and saying, "Downing Street want to talk to you." And talking to the prime minister again and saying, "I'd be delighted to accept the role," and the prime minister saying to me, "I'm so pleased you've said that because you've got [parliamentary] questions at 2.30." Again, you have to snap straight back into it and all of the media pressures.

AL: When you took on the housing role, to what extent were you able to set your own priorities, versus inheriting certain issues from the previous person in the role?

JB: I think there was quite a lot of scope, actually, when I got into it. And yes, we need to build the homes the country needs. Yes, there were certain commitments around building safety and around social housing. And in MHCLG [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government], you are dealing with very, very big budgets and therefore how to spend that wisely and effectively to deliver the number of homes, the outcomes that you want to achieve. So, understanding how to work with Homes England and having that as effectively your delivery mechanism, and some great people there with [Nick] Walkley [CEO of Homes England] and Sir Ed Lister [chair of Homes England], who I think were doing a great job in shaping that new agency.

I had some mixed views about externalising responsibility from government departments to create non-ministerial agencies or offices, or whatever. Because you think that you are de-risking it by putting it almost at arm's length, whereas the fact that you may be creating more risk for yourself in not fully seeing what may be happening within that agency. That said, it was in my experience of Homes England, I was really delighted to see the energy that Homes England possesses in really following through on this agenda.

But saying that, there were challenges on homelessness and rough sleeping which I feel very passionately about, and that was a real priority for me. One of my first visits to telegraph that message was to visit a rough sleeping charity in Birmingham and to take a message that it's not about London exclusively, profoundly it's about our regions, our cities. So, sometimes with this signalling, that can be really important. What's your first visit? What's your first statement? What is it that telegraphs your own personal priorities? Which will be born from a range of different influences. So, for me, rough sleeping, absolutely, it is profoundly wrong that we have a country where we have so many people living out on the street and we need to fix that. And that has been… was something that I took very much to heart in creating the rough sleeping strategy.

Of course, some of the framework was there, but equally drawing together bits of other government, arguing with the Treasury and Number 10 how we need either more resources or more focus on this. Actually, in a short period of time, from effectively May [2018] through to last July [2019]… you know, last July, just a few weeks back, we got a lot done. I think it underlines that with a sense of focus and intent, you can get stuff done. Now, again, we probably benefited from having Downing Street who were supportive of what we were doing, and so for some of those battles that inevitably you get into in Whitehall, having their backing at a number of key moments.

But to drive forward, things like freeing up councils to borrow to build, to scrap the borrowing limits that councils have, against some opposition in Whitehall, was a really important step to promote the growth of social housing, a new generation of council homes. For me, it is about that mixture of social housing. Yes, doing those steps that we need to do to get more people to buy their own home, but also what the rental and the letting market looks like, with reforms that we have started to put in place around that.

As against the context of a hugely continuing challenge of building safety where, coming in, you realise that you're at the start of a journey, very firmly at the start of a journey. With the Hackitt Review [on building regulations and fire safety] and all the legislation that will need to follow to completely change the way in which our construction and our building sector operates, and a drive for quality, as well. So, some of the statements I made around Help to Buy, and how that was used, and the wrongness of using leasehold for the building of homes, the issues of quality on the nature of the building that they've constructed, the need for a new homes ombudsman to be able to challenge the sector.

I think that you suddenly realise that by setting out an agenda and speaking powerfully on an issue, that of itself starts to get things to happen. That it's not simply about legislation. There is so much more that you can do and that with a real positive intent and some carefully positioned speeches and interviews with the media, you can influence change in that way. So, yes, I realise that whilst the framework was set, you can put your stamp on it. And understanding that you may or may not have a long or a short period of time but being clear on some of those objectives at the outset. Not trying to boil the

ocean, not trying to do everything, but having two or three things that you want to do, that you want to mark out. That, for me, I think, was where we put our energy.

AL: There has also been a lot of legislation related to Northern Ireland that's had to be passed in the last few years. How much did the change in parliamentary arithmetic in 2017 affect your roles?

JB: Parliament has changed enormously over the time that I've been a minister. A much more activist parliament that we have, and the way in which urgent questions are now used much more frequently. I remember when I was immigration minister, I used to joke with the Speaker. I used to say, "I think we should just put down on the order paper urgent questions, the immigration minister, subject to be announced on the day." Because I think there was a week where I literally did, I think, an urgent question every single day, and you don't have much notice of this, and therefore just have to deal with the dynamic of how that operates.

What has altered under this parliament is some of the ability to legislate, and the way in which scope has become the issue of the day in terms of your legislation. So, it's not about what you put in it. It's about what other people will put into your bill. So that has meant that, actually, in MHCLG, we probably over the last 12–18 months have taken through more bills than probably any other department. But they were all very small but short, bespoke bills, and that's what shifted.

You no longer have bills in the traditional sense, a 50- or a 60-clause bill. You're now seeing bills that are about 12–14 clauses, with a very tightly designed scope of the bill so that you can't put lots of other, potentially extraneous or other topical issues into it, either in the Commons or in the Lords, where they have an even more expansive view on scope. So that's why, I think, that now creates these very narrow, very tight bills where you can get things done, but they need to be quite constrained. And so… whereas in the old days where perhaps people would say, "is that an issue for, you know, a handout bill or a private member's bill?" Actually, that now has been reversed. It's been those quite narrowly focused bills that are the ones that are able to progress.

You can get stuff done, but it's in a slightly different framework, and so… and I've probably taken more bills through parliament than any other minister. With the work that we did in the Home Office, so big expansive bills, through to some of the budget bills and other things I then did as Northern Ireland secretary, through to all of these quite narrowly defined bills that we've taken forward at MHCLG. All different in nature as to how you get stuff down and how to legislate. But I think that's been the most striking thing, where you have a much more activist parliament with the greater use of urgent questions, but also how to make stuff happen from a law-making perspective has markedly changed. I think that that will remain the same whilst the parliamentary arithmetic remains the same.

AL: You've been in government during a coalition, during a majority government and during a minority government. And you were in opposition before becoming a minister. How does each of those different situations affect your work?

JB: Opposition is just hugely frustrating because it's sort of David versus Goliath. But at the same time, I realised then that you could still be quite effective if you do your research. Sometimes you can be better prepared than a minister in a number of ways, and understand the subject matter, because you've got the time, you've got that ability to get out. Therefore, how to get stuff done in opposition, how to use FOI [Freedom of Information], how to use parliamentary questions to tease out information. So, a different dynamic, but yes, very much a 'dog and pony type show', a real 'one man' or 'one woman and their dog' sort of thing to try and hold government to account.

Then you move into, yes, coalition government, but still, if you've got a programme that you're able to set and you have a workable majority, you can absolutely get stuff done. I suppose the common theme, though, is also the fact that there's stuff that just gets chucked at you, that you don't expect, that's blue sky. When you take that call from G4S that says, "by the way, you know those security guards we were going to provide you at the Olympic Games? I think we're just a little bit short, maybe… is that alright?" Or some of the horrendous challenges we had dealing with the migration crisis and literally people throwing themselves off trains in northern Calais, it was just horrific. And having to, in essence, create the security envelope around the ports of Calais and Coquelles, which doesn't fill me with great pleasure whenever I take the train through there. I look at some of those conversations saying, "you know, we need to get fencing up here, how do we do this?" And that sort of real-life stuff that is, again, quite difficult to prepare you for, and some of those decisions that you have to take that do have a profound impact on people's lives in that way, or trying to stop people… trying to get Border Force deployed to the Mediterranean. You know, there are so many events. Events, dear boy, events. However, much you may have the programme, there is always stuff that you just need to deal with.

So that's the common theme that underlines all of it. Yes, to then move into a majority government where we were able to, I think, get some things done and how to… how you operate in that environment, and thinking back to the time when I was on the other side of the fence and seeing how you can operate then. But then, we were in a minority situation which is, I think, the most challenging, the most difficult of the lot. Where, yes, you have a confidence and supply agreement, but knowing that that does add complexity in dealing with relationships within Northern Ireland, and therefore how you continue to be focused on and upholding that sense of being fair across communities and across parties in Northern Ireland, and never forgetting that.

And just the broader political tension with a much more activist parliament. I think that's the distinction. You've got an activist parliament which will now use all sorts of different tools, SO24 [Standing Order No. 24, which backbench MPs used to control business in the Commons for certain periods] being the latest addition to that, and, in essence, which I

think will have ramifications for years to come. Where we now have parliament setting a precedent that it has the right to almost set a legislative programme that, when we're looking at this distinction between the executive and the legislature, the judiciary, where I think those lines are now becoming very blurred, and that will pose, I think, some significant constitutional and legal questions for years to come. We will need to, in some ways, reset and reaffirm where some of those boundaries may need to lie.

As against also the cabinet, where cabinet responsibilities, I think, were not upheld. Where secrecy in cabinets and being able to have frank conversations was frankly denuded over the course of the last number of months. Indeed, where issues such as professional legal privilege, on being able to hold legal advice confidentially has now also started to be eroded.

All of these things on collective responsibility, on cabinet secrecy, on the ability for legal advice to be protected, those have also been watered down. When you then lay along an activist parliament, plus no majority, it's all part of this dynamic that has been hugely, hugely challenging. I do worry as to how we can reassert some of those basic functional principles that allow government to operate. That is under significant strain at the moment and I hope that once we do get through this Brexit quagmire, and I believe that we will, but when we do, there is going to need to be a long and careful and thoughtful look as to how we can reaffirm some of the principles and concepts that have enabled our democracy to function well and our government, I think, to function well with the civil service. To enable that to be able to look to the future in a positive way.

The extra bit to add to that is the weakening of the civil service with some of the personal attacks on individual civil servants, which I think, again, is hugely wrong when we are the political masters, we are the accountable ones. We are the ones that take the advice – and it is advice. Again, we need to be very firm and actually stand behind and support the good of the civil service, and my concept on this has always been that we are one team trying to achieve the same agenda. But again, it's troubling some of these things that have happened over the course of the last number of months, and there is a need to, I think, reaffirm a number of those principles once we're through the current crisis.

TD: You left government in the July 2019 reshuffle. Can you describe that process for us?

JB: Rapid. It's a bit like appointment. The way in is sudden and quick, and the way out is sudden and quick. I think that if you'd been around politics you know it is a bit of a rollercoaster ride and there are the ups and the downs, and that is the way that government has to operate. Yes, it can be pretty brutal in that sense. But no, you know, I do understand the need for a new prime minister to set out a new agenda. To confront the issues of the day and to build a team that they want to have alongside them to advance that. But I've still got more to give and I'm not going anywhere.

AL: What achievement are you most proud of from your time in office?

JB: I think there are a number of things that I would point back to. Most recently, getting the borrowing cap lifted for local authorities now to borrow, to build a new generation of council homes, which I think will be transformative. I want to see councils now using those new powers to be able to do that and bring about the change that I think that we need to see. There are other, I suppose, more direct issues that I'd point to. The work I was involved in [at the Home Office], in the deportation of Abu Qatada, negotiating with the Jordanian government. And again, learning that sometimes when you're told that something is impossible, not giving up and realising that there is and can be a way through to achieve a positive outcome and objective. I think some of the work that we've done on crime and antisocial behaviour, some of the legislation that we put in through the Protection of Freedoms Act [2012], as well. Also, the work I was involved in on modern slavery and starting to set the framework and position on challenging all of us as to what we need to do to confront slavery and some appalling behaviour, which is in plain sight. And how I think that we've started to lead the way in bringing this issue to the forefront.

And also, I think, looking back… despite all of its challenges, a safe and successful 2012 Olympic Games. I was the security minister during that time and yes, I think it's fair to say there were a few challenges along the way. But I look back on that time, which was an incredible moment for our country, the way in which we unleashed such positive spirits. And perhaps at this time, where things are a little bit more bumpy, to take us back to that moment, to remind us of what we are as a country, how we can achieve and how that was such a proud moment.

AL: If you had to give one piece of advice to a new minister starting out in their career on how to be effective, what would it be?

JB: Listen to advice from your civil servants, but also don't be afraid to challenge, or indeed to ensure that you keep those connections outside of your department to get those inputs, to ensure that you really are getting the broad cross-section of a picture. And getting sometimes advice and thoughts that are not necessarily going to be available to you within the civil service. That's no criticism, that's simply because of the nature of the experience and operation of those who do their best and serve you incredibly to give you the best result, but sometimes getting an external view is important.

And if I may, a second one, is whilst yes, you'll have someone to manage your diary, make sure that you keep some control of it, because whilst there will be, I think, good intent to fill your day with all sorts of different appointments, nonetheless getting a good balance between external and internal meetings. And also ensuring that it is your agenda, rather than at times the department's, in their best… with the best of intents, agenda. Because ultimately, you're the one who's accountable. You're the one who's got to stand up in parliament. You're the one that actually wants to get things done. But also knowing the civil service do too, and seeing yourself as part of a team and finding that constructive

way to work together to get the best out of both you and them, and get things done for the benefit of our country with that strong sense of public service.

TD: Is there anything you think we should have asked about, but we haven't?

JB: There is always so much to discuss, actually. And that's, I think, the challenge that in each of these individual roles I could go on about security, counter-terrorism, Abu Qatada, just how to get stuff done. And sometimes that is force of will. Sometimes you almost see the set-up being the non-executive and the executive. Well, [as a minister] you're the non-exec almost, but it isn't as clear as that. I remember when we had the meltdown in the passport service, effectively you roll your sleeves up and get stuck in, and in a strange sort of way, you almost are running the… some of these agencies in that way. Getting under the skin of the operational side of things. When I was dealing with border stuff and the IT goes down at Heathrow and you get the call to say, "okay, minister, what do we do here? Do we do these checks? Do we not do these checks?" *[Laughs]*

You know, some immediate real-life stuff that gets thrown at you, and you have to deal with that and literally to survive. Knowing that you've got to roll your sleeves up. You've got to understand that business or that situation as best as anybody else. Not thinking that you can, at times, step back and leave your officials to deal with that. I think sometimes that's where we did have so many things that used to get thrown at us at the Home Office all the time. And you think, crikey, how are we going to literally get through the day, let alone the week, at some moments.

But ultimately, sometimes it is getting out, being seen, doing stuff and really creating a culture and climate. Which is why I make the point that I do, about working with your civil servants, so that if there is a problem, if there is an issue, that they come to you early. Don't try and think they can solve it themselves, where it all then mushrooms and becomes even more of a problem. I've always been very clear with all of the teams I've worked with. If there is a problem, my door is always open. I will want to know about this. Not so that I can point fingers or deal with blame, that's not what this is about. It's actually about finding out, dealing with it and getting on with it.

So how you create that culture, that supportive culture, I think is an important part of the job that you do. Because there will be stuff that will go wrong, it's inevitable, and there are so many moving parts. But how to create that culture, which we found tough at the start at the Home Office. It was a department that effectively had gone through, and it felt like this, a collective nervous breakdown. Where it was told it was not fit for purpose. How to build that back up to give a sense of morale boosting, or a sense of value and determination and pride in the overall Whitehall machine.

That's why, I think, that relationship that you form with your permanent secretary, with your private office, with your DGs [directors general] and the whole team, does matter so much that you get their respect and you respect them too. And that culture, I think, is

absolutely critical if you are to thrive, and at times survive, so that you all work together with that same objective.

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