

Ministers Reflect

Jo Johnson



28 May 2019

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2010 – present: Member of Parliament for Orpington

Government career

2018: Minister of State for Transport and Minister for London

2016–18: Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Department for Education)

2015–16: Minister of State for Universities and Science (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

2014–15: Minister of State for Cabinet Office and Head of No10 Policy Unit

2013–14: Parliamentary Secretary (Cabinet Office) and Head of No10 Policy Unit

2012–14: Assistant Whip

Jo Johnson was interviewed by Tess Kidney Bishop and Dr Catherine Haddon on 28 May 2019 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Jo Johnson reflects on his time as a minister under David Cameron and Theresa May, the value of continuity in ministers, seeing policy through from manifesto to legislation and the achievements he was most proud of from his time as a minister.

Tess Kidney Bishop (TKB): If we could start when you were appointed a parliamentary private secretary [PPS] in 2011. That is often considered the first rung in the ministerial ladder, but there is not much understanding of what the role actually involves. How much did you know about the PPS role when you were appointed?

Jo Johnson (JJ): I was appointed PPS to Mark Prisk, who was then the business minister in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], as it then was. I didn't know much about the role. The permanent secretary in the department, Martin Donnelly, who was a lovely man I got on with very well, took me into his room and said that this was an opportunity to learn what it was like to be a minister without any of the responsibilities of being a minister, and that he was there to help and to ensure that if I wanted to see the papers relating to any of the decisions that the department was considering I would be able to, subject to my being responsible about keeping them confidential and all the rest of it. So Martin was incredibly supportive in that role and I am very grateful to him for that.

It didn't really involve a huge amount, to be honest; it involved turning up to a weekly diary meeting, turning up to prayers, which is when ministers get together, I think it was then a Tuesday morning, and discuss the various issues facing a ministerial team. Obviously at that time, it was a coalition government and there were ministers from both sides of the [Conservative–Liberal Democrat] coalition in the department. So it was an opportunity to have an insight into how that was working at the time too, so quite useful in that respect. But the role doesn't involve a huge amount, to be honest. It involves passing bits of paper to the minister when he or she is at the dispatch box or doing debates in Westminster Hall. It involves a bit of colleague handling, making sure that the minister is being supported in terms of questions and so forth.

The only way in which I felt I added value occasionally was writing articles for Mark Prisk which went out for publication – in his name – trying to get some credit for some of his initiatives, particularly around de-regulation. At the time, the government was very focused on this thing called the 'Red Tape Challenge', of which we haven't heard much in recent years, but in 2011/12/13 [Oliver Letwin](#) was driving it, and the Department for Business was quite an important player in it. And Mark Prisk's responsibility was to ensure that we had a legacy, as a government, not of leaving our mark in legislation but actually in removing red tape and removing regulatory burdens on business.

TKB: So did you personally find that your time as a PPS was useful for when you then became a minister?

JJ: At the margin, yeah, I think it probably was. I mean, it gave you a bit more of an understanding about some of the various things that a minister is required to do: the performance in the chamber, the performance in Parliament. Parliamentary accountability is a very big part of what a minister does, and the junior minister does an awful lot of it. Probably more of a junior minister's time is spent dealing with Parliament and being held accountable to Parliament for what is going on in the department than he or she does developing policy.

TKB: If we move now to 2013, when you were appointed as a minister in the Cabinet Office, what did [David] Cameron tell you about what the role would involve when he appointed you?

JJ: I briefly went into the Whips' Office. I did six months in the Whips' Office, then in April 2013 I was appointed to run the Number 10 Policy Unit and was given a role in the Cabinet Office at the same time, to make sure I had a ministerial rank. Cameron got me into his study and said I would be taking a different path from colleagues in my intake who were entering into departments in classic ministerial roles. He'd put me off on this different path which was to run his policy unit. He made very clear what his intentions were. The Policy Unit, up until that time, had been a bit of a weird, double-headed beast reporting both to the prime minister and the DPM [deputy prime minister], and to Jeremy Heywood [Cabinet Secretary] so triple-headed in some ways. And Cameron, given where we were at that stage in the political cycle, it being 2013 and two years before a general election, wanted a more political policy unit that reported directly to him and didn't have to have the whole business of keeping interesting policy ideas to one side, or having to share them across the coalition.

So it became a more classic political policy unit, and the civil service was great. Jeremy Heywood was absolutely brilliant in showing that we were well supported, that everybody understood how the new Policy Unit was going to work, didn't mind that it wasn't reporting to him directly anymore, because previously it was headed up by a civil servant, Paul Kirby, and before then others. So he was totally relaxed about that. All he wanted was for it to work, he wasn't interested in seeing it fail, he just wanted to ensure that we were able to do what we wanted to do. And he put in place a structure whereby I recruited quite a significant number of spads [special advisers] covering each of the major policy areas and ensured that we had enough civil service support to connect into the departments so the whole thing worked. You can't have a policy unit that's just spads, nor can you have one that's just civil servants, they've got to work in a way in which they're enmeshed with each other, otherwise the political wheels spin and never engage with the departments themselves, and the whole thing is utterly hopeless. You really do need the civil servants in the department working alongside the spads, and I feel we did get that aspect of it right.

So, Cameron wanted a more political unit and, given where we were in the political cycle, two years from an election, our immediate challenges were around dealing with quite a significant cost of living issue on which Ed Miliband was making significant progress at the time. So we had some immediate policy priorities around cost of living and ensuring it was a 'recovery for all'. Those big set piece moments where a prime minister has an opportunity to make his imprint on an agenda are principally around the party conferences, so party conference 2013, party conference 2014. Those are very big events for Number 10 because it's the moment where, across government, the prime minister chooses what announcements get made and don't get made. There's a process of Number 10 working with each of the departments, ensuring that they've got a strong set of announcements that reinforce the prime minister's strategy for the look and feel of the government and its priorities. So, apart from dealing with the big set piece events, the party conferences, and the usual firefighting that Number 10 has to do to ensure departments aren't doing things that are going to actively blow the government off course, the major focus for the Policy Unit at that time was in getting ready for the coming election.

We worked very, very hard on the manifesto for the 2015 election; that took an awfully long time, but I think it paid off in the sense that we had time to really kick the tyres on all the different policies in it. It was a very big and detailed document. But none of those policies blew up in the campaign and we put in place lots of structures to ensure they were properly road tested, polled, focus grouped and had the consent of the parliamentary party before they went into the document. Those are absolutely critical elements for a successful manifesto, as we learned to our cost with the 2017 election. Obviously, when you're calling a snap election, it's a very different scenario and you won't have the luxury of time to do all of that road testing and focus grouping and polling, but it is incumbent on anyone who calls a snap election, to ensure they're not going to blow themselves up in the campaign with a badly thought-through manifesto. Cameron made sure that we had the time and his authority to do the manifesto properly. We worked very closely with Lynton Crosby [political strategist who advised the Conservative Party in the 2015 election campaign] throughout that process, doing all the focus grouping, the testing and so on. But it just ensured that we had a disciplined process. And getting parliamentary consent for the final document was also very important. We set in place a very big process with policy commissions, working with Graham Brady's 1922 [Committee's] policy committees to ensure that everybody had a chance to chip in ideas. To the extent we could, we tried to accommodate colleagues' ideas from across Parliament to ensure that everybody felt they'd had a stake and a voice that was listened to in the process.

Catherine Haddon (CH): Do you think it was an innovation for the Policy Unit that others should consider? You are the only minister to have headed it in that way, it's always been advisers. Did it make a big difference you being a minister?

JJ: I'm not sure. As an MP, it helped being a minister as well. But ultimately what gave me the authority that I had, to the extent that I had authority, was not that I was a minister but that I was reporting straight back to David Cameron and secretaries of state knew that I was reporting back to him. So whether or not I was a relatively junior minister in the Cabinet Office, I don't think that was the decisive thing. The fact was I'd been asked by David Cameron to run his Policy Unit and was reporting back to him and to George Osborne [the chancellor] what they were doing in their departments. I think that was where the authority came from – it wasn't from some ministerial rank or other.

CH: To move on to after the 2015 election, that's when you became minister of state for universities, science, research and innovation. You inherited the Nurse Review [of research councils] and the work that Greg Clark had been doing on that [as the previous minister of state for universities and science]. How much did you get to make your own priorities for that role and how much were you told the areas they wanted you to work towards?

JJ: Well, a bit of both. The main focus of my time in the role was putting together the Higher Education and Research Bill, which became an Act in 2017. That had two elements, one part of it was implementing the recommendations of the Nurse Review, which effectively pulled together the research councils into a more strategic entity called UK Research and Innovation, and that was fine. It was controversial with the science community to some extent because they feared a loss of autonomy for the research councils. That was fine, but the far more interesting part of the role was on the higher education side, where we implemented ideas which I'd helped to develop in the Policy Unit to make universities more accountable to students who, under the new funding system, were themselves making a very significant contribution towards the cost of their higher education. The Higher Education and Research Act was probably the most significant bit of legislation for the sector in a generation. It created a new regulator in the Office for Students which was able, with the powers it would have under the legislation, to make universities much, much more accountable to students, in particular for the quality of teaching that they offered to students who, as I said, under the new system were paying £9,000+ a year for their tuition.

I think to a very significant degree I had real autonomy as a minister in that role, and that was fantastic because it was just a really, really great role, a really exciting role. It's one which offered a chance to interact with lots and lots of brilliant people across our science and research communities and to deal with an issue which really mattered to young people. The question of how they could get better value for money from their time at university. And which from time to time became politically very important too. So it was a role I enjoyed greatly.

CH: Setting up a new public body, setting up a new regulator, is quite a challenge. How good was the civil service support in doing that?

JJ: Oh, unbelievably good, I just could not fault it, really first class. I was so lucky across my time in BEIS [the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy].

My role split at one point, because when Theresa May came in, in June 2016, she split the role so that universities moved into the Department for Education [DfE]. Up until that point, both bits of the beat had been in BEIS. I was not particularly keen on seeing universities move over to DfE. It created a lot of turbulence in the system for a while, a lot of upheaval as people found computers and offices and so on, and in the end, they were sitting 100 yards away from where they'd been sitting before. It didn't seem to me to add a huge amount of value to the higher education team's work, to be closer to their schools colleagues. But it did mean a real loss of focus on universities as contributors towards growth in our economy. When universities were in BEIS, they were really part of our overall growth narrative: universities were 'knowledge factories', 'engines of innovation', all that sort of stuff. As soon as they went over to DfE, the civil service mindset changed altogether, and they became part of the public sector, part of the overall education machine. So I thought that was a real loss, a net loss for universities in that respect. I thought they were much better off in a growth department of government than in a classic public sector department.

TKB: Were there any more practical challenges for you when it became a joint role and you were working across two departments?

JJ: In a way it was nice, because I had even more autonomy. In the sense that when it was in BEIS, there was more of a classic minister of state–secretary of state relationship. When they were split across two departments, I could really roam around and no-one knew what I was doing, which was even better!

TKB: Would you go to the ministerial meetings in both departments?

JJ: Yes, I would.

CH: And where was your private office based?

JJ: We did a sort of European Parliament-style migration. So, Mondays and Thursdays I would be in DfE, Tuesdays and Wednesdays I would be in BEIS, and Fridays I would normally be in my constituency.

TKB: Did you have much contact with the permanent secretaries in either of those departments?

JJ: Yeah, a lot. The permanent secretary [for BEIS] changed with the arrival of Alex Chisholm [in July 2016], a very good permanent secretary too, and obviously I'd developed a very good relationship with Jonathan Slater over at DfE.

CH: What was your experience of taking through a major piece of legislation?

JJ: That was an amazing experience, and such a rare thing as a minister to do the whole journey: policy development, green paper... It was the classic journey. I was in the Number 10 Policy Unit that developed some of the policy ideas, then was able to join the department that was implementing them, and took on that responsibility of taking on the manifesto commitments, green paper November 2015, white paper, publication of the bill and then the minister in charge of taking it through the House of Commons, all the way through to Royal Assent. It was an incredible experience and I don't think many ministers have that sort of continuity of association with a policy area, and I was very lucky to have it.

It's quite an experience taking higher education legislation through the Houses of Parliament, particularly because of the Lords. The House of Commons was a walk in the park. We got the bill through its Commons stages with no trouble at all, scarcely any amendments went down, none were passed. With the Lords, though, it's a world of pain because there are so many members of the House of Lords with associations with the university sector, and they're all basically there in some capacity or other as advocates for the sector. So there were moments when it looked like we were really going to struggle to get it through the Lords, particularly as the curtain came down on that session of Parliament, with the prime minister announcing a general election. We were in the Lords at that time.

I think the lesson I learnt from that is that the really heavy engagement that we'd put in early on and throughout the bill, accepting every request for a meeting anybody ever made of us and going out of our way to engage peers at every stage in the process, paid off. Because we'd done industrial amounts of listening and consultation, and whilst they remained, many of them, exceptionally unhappy with parts of the bill, the fact was we'd listened and we'd made concessions on various things. We'd incorporated changes that some people wanted in other areas, which weren't originally in the bill, to the extent that when they were presented with an opportunity of basically timing it out, they didn't take it. Notwithstanding there were political opportunities to them of doing so. So, my advice is, if you've got a big, complicated bit of legislation, you've just got to go out of your way to make friends across the House, and to make everybody feel like they've got a stake in a bit of legislation. Otherwise, your chances of getting it through when time is running out and you're presented with only a few bills likely to make it through in a wash-up [the period before the dissolution of Parliament when any final bills can be processed], you desperately need to make sure your bill is one of them. Because I was doing it at a time when Number 10, at that point, had changed and this wasn't really a priority area for Theresa May, she had no personal interest in the bill, it didn't do anything for her. Whereas her predecessors, Cameron and Osborne, were very committed to the bill, saw it as something they really wanted to get through. But for her, she could totally take it or leave it.

TKB: Did you have a PPS when you were doing that?

JJ: Yeah.

TKB: And did you find that helpful, when you were doing a big piece of legislation?

JJ: Yes, they are helpful. I mean, it's just helping you manage colleagues, helping you to identify colleagues with particular concerns that you need to talk to, reassure on various points.

CH: Moving on to January 2018, you've said that it was quite good to be able to be in post for such a long period of time, to see a major piece of policy through to the end, which is actually quite rare for ministers these days. Would you have stayed on longer if you hadn't been moved in that January 2018 reshuffle?

JJ: Yeah, of course I would. If I hadn't been moved, I would have stayed on.

CH: But would you have been looking to the next role that you might take on?

JJ: I was quite keen to implement the legislation. Having enacted the bill, I was quite keen then to see the establishment of the Office for Students, see it get off the ground and see it start to use its powers in the ways we'd intended it to use them, to drive greater accountability and so on. As it happens, I am thrilled that my successors have carried on with the work – the Office for Students is there, Sir Michael Barber [Chair of the Office for Students] is doing the job that we wanted him to do, I wanted him to do, so I am very glad they're carrying it all on.

CH: Let's talk about that move to DfT [the Department for Transport]. How different was it as a department?

JJ: The role is obviously very, very different in terms of what you're responsible for. It's really hard to imagine how different it was. There I was back in a department with a much more classic secretary of state/minister of state arrangement, so I had less autonomy than I had as a minister of state roaming across two departments. So, yeah, it was a different role.

CH: So, your priorities were set for you by the prime minister, by the secretary of state?

JJ: The priorities were determined, to some extent, by the rolling timetable of franchise renewals in the railway system. There were X franchises, 15 from memory, of which one or two are going to be coming up for renewal at any time. So thinking about those, structuring other competitions and then dealing with periodic crises, which DfT has the knack of generating.

CH: Can you talk us through one of those? What it's like to be a minister in a crisis? How you get supported, what the role of the civil service is, what your role is...

JJ: Too painful, almost [*laughter*]. I'd barely arrived when it became clear that the whole system was about to fall over. This is the worst possible thing for a minister to realise, that you're walking into a department where the whole system was collapsing around you. And the department was well under water in terms of its ability to deal with it. So that was what I walked into. Some fairly new civil servants...

CH: New to the department?

JJ: Yeah, new to the department, at the most senior level. And then, you're dealing with quite remote systems, arm's-length bodies that are removed from the department, so you have that whole level of complication as well, in the form of Network Rail being at quite a significant remove from government. Then heavy contractual, legal minefields to navigate whenever you're trying to change anything in terms of how the private companies operating franchises do anything. So, a very, very difficult situation.

I think the lesson I learnt from that, there were many lessons, but one of the lessons I learnt was: departments are really struggling to manage arm's-length bodies that are delivering critical public-facing services. And that creates a real problem for ministers because ultimately ministers get blamed when things go wrong, for example on the railways, but we don't have, through our departments in Whitehall, the insight into what's going on in these arm's-length bodies, nor do we have really effective levers to get them to move at the speed we need them to move when a crisis hits. So that was very frustrating. Massive co-ordination problems between the department and Network Rail and in operating companies; things weren't moving at the pace the public had a right to expect.

TKB: You were also minister for London in that time. What did that role involve?

JJ: Not very much. That was really a sort of ceremonial role, I don't really know why it existed. There is a mayor of London who has all of the statutory responsibilities, the budgets, the visibility. The minister for London role, it's not at all clear to me why it exists.

TKB: Did you meet with the mayor?

JJ: Yes, periodically. Technically it was meant to be to offer a point of contact for local authorities across London and the mayor to liaise with central government. The reality is you don't need a minister for London to offer a liaison function, though I was quite happy to do it, you don't need it. The mayor of London is quite capable of talking to relevant people at the Treasury, or DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] if he needs to. He doesn't need to route through me as minister for London and the Department for Transport.

TKB: A few questions about your whole time in government. You worked with four secretaries of state: Sajid Javid, Justine Greening, Greg Clark and Chris Grayling. What do you think makes an effective secretary of state?

JJ: One who gets out of my hair, basically! And lets me get on with it. One with whom you can develop a relationship of trust, so that they know that you know what you're doing, understand where you're trying to go with your brief and let you get on with it. And you can have periodic conversations about what you're doing, but basically they just let you crack on with it because they broadly support what you're trying to do and know that you know more about it than they do and want you to get on with it.

I definitely had those relationships with Sajid Javid, Greg Clark and Justine when I was doing the science and universities beat, and that was why it was such a satisfying role because I liked my secretaries of state and they were quite confident enough, in that I knew what I was doing, and let me crack on with it.

CH: You've also worked under two prime ministers and you've talked a little bit about their interests, but what about the style of prime ministers? What did you see as the key differences, from your position, between Theresa May and David Cameron?

JJ: Well, Theresa May had a sort of phobia about universities, the origins of which were a mystery to me, I think rooted in her time in the Home Office. She saw them as a sort of hostile body. Whereas Cameron recognised that they were a great national asset and needed to be supported. There was certainly room for reform in various ways, but he saw them as a great national asset. For Theresa May, they were lobbyists who were annoying and who were working against her most important agendas on immigration, so there was a completely different approach to them, to the university system, which was a big contrast.

CH: What about the way in which Number 10 operates? Because it can change massively from prime minister to prime minister.

JJ: I think the Number 10 of David Cameron was more confident and open with departments. More willing to get into departments and engage with them and to stimulate policy ideas. I think the Number 10 of Theresa May has been much more of a black box, and I don't think it's had the self-confidence to go in and suggest interesting policy ideas. It hasn't had the bandwidth to do that. I mean, you either do Brexit or you do other policy stuff – you can't do both because there simply isn't the bandwidth to do that.

CH: You were in DfT by the time the government started to do no-deal preparations. Did that start to then take over the work of the department, and did it affect your role as well?

JJ: No, it didn't really affect my role. The no-deal preparations weren't visible to me when I was in the department. They were undertaken in the secretary of state's office, to the extent that they were, and I was not part of that.

CH: You've talked about the coalition government and the relationship with the Lib Dems. From coalition government to majority is obviously a change, but then going back to minority government, what was the impact on the way in which you worked as a minister, if any?

JJ: The obvious thing was you couldn't be certain of a parliamentary majority for anything outside of the confidence and supply agreement. That's the most fundamental shift moving from a majority government between 2015 and 2016 to thereafter when we were dependent on the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party]. Tuition fees policy, for example, became suddenly very precarious as a consequence because higher education finance was not within the confidence and supply agreement. So we suddenly realised that the path we'd set down in terms of trying to give universities a sustainable means of funding themselves, with inflation-linked tuition fees which rose 2.5% a year, was suddenly impossible because that annual increment with inflation required a vote on the floor of the House of Commons. It suddenly became impossible. So we were in a world where, unfortunately, we were back to real-terms cuts for our universities. That was one immediate consequence, because the DUP just weren't in the market for even an inflation-linked increase in tuition fees.

TKB: If we go to November last year when you resigned, why was that the moment for you?

JJ: It was the moment for me because we were starting to see the shape of the Withdrawal Agreement by that time. We'd spent whatever it was, almost two years at that point, negotiating it. We'd had the Chequers proposals from the government that July, and then over the course of the following four or five months it was becoming clear what the eventual compromise would end up looking like. And for me, that was the moment at which I felt I could no longer suspend disbelief that we were going to end up with a withdrawal agreement and future relationship that reflected the aspirations of those who'd voted for Brexit back in June 2016. It seemed that we were going to end up with a deal that was the worst of all worlds, that would leave us rule-takers in huge swathes of our economy and leave us less in control than we were as equal participants in the decision-making structures of the European Union. So, it seemed to me that we were heading for something of a pointless Brexit that would impose real costs on important parts of our economy, particularly our services sector which was going to see very significantly reduced access to the single market. So, for

me, we were, through her deal, going to get a double whammy. Not only were we going to be less in control than we were before, but we were going to be poorer as well. That added up, to me, like a completely pointless exercise, and that was why I resigned and why I opposed the Withdrawal Agreement.

TKB: Your piece in the *Financial Times* suggested you decided not to tell anyone in your team that you were going to resign. Could you explain a bit more about why you thought that was the right approach?

JJ: Who would I tell in my team? It's obviously quite sensitive information, you wouldn't go around telling large groups of people you're going to resign, you just have to get on and do it.

CH: I think you said something to the effect that somebody you worked with only found out when everybody else did.

JJ: No, my policy adviser, a very bright woman. But I didn't tell anybody, I just wrote my resignation piece and resigned. Because you can't tell people when you're about to resign, you've just got to go on and do it.

TKB: What achievement are you most proud of from your whole time in government?

JJ: I am proud of lots of things. I am proud of the 2015 manifesto that won us, or helped to win us, the first majority in almost a quarter of a century. It was a coherent programme of socially liberal, fiscally conservative policies that enabled the Conservative Party to reach out beyond a core base of supporters. David Cameron deserved that majority and it was a shame we lost it in 2017. So that's one thing I am very proud of.

The other thing I am very proud of is the Higher Education and Research Act and all the work that went into that across two departments. I hope it leads to a stronger university sector and science base as a result.

TKB: What would your advice be to a new minister on how to be effective in office?

JJ: You've got to genuinely love the brief. If you don't love the brief and if you're not absolutely passionate about it, these jobs can be very painful because they're enormously challenging, and if you're not passionate about it, genuinely passionate, it's very hard to do. You've got to be able to throw yourself whole heartedly into it, there's no point at all in just taking a job for the title because the satisfaction of having a title wears off pretty rapidly and you've got to be genuinely interested in the issues to make it worthwhile.

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