INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Ministers reflect

John Penrose

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John Penrose – biographical details

Electoral History

2005-present: Member of Parliament for Weston-super-Mare

Parliamentary Career

2015-2016: Parliamentary Secretary (Minister for Constitutional Reform, Cabinet Office)

2013-2014: Lord Commissioner (HM Treasury) (Whip)

2010-2012: Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department for Culture, Media and Sport; Heritage and Tourism)

2009: Shadow Minister (Business, Innovation and Skills)

John Penrose was interviewed by Ines Stelk and Nicola Hughes on 18th October 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Let me start in 2010, when you came into DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport], which I think was your first ministerial role. Could you talk us through what that experience of coming into government straight after the election was like?

John Penrose (JP): It was a little different for me than for others, because a lot of ministers had shadowed the role that they were then promoted into, in opposition. Because we formed a coalition, some of us didn't go into the role we had been shadowing. I was the only one in the DCMS team who hadn't been shadowing the role for several years beforehand. So I was on a fairly steep learning curve.

What did I find? I found that the private office and the tourism and heritage teams I was dealing with were very helpful. If I asked for endless briefs to understand what the issues were, they were happy to provide them, and they did so pretty well. I don't think there was anything which I found which was either inaccurate or missing the point. It was good quality stuff. Inevitably, the only drawback was, that it was quite high level, because I was brand new into a role and we had to go through several layers in some cases in order to get there.

What else did I find? That the officials were good at providing enough information to make sure that someone like myself who had been shadowing a different role could deal with the parliamentary process, and with being on the other side of the Chamber, answering questions rather than asking them. That was all fine. I could trust them and they weren't going to steer me wrong. There were a couple of things where I ended up disagreeing with the advice and we ended up going down a different path, but they were fine with that. The interesting thing was that I wasn't sure – in retrospect – that they had necessarily pushed back hard enough in every case. That's a personal style thing in that I prefer people who will speak truth to power and if I can't then win the argument then that's my problem, rather than with them having had the bravery to make the point to me. And actually, I would venture that most ministers worth their salt would prefer it that way round, because it helps them spot the flaws in the argument and some of the lines of attack. It won't be all the lines of attack, because some will not be based on logic, they will be based on other factors as well – but it is undoubtedly helpful.

NH: Did that change over time as they got to know you?

JP: Yes, and I am not sure how much of that is then getting to know me and me needing it a bit less. As your instincts are honed in each role they ought to be right more often. You never stop needing it entirely, so you always will require it at some level. But I think things settled down after a period of time. I took a couple of decisions which – thank god – turned out to be right later on, but I don't think I realised quite how brave I was being on one or two occasions! [laughter] Good and lucky, I guess! So it is always helpful to have them saying 'Look, you need someone to play devil's advocate'. And then that should tell the minister that this isn't internal resistance, this is people trying to make sure that the thing is as bulletproof as it can be.

NH: So you had to learn up the policy brief, because you hadn't shadowed it. Was there anything about the role itself – about the Civil Service, about how government worked, about being a minister that was a surprise to you or that was a learning curve?

JP: Well, my background was in general management in business, so I was relatively used to taking executive decisions fast and clearly. So that bit was pretty familiar. The bits which surprised me were, having been a general manager with profit and loss responsibility, I was not being allowed to manage my team as a team – that felt weird. It means quite a lot of the techniques you should be using either can't be used or are much less powerful and effective than they would be in other organisations. Now, I appreciate why that's the case, because you will get some ministers who couldn't organise their way out of a paper bag or may be sociopathic and therefore you have to have a system which is robust no matter what kind of minister you get. But it's weird and it requires some adjustment, for someone with my background. People with other kinds of background who were from, I don't know, something like

journalism, where you don't often have to lead a team unless you're part of the management team, will probably find that much less of a change.

The other bit which is just permanently strange, and again, I think is hard for people from a business background – and this may be tougher for people who've got a wealth-creating background to appreciate that business is very complex, but the objective functions are relatively clear-cut. They are simpler than in politics, which is a different cast of mind. When you go into an executive role as a minister, it's tempting to go back to old techniques, some of which are really valuable and equip you better to be a minister, but you need to be aware that there are limits to their applicability**.**

NH: OK, and so you had the heritage and tourism brief.

JP: Yes, and gambling and horse racing too. And the National Lottery, it was great fun! [laughter]

NH: How did you determine what your big policy priorities were?

JP: There were a couple which happened to me and a couple which I was able to choose myself. The manifesto was relatively light in my area, so there wasn't a huge acquis of policy that I was duty- and honour-bound to inherit and do. The field of tourism was relatively open. And since I represent a tourism seaside resort as my constituency as well, that was great news. It's an important industry and it's one which up until then felt comparatively unloved and under-represented. So (a) it was something that I was interested in but (b) there was a political imperative to raise its profile, to show that it was being properly appreciated for an industry of its size. And also for its soon to be higher profile, because with the Olympics and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee – and we didn't know it at the time, but a royal wedding on the horizon as well – that was clearly going to make tourism much more important than it had been in the past. So, that was a clear decision that I was going to max on that, to come up with a new tourism policy and to get buy-in from the industry. I managed to get both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to write two forewords to it, because they were both excited by it and the industry appreciated it, which meant we were able to use the springboard of 2012 effectively. I should also say that Jeremy Hunt [then Culture Secretary] got it and was happy to help and be supportive and that was invaluable. So that was a deliberate and early decision.

On some of the other areas… I took a decision to go for a change in the regulatory approach for gambling, to base it on place of consumption, rather than place of origin. And that was again an individual decision, a deliberate decision rather than something that was thrust upon me. But that was because the current situation wasn't working and was not future-proofed. The law had been written in the very early days of online gambling and we could have ignored it, but it wouldn't have done the industry any good, so we decided to go ahead. It was never going to score any huge points, but it was necessary. So I took that decision quite early too.

Most of the other stuff were things that were being called for by other industries. So we did a triennial review of stakes and prizes, for example, in the gambling industry. And the clue is in the name, it's supposed to happen every three years. It hadn't happened for at least six and they wanted one. So you get external pressure although they still required a decision that we would do it at a particular point in time. So there are chunks of stuff coming in from external stakeholders, including a vast amount of the lobbying. Some of the representations you get are pretty transparently self-serving. If you can't spot that the person concerned has a massive axe to grind, then you shouldn't be a minister in the first place. And quite a lot of the time is finding nice ways to explain to them that you spotted them and the answer is a very polite 'No'. Finding a good way to say 'No', is a key skill.

NH: Yes, the sort of 'Sorry, urgent things in the House' excuse!

JP: Yeah! Although I was finding ways to actually argue the case why it was a bad idea, as opposed to just dodging the question!

NH: After DCMS you had a couple of years as whip and then came into a different sort of job, I suspect, in Cabinet Office, on constitutional issues.

JP: Yes. To skip lightly over the whip role, it is actually a great deal less shadowy than everyone assumes. But suffice to say the job of a whip is harder now than it used to be, because there is much less patronage. And therefore you actually have to do something terribly difficult called 'persuading people with the power of argument' much more than before. But that's an entirely separate thing.

NH: So talk us through the Cabinet Office role and how, again, you got your head around this new policy brief and established your priorities there.

JP: There was more of a policy outline which needed to be delivered, but there were still some things about which there was flexibility. So, for example, things to do with rather poor rates of voter registration, I was the one who went to Oliver Letwin [then Minister for Policy] and said 'Look, I think there are things we can do here to drive that up. I think as democrats we should and I don't think it's going to cost the government a very large amount of money, providing we just do what we are doing differently.' And he was happy to go along with that and basically let me get on with it, providing it didn't fall over and cause him grief. So, that was again a clear decision, but I thought there was an opportunity there to forge a cross-party consensus. That turned out to be harder than I had hoped, because there is quite a large degree of mistrust over voter registration, because the Labour party thinks that low rates of registration benefit the Conservatives. It took a while to persuade them that I was actually quite genuine about this and that I wanted to do something about it. I think I probably got there after about 12 months but then I got reshuffled, so it didn't really count, but we managed to lay the foundations of a project which as far as I can see, is still being carried on. It wasn't helped either by the fact that it happened at the same time as the start of a boundary review, which again is always likely to create suspicions. The natural assumption is that whoever is in government will grab all sorts of opportunities to do nefarious things. Even though the Boundary Commission is at arms-length, and would shriek loudly if any serving minister tried to interfere, nonetheless suspicions persist. So establishing trust turned out to be a slower business, although I had reasonably good relations across the House.

There were some other things which I had to do, which were handed to me because they were part of the manifesto. So I was half the team on the EU Referendum Bill, now the EU Referendum Act, required to set up the referendum. There were a series of other things which we were developing: one on overseas voters, getting rid of the 15 Year Rule, which when I left was ready to roll, and we've had since a government announcement that they're going to produce it. There's some other stuff which had nothing to do with my official role, but because Oliver [Letwin] needed bandwidth he asked me to lead on combining the Local Government Ombudsman with the Parliamentary Ombudsman.

NH: And did it feel different? Because the Cabinet Office is a central, quite cross-cutting kind of department. Did that feel quite different then as a ministerial role to being out in a more standard department like DCMS?

JP: A bit. Not as much as you might think, because quite a lot of the operational stuff in DCMS is done through arms-length bodies [ALBs]. So the operational stuff in DCMS was more to do with things like campaigns. For example, Jeremy [Hunt] and I were instrumental in putting together the 'GREAT' campaign, which is still running today. That had quite a big budget and there was working out the creative content and approach and then how it was going to be applied to tourism, which at the start was the major focus of the campaign - it has since broadened out and applied to other things too. So that was reasonably operational. But it wasn't massively more operational than Cabinet Office, if only because we were spending some money in Cabinet Office on voter registration drives and those sort of things. And in both cases - again this is the difference between that and business – you are a slightly distant senior manager getting reports on what's happened and shaping what's going to happen. But actually going out there with the teams and leading them, getting your hands dirty is much, much harder as a minister. So it's much more like being a board director in a PLC then it is an operational team leader. Even in what's supposedly an operational department. They are both much closer to that latter role.

NH: Just two questions on the back of that, so comparisons between the business sector and the ministerial role are really interesting. I mean how would you summarise what are the main roles and duties of a minister?

JP: Well, there is a leadership of your chunk or of the entire department depending on what level of minister you are. That's the bit which is weird because it's only half a leadership role compared to many other sectors outside politics. It does not mean to say you mustn't lead, just you've got fewer tools at your disposal and you've got to bang those particular drums harder to make them work. Beyond that, the remaining parts of the job of a minister are much closer to being a CEO of a public company, because you need to manage external stakeholders in a way which most other business people don't have to do. You have the equivalent of not just your non-executive directors and the shareholders and the press all on your case, but there is an equivalent of an annual general meeting every week, with people out there to not just to potentially steal your customers as competitors but also to actually do you down, in a way which is rarer and a great deal more subtle in business. So that's quite different and your job is to anticipate and blunt, deflect or otherwise overcome those external diversions without losing track of the central purpose of whatever your priorities are.

If you let these other things distract you, they can slow you down, they can divert you and you've got to carry on battling against whatever storms may come. So there are stiffer head winds and side winds as a minister. But the job is still the same, which is to make sure you're leading an organisation to deliver on whatever the current priorities are. And also, as I said at the start, the chosen priorities can be a great deal more diffuse and more diverse than you'll find in businesses, because the objective function in politics is not always to maximise after-tax profit or shareholder value. It's a great deal more complicated.

NH: And just the other thing you mentioned was arms-length bodies, what's that like as a minister when you've got bodies that are charged with delivering operational stuff in the department, but you don't have direct control over them? How do you make that relationship work?

JP: Well, it depends on what kind of minister you are. I am somebody who believes that politicians as often subtract value when they decide to helpfully intervene as add it. If you have got good people running an arms-length body then what they will thank you for is clear parameters, clear accountability and not meddling in the day-to-day. The more you do that latter thing, the harder it is for them to do what you hired them to do. You've got to spot when you think there's going to be a problem well in advance and tell them about it, so they can head it off: you define outcomes rather than process. If you do it that way, well in advance, you can get the best out of people. And if you've got good talented people running these organisations, you're mad if you don't give them space, because they will know more about running museums or the Arts Council or the lottery regulator than you do.

It's different though, when you have somebody who you have less confidence in, because you can't let them get on with it, secure in the knowledge that they're going to succeed brilliantly and the government will look good as a result. At that point, it depends on the governance of the arms-length body as to how you deal with that and it may be that the governance isn't terribly good, whereupon you may need to change that governance too, but that's a longer term process. But if you start to get to the weeds of how something is run, that is probably usually a really bad sign, both for you as a minister and for the organisation that you are dealing with.

Ines Stelk (IS): OK. Great, if we then move onto the day-to-day reality of being a minister. So we're quite interested in how you spend your time, considering the different demands on you – parliamentary demands, departmental departments, or the media. How do you deal with handling all those different demands on your time?

JP: That bit I found quite straightforward, because if you are a competent general manager in running any kind of organisation, or indeed if you are managing your time as a backbench MP, there are a thousand things you could do every day and only three or four of them are going to move the dial. So you have to choose what those three or four are and put the other 997 to one side. Being a minister is no different. What I found most important was to have a concentrated burst at the start of the day when I was just making sure I was up to date with the press, to make sure there wasn't some incoming flak that needed to be dealt with. If there was, that could derail the next period of time while we dealt with it.

But if there wasn't then you can move onto other stuff. I, because I have a young family, tend not to like to take boxes home with me. So I said I will have an in-tray rather than a box. So I would do in-tray and

process stuff reasonably quickly. And one of the things which is in the job description of every minister – or should be – is to make clear decisions fast and then stick with them and protect your staff even if they run into trouble. That way, you earn their loyalty. So dealing with the in-tray would happen at whatever stage in the day we engineered a gap in the diary. I didn't mind when it happened, but I said it's got to be there. It also was advantageous because it meant that if there were questions, I could get the person who had written the brief in my room quickly, just to say 'Hang on, I don't understand that', or 'Why are you saying that?' or 'That number looks flaky'.

I would also hold weekly update meetings with the teams who are running the projects I had kicked off. I would try and keep those as short as possible. They would usually be done by exception. I would have a straightforward report each week that says 'What are we supposed to have achieved in the last week, what have we got to do in the next week, what has slipped, what has been done, did it work, are we happy with it, are we ready for the stuff that's coming up next week, what are the problems?' Quite a lot of the time, those meetings could be very, very short indeed. Because they would say 'Yeah it's all fine,' or 'We have got a problem and it is three weeks hence, because we've got someone going on leave and we haven't got cover. We need you to help us bidding for a bit of temporary resource to make sure that progress remains on track.' But those meetings could be quite short and what tended to happen then, quite a lot of the time, was that if they needed a ministerial steer on a particular point of policy, we would often morph into that. Because I like policy, that's always a temptation so I had to be rigorous that we'd finished the operational stuff first and was all tied down and nailed to the deck before we moved onto anything else. It meant if there were problems which needed to be dealt with, then we dealt with them first and foremost and the other stuff which is less time critical, could come back into my in-tray for the following day or that afternoon or whatever it might be.

IS: Great and on that, were there any kind of other structures that you found helpful, your private office – how useful did you find them in terms of managing your diary?

JP: Oh, fine. I have never had a private office which has worried me in that way. I tend to say, 'Look I want to see everything that people are asking for my time and you can put up to me the recommendation as to whether we should accept it or not, but I will decide we're going to do it and then it's up to you to slot it in, I'll tell you if it is urgent or not.' They were good at doing that. It seems to take an inordinate amount of time for my diary person to set the meetings up. I don't know if that is a function of the software or the complexity of the Civil Service. It seems to take twice as long to set up the meeting with the Civil Service, no matter how high the quality of the diary manager might be, than you would find in most other walks of life!

IS: And another thing we're interested in is how you deal with crises and unexpected things that come up?

JP: Do those happen? [laughter] Yeah. So I gave an example earlier on, if there is something that happens in the day's press you've got to respond. The most difficult piece of judgement in my experience, is naming it in the first place and saying 'OK, this is actually quite serious.' Or it's more serious that we were expecting or we wanted it to be, it's not in our plan for the day but it is important enough to merit tearing up the next four meetings because we've got to fix this now. The temptation is always to keep the machine running along, because that's what the inertia and momentum does. Saying 'No, we've got to fix this now' or alternatively 'I need an answer to this problem, which looks like this - I don't know what the answer is, but I need clever people in this department to go away and work it out and I need them back here with their best version of it, in about an hour and half's time and we need to work out whether or not that's good enough.' Yeah, so making that call promptly rather than letting the machine run. Because on occasions they will not realise that a problem has more political ramifications and is worse than they thought. But providing you give them outcomes you need to achieve and a timescale, they will then come back with – usually, in my experience – a good starting point and some good suggestions, which you can then work on and mould and shape.

IS: In relation to that, what came through in some of our interviews was that it can be quite difficult for government to learn from experience. So you might face a problem and then five years down the line you might face it again, but the people who have built that expertise in dealing with it might have left – do you have any more general reflection on

how government might learn more from past crises or things that might have gone wrong or particularly well?

JP: Only a couple of quite superficial ones. Firstly, I think that Cameron was better than most prime ministers in that he didn't reshuffle people terribly often. So people had on average, longer in post. However, I think he was still the one eyed man in the land of the blind. I think he managed to get the average length of time in a particular position up to two years or maybe two and half. That's still too short. From a ministerial point of view, if you're going to carry something through, if you're quick and you're effective you may make decisions in the first three months or maybe in the first six if it's a really complicated problem. If you're not quick and not decisive, then it will take you twice as long. And then it will take, if it's a big project at least a year and possibly three or four years to complete. If you get reshuffled, the chances for a change of direction, which will be not necessarily helpful, are very high. There are plenty of stakeholders both within the government and outside it, in whose interest it is not to present a new minister with the thing that they don't want to carry on. So there's always a danger difficult projects won't get picked up by your successor unless they've got the wit to come and ask you what it was that you think needs to be done. That creates changes of direction, sometimes without even the incoming minister realising it or understanding all the reasons why you were doing what you were doing after you've been in place for two years. So ministerially, I'm afraid politicians are their own worst enemies on this stuff. We are poor at that, but Cameron was better than most.

Beyond that, I don't know enough, I'm afraid about how the professional civil servants instil institutional memory and institutional learning. They are good on process, but I don't know how they do the equivalent for knowledge and skills. So you're asking the wrong person on that one.

IS: You've talked us through a range of things that you've done at DCMS and the Cabinet Office – what would you consider your greatest achievement in office?

JP: Blimey! There are a couple of things which I think will end up being durable. We took the decision to split English Heritage into a regulator and a property portfolio. That was a decision I took and was carried on and finalised and finally delivered by Ed Vaizey, my successor. And that will mean that we have effectively a second National Trust. That, I think, will outlast both Ed and I. It will turn out to be quite big, I think, even if the short term political impact was not enormous.

Switching the gambling regulation to the point of consumption sounds horribly techy, but it will probably mean that more people in this country will be safer from gambling addiction than they would otherwise have been. I doubt anyone will notice, but I think that's important. The project which I kicked off for voter registration, providing it's carried on, has got a very good chance of driving up rates of voter registration – and therefore the health of our democracy – up quite dramatically over the course of the next five to ten years. But the jury is out on that.

IS: And then moving onto how you go about making policy decisions and the kind of information that you use and evidence that might feed into it. You've touched on working with lobby groups…

JP: Sometimes lobby groups can be really helpful. The art of being a minister is to spot where they've really got a point, alongside the other stuff where they're being utterly self-serving. Being able to pick your way through that particular minefield is a crucial skill.

IS: Yeah. Do you have any examples of where that was quite useful, having that outside influence?

JP: Blimey, there's quite a lot of examples, take gambling. Gambling is a difficult issue, because it's an area which some people have strong moral objections to. It has, I think in this country, a relatively unmerited reputation for being slightly seedy. But that's mainly because people watch films about America and mob gambling and that sort of stuff from the 1930s! Actually in Britain, we're blessed with it being a rather more clean and professionally run industry. But you get some very strong and carefully thought through lobbying from very large gambling organisations, and from horse racing which depends on the levy. And from religious or medical organisations with concerns about gambling too. Some of those points that they were raising with me were absolutely valid. But quite a lot of it didn't stand up. You need to maintain balance between the competing interests too. Not only from the point of view of

your own personal morality, but also from the point of view of being seen to be above reproach and equally accessible. The simple question to ask yourself is 'Who is going to benefit from this piece of seemingly reasonable advice that someone is suggesting to me?' And if it is not the person who is offering this piece of advice, it might actually be worth listening to. If it is the person who is in front of me, there's a possibility that it's still worth listening to nonetheless, but tread with caution.

IS: Did you have any frustrations as a minister?

JP: Dozens! [laughter] Of course, yeah. What sort of frustrations do you get? You get frustrations because you need to slot in with the Number 10 grid and that means that stuff you think is important, from the point of view of a government as a whole, is not. Or it is important, but not urgent and therefore it gets postponed. It's frustrating but it's like complaining about the weather – it doesn't stop it raining. So you just live with that.

But are the frustrations any different from those working in any other large organisation? No, I don't think they are very much. You get just as many people behaving in just as good or bad a way. It's just that it is a slightly different environment and the opportunities for bad behaviour in public are greater in politics. But I don't think it's any different from working in a large corporation for example.

NH: So I want to focus a bit on the 2015-16 period. So there was one very obvious difference in your job, which was that you weren't at that point in coalition. Did that make a difference to you as a minister?

JP: In my case, no. But that was because when I was at DCMS, we didn't have a Lib Dem minister in the department. Now that was unusual. I observed other departments having to change the way they worked quite dramatically and it made things, in some cases quite dysfunctional. And you had these sub-ministerial meetings, depending on people's party affiliation, which is never good for coordination. That wasn't a problem at DCMS and it clearly wasn't a problem at Cabinet Office either. So, no that didn't really make a difference.

The thing that makes the biggest difference is the personal style of your secretary of state. In my case, I happened to get on with both, although they were both very different. But you hear of other departments where the secretary of state is much, much more difficult. Because ministerial teams are thrown together, often without a huge amount of consultation amongst the people concerned. They don't always make it work. And that rapidly becomes very, very difficult indeed. I haven't been in a very difficult department like that, thank goodness!

NH: But you think that was more just a case of luck?

JP: Yes, entirely. Jeremy Hunt and Oliver Letwin were both delightful to work for, both very different characters, very different ways of running their departments, but it was fine.

NH: Obviously the other big thing happening in 2015-16 was the referendum and the run up to that. Did that affect the way you worked as a minister?

JP: Not hugely. This is partly because in Cabinet Office I was responsible for delivering half of the referendum bill, I had to work with David Liddington [Foreign Office minister] and between the two of us come up with something that was going to be acceptable, to make sure we could actually get the thing through Parliament. That meant we had to square people who were potentially rebels and could endanger the majority, and Number 10 as well. So that was a complicated piece of legislation, where David Liddington and I had to be seen to be trying to create a level playing field for the poll. There were plenty of people who were hugely concerned and potentially distrustful on both sides so we had to make sure they weren't being unfairly disadvantaged.

When it got to the referendum campaign itself, the entire government went into Purdah, which meant that quite a lot of what was happening in Parliament was at a very slow heartbeat. Parliament and Government kind of slowed down. I ended up doing some stuff which had nothing whatsoever to do with the referendum but needed to get done, because no matter what, we thought we would need to have it

ready for the weeks afterwards. So I mentioned the overseas voters for example: that needed to be ready to go after we got back. But Parliament was in semi-hibernation for six, eight weeks.

NH: And thinking back to pre-referendum, did you have much contact with the EU in your ministerial roles?

JP: Not really. No. I had a couple of conversations with people in the EU about tourism, because they had a very statist view about what tourism and tourism promotion should be and I didn't. So we had to agree to disagree. That was all, mildly frustrating for me and for them, I suspect. I did a little bit on gambling, because we are a regulated free market in gambling, but most other countries in Europe at the time were state-run monopolies. Some of them were considering switching and were looking at our example and going 'Oh, does that work?' So there was a bit of discussion and conversation about that sort of stuff. I was very interested, because if they were to liberalise, British bookmakers would be very well placed to expand overseas. But beyond that, no, I didn't have to go to endless Fisheries Councils for which Lord, many thanks!

NH: Thinking back over all of that, are there any key pieces of advice that you would give to a new minister?

JP: It depends on your background. If you've done senior management roles leading medium to large-sized teams, some parts of the role will feel really familiar for you. You will be better equipped to make good decisions and get the data that you need than somebody who has never done that before. However, there will be parts of it which you will feel like you are fighting with one hand tied behind your back. You just need to be prepared for that and to accept it, because unless you are the Minister for the Civil Service, you aren't going to be able to change it! And therefore you need to work out how you're going to lead a team when you can't do a lot of the HR stuff, which you would be used to doing elsewhere.

Equally, you need to be good at working in a different kind of team from teams outside. Political teams are usually made up of people who aren't natural team players. They work well up to a point, but you need to be aware that just sometimes someone will behave egregiously badly and trust is something which is hard to acquire. You will know who you can trust and you will know who you can't. The Civil Service will usually be on your side, if you show them that you're on theirs. Just be aware that time is on their side. If they wish you weren't doing something, the temptation for them to play it long will be quite high, if they don't want it to happen, on the grounds that the chances are that the ministerial half-life means you may have gone before it is finished, whereupon they have got a chance to not do it. So bear that in mind and move briskly, once you've decided to do something.

The one weakness I found in Civil Service advice is: it tends not to have many numbers in it. Once they know you want numbers, they will start to include them. But if you don't ask for the numbers, then you will only get what historians call secondary sources, rather than the primary stuff. Also holding people to a timetable and asking them how you can make sure they have the equipment they need to adhere to it, is absolutely essential. Because otherwise you won't know that things have slowed down or gone wrong until it is too late.

If you are very concerned about a legacy, bear in mind that big operational programmes won't necessarily provide one, because anything you do can be unpicked and most operational things – rightly – need to be flexible because the world changes. Therefore, you may set up something which is brilliant, but don't kid yourself that your grandchildren are going to be able to admire it. If you really want to leave a legacy, it may be a much, much smaller scale thing with a much, much smaller budget and probably needs to be institutional, rather than a socking great big spending splurge. That doesn't mean to say that the operational stuff isn't really important, because it really, really is. But when you asked me about the stuff that I think is a legacy, I ended up choosing quite small stuff. Not the things I did for tourism, even though the tourism industry really liked it and still talk about it now. But that will rightly not be around in 20 years' time, because the tourism industry ought to be a lot different. And you just need to understand that as a minister and therefore not be obsessed by creating legacy on operational stuff. You just need to make sure that you're moving the ball far enough down the pitch towards the try line rather than obsessing about the legacy in that respect.

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