

Ministers Reflect Johnny Mercer



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Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2015 – present: Conservative MP for Plymouth, Moor View

Government career

2019–21: Parliamentary under secretary of state for defence people and veterans

Johnny Mercer was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Jack Pannell on 24 November 2021 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Johnny Mercer discusses his work on veterans' issues and his experience trying to pass legislation in parliament. He also discusses working with Boris Johnson and the tensions he witnessed between ministers and civil servants.

Tim Durrant (TD): Let's start then by thinking back to the leadership campaign in summer 2019, just before you went into government. Did you have any conversations with Boris Johnson about joining the government and what your role would entail before he became prime minister?

Johnny Mercer (JM): I think it would be fair to say the country was in a pretty unique place at that time, around this Brexit issue – which I had never particularly had strong feelings on. But it was clear to me that the prime minister of the United Kingdom was going to change, and I obviously came to parliament with an agenda around veterans and the military, so I had to then think about what was the best and most effective way I could achieve that change under the next prime minister. It became pretty clear that, for example, Theresa May was not going to address the unfairness and inequalities veterans faced, or the issues surrounding legacy in Northern Ireland.

I essentially had to identify who was going to be the next prime minister, and it was pretty clear to me that that was going to be Boris Johnson. And I was reasonably good friends with him at that stage anyway, but I then thought: how am I going to get him to actually deliver on stuff for veterans, other than just kind of saying nice things during the leadership campaign? And so I spoke to friends in the military, charities – leading charities – and to *The Sun* newspaper, and we came up with this idea of a Veterans' Pledge that we would get each candidate to sign in the paper. Because we know that politicians are very good at saying one thing and doing another, so we would get them to actually sign it, photograph them signing it, and put it in the newspaper so whoever became PM couldn't get out of it.

And we thought, right, there are three things – three very broad things – that we as a veteran community would like to see. The first thing was getting the Armed Forces Covenant enshrined into law. The second was the establishment of a proper Office for Veterans' Affairs, with a dedicated minister at cabinet-level rank, who sat in the cabinet every week. And the third was an end to the vexatious pursuit of those who served in the military in Northern Ireland. Those three things. So fairly broad brush, pretty easy to commit to stuff.

And, in the end, both candidates signed up to it: Jeremy Hunt and Boris Johnson. And yeah, I make no bones about it, I was very keen for Boris to sign that, and I advised him

he should sign it, and I campaigned in public for him to sign it. So, yes, I did do that preparatory work.

Was that on the offer of being employed in his government? Absolutely not, no. And that conversation never happened, and it would have been inappropriate – and to be fair he never raised it either. For me, it was always about the issue. And that’s what drove my actions.

TD: So when you were appointed, what was the conversation? Was it the prime minister who appointed you? Did you speak to him about the ministerial role?

JM: Yes, the prime minister appointed me. But unfortunately, on appointment, he said to me that the Veterans’ Pledge was, quote, “a ruse from me and Tom Newton Dunn [a journalist, then working at *The Sun*]”. A ruse to what I wasn’t quite sure. I told him I found this fairly offensive. And he wanted me to serve as the Minister for Defence People and Veterans but in its old calling, as just a sort of junior minister job in the MoD [Ministry of Defence], bolted on to the MoD. At that point, I said I wasn’t prepared to be in his government on that premise. I said that he either had to go away and read the Veterans’ Pledge and come back committed to fulfilling it, or unfortunately I wasn’t going to be able to serve in his government.

We had a fairly long conversation and we both got quite cross with each other, I’m not quite sure why. I think he didn’t like me being firm. But I’m afraid I just kept saying to him, “Look, I’m just playing you with a straight bat – give the job to someone else. You committed to this, I will not let you off.” I reminded him that veterans previously had David Cameron commit to putting the Armed Forces Covenant into law when he was trying to become prime minister, and he went back on that, and I said I wasn’t going to let him [Johnson] do the same thing.

TD: And so you did then become the minister for defence people and veterans...

JM: Well, what then happened was I had this chap called Rob Oxley [then the Downing Street press secretary] phone me up and say, “Right, what is the Veterans’ Pledge?”, which obviously was quite disheartening. And he then phoned me back and said, “What we’ll do is, we’ll enshrine the Armed Forces Covenant, we’ll end the pursuit of people in Northern Ireland, and we will establish an Office for Veterans’ Affairs but it will be represented by the Cabinet Office and it has to be a bolt-on.

Boris phoned me back: “That’s not going to work”. The Veterans’ Pledge was well-thought through, limited in its ask and would have genuinely made doing it worthwhile – both for the nation and for veterans. I made it clear that that wasn’t going to work and that it might not be worth doing it if that was the limit of the PM’s ambition. I then had to think quickly about whether I would be achieving what I wanted to and, well, two thirds of it I would, basically. And should I, because I didn’t get everything I wanted, do I turn it off

and walk away? And, in the end, I said to him that I would give it a go. And so I joined the government. In hindsight this was a mistake, and I've learned from it. Politics is about compromise, but not always.

TD: And you went into parliament, and then into government, with a clear set of objectives, wanting to increase support for veterans. Was that helpful – as a guiding light, as a structure for your work as a minister – when you took on the job?

JM: It was very helpful. So, essentially, I was a minister in the Cabinet Office and a minister in the MoD. If we go for the minister in the MoD role, what was interesting was that we had a meeting after about three months, and all the senior civil servants were in and they asked, "What's it like to be a new minister in the department?" I said, "I'll be honest; you're basically configured to have really poor ministers. You filter out all the options – you give me so little choice in the decisions because you've basically made political judgements as to what you think is suitable before it reaches my desk. So, essentially, a monkey could do this job."

And it was gently explained to me that they'd had a parade of ministers through the MoD over the last three to five years, who hadn't been either particularly capable or interested in the brief – save a couple of people like Mark Lancaster [now Baron Lancaster of Kimbolton, served as a minister at MoD 2015–19], who were clearly very good. And they claimed that was their norm. I said, "I'm not going to pretend I know everything but there are certain areas where I have a lot of experience and knowledge and background and I want to deliver change in those areas, primarily for the veteran community, but also on behalf of the prime minister and the government" – and that we were going to see those changes through.

A good example of the pushback came with the Overseas Operations Act [2021]. In the first meeting I had on that, the senior civil servants in the department said, "This is never going to happen. This is just never going to happen." I remember it very clearly. I think they'd misunderstood what I was trying to do, because we were never trying to put UK troops outside the law. What I was trying to do is stop the mass commercialisation of human rights claims that had basically become an industry aided and abetted by the MoD paying out to these people. But they didn't really understand that; I suppose they wouldn't, having paid out all that money to the likes of Phil Shiner [a former human rights lawyer].

Jack Pannell (JP): So you'd spent 12 years in the army and did three tours of Afghanistan before making the decision to become an MP. You've spoken a bit about how your experience in the army, and the aftermath of that, drove you to become an MP. But I was wondering, were there any specific ways that your experience in the army helped inform the way you acted, and the way you got things done, as an MP and in particular as a minister?

JM: Yeah, absolutely, because it teaches you how to be with people: how to shift from briefing the prime minister on a complex issue to dealing with soldiers at the lowest level; how important it is to be essentially decent to everybody. On leadership, it taught me to bring people with you on a journey of transformative change, rather than just going into the department of bright, capable people, dictate what you want to see, and expecting everyone to run around. It's basic leadership really.

Do you know, the biggest thing that helped me out from the army going into being a minister is, if you had talked to officials the way I've seen some ministers talk to officials, if you'd have talked to people like that in the army, you would have got punched in the mouth. I would always leave my door open so people could come by, pop their head in, have two minutes, 'normalise' the minister's office.

There are two things I did that I don't think had been done before. I used to go around a different floor-plate every Friday and just say hello to everybody. And the other thing was, I would have groups of the most junior soldiers and civil servants in for lunch on a Tuesday, just to find out what was going on. And I was always surprised to hear – and see, actually, with my own eyes – how the junior echelons were treated – less so in the army, but definitely in the civil service.

You know, I'd have someone aged 28 come in and tell me they were the equivalent grade of a brigadier in the military, and I would think to myself, no, you're not, there is quite a big difference between being quite a senior military rank who has commanded men and women etc. and being at your level in the civil service, and it shows in how you treat people. So I resolved that if we took the chips off of all of our shoulders and just worked together as a team, things would probably be a bit easier. I called everyone by their first name and insisted they call me by my first name too. However, I was also aware then that some people didn't like that – fair enough, but this wasn't the military.

JP: The MoD has this mix of career civil servants and military personnel. How did you find managing those two slightly different types of relationships as a minister?

JM: I think that... I mean, I did address both... you know, ultimately with... primarily with respect, and that was my kind of overriding thing. Like, I always felt, particularly when I was in command in the military, that if you treated people with respect, it would often come back to you. So spending time... like, I always used to have a bit of banter with the cleaners and the people who made you coffee in the morning. Personally, I thought it was

ridiculous that there are literally people employed to go and make ministers coffee in the department, but I would then keep them in the office for five minutes, ask them about their family, have a laugh about how long they'd worked there and stuff. And to be honest, it would be exactly the same with any junior rank so there wasn't a difference between the civil service and the uniformed lot. I think... yeah, no, I never found any friction in that space, to be honest, I found that it could be managed quite easily. And I, as a minister with a military background, sat in the middle, so I wasn't really on anybody's team. I just tried to be a fair broker in everything we were doing.

JP: You've spoken before about the way that charities often fill in for the role of the government in veterans' affairs. Did you have much of a relationship with external campaign groups on these issues, and work with them?

JM: Oh yes, all the time. I very much used key groups as my real sources of knowledge. I went in there assuming I knew nothing. I mean, clearly, I had my areas of expertise but, even then, I think, outside the department, you get a sanitised view. So I would often use others as my real points of knowledge. For example, I had my views as to what I thought needed to happen to veterans' care service, but I always ceded to the experts – those who had worked in the field for 20 years – like Cobseo [The Confederation of Services Charities]. My job was to serve them – ultimately serve service personnel and veterans, lead change where required, arbitrate between groups that didn't agree and get the political bandwidth necessary to make genuine profound change in government for veterans. Obviously, I was not a screaming success on that last point.

JP: And how often would you be able to get out of Whitehall and go on visits to work on these issues?

JM: So there were a lot of opportunities to go out and go on these visits, but I chose to do less visits than other ministers and I know that that annoyed my team who wanted to go on visits. But, as far as I was concerned, the work I had to do was behind the desk in government – I didn't feel the need to go out and seek credibility with the military or veterans like other ministers did. I needed to change how it felt to be a veteran, and so I had a lot of work to do, and I decided I should get on with that first, rather than go out and about talking about my ambitions. Maybe I didn't get that right, but that was a choice I made.

JP: So the Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) was set up as a joint unit with the Cabinet Office. You said that you weren't super keen on that initially. How did the balance between departments work in the end?

JM: Oh, it was a disaster. Essentially, both departments – the MoD and the Cabinet Office – then didn't take responsibility for it. And obviously it didn't have a dedicated cabinet minister, so actually getting it up and going was shocking. By the time I left office, we still

didn't have an actual physical office for the Office for Veterans' Affairs. The guys were still working at home, even though that phase of the pandemic had passed.

I brought in a guy called David Richmond to help me run the Office for Veterans' Affairs. And his experience of working in the Cabinet Office was so bad it literally used to keep me awake at night, because I felt so guilty about bringing this man into government, because his experience was so appalling. No one would listen to him; it would take him three or four months to have meetings with other people in the Cabinet Office. I mean, we didn't even have an office right up until the point where I left government: *We didn't have a physical office for the Office for Veterans' Affairs*. Literally, no one gave a shit at all. And his experience was shocking. If he did get staff, they would then suddenly be taken off him by some other faceless rank in the Cabinet Office to go and work on something else. And he'd come in in the morning and phone them up, and they'd say, "No, I'm working on something else now." So there was a time when it was just me and him. And yeah, it was shocking – very, very difficult.

TD: What about your relationships with other departments – so ministers, civil servants and special advisers? Were you talking to the Treasury, to the Foreign Office, to No.10 etc. about any of this stuff?

JM: From fairly early on, it was apparent to me and pretty much everyone else that the structure wasn't going to work, and I started seeking a meeting with the prime minister. In the meantime, I was sort of battling away between two departments, neither of which were particularly interested in the agenda ...

But it was to no effect. I did write to the prime minister in June 2020 and said what needed to happen, but I got a letter back essentially saying: "We'll do a review, but we don't really need to change." There was then a review of the job of the OVA: where it should sit and what it should do. That was okay and done by a good guy in government and was really helpful in terms of actually delineating what the office should be doing from other departments. But it didn't change anything at all.

I wrote to the prime minister again in December 2020 with the same concerns. And when that letter was then sent back to my own senior civil servant for him to reply to me, I realised the game was up, really. I was onto a loser. Literally, the letter was sent to the guy who worked for me, who worked under David Richmond in the Office for Veterans' Affairs, but essentially worked for me. The letter that I had written privately and in confidence to the prime minister was passed back to the OVA to reply to me. Nothing indicated better to me No.10's disinterest in veteran's affairs. I knew it was over.

TD: Let's come back in a bit to the point at which you did leave government. But just before we talk about that, you mentioned at the beginning that one of your big objectives with the Veterans' Pledge concerned the prosecution of veterans, and particularly those who served in Northern Ireland. Could you tell us a bit about what your objectives on that issue were?

JM: My objective was to inject fairness into what had clearly become an unfair system. So at no stage was I looking to protect servicemen and women and veterans from prosecutions for breaking the law, wherever that may be across the world. What I was seeking to do was trying to configure legislation that would specifically go after the kind of industrialised nature of human rights claims against servicemen and women that had seen 3,500 claims come out of Iraq, and another 1,600 out of Afghanistan. These had then fed into police investigations, none of which resulted in a conviction, because the evidential threshold was clearly so poor. But what then did happen in the margins was that the MoD was settling civil cases without admitting liability, which fuelled an industrial machine of claims.

The effects this had on veterans was dire, and I was determined to tackle that. It had nothing whatsoever to do with protecting people who break the law. But I was not prepared to let the hundreds of entirely innocent and honourable veterans have their lives destroyed by a government-enabled witch-hunt.

But I had a secretary of state [Ben Wallace] who clearly didn't really understand the issue. I had worked on legacy issues for seven years by then; he had never mentioned the subject. The only time he had was when he was a junior Northern Ireland minister and he had argued for these processes to take place; i.e. in the opposite direction to my work. He then decided to get involved in this legislation itself, in an issue he didn't really understand, and, essentially, bit by bit, I suppose lost total control of it. I wasn't pig-headed about it; I just knew what needed to be done, and he wanted to be seen to be the guy to do it. It created a conflict. In the end, the relationship basically became unworkable because, every time he went near the legislation, it made my life harder. Whether it was losing his temper at the dispatch box calling the Iraq War illegal or putting things in there – carve-outs in there – for things like sexual offences which were really unnecessary but then opened up a Pandora's box of other carve-outs that should be in the bill, and essentially blunted it as a legislative instrument for tackling the problem we set out to tackle. Even the name of the bill itself we couldn't agree on.

So it became very, very difficult. I lost control of it. And, you know, it was clear to me that, essentially, I was the face of it – I was there to get the government off the hook for its many failures on veterans – but I wasn't actually going to be able to effect any change.

TD: And in terms of the conversations behind the scenes with the bill, were you meeting the secretary of state, or his advisers, to talk it through?

JM: Yeah, it was very difficult. I once tried to get hold of him for two weeks without success. He denied it of course, but when he pulled out his phone and I showed him the missed calls and texts, he didn't have a leg to stand on. It was sad really – I liked the guy. But he either could not cope with the workload or was absolutely determined to make a name for himself to the point of not allowing anyone to do anything else, and hence the whole thing wasn't working – you can't run a big department like that.

For example, I remember, one day I went into his office, and I said: "Look, Ben, we really shouldn't call the bill X, you should call it Y, because that way it will speak to veterans a lot better, and people will understand what we're trying to do. It will really help us." I just remember, he put his hand up and went: "No, no, no, get out, I'm not talking about the bill anymore." And I just thought a) "Bloody hell – I would never treat someone like that", and b) this is not a professional working environment. I found it really tough, particularly when the other ministers and senior officials tried to get me to reason with him on their behalf. But that is their story to tell.

TD: One of the most difficult bits of the bill was around people who had served in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland generally has been a big topic in recent years, partly because of the Brexit process. So did that wider context affect the way you were dealing with that issue, the way the Ministry of Defence was approaching it?

JM: There were lots of really complex issues around getting Northern Ireland included in this bill, and I was extremely alive to them. You couldn't just bolt on the words 'Northern Ireland', because justice is devolved. And that issue in itself is lost on the majority of other ministers and colleagues. I persistently agitated and had many conversations with Brandon Lewis [the secretary of state for Northern Ireland], where I said, "Look, I can't take through this bill without something coming down the line in parallel to cover Northern Ireland veterans as per our manifesto. What we're in danger of doing is establishing two different categories of veteran in the UK: those who've served in Northern Ireland and those who haven't. And those who did not serve in Northern Ireland will be subject to a degree of protection from lawfare, whereas those who did serve in Northern Ireland will not. Brandon to his credit was very clear, and made unequivocal commitments, that he would "walk hand in hand" – his words – legislation in line with the Overseas Bill so that, when we got to the end of the legislative process, veterans of Northern Ireland would be protected in a similar way that veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan would be from vexatious litigation. Unfortunately, these early commitments were the high point, as it became rapidly clear that he had neither the individual capability or understanding to deliver on his promises. As such, things became extremely difficult.

TD: So picking up from that point, you were having this discussion with the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, and you then left government in April 2021 after it became clear that there wouldn't be this parallel arrangement for veterans in Northern Ireland. Why was that the point for you, and what was your thought process around leaving?

JM: It was the culminating moment. The difficulty was that Ben Wallace and Brandon Lewis would consistently blame each other for the shortcomings of the bill and treated me like the stupid kid in the middle who didn't really understand politics. I was trying to get them both into the same place and make sure we delivered on what were our manifesto commitments. Not mine, but *our* manifesto commitments. I won't betray Ben Wallace's confidence... I don't owe the bloke anything... I'm not going to betray his confidence on what he referred to Brandon Lewis as the entire time – it was quite funny to give him credit. But safe to say they were both extremely rude about each other's abilities; I guess I agreed with them to some extent because I was regularly taken aback by their extreme confidence blended perfectly with an almost total ineptitude on this particular subject.

Equivalent protections were a red line for me, for those who had served in Northern Ireland to those who hadn't. We couldn't create two tiers of veterans. At a number of stages I said I wasn't prepared to carry on taking the bill through unless those equivalent protections were there – both to secretary of state for Northern Ireland and secretary of state for defence. I don't think they thought I would actually quit.

The process of first and second reading was a nightmare. As the bill started going through, one day in September at second reading I was told, "You're not allowed to use the words 'equivalent protections' anymore." A MoD spad [special adviser] texted me on the bench, "You're not to use that – from the NIO [Northern Ireland Office]." I then immediately got up at the dispatch box and restated the government's commitment to equivalent protections for those who served in Northern Ireland, at which point Brandon Lewis appears at the bar in the chamber, trying to catch my eye. I just made the point of completely ignoring him. We get to the end of the second reading, where in summing up I restate *again* the government's commitment to equivalent protections for those who served in Northern Ireland.

I immediately left the chamber afterwards and went out to see the chief whip. "This is a farce; it's not a professional organisation. You cannot ask a minister to change government policy or manifesto commitments at the dispatch box, when he's going through second reading, just on the whim of a text from some faceless spad in the NIO." I then bumped into Brandon Lewis on my way out, probably on his way in to see the chief whip to moan about me, and he blamed No.10 and said No.10 had told him that he wasn't to use that language either. Unfortunately for him, I immediately rang the policy team in No.10 and said, "Have you told Brandon Lewis X?" And they came back and said no.

So it was a nightmare – no one told the truth to me. Restating these manifesto commitments all the time – I was basically a dope on a rope for the government.

At second reading in September, obviously the Northern Ireland stuff didn't appear again, and that was very, very difficult. I received a great deal of deserved opprobrium from the veterans community about leaving Northern Ireland veterans behind after our many promises to them. But I pressed on, repeating further empty promises from SoSNI I knew in my heart he would never deliver on. The second reading went through the autumn, then we had committee stage, and still nothing on Northern Ireland. SoSNI promised September, he promised December, he promised March. It was pretty humiliating.

By then we had these trials coming up for the first two soldiers in Northern Ireland in April. So I finally got a meeting with the prime minister in March, two years after first asking for one, and literally four weeks before [the trials]. I said, "Prime minister, after all these struggles in your government on veteran's affairs, I am not going to be able to be your veterans minister anymore if you have done nothing on Northern Ireland and these two veterans are on the steps of the courthouse in Belfast next month." I didn't for one minute think we were going to stop that case, because you can't interfere in that way, but I did expect us to show something, some commitment to veterans of Northern Ireland. I was very clear with him – the veterans agenda was a joke; I was embarrassed to be his minister leading it, and I couldn't trust anything anyone told me – including people in his team. He was very cross and rallied against others. But by now I knew that between Ben Wallace, Boris Johnson and Brandon Lewis, well, you could have grouped any two of those up against the third at any stage and they all would have essentially blamed each other. And I was caught in the middle, but with absolutely no tools, leverage, seniority, or power to do anything about it. Like I said – a dope on a rope. It made me very deeply, very personally unhappy.

TD: So clearly, going through that process, you didn't feel you like you had support, or buy-in, from other ministers?

JM: No. Look, I think we're going through a phase where, essentially, secretaries of state are front and centre of their department and want to be on every good announcement going, with a picture of them with a professional photographer and a nice post on Twitter for every policy that comes out. Government doesn't really work like that in my experience. Even as lowly junior ministers, you're making lots of decisions every day. And there are some very talented junior ministers, and they should be able to get on and make those decisions and be backed up by their secretary of state, rather than secretaries of state wanting to grab the attention for everything.

It's part of the problem of the spad system, or 'fluffers' as I call them. Fluffers for their secretary of state, for they seem to do little else. How you have people... I mean, 'special adviser', the title is an oxymoron. I am really, genuinely, yet to meet a special adviser with any specialist advice to dispense. They operate – in my experience I hasten to add, I'm

sure there are some good ones, but they operate like the kind of power-drunk politicians they used to have in the Russian army to make sure everyone was in line, who have watched one too many political dramas on the telly and think that the way to get things done is to be a shit to everyone. All with no discernible relevant background or experience, or indeed specialist advice to disseminate... I can understand why a SoS might need one, but literally just one. Ministerial teams should be used as a team – we are elected, appointed by the PM and accountable. How government runs is a whole other debate.

I remember sitting there sometimes and a spad would say to me, “Yeah, politically, I don’t think that’s the right thing to do.” I’m not sure what their grounds were for this ‘political advice’, but they certainly had never sought elected office, and they certainly had no idea about a) lawfare or b) politics and how to get politically difficult stuff through the House of Commons. I just don’t get it. Sorry if either of you two were spads, but...

TD: No, no.

JP: No, don’t worry.

JM: The way they carry on is just insane, absolutely insane. No other company would work like that because they would get fired. You might have personal assistants in your private office, of course, but people making totally unqualified decisions at a strategic level does not exist in the private sector.

TD: So what would you do differently?

JM: Well, it can work. The construct and the idea of it can work. For example, there was a guy in the MoD who just focused on procurement for the secretary of state for defence, and he was very, very good. But at no stage did he think he ran the department or that he could speak to civil servants as though he was secretary of state or tell junior ministers what to do. He just had his specialist knowledge, and he really added value to the department. So I guess I’ve corrected my own narrative there. There is a special adviser with specialist advice to dispense... but he was the only one.

TD: But that kind of model does work?

JM: Yeah, it does work, if people know their lines and their boundaries, and treat each other with respect. The problem is, everyone likes to step outside their lane, don’t they? And gain credit for things that have got nothing to do with them. And the briefing in the media is another level, particularly against colleagues – spads are relied on extremely hard for that, particularly where I worked.

JP: So now for some reflective questions. If you look back on your time in government, is there a single achievement that you feel most proud of, something that you got done?

JM: Changing the structure of government to get the Office for Veterans' Affairs established is a big step because, even now, I don't think you will find a prime minister who will come in and get rid of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, even if it's only 15–20% of what I envisaged.

JP: And what do you think contributed to you being able to get that done, to set up the OVA?

JM: Getting senior ministers to commit to it publicly. Ultimately, I could have gone in there, kept my head down, sucked up for years, and seen where it got me. But I was totally focused on delivering what I said we would for veterans. I found that helpful... at times incredibly lonely. I'll be honest, my time in government was awful. And the only thing I ever achieved was when I was able to get senior ministers to publicly commit to something, and then they'd only do it so that they wouldn't get caught out politically, rather than because they actually believed in it.

JP: So following on from that, if you could give one piece of advice to someone that's just about to go into government, what would you advise them in terms of what would help them be effective when they were going in?

JM: My number one piece of advice would be the piece of advice that someone gave me when I started off as a junior officer in the military, which is, "Don't be a dick. Treat everyone with respect. Someone is better than you at everything and knows more." And then you'll get a lot further than a lot of other ministers.

JP: And so now you've gone back to being a backbench MP, do you think your experience in government has changed the way that you approach that?

JM: It hasn't changed it, no, because I always thought in the same way. I knew the only way I was going to close the Iraq Historic Allegations Team was by publicly shaming the government into it. The only way I was ever going to achieve change for veterans was not by highlighting their plight and saying, "Look, you should believe in this, let's do something", but by shaming people into doing the right thing. So no, it hasn't changed. I wish it had, but it hasn't changed the way I do business in Westminster, no.

JP: And is there anything else that we haven't asked you about that you would like to add?

JM: Sorry for being so miserable about it all, but it was truly awful.

TD: How do you think that could be changed? If you had a magic wand, how could it be made less miserable?

JM: Well, the whole thing needs ripping up. From secretaries of state only in place because they are gofers for the prime minister, to treating MP colleagues who are actually elected and bang on doors for you with a whole load more respect. I asked someone who stood to be prime minister at the last leadership election – I asked him how to be a good junior minister, and he said, “Basically, you’ve got to suck up to your secretary of state and the PM, and then suck harder.” And I just thought to myself, “I’m never going to be able to do that”. And that’s not because I am particularly proud or entitled – I never thought I’d be in politics. I’m not an academic, I’m not a politician, essentially. But I’m also not going to be able to park my values and just suck up to people until they give me what I want. Because, ultimately, I’m not here for myself, I’m here to serve others and fight for them. When you’re after things for yourself, then maybe you can do that, and change who you are. But when you’re doing it for other people, you’re kind of like, “No, I am going to bang the drum for these guys until you change direction because they deserve it, and you are failing them. And it matters. And by the way, you said you’d change direction as well, so I’m only trying to get you to fulfil your own promises.”

Not a popular way of doing business – I wouldn’t advise it!

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