

# Ministers Reflect Ken Skates



27 September 2021

# Biographical details

## Welsh Senedd history

2011–present: Labour Party member of the Senedd (MS) for Clwyd South

## Government career

2013–14: deputy minister for skills and technology

2014–16: deputy minister for culture, sport and tourism

2016–21: minister for the economy, transport and North Wales

**Ken Skates was interviewed by Akash Paun and Alex Nice on 27 September 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.**

**Ken Skates reflects on his time as deputy minister for skills and technology, deputy minister for culture, sport and tourism, and minister for the economy, transport and North Wales in the Welsh government following the EU referendum and during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

**Akash Paun (AP):** We want to start back in 2013. You’d been in the Senedd for a couple of years by that point and then you were appointed deputy minister for skills and technology. What was your first day like in office, as a minister? What did it feel like to come into government for the first time?

**Ken Skates (KS):** Daunting, but very exciting. I was unsure as to whether I was ready to enter government. The first minister had a huge amount of belief in me, more belief in me than I think I had, and assured me that I was ready and that I was well suited to the role. The confidence that he had in me carried me through those early stages of self-doubt. But those first days and weeks were tough, because you inherit a diary and a workload and you have no time beforehand to review any of the diary events, any of the workload, any of the strategies, the proposals, the submissions that are waiting on your desk and you have to hit the ground running.

If you’ve got no previous experience of government, you also need to learn how the system operates, from the very basics of where your office is, how to gain access to it, your private office and the new staff, an entire raft of officials at all levels. So you’re learning at a million miles an hour. And at the same time, you are trying to stay focused on the work that you’ve inherited, and at the same time trying to figure out what it is that you want to focus on, that will align with what’s happening across the government.

But you also have to ensure that you take forward work that is being carried out so far by the existing administration and by administrations beforehand.

**AP: How well did the civil service and your private office around you support you, in particular to get up to speed and to take on the responsibility in that way?**

**KS:** They were incredible. I look back really fondly at those early days, actually. Putting aside the nervousness that I had, I look back with incredible fondness for the people that were there to help me, right at the outset. As soon as I was appointed, I was then taken to meet my private office by a very senior civil servant, who to the very point of his retirement remained incredibly supportive and helpful. I met my private office, my private secretary, Helen Palmer, who was amongst the very best civil servants that I've ever met, incredibly hard working and loyal and really, really keen on the subject matters that we were working on. And I had a small private office at that point. It was myself, my private secretary and diary secretary.

But I was also fortunate to have some incredible senior civil servants as well. The people who were in charge of the apprenticeship programme were incredibly passionate and to work with them was a real thrill, because we had big ambitions for the apprenticeship programme. We didn't dilute apprenticeships in Wales, as was the case across the border. We remained committed to the value of apprenticeships, but also to increasing volume and the ambition was to create 100,000 all-age apprenticeship opportunities in the last Senedd term. We did that, we exceeded it, but it was really tough to try to create those 100,000 opportunities and then to find the people who were suited to them.

I also had a phenomenal team who were delivering the Jobs Growth Wales programme. This was a programme designed to save young people from long-term unemployment and during my time in the role, we hit the 10,000 mark. So we essentially prevented 10,000 young people from experiencing the debilitating and lifelong scarring effects of long-term youth unemployment. And that was a programme that I think the first minister at the time was incredibly proud of as well – that was a flagship programme. Because at the time – I remember crunching the numbers – between 2010 and 2015, some parts of England, in the north-west, around Leeds, Merseyside, experienced increases in youth unemployment of several thousand percent. I think it was in one part of Leeds, they saw an increase of 3000%. In David Cameron's own constituency during that time I think it increased by about 600%. And as a consequence of us introducing the Jobs Growth Wales programme, we managed to rein in that increase to around about 60% in that period. And such was the success of the programme that we've maintained it and it was operational, right through to the end of the last Senedd term as well.

So during those first days, months and years in government, I really benefited from an incredible team of civil servants who were experts in their field, passionate about what

they were working on and I had a lovely team around me in the private office as well. My colleagues were superb and really supportive as well, because it can be quite a lonely place in a ministerial office and you do rely on your private office staff and your colleagues to get you through some really tough times. And of course, we were operating against a backdrop of continued austerity. That was something that would follow me through various portfolio responsibilities, but it was really tough at the time, fighting the corner for skills and employability and apprenticeships whilst you see your budgets right across the government being reduced.

**AP: During that period you were a deputy minister. What exactly did that mean in terms of where you stood within the hierarchy?**

**KS:** The role of deputy minister for skills and technology meant that I reported to two cabinet ministers at that time, principally Huw Lewis, who was the education minister, a fantastic person, an incredible, incredible person to work for. He created a wonderful team as well and we had great bonds and a great sense of purpose. And on the technology front, I reported to Edwina Hart [then minister for business, enterprise, technology and science], who likewise was an incredible person to work for. Again, determined and really phenomenal in the way that she was able to get things done. Both were really supportive of my inexperience and my need to have advice, support and comfort at times as well. Because you go into a role like that and you're suddenly faced with the prospect of appearing before a scrutiny committee within weeks of taking the role up. And so you do need a lot of training, help and advice from the people that you're working for. The first minister likewise would regularly chat with me about how it was going and assure me that I was doing a good job and that the various programmes I was in charge of were being delivered well.

So I'd report to two ministers and the majority of the work that I undertook concerned the education and skills portfolio. I was responsible for employability programmes, for work experience, for the apprenticeship programme and all of the traineeship programmes alongside that. That was within the education and skills department and on the technology front it included principally the rollout of superfast broadband. I reported to Edwina Hart on that matter. It took, I think, probably two months to really get to grips with the whole raft of responsibilities that came with the job and to have a sense of purpose. I tried to distil it down in my own mind, on both the technology front and on the employability and skills front, to something that could be created into a narrative about what government wanted to achieve, but also which carried with it a very simple message and which gave a sense of meaning to our skills and employability programme and our technology programme.

I recall very clearly my dad and I had to go down to the south-west of England one day, with one of his classic motorbikes that he had sold to someone. So we put it in the back of a van (this is over summer recess, by the way) and we took turns driving. When we reached the person who had bought this classic motorbike, I think it was a Norton

[motorcycle], I was having a chat with the couple and it transpired that they were friends with Edwina Hart. It's a very small world. So we had a great chat about their days working together within the trade union. Then on the way back, it just suddenly occurred to me that everything that I was doing on the skills and employability front was focused on three principal objectives: improving employability skills for young people, improving youth engagement and ensuring that we have better alignment between the skills that people acquire and what the workplace needs in the 21st century. So the message was quite clear from that new term and for the remaining period that I was in that position, that we were focused on alignment, engagement and employability.

On the technology front, we had to focus 100% of our energy on the rollout of the superfast [broadband] Cymru programme, which I explained to people was operating faster, further, with a greater reach and quicker than the UK programme was rolling out. So again, it was about making sure that there was a narrative to it, but a very simple message that could be understood by the public and that the civil servants were able to deliver against.

**AP: Moving forward then into the next part of your career, you then moved over to the culture, sport and tourism role in autumn 2014. Could you tell us a bit about what your priorities were in that job and how you went about achieving them?**

**KS:** Moving into that job was both a delight but also filled with sadness in that I was leaving a role that I really, really enjoyed and people that I found fantastic. And of course I didn't just lose the civil servants that I'd been working with, I also lost the private office, because I gained a new private office. But again, I was fortunate to inherit a fabulous private office with great staff and a group of officials who were brilliant as well. And I think actually with hindsight, moving relatively quickly from one government role to another, and changing completely the focus of my work was very helpful, because there is always a risk of ministers acquiring a form of 'departmentalitis'. Whereas if you move, particularly in your early years, quite quickly from one department to another, you appreciate the need to reflect constantly on what's happening in all departments and to focus primarily on the overarching, cross-government themes.

In that assembly term, we were particularly keen to promote employment, reduce inactivity and improve [the] mental and physical health of the population. Basically 'wealth and health for all' was the mantra. So there was a relentless focus on job creation that I'd seen Edwina Hart dedicate her time to. There was also an equally relentless focus on improving the mental and physical health of people and indeed the wellbeing of the population. I came into that role in culture, sport and tourism whilst Mark Drakeford [current first minister of Wales] was health minister. It was fantastic to work with Mark on areas that we both were passionate about, because my concern about culture, sport and tourism was to use those as vehicles to improve wellbeing and

to widen participation in social activities that are proven to improve wellbeing, emotional and mental health, as well as the obvious benefits that particularly sport gives to physical health. And so I was able to work with colleagues in the health department, and particularly with Mark Drakeford as health minister, in identifying ways that we could use culture, sport and tourism activities to improve mental and physical health. And that became the top priority for me in that particular role: widening participation and serving that cross-government objective of improving our mental and physical health.

**AP: And to what extent were you able to define those priorities for yourself as opposed to being tasked with that by the first minister, for instance?**

**KS:** I guess I wasn't tasked, there was never a tasking from the first minister. I think it was obvious to all that we had key objectives with the programme for government. So to that extent, I was effectively invited, or asked, to serve those cross-government objectives. I think it was Barack Obama who said: "Don't task, ask, to get the best out of people." And that was similarly how the first minister operated as well. So the objectives were set for us, and I genuinely bought into those objectives. I was desperately keen to improve mental health and emotional resilience, particularly within young people, because of what I went through. I've been very open about my experiences of generalised anxiety disorder. So I saw, again through my own experience, the value of employment, the value of physical health and physical activity and the value of activity within the arts in driving improvements in levels of wellbeing, mental health, emotional resilience and physical health. So I was completely, completely committed to what I was doing in that role.

But I think it also required a very strong message to be conveyed to stakeholders that the objective of what we were doing in this area of work was to drive better mental and physical health. The ends were hugely important to our society and the response from organisations and individuals was superb, particularly on the arts front. The way that institutions responded was incredibly impressive and we created something called the Fusion programme, which was a fusion of heritage and culture, which was essentially used to drive better employment prospects, emotional health and physical health.

We created a new culture strategy as well, with the primary objective being one of improving wellbeing. So it was an exciting time. It was exciting also personally, because, I mean, I love the arts. I am super keen on various sports, and I love heritage, particularly protected environments and built environments. So it was something I was personally passionate about as well and that really helped. I think if you are going to have meaning in life, then you have to have two things: you have got to have passion and you have got to have purpose, and that gives you the meaning. And I was very fortunate, again, in that role to be passionate about what I was working on and have purpose and that then gave a meaning to the job.

It helps to carry you through what can be tough reforms as well, and to carry you through what can be very difficult decisions, particularly given the really challenging time that we faced at that moment in terms of our budgets. Austerity was biting incredibly deep at that point and it was horrible having to continually cut, year on year, budgets, whereas in the past decade, year on year, there were budget increases.

**AP: Let's move forward in time to May 2016. There was the Senedd election and Labour was re-elected and you were then promoted into cabinet as economy minister. You had a few years of experience by that point, but this was a step up. What did going through that promotion and becoming part of cabinet feel like for you personally?**

**KS:** It was an incredible honour, again, to have a huge amount of trust, faith and belief shown to me by the first minister who promoted me. I guess I was expecting promotion because I'd been asked to write the manifesto. And of course we won the election, so there was a lot of speculation at the time, in political circles and in the media, about the role that I would be given. I thought it might be education, given that I'd been in the education department previously. But when I was offered the economy and infrastructure [portfolio] along with culture, sport and tourism still, I thought: "This is just phenomenal. This is an incredible package." Then I looked through the pages of responsibilities and wondered whether I'd be able to survive. Because I think I had, with those responsibilities, the equivalent of [the portfolio of] – it would have been – three or four UK cabinet ministers. Oh, trade as well. I was responsible for some of the international relations activities. And so there was a huge, huge amount of work that came my way as a result of that appointment. But I gave it my all and it was quite thrilling.

I think it was also helpful that the programme for government was then based on a manifesto that I'd been asked to pull together. And for the manifesto, I went largely back to basics, to the purpose of government. And I based the purpose of government on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and as a result of that, the manifesto is based on four strong pillars: a united and connected Wales, an ambitious and learning Wales, a healthy and active Wales and a prosperous and secure Wales. So I aimed to deliver not just the objectives within the department that I was responsible for, but also to deliver against the objectives that other departments were responsible for as well. So it was a huge, huge responsibility, but it was an incredible thrill.

Once again, I had just the most amazing private office, which was much bigger than I had previously. I had a principal private secretary, a private secretary, a diary secretary and other support staff and they worked round the clock. We all worked round the clock. And as a result, we all made sacrifices. Everything, at that time, was about my job, everything. You do sadly carry more and more remorse and guilt about not being able to spend more time with family, friends and constituents and that builds up over time. But there is no relief or release from it. Because from 2016, at the time when we were

still facing austerity and the consequences of it, particularly in terms of youth and employment, we then had some pretty significant challenges thrown at us very quickly.

Well, Brexit...

**AP: Yes, let's talk about Brexit. Firstly, had you and the Welsh government, particularly within the economy department, done significant preparation of any kind for a potential vote in favour of Brexit, such that you knew how to respond come 23 June 2016?**

**KS:** Well, the big challenge here was that the referendum took place very soon after the [May 2016 Senedd] election campaign. The first minister, Carwyn Jones, warned the prime minister, David Cameron, that the risk of staging a referendum so soon after a national election was that the civil service would be geared up for a potential change of administration, certainly a new administration, and so a huge amount of their time and energy would be invested in preparing for the new government. So the civil service, with limited resource, rightly had to focus on what it knew would happen, which was that there'd be a new set of assembly members and a number of potential outcomes. David Cameron was warned about this.

Then the second challenge is that you go through an election campaign and that was a really, really tough election campaign, and you're exhausted afterwards. Then you have new ministers appointed who need to focus on new roles that they have, learn the ropes and form views on what was working, what needs to be maintained, what needs to be accelerated and what needs to change or be abandoned.

Then you're thrown this curveball of a referendum to consider as well. It was always at the back of our minds, during the election campaign, that this could be a massive, massive change for the UK. But we had to stay focused first of all on the election, then by the time the referendum came, even though we were exhausted, we had to invest a huge amount of time and energy in trying to get a vote to remain in the EU. So there's only a finite space in your mind to be able to consider various outcomes of various events and the Brexit referendum was one of those major events, alongside various other major challenges and events that were taking place.

I think it was a terrible mistake. I mean, hindsight is great, isn't it? But it was a terrible mistake to hold the referendum at that point – for Wales and for other parts of the UK, and ultimately for the UK itself and for David Cameron as well.



**AP:** You had spent all that time developing a manifesto and thinking about how you are going to put it into practice, having won the election. How much did the referendum result change what you were able to do and what you had to focus on? Did you have to completely shift gear?

**KS:** Yes. The gears changed overnight and there was a very real risk that everything would become Brexit in terms of my department, and other departments. But I was keen to make sure that we didn't lose sight of the horizon that we could see prior to the outcome of the referendum, such as the move towards automation, for example, and the impact that that could have on society and on the economy. The ever-intensifying need to decarbonise. The need to make sure that we ironed out inequalities across Wales. We were very advanced in terms of the 'levelling up' agenda that's going to be set, because when we published the economic action plan, it was all about inclusive growth and supercharging the industries of tomorrow, we just didn't coin the phrase 'levelling up'. I think it's a wonderful phrase, but we didn't coin that phrase at the time, unfortunately. But our strategy was about inclusive growth and evening out the Welsh economy. And so I was determined that we retained a good degree of energy and resource to create a strategy for the Welsh economy that addressed the major challenges that were bubbling before Brexit, which I think have become even more significant as a result of the pandemic: decarbonisation, the climate crisis and fair, inclusive growth and an economy that serves all people.

To their credit, civil servants were able to both respond to the referendum result with a huge amount of assessment and preparatory work, but also they were able to help develop this new strategy and change the way in which we operated. Just prior to the referendum I'd formed a view that we needed to consolidate the amount of advisory boards that we had serving ministers, principally myself, and that we had to ensure that the advisory boards were cross-referencing the work for one another as well. And so after the referendum result, in spite of that throwing up a huge challenge, we were still able to progress a pretty radical new strategy for the economy of Wales and also change the way in which we gained advice and the way in which we delivered as well. We made a massive change in terms of stepping away from a purely sectoral approach within the department, to a regional approach, again aimed at making sure that those areas of Wales that have felt left behind now felt that they had an opportunity to have a voice. And so there was significant change alongside all of the preparatory work that was taking place in regard to Brexit.

**AP:** Another big change that came while you were in that role was the change of first minister in 2018 [from Carwyn Jones to Mark Drakeford]. What did the change of first minister mean for you, and in terms of the operation of the government and the cabinet as a whole?

**KS:** It was very difficult prior to Carwyn Jones stepping down, because a lot of people believed that I was going to run, and were trying to get me to run, for leader. I think at one point I was odds-on favourite to become the next first minister. I was incredibly close to Vaughan Gething [runner-up in the 2018 Labour leadership election], and remain to this day very close to Vaughan. I was also close to Mark [Drakeford, winner of the leadership election], who shares some interests that I share, such as the outdoors. He loves his allotment, I love my garden. We are passionate about mental health, wellbeing, tackling the climate crisis. I felt at that time the need to make sure that we didn't just have the right person becoming first minister. Because a huge number of assembly members, or as we're now called, Senedd members, could be well suited to being first minister. But you had to be the right person for that moment in time. And Brexit was, and remains to this day, still a matter that would, I felt at the time, end up defining the administration and the leader of the government. It was my view that Mark was that right person for that moment in time. And I think he's proven to be that. None of us could have foreseen Covid. In my view, Covid has demonstrated that, my goodness me, he really is the best person that we could have hoped for during these difficult years. But I remain incredibly close to Vaughan. I think Vaughan has shown phenomenal leadership skills during the Covid crisis. Again, he would make a brilliant leader as well.

The change with Mark primarily concerned the way that the cabinet operated and the way that we moved very much to a kind of a team approach, particularly when it came to media engagement. Mark was very keen to make sure that the public saw that we had a team that represented all parts of Wales and that the members of that team should speak directly to the public. He placed great emphasis as well on decision making, not just within cabinet but the decision making politically over some of the grand challenges to come. So our political cabinet, again, became very discursive. I felt that we moved to a point where we were kind of looking beyond the horizon and really, really considering, in depth, those huge challenges that will face not just our generation, but generations to come. Both leaders have distinct styles, distinct characteristics, both have worked incredibly successfully I believe, but it is interesting to see different leadership styles. I think the two represent how the electorate often swing like a pendulum from electing what you might consider a charismatic character to someone who is then considered a stable, safe pair of hands. If you look back over time, you see the electorate changing governments and with it, changing prime ministers that have very, very contrasting characteristics. I don't think you could see a greater contrast than the move from Margaret Thatcher to John Major and then John Major to Tony Blair. So I think that's what we saw with the move from Carwyn to Mark.

**Alex Nice (AN):** You've mentioned the Covid crisis and I wanted to ask about your experience of being a minister as the crisis started to emerge. What was it like being in government in the weeks leading up to the lockdown and implementing the economic responses that the Welsh government and UK government both put in place? Did you have a sense of the gravity of the crisis from early on?

**KS:** So early on, it primarily felt like a health matter, a health crisis. It rapidly escalated and metaphorically it was like being on a very large tanker, in a relatively calm ocean. You see on the horizon, coming towards you, a tsunami and with it very, very dark clouds and lightning and thunder and it's upon you within moments. The only way that you can get through it is by keeping steady and powering forward and taking incredibly difficult decisions to maintain that course.

On the economy front – and indeed on transport because the challenges with transport were huge as well – thanks to various organisations and the internal workings of the civil service, we were able to make a pretty rapid assessment of the economic consequences of the pandemic and we were able to deploy, very, very quickly, some significant support packages for businesses.

The day before lockdown was announced, I recall reflecting on some lessons I'd learned, in terms of leadership practices. One of the principal lessons was that in a crisis, it's the failure to act with enough energy and intervention soon enough that leads to failure for an economy, for a business, for an organisation. Doing too little, too late, is a fatal error. You have to act swiftly and you have to act with sufficient resource and intervention. So we pressed the UK government to introduce what became known as furlough and to invest what would become an unprecedented amount of money to save people from unemployment and to save businesses.

At the first press conference that I gave, the key message from me was very simple. It was: "If you had a good business in 2019, in 2021 you'll have a good business. If you had a good job in 2019, you will have a good job in 2021. We will do all we can to make sure that that happens." Because I think people at that point were so scared that they just needed a message of hope and they needed to see there was a government that was ready to stand behind that message and save jobs, save businesses. And thankfully, the UK government then did introduce the furlough scheme and we developed what I think remains, to this day, the most generous and comprehensive package of support for businesses anywhere in the United Kingdom. And we deployed that incredibly quickly. Again, to their credit, civil servants had to change the way that they worked and operated in order to ensure that ministers could make decisions over the course of hours that would normally take potentially weeks or months to make.

It was a scary period, because systems that protect against poor decisions and poor value for money had to be refined overnight and tough decisions had to be made in the full knowledge that we had to answer for them in the long run. But if we didn't make

decisions very, very rapidly, then we would have a huge number of people facing extraordinarily challenging times without work.

**AN: You had been through a period of fairly difficult relations between the Welsh government and the UK government. How did that change during the Covid-19 crisis? How did you find working with the UK government during that period?**

**KS:** I can only really talk for myself, but I found that the engagement that I had with UK government ministers and ministers in the other devolved administrations improved quite incredibly during the pandemic. I've always placed great value on developing personal relationships in order to influence policy. It felt, at times, like I was speaking to Nadhim Zahawi [then minister for business and industry and minister for covid vaccine deployment in the UK government] on a daily basis. He really was switched on and engaged with what we were doing in Wales. I spoke with Fiona Hyslop [then cabinet secretary for economy, fair work and culture] in Scotland and with ministers in Northern Ireland as well. Okay, we disagreed on a number of fronts, policy matters, but my concern was always, during engagement, to focus on what we could agree on, what we were united on, what needed to improve within those policy areas and what could be developed collaboratively amongst all of us.

I felt that with Nadhim, with the secretary of state [Simon Hart] and parliamentary undersecretary of state within the Wales office and with other UK cabinet ministers, the relationship and level of engagement improved quite considerably. And we were all – all of those people in other governments that I was working with – we were all focused on the single challenge that society faced. We were able to just make sure that we cast aside, as much as possible, political differences and the theatre of politics in order to deliver what we could agree on.

**AN: The Covid crisis has made many people more aware of devolution and of the powers that rest with the Welsh government. But did you also feel that there was a certain amount of pressure to align with UK policy in various areas?**

**KS:** Yes. And the message [from us to the UK government] was always clear. It was: "We are going to disagree with you on that policy, but it's for good reason and we are not doing this for political advantage, we're doing it because, based on our assessment, based on the advice that we're getting, we believe that our approach is correct. And if you disagree with us, then let's politely disagree, move on and focus on what we do agree on and make sure as much as possible, during this time of crisis, that the public see us as acting as united as we can." And that was the approach that I and my colleagues took. And yes, there was divergence, but by and large I think everybody tried as hard as possible to make sure that that divergence was minimised and that our policies were able to complement one another. Certainly in terms of the economy, [we tried to make sure] that our interventions were able to complement what the UK government was doing, particularly in terms of support for businesses, furlough

[support] for individuals. Our support was focused on ensuring that we could create a bridge, or a tunnel, through Covid for businesses to be able to get to the other side. Essentially, we were trying to ensure that businesses were able to hibernate during a very difficult period and that they had a pathway through to recovery.

And we couldn't have done that without the support of a UK government. And that's why I felt it was incredibly important to maintain good working relations, as much as possible, with [UK] ministers and I encouraged my civil servants to do likewise, at an official level. And I think this is on the record in committees – civil servants within the departments had probably the best relationships that they'd ever had with UK government counterparts as a result of our collaborative approach.

**AN: Thinking more broadly about the operation of the Welsh government and the support you were given by the civil service, are there reforms that you either wanted to make or wish you could have made to improve the effectiveness of the Welsh government and the way the civil service supports it?**

**KS:** There are reforms that I think I would probably, if I had the opportunity, I would have pursued. That's kind of academic now, I guess, unless I was to ever return. I think by and large the civil service acts with incredible integrity and great purpose and the support I had from civil servants was nothing less than phenomenal. There was real passion and commitment there and it was apparent every single day.

In terms of structural organisation, I think perhaps in order to avoid 'departmentalitis', you do have to have a central core of government activity, whether it be a cabinet office or whether it be a reform, a reconfiguration, of the way the departments are established, in order to make sure that you do focus just on those big challenges and big objectives across government departments. And so perhaps one reform that would be worth considering would be the creation of overarching super-departments which can then be focused on those great challenges. An example might be three super-departments. One focused on wellbeing. You'd have that subdivided into reactive medicine treatment, which is traditionally what we consider the health department, but also preventative measures, such as social prescribing, the role of culture, sport and heritage and the role that communications have. Then a super-department for learning and for connectivity; you could include parts of infrastructure in that. Then a third department that would focus on the economy and public service delivery.

**AP: Moving to your experience of leaving office, could you talk us through your final days as a minister? What were the final actions you took before leaving office and how did it feel to leave?**

**KS:** So I knew I was leaving. It was very difficult because I knew I was leaving office for quite some time. I'd taken the decision quite a while before the election and so I was able to conclude pretty much everything that I'd been working on. Normally when a

minister goes, they're either sacked, they retire, they resign or they're dismissed by the electorate. That didn't happen to me. I knew why I wanted to go. I knew it was the right thing to do and so I had the luxury of being able to at least allude to my departure with the people that were very close to me within government, within the civil service and political colleagues. Nonetheless, it was very difficult still to say goodbye and I recall I couldn't say goodbye to a few people, including my principal private secretary. We knew that we'd get too upset if we said goodbye. So I think I said *au revoir* rather than goodbye to people.

But once it was announced, it felt like a huge relief. I have found since that I now have a huge amount of space to be able to be creative again, to think about things and to develop ideas. I guess I was unfortunate to a degree in that I was a minister during periods of crisis rather than periods of calm. So a huge amount of my energy and attention was given to responding to events. But now that I am out of office, I am able to really consider how we might respond to those big challenges that I never really got enough time to consider when I was a minister, even though we developed strategies to address them. Yes, I am back to the point now of actually being really excited about policy development for the grand challenges of the future.

**AP: We have two final questions that we always ask everyone that we interview. The first of which is: What are you proudest of having achieved in your time as a minister?**

**KS:** I think helping to steer Wales, and the Welsh economy in particular, through some incredible events and in so doing, maintaining a downward trajectory in terms of unemployment and an upward trajectory in terms of economic activity, household earnings and opportunities for young people.

**AN: Finally, what advice would you give to a future minister on how to be effective in office in Wales?**

**KS:** You have to be authentic. You genuinely have to be passionate about the subject that you're working to. You should have a utility belt, which should comprise of a penknife. The penknife is your principles that are immovable and that you won't compromise on. They're your values. Have that penknife; that'll keep you focused on being true to yourself, on being your authentic self. Your utility belt should also contain a compass of no more than eight points, ideally four points. Four people that you go to for advice and they can sometimes challenge you as well. You should expect to be challenged by those points on the compass. Because otherwise, you do run the risk, in government, of being overwhelmed by different voices and different advice. You should also have with you a pen and pencil. Note down, periodically, what is working within the role and what isn't working and make sure you address what isn't working. Whether it be the way that your diary operates or the people that are around you. Make sure you address what isn't working. Then also have your map, your vision of where you want to take your department and policy in the future. Make sure that periodically you check

that that is indeed where you want to be going. Finally, make sure that you've got your own vision board as well for your personal life. Because the reason that I didn't like being called minister, I preferred being called Ken, is because it reminds you that your political career can be very short and you must have life outside of politics if you're going to get the best out of yourself whilst you've got that career in government.

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