

Ministers reflect

Lord Davies

June 2016



Lord Davies – biographical details

Electoral History

2009-present: Labour Member of the House of Lords

Parliamentary Career

June 2009 – May 2010: Minister of State for Trade, Investment and Small Business and Minister of State for Infrastructure (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; UK Trade and Investment; Foreign and Commonwealth Office)

Feb-June 2009: Minister of State (Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform; UK Trade and Investment; Foreign and Commonwealth Office)

Lord Davies was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Catherine Haddon on 6th June 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): So if we can start – I think it was 2009, when you first became a minister.

Lord Davies (LD): Yes. End of 2008.

NH: What was the experience of coming into government like, especially from the outside [as a business person]?

LD: Well, clearly, even though I had lived overseas and been a CEO and run lots of different businesses, you're immediately in a completely different world. You have no background with the individuals. You don't know how the system works. You are out of your comfort zone on an hourly, daily basis. So I would articulate it as, 'It's scary'. I think it's like going to a new school and you don't know anybody there and you don't know the rules and you don't know the masters. And actually, I was doing it unpaid. We were in the middle of, obviously, one of the worst crises we have ever had.

So exhilarating at one level, scary at another. I think for me, it was – I mean, it is interesting and you can choose the words and how you express it, but it was undoubtedly one of the best experiences of my professional life. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I grew enormously, not in size, but I grew enormously as a result of experience. [laughter] Met some amazing people. And not moving on to other questions, but I found that you had to work harder than you ever had done in order just to keep up, because you were in a new world. So I was shocked at so many different aspects of government, which we can come onto. But overall – [an] unbelievable, wonderful experience. But at the start, you know, I didn't know any of the protocols of a minister. I had no tuition, no induction. I was, on a Friday, chairman of a bank and on a Wednesday, I was a minister in the Government. On the following Monday, I was answering questions as a front bench minister. It was like, 'Whoa!' On a subject which was nothing to do with my background. [laughter] I spent all weekend revising; you don't know whether you can handle it until you are in there.

NH: So you were saying about the protocols and the rules. How did you navigate those? Did you have any support? How did you get your head round it?

LD: Yeah. I was given another peer to help me in the [House of] Lords. But to be honest, we were so busy and had Cobra [Cabinet Office Briefing Room A; crisis response committee] meetings every morning, every afternoon. I obviously negotiated with the Chinese for the G8. So it was like full on, and you know, in that regard, it's like taking a new job, but you are in a new country, a new company, you have never met anybody in the company. Yes, I had met a number of the senior people – Gordon, Peter Mandelson [then Business Secretary], etcetera. I had lots of direct reporting lines, so I reported to Alistair [Darling; then Chancellor], Gordon, very much so. Peter Mandelson and David Miliband [then Foreign Secretary]. So actually, I found everybody incredibly welcoming. Not making a party political statement. I found them very welcoming, I was very honest about something if I didn't know it. And then I found the officials to be incredible. Absolutely awesome.

So I don't join the camp of Digby Jones [Minister for Trade and Investment, 2007-08] and others where it was fashionable to slam the civil servants. I found them to be hardworking, professional, diligent and I found the number of women to be incredible. That was really encouraging. So you know, I think in terms of rules and regulations and your red box and all of that – I mean, if you are streetwise, you learn very quickly how things work. So you just learn. I think that I went from not being a minister to being in the eye of the storm so quickly, I didn't have time to worry about whether I was making mistakes. The one

4 Ministers reflect

thing I would say, when people say ‘Well, were you able to make things happen?’ – absolutely. I really, I mean genuinely... yes, there is bureaucracy. Yes, there is public accountability, [the] National Audit Office, the press, whatever. But I think you are able to make things happen very quickly.

NH: Your previous experience in business and banking, how did that transfer across?

LD: If you are international and you’ve run a complex organisation and you are used to politics and backstabbing and you know all the stuff that goes [on], you are used to it. If you are a mid-level exec, or even a senior exec and you haven’t travelled the world, I think it’s pretty tough. And you better be OK at public speaking. So I think we are seeing less and less people willing to move into government, from the private sector. And I think that we don’t do enough skills – if it was business, you’d do a skills matrix. What skills are we looking for, what do they need, have they got the attributes to be able to cope and not make a mess with the papers or on the media generally or whatever it might be. Can they actually work with [the] complexity of different departments, fighting the Treasury, all of that stuff? Well, they will be able to if they worked in a multinational. Because that’s what life is like.

NH: And related to that, because you were one of several people, I think that...

LD: We were ‘goats’ [Government Of All the Talents], yes.

NH: The goat period. Did you come away from it thinking there should be more outside expertise into government?

LD: I found – this is not a criticism of the politicians, quite the reverse - I found the work ethic of the politicians and the calibre of some of the individuals extraordinary. You know, I think Peter Mandelson is one of the great strategists and he was great to work for. And likewise with some of the others – David Miliband in particular. What I would say is that if we are going to bring business closer – not just business, but society - closer to government, then both sides need a greater understanding of each other. So what I would say is that too many of the politicians lived in a life cocooned, all in their little bubble. They eat together, they drink together, you know, a lot of them sleep together. [laughter] They literally, they are in this village, which they describe and they don’t get out a lot. They maybe go to their constituency on a Thursday or a Friday and go to a couple of fetes, but that is it. So actually, you are not seeing the world, you are not mixing with enough different people. The same for business, I would argue. So I just thought their conversation was different. The nature of their dialogue was different. On the other hand, I also realised how obsessive some of them were about public policy, which was great for me to see.

But I do believe, as a result of my couple of years in, that parts of education, parts of infrastructure – I was the Minister for Infrastructure, I complained so much about it, I became the minister for it! [laughter] So infrastructure, education, health and one or two other long-term aspects of running a country should be taken out of party politics. And they should be a cross-party approach, like a strategic plan for the country. That’s where the Institute for Government comes in, because we are chopping and changing, you know. Yes, there are slightly less ministerial reshuffles now, but you need consistency. You can’t be changing, I don’t know, GCSEs, attitude to Crossrail, attitude to Heathrow, attitude to exams for 13 year olds, whatever it might be. We have seen it’s just too inconsistent. So for me, the one thing I learned, I believe more so now than ever, that [for] certain things you need a long-term plan and then you can – for political reasons - you can adjust round the edges. But that was a great learning.

NH: Just out of interest, what was it that made you take the job, or got you interested in it?

LD: National Service. You know, I think if you’ve got an ounce of interest in public policy and you get a call from the Prime Minister, then calls from everybody, to do it, then... and no money, not being paid for two years. I think it’s like a calling. So for us, as a family, it was a big call. You know, yeah, I was in

the media already, but not – you know, it's putting your money in trust, the intrusion of the media, my Wikipedia entry was changed within an hour, had an attack, you know, like a serious viral attack on me. And FOIs [Freedom of Information requests] came. FOI was, oh my God, we have got to change FOI – it's just gone too far. So FOI requests in my first week – I didn't even know what an FOI was [laughter] – just came in, in literally hundreds. So that was a bit of a shock and that made me think, after two weeks, 'What have I done?' You know, whoa! But then you settle down and, you know, you are very dependent, as a minister, on your private secretary. So it took me some time to get the team that I wanted, because I was naïve and I just took the people that they wanted to throw at me. And that was a great learning. If I had been a CEO, I would have said 'Sorry, but...' In the end, I ended up with a great team, because I picked them myself.

NH: Because you were split between two departments, weren't you, the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills]. How did that work in terms of private secretaries?

LD: Yes. That was fine, actually, private office was BIS. But because of the financial crisis, I spent a lot of time with Alistair Darling and Gordon. And then Miliband was just great to work with, so he would see me on a consistent basis, for breakfast. So I think you learn what's urgent, what isn't, what is, you know – the ministers see whether you are willing to take your load. And if you're not willing to take your load... I think the thing that shocked me – one of my predecessors had not answered any of the letters that had come in, so we had like 5,000 letters backlogged. So I said 'Well, I don't care. I am going to clear them.' And we cleared them. Now, did it mean that, on a weekend, I had like 500 letters to sign for a few weekends, yeah, but I think what you can't do is drop your standards. I think there is a very interesting issue around... you know, this was a crisis and I was thrust into it. In a perfect world, a minister would go through an induction programme before they start. How do you handle, you know, when you walk into Number 10, don't have your document on the outside. How do you handle delicate media issues? What is the role of your private secretary versus whatever? How sensitive should you be about being attacked by your own side? (Which happened a few times to me). It's all that stuff.

NH: You were talking about stuff that was most urgent, how did you determine your priorities? Did you just get sent them from the Secretary of State, or...?

LD: No. I think actually, to be honest, it's not criticism at all – I think we were given a lot, I was given a lot, of leeway. I mean, they realised very quickly that I was very hardworking, that is the only attribute I've got. [laughter] And no, they realised that I was able to handle the pressure. They realised – you know, I don't think I have worked as hard, apart from when you've just been made a CEO, when it's 24 hours a day. But in that first six months, whoa, I mean the world is falling apart and my workload, you know: automotive industry was going down the tubes, so I was in charge of that. The banks were going down the tubes, I was in charge of all the bank lending. We had got crises popping up on a daily basis. We had 25 Tata Steel type things [significant job cuts in UK industries]. We also had to get the Chinese to sign up for the G8. You name it. I mean, I've forgotten most of it but it was very exciting. You are given a lot of leeway. So I would say as a minister, you have got to be a self-starter. If you sit there waiting for some order [from] the Secretary of State, it ain't going to come. And then you are just – you will give a few speeches and it will be over. Then you will be reshuffled or you have resigned. Or you lose your seat.

Catherine Haddon (CH): And so that day-to-day reality then, of being a minister, you've said it is an all-consuming job and you are just a workhorse but what did you find were the things you spent most of your time on, being a minister?

LD: Well, I think you very quickly work out what your priorities are. And I would say it depends, doesn't it, whether you are in [the Department of] Energy [and Climate Change] or Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs], whatever – I would have said that having a business background

6 Ministers reflect

gave me [a] huge plus in terms of knowing how to prioritise, knowing how to spend my day time, not allowing interviews to last too long, you know. I found you give a lot of speeches as a minister and I think that some of the speeches were just garbage. [laughter] They were absolutely dire. So to begin with, I spent a little bit of time telling them my style. You don't need to write a 10-page speech for me, just write 30 words that are relevant to an industry. Could be automotive industry or manufacturing or whatever. So I think you very quickly learn how to give speeches. You learn how to get the best out of the department and how to work with your secretary of state. Then I would say you very quickly learn how to prioritise. And everybody wants a bit of you. It doesn't matter whether you are a secretary of state, minister of state, everybody wants a little bit out of you. I think, in that regard, you are a self-starter. But if you have got business experience, you know how to get on with it.

I would like to see more business people going into government. I would like to see more secondment of MPs or people who have political ambitions. So I'd like to see, you know, there is all sorts of conflict of interest issues, but we need a bridge between the world of wealth creation and business and entrepreneurialism and whatever, we need a bridge. I think the spad role [special adviser] was – I mean, what is a spad? You know, that was a bit of a shock to me. So then you learn where the spad fits in, and they play an incredibly important role.

CH: You also said that you had all number of different crises that you had to deal with. Can you just give us an idea of how you coped through one of those and perhaps also how you saw the department coping through it?

LD: Well, I think the lack of bank finance and the lack of liquidity resulted in the finance companies of the car automotive giants being unable to finance themselves and therefore if they didn't survive, the car companies wouldn't survive. So suddenly, in late December, early January, it became evident, after the October crash, that if we didn't help the car finance companies, one million jobs were going to be in trouble in the UK. So you end up spending a huge amount of time getting the Federation of Small Business, the CBI [Confederation of British Industry], the Institute of Directors, the automotive industry, then the individual companies, then the banks, in. I think we are very quick to criticise; I thought everyone came together really well. The ministers got on well. There was a little bit of suspicion, 'Who is this guy, who has suddenly got the ear of the prime minister? He is not elected, he is everywhere, what's his gain?' Well, if you haven't been elected, you are not being paid. You haven't got any gain, you are just trying to do the right thing. So I would have said, firstly, the department reacted really well. They are used to crisis, so that's when the officials really come into their own. Some of the ministers panic, they don't want to be seen with failure. You learn that very quickly. They are – if something is going wrong, they want to run a million miles, whereas people like me say 'I'll sort it'. So I think the officials – that's when we really see the value of the permanent secretary role. You know, you really, you see their role, their experienced hands. So on balance, I would have said my experience was pretty good. They are able to cope, they can multi-task. They can have a few crises going on at the same time. I thought the most amazing thing, which I learned, was an ability to go to a meeting, learn about a problem – the Post Office or whatever - and then half an hour later to be on Sky talking about it. I mean, that was just – for me, I really got good at that. That was a new skill I had to learn. You know, really prepare – because if you are in corporate life, you are not about to walk out of a board meeting and then you are on Sky or BBC. So you change and you can see the ministers visualising, 'How am I going to communicate this outside?'

CH: I was going to ask, was there then a balance that you have to find between solving the problem versus managing the media?

LD: Well, I think that's the biggest test for government. And I think if they bowed to the latest edition of the free newspaper or the Mail or whatever, then we'll have a totally populist government, without any long-term thinking. Because of the internet, because of social media, because of everything that's going on, we are going more and more transparent: fine. We are going more and more short-term. That's fine,

providing you have long-term plans around some of these other things. And the danger is we don't. So the big challenge for governments is how do you, in such an instant society, how do you develop long-term strategies? Now, particularly in a democracy where you are reacting on an hourly basis. I think that's a big challenge. So the secretaries of state had to have enough inner steel to say 'Actually, this is my strategy.' So I don't talk about manifestos, I like to think of strategies for the country. So what I would like to see is governments and parties saying 'This is how we are going to change or adapt the strategy for our country' – but they don't talk about that. They talk about their manifesto for their parties. Well, parties are irrelevant, it's the country that's relevant. So I think that, you know, I did learn how clubby the whole thing is.

CH: OK, so aside from those crises where you are handling what is happening day-to-day, what about – you said about your priorities early-on – what did you think was your greatest achievement? Something that perhaps you managed to change in government?

LD: Well, I was involved, obviously, with [Paul] Myners [then Financial Services Secretary] and others on the banking side, so making sure that the economy didn't dry up of financing. I think that was a major achievement. I was very involved in car scrappage, automobile industry, keeping that alive. Very involved in restructuring all of our approach to infrastructure. We had, like, 20 different bodies, I collapsed them into one, appointed a chairman and CEO. I look back on that, and then that was carried on by Paul Deighton [appointed Commercial Secretary to the Treasury in 2013], as a huge achievement. I think the success of the G8 and treaty – myself and others were hugely involved in that. I think that getting the regions to feel – and various industry groups – to feel that they had an ear. This morning, I spoke at the UK-China Business Forum, business leaders get together and one of the guys came up to me and said 'Thank you so much' for some - you know, this was like 2009, I have completely forgotten to be honest - but I had helped him and his company and he said 'Oh my God, now, a few years on, this is a huge business' and whatever. So I think myself and a number of others, at a time of national crisis, were able to offer calming influence and a different perspective. So no great flash, we did X, Y, Z but if we hadn't been there, a number of us, I don't think we'd be in quite the state we would be today.

CH: You came in obviously at the end of that 1997 to 2010 series of governments. It's seen historically as a big period of change in terms of public administration, the running of government and so forth. Were you conscious of any of those changes? Were the people that you were engaging with planning...?

LD: Yeah. I think they were. I think they were. I think that we were going through a big social change period. We are obviously at the forefront now, what I'd describe as an industrial revolution. The impact – every business model, the way you communicate, the way the mobile and tablet is so fundamental to your life, the way that you buy, sell, the way you communicate on FaceTime, whatever it might be, it's all changing. It's changing everything, the landscape. It's profoundly changing. So I think that, if you go back to 2009, it was the beginning of that change in 2010 and it just carried on speeding up. I think it's a real challenge now for ministers – that's repeating what I've said earlier – they have got to steer, they've got to be sensitive to what the media and public are saying, but they've also got to stick to their guns. They've got to stick to their messages, stick to their long-term strategies. Otherwise they are just changing their mind every five minutes, according to what the latest article was. Well, you can't run a country like that.

NH: So I think you've touched on a couple of these - you mentioned FOI before and lack of long-term strategy. Was there anything else you found particularly frustrating about being a minister?

LD: I think the career planning in the Foreign Office and government departments is a major plus. I think the way they train people, language skills, moving them across departments, it's not a frustration, it's quite the reverse. I think it's just to be admired. I think the frustration is that we then don't move

8 Ministers reflect

more of them into secondments and public company boards, because they would then grow exponentially. There is so much talent in the Civil Service and a frustration would be that they are not recognised. Which I think is a big deal.

NH: Something some of our other interviewees that have come in from business have talked about is how, obviously in the corporate world, you can succession plan more and it's easier to have control over staff. Did you find that?

LD: No. I think – no. Because you know that these are part of a different stream. If you want to control them, then I think somebody needs to talk to you and explain to you how the system works. Once you know how the system works, they are part of the civil service. You are part of the government.

NH: So you saw a very clear line between what you do and...?

LD: Yes. I mean, did I want – did I fight like hell to make sure that my private secretary wasn't moving, because I'd identified her as a superstar and you are not yanking her away from me – yeah, of course. But if you think 'Well, I want to be involved in succession planning of BIS and who is the next perm secretary' – I don't think that's your job.

CH: Well, on the private office, how long did it take you to get the private office team that you wanted? You said, obviously, it took a bit of time.

LD: Six to nine months.

CH: Right. That's quite a bit of time. And were you then able to be involved in the recruitment process?

LD: Yes.

CH: Was it somebody you had already encountered or did they go through the selection?

LD: No. I just said this is what I want and they then realised that actually, you know, I was somebody who delivered. I'm just a businessperson, I think that if you are seen as a minister who just gets on with the job, you just get on with the job.

CH: What about changes of ministers that were around you at that time?

LD: Yes. There were a few changes. But not – it didn't change that much. Obviously Peter Mandelson stayed in the same job. You become incredibly sensitised to reshuffles and who is in the Cabinet, who is not, all that stuff. But I didn't have any political ambitions, so you know. I think because I was very close to the Prime Minister and Peter Mandelson and Alistair, that people were watching me. There is no doubt about that. There is a lot of people-watching in politics, which is slightly different. I suppose it's the same in business, but it's different, it's different.

NH: Did you ever get much involved with the party politics, or the parliamentary side of things?

LD: They wanted me to. I tried to sort of just do – well, I think if you get really sucked into it, then you better make clear what your ambitions are.

CH: What about being a Lords minister – how did you find the House of Lords, as a minister?

LD: Incredibly tough. I don't buy – I mean, Paul Myners, have you interviewed Paul?

NH: We are seeing him tomorrow.

LD: Paul was a genius at answering questions and had them all every day. I did agree to do questions, so did Paul. Since then, a lot of the ministers haven't done it. Alright, so Stephen Green, I don't think Ian Livingston [both former Lords Ministers for Trade and Investment], Shriti [Vadera, Lords business minister] didn't do them. Paul certainly did and so did I.

I loved the intellect of the House of Lords. I loved the questioning – it's a different style to the House of Commons. I loved the group of people that I came across, which obviously I had never met before, I didn't know many people in there. Most of my friends were on the other side. I just was in awe of them. So my admiration for the House of Lords just went through the roof. I saw how hard they worked, I saw that whatever subject came up, there was somebody who knew a lot more about it than I did. And that made me think 'wow', you know, it's incredible. Now, should the House of Lords, does it need a bit of changing? Yes. Maybe there should be an age limit etcetera, etcetera. But would I fundamentally change it? No, I think it works. It's not bust, don't fix it.

CH: And also, you had oversight of UKTI [UK Trade and Investment]. Did you find that any different from things that were directly within the purview of the departments?

LD: Well, you realise it's very difficult to get performance management into something like UKTI. I had a very good CEO in Andrew Cahn, who was great. And he and I got on really well together. But I would say that performance management was the one – not frustration, but difference between what I would describe as ordinary, cut-throat business life and running UKTI. So I had small business, civil service reform, infrastructure, automotives, trade, something else, I can't remember now. So it was a great portfolio I got.

CH: Quite sizeable.

LD: Yes. It was great.

NH: And I guess there were a few other 'goats' around at that time. Did you work much with other ministers or did you swap notes?

LD: No. Stephen Carter [then Minister for Communications, Technology and Broadcasting], a little bit, because we overlapped. Paul Myners a lot. Shriti a lot, obviously because she was at the heart of things, heart of the crisis. And the Science Minister, Lord Drayson, a little bit.

NH: Did you have a sense of working as a team?

LD: No. No. No. You were in your departments, you were part of BIS. So, I mean, look, the politicians are very good at dumping you in it. So you have got to be very streetwise when you see, you know, a car crash happening. Oh my God, it's coming my way. That is no different in any walk of life, is it? They don't want to be associated with problems and failure. So you've got to be careful you are not naïve. I only had that once.

NH: You were talking before about skills matrix. What, for you, are the essential skills needed to be an effective minister?

LD: Well, I think it sounds a bit ridiculous, but I think they mustn't be too political. They've really got to master it – they have got to stop worrying about their next job. Because politicians just worry about their standing, what the prime minister thinks of them. It's like if you are in a company, you don't spend all day thinking about what the CEO thinks of you. But they do in politics. I just was shocked at how much influence the prime minister has, because at the end of the day, there is no board of directors. The prime minister decides on the reshuffle. So I would say skills required, I think you have got to work hard,

10 Ministers reflect

you've got to master the brief. You've got to really look back at the track record of what's worked well for your predecessors, which I did a lot of. You know, what did they do well, what did they do badly, what lessons can I learn from that?

NH: Did you talk to them?

LD: Yes, I did. Yes. Went and talked to them, went and talked to Chris Patten, John Major, Blair, you name it. [Michael] Heseltine, William Waldegrave – how do you handle your red box, how do you handle the different departments coming together? Yeah. I think that ministers have got, irrespective of whether they are junior ministers, ministers of state, I mean, we were all offered to be in the Cabinet and I was an observer at most of the Cabinet meetings, but to be honest, the one thing I realised it's not about where you sit, it's about how you do the job. So titles to me are irrelevant. So you know, the Civil Service is very good at realising when a minister is not working. That is something I learned. When they realise that they've got a lazy minister or a minister that doesn't really care, they kill them. In that regard, that's why the system – I mean, I'm a huge fan of Jeremy Heywood [then Downing Street Chief of Staff], he was just fantastic to work with. Great help to me personally, just a privilege to work with him actually. So in that regard, I thought Jeremy did so much for the country, for me, for making life much easier. If I had a problem, I could call him. So I think for ministers, realise that if you are so obsessed about your own party and your own positioning then you will be, excuse my language, a shit minister. You know, master the brief, think about your legacy as soon as you are in the job. What is my legacy? You know, if I'm in the job three years, six months, two years, three years, whatever, you know you've got a max of five years and that's absolute max, so work back from there and say right, I need to start running. It's not as if you can spend the first year, 'Well, I'll get used to the job.' Well, you might be gone then.

NH: And if you were advising someone now, say someone from the business world who is thinking about taking a job as a minister, what are the key bits of advice you would give them?

LD: Well, I just had dinner with Mark Price [Minister of State for Trade and Investment since April 2016], who was looking for a bit of advice. Enjoy it, it's a privilege. You've got a window on running the country. I'm a big believer in 'You focus on the positive and not the negative', in life generally. So yeah, look, there's bureaucracy and challenges in every job you do. I don't think government is any different. So just focus on getting things done. So I would say my message would be 'Go do it!' I think it's great fun. Not everybody has succeeded, not everybody looks back on it with pride or enjoyment. I would say there is no amount of money, nothing would persuade me not to have done it, you know what I mean? I loved every second of it. Challenging, but yeah, I loved it.

CH: Would you have stayed longer if the government had been returned?

LD: That's a tricky one. Tricky. Well, because you are in – you have got to get back to your normal life, to a degree. But I love doing now – I have been in this big campaign on women on boards and done a public enquiry and done about 360 public engagements on it. So I think what that does – and Paul I know has done a lot of stuff – is it gives you an appetite for helping on public policy issues. So would I do major public policy issues again? Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. No problem at all.

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