

Ministers reflect

Lord Marland

December 2015



Lord Marland

Biographical details

House of Lords

2006-present: Conservative Member

Parliamentary Career

2012-2014: Prime Minister's Trade Envoy and Chairman of Business Ambassador Network

2012-2013: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Business, Innovation and Skills

2010-2012: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Energy and Climate Change

Lord Marland was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Peter Riddell on 19th August 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Nicola Hughes (NH): If we could start off with when you first started as a minister, could you talk us through what your experience of coming into government was like?

LM: I ran a business which had 3,500 people, so I am used to running businesses. The very easy bit was running the department, which I was asked to do by Chris Huhne [then Secretary of State] at Energy [Department of Energy and Climate Change], and all the businesses in the department. That was like falling off a log for me. And also empowering the Civil Service was a very easy fit because you were used to managing people.

The difficult bit was standing up in the House of Lords and performing and having to learn a sort of university degree in three weeks, which as you can imagine with energy and climate change, you had to know what an ohm [unit of electrical resistance] was and what our policy was on climate change and what our carbon footprint had to be and all these sort of various things. And you had to learn the detail – nuclear energy and coal power and wind farms and what our subsidies were, etc. So literally, you had to learn a university degree in three weeks and then you would have to make a statement in the House of Lords in front of, I think there were at that point, 16 former energy ministers, there was the Chairman of the Climate Change Committee, there was, you know, Nigel Lawson [former Secretary of State for Energy] and a lot of incredibly knowledgeable, interested parties.

And if you were not used to performing in that sort of scenario, and it is an incredibly special scenario because of the nature of the room – it is almost like being in the Globe, you are in a pit and you have got a whole lot of things which you are not used to doing. You are not particularly trained as a public speaker and you are not particularly trained as an orator. Not knowing what the first question is and then not knowing what the other 20 are going to be is an ordeal.

So you either take the view, I am going to run scared from this or I am going to really win this battle. So, I decided I was going to win this battle and create a sort of persona in the Lords of a bit of fun but also having complete knowledge. So I used to do every question time without a single note and that had a huge effect on people, as well at the same time, standing up to Lawson and Kinnock or whoever it was without being frightened of them. To say you were nervous would be an understatement; it wasn't nerves, it was all manner of emotions. It used to take me eight hours to prepare for eight minutes question time. So it is a huge thing, so that was the real challenge, if you like, and the rest was a doddle.

Peter Riddell (PR): That is very interesting, so business and all the other public things you've done in sport and the Commonwealth and so on, had not prepared you for that kind of public appearance?

LM: No. I mean in business, we were a public company, we would do our annual results; we would say a few words and then do some Q&A, pretty simple stuff. We knew the subject backwards and actually, the really interesting thing is that business people are on the whole really bad at making speeches. They go off for a lot of training. I went off for a lot of training and I was still not much better at it, to be honest, and then suddenly, you are forced into this environment and it really is like nothing else you have known.

NH: What about having done opposition work in the Lords?

LM: I didn't do a great deal of opposition work. I was there for three months. I asked a few questions; we didn't have a bill on either of the subjects that we were. I asked a few questions, I spoke in a few debates. It is nerve-wracking speaking in debates unless you are used to it.

PR: What support did you have when you became a minister? Both within the departmental role and also within the Lords role, did anyone help you?

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LM: No, not in the performance in the Lords, not at all. I was given a speech writer who I discarded because I liked writing and making my own speeches and I don't really write speeches, I just ramble [*laughs*] as I am doing now!

So you are given little support in the Lords. I remember one or two of the 'old and bold' sort of tut-tutting when I hadn't said 'My Noble Lord' or I thanked people too much or something like that. By and large, people are very generous to you in the place, they know that you are new to it. They want you to do well. They are not looking at you thinking, 'I hope the bastard screws it up' – they probably were actually in my case [*laughs*]! But by and large, people want you to do quite well and if you've got a bit of humour about it they really like that.

NH: And when you first entered office, what were your big priorities; what were the big things you wanted to achieve?

LM: Well, [Chris] Huhne was a very good minister to work with. We became quite [good] allies because I was no threat to his job and I could give him some insight into the Conservative Party, who he was in coalition with... to which he took not a blind bit of notice, largely. But what he basically said at the beginning was 'You have been in business all of your life, you run all the businesses, get them under control, you do the spending review, you reorganise the department' and it was an absolute pleasure and relatively easy.

The challenge was, and this was the real challenge of government, as I see it and from my perspective, it is almost like winding the clock back a bit because when [Margaret] Thatcher got into power, most of her ministers were in their 50s; they had all done things, most of them had run things, so they were very skilled at running the business side of an organisation. When [Tony] Blair got into power, few of his ministers had run things. They had not [got] experience of running things. And indeed, when [David] Cameron got into power, the same thing happened; there were two or three ministers who had an idea of how to run a business and the problem situation we had in our government is you have got a bunch of people who start to learn how to run things the second time around, which is what Blair started to do. They started to understand, they had five years learning. And the same with Cameron and his team, they have had five years learning how to run a government. The civil servants therefore were expected to make huge commercial decisions, to challenge commercial decisions, to do a lot of commercial activity which, of course, they were not trained for.

So when an organisation gets someone who actually is prepared to make a decision, is not interested in passing it down various layers and is largely supportive of them as individuals and gives them very clear instructions, they by and large, [they] love it. They are terrified by having to deal with the Western Rail Contract of £3bn or nuclear decommissioning of £10bn a year. They do not have the skill set to do it. They are not trained to do it. This is not a criticism, this is how we have employed our civil servants and so you have had this very perfect storm of civil servants not having the skills to do it, civil servants actually being thinned out quite significantly and wrongly within their own service because of the structure of their own organisation, and ministers not understanding how to run the business of government.

So I will be very interested in how Cameron does it second time round, the same way it probably was with Blair. I think you were more of an observer than I was, but it does not make for good government. You have got wrong skill sets going into government; there is not enough balance and you know, if you look at who Cameron is appointing now, political decisions are driving his appointments not necessarily the best person for the job.

NH: You mentioned the Thatcher government and skills from business, was there anyone you saw as being a really good role model as a minister?

LM: What in those days?

NH: In general is there anyone you thought those are the sorts of skills, that is the sort of person I...

LM: Well, I think [Michael] Heseltine had the skills to go out and actually do things. Obviously [Nigel] Lawson because he had been a banker and he had that experience. I mean, you had [Peter] Walker; you had David Young. Most had been in some form of business because they had been out of power for quite a long time or not been in favour.

And then name me a businessman who was in the Blair government? Robinson perhaps, he really wasn't in the government but he was the only person who, in theory, did business. And then name people who had been in business in the current government: [Philip] Hammond was in business, Justine Greening, but largely, you know, they had come up through the political [ranks].

PR: What are the plusses and minuses of business experience?

LM: Well you know how government is. The business of government is a seriously big business and if you are going to make people redundant or instruct redundancies, you have got to understand firstly, the compassionate side of redundancy because actually most of them have never sat down with an individual and said 'I am terribly sorry but it is over' and look them straight in the eye and you know, 'I have four kids and what am I going to do now', sort of thing. They have seldom had that requirement to do that sort of thing and so they have never had the ability really to understand and select X, Y or Z from the same job. And if you look at government now, they don't say well 'He is best at...the best salesman we have got, so let's put him into the sales bit' or 'He is the best person' or 'She is the best person for that particular skill'. It is just you know, politically, 'I want to have that person here and that person there'.

So, you are not putting round pegs in round holes, you are just putting people in the places that you think... if you think of Chris Grayling, he knew nothing about the law, nothing about lawyers, how they operate, etc and yet he was sent into bat and, not surprisingly, he did not get on very well with them. And Michael Gove doesn't either but actually will probably do it in a different way and will have learned from his previous role.

So, a lot of it is there are a lot of people issues in government and, of course, there are a lot of businesses. If you look at [the Department of] Energy and Climate Change, I was sort of responsible for the Coal Board that we had, also all the nuclear decommissioning, the new nuclear power station, we had to decide on the old nuclear power stations, we then had the subsidies that had been awarded. I mean, no commercial person would have given the subsidies that we are now reaping the whirlwind of.

PR: What are the bits that business does not prepare you for in politics because after all the record has been a mixed one?

LM: [Laughter] I mean, in business, you are all-powerful. You know, I had 3,500 people and if I wanted a car to take us to the Savoy for lunch [clicks fingers] a car took me to the Savoy for lunch. If I wanted my bag carried from A to B, if I wanted British Airways to pick me up at my door, you know, you are all powerful. If you are running a big organisation and you send out instructions, the instruction is carried out and to the letter.

Here, you have got to manage your relationships with a whole bunch of people who are of equal merit. So that is the first thing and that is a huge frustration for people in business. They cannot understand why they can't say, 'Go and sell 10% of widgets' and the people around there saying, 'Well we can't do it and we have got a process'. So that is a huge frustration for people.

Secondly, it is this business of having to perform and having to make speeches and having to be very humble, actually. And I learnt that you had to start right from the bottom. If I had not, I think I would have found it unbelievably frustrating. And then, of course, there is the politics of it all, which is that you find yourself working with a bunch of people who you slightly end up holding in contempt, actually, because you just wonder what they are doing and what they know about anything. So there is that

frustration.

I think finally, it is the fact that most politicians are really only in it for themselves. There is no real community of spirit in trying to achieve in the current environment. In business, you have got to have the team all rowing in the same direction. If they don't you fire them. In politics, everyone is rowing in their own direction, you know, they are all in scull boats rather than in eights if that means anything to you? And they will climb over their own mother and grandmother to get to the top. I used to laugh because I refused to do any media at all and let the great elected body go do it. Someone would come into the minister's meeting and say BBC Wales would like to do an interview with us or something or other. The four of them would go straight out the door in a scramble to be on BBC Wales. They would spend their full time, if they could, going around studios. And of course, it gives them so much trouble, as much as they think it benefits [them].

NH: And how would you describe the main roles and duties of a minister?

LM: Well, I think it depends on what job you are given and it also depends on what department. I mean, I was for a short time in BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills], which is a department grossly overloaded with ministers. Most of us were put in to keep an eye on Vince [Cable]. But it is grossly overloaded, so each minister has got a very small portfolio of stuff. I was given Intellectual Property and I said to Vince if I don't get more than this I am going, and so I went, because frankly I had sorted Intellectual Property quite quickly.

So it depends on each department what the role of the minister is. And of course, it depends on the minister. I mean, you mentioned earlier on Lords ministers. Lords ministers, really all they do is carry a bill through and speak... they don't really have any influence on the proceedings. I was not a Lords minister per se in either case. And being a Lords minister is to me an incredibly boring thing, that's all you are because all you do is take legislation through and answer questions and there are a lot of people who love legislation and taking it through and the debate surrounding it but to me, it is not really running the country or changing the way the country is being run. So I think it depends on the individual and the jobs they're given. I mean, some are very substantial jobs and I was very lucky because not only was I doing Energy but I also became the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy. I was also on the Civil Service Reform Board. I was also on the Government Assets Committee. So it was a pretty full day.

NH: In terms of the day-to-day reality of it, how did you spend most of your time?

LM: Well, it got to the point where I could not really carry on being a minister if I was expected to do question time, legislation, and be on an aeroplane all the time. I mean, I did 52 countries in the last six months as a Trade Envoy, so doing Kuala Lumpur for a day is nothing, you are constantly trying to rebuild the trade thing. You know, you cannot attend Parliament as well as being on an aeroplane.

It is a surprise Dave [Cameron] doesn't use [the] Lords or non-political people well is because we can take on a lot of work. We don't have a constituency to run back to. We are not interested in our own personal... we are doing it for love. I did not take a salary because I just felt it was wrong. We were doing it for genuine public service of which we get no thanks by the way. So he doesn't use enough the resources that are at his disposal. We can work Fridays and we can work Thursdays and we can work weekends and we can go and do lots of other things.

PR: It is very interesting these divisions of roles you describe – doing the [House of] Lords stuff where you are setting questions, sending bills through and the departmental stuff. Traditionally, many ministers in the Lords were doing the Lords stuff rather than doing the substance of working in departments. And you can argue that over the last 15/20 years there was a gradual increase in the number of ministers in the Lords who are doing proper departmental jobs. There are more of them.

LM: Freud, Sassoon, Green... yes, I mean, there weren't that many, most of them were spokesmen.

PR: Yes. Did you have an unexpected event or crisis in the department and how did your background enable you to deal with it? You know something just hits you, which you had in business by definition; how did you find that as a minister?

LM: Well, if you are in business and without blowing my own trumpet, which I apologise for, but you know, if you have been successful in business it is because you have been successful in dealing... with the challenge of the problem coming in your direction. And actually that is the fascinating bit – ‘This is the problem, let’s solve it, we will solve it’. And of course the Civil Service love that. They love direction of travel and they love someone who is going to be strong dealing in... well not all of them, of course, but a lot of them.

You can never please everyone all the time but the way I deal with it, if anything happened and of course, I didn’t have the short-term issues that politicians get because not doing any publicity and not one to have my name in the frame, there were very few moments where the shit hit the fan if you know what I mean. But clearly, there were times when we had a series of nuclear attempts at the site and it is like in business, you engender a collective group of civil servants to help achieve the aim.

PR: Well that is very interesting because there are totally different styles of working aren’t there? I mean yours is maybe a more business one and some people like lots and lots written down.

LM: Yes and mine was that. I like to see the colour of their eyes when they are telling me something, rather than six pages of stuff and hidden in it somewhere is, ‘Minister, we think you should do this’. I like them to come in and tell me why they think I should do this and to be challenged on it. And that was the thing that was very rewarding for a number of civil servants and not so for some!

PR: You said you had a good relationship with Chris Huhne. How much did you feel you had discretion as a junior minister within the department and also within a coalition structure too?

LM: Oh a lot because I had the full support of the other two ministers who were Greg Barker and Charles Hendry, at the time. They were friends of mine anyway and they both felt I knew what I was doing and I felt they knew what they were doing. We had one or two areas where we disagreed. With Charles it was over smart meters where I wanted to crunch down the amount of time and resources that we were spending on them and he wanted to maintain them. I just had to find cost cuts from other areas.

PR: What do you regard as your big achievement in office?

LM: It is not for me to say what my achievements were. The things that satisfied me most whether they were achievements or not, are firstly and this is in no particular order, so just conquering the business of appearing at the Lords and being able to stand up and public speak so that was, for me, if you like the part of my skills that I did not have before I went in and then I had when I went out.

I think opening trade relationships with some of the biggest countries in the world which had completely died. I mean, Malaysia for example, you know, the amount of Malaysia monies coming in, the Kuwaitis, the Qataris, the Angolans, just starting countries that we had not done trade or had not had a minister to some of these countries... no Minister had ever been to Angola, let alone... and it is the richest country in Africa. You know, just things like that. Getting those relationships going and then buying into British.

I think totally reforming the way that our nuclear power stations were protected was a massive reform which of course, we are not really allowed to talk about but I mean, that was a complete shambles. It was unbelievable, a potential disaster. They were so badly protected and so dangerous, it was just extraordinary. If you were able to throw a rucksack 50 yards, 30 yards, you would be able to land it on the most volatile site which would have taken out Paris. That is how bad it was.

So I think the total reform we had of that and various other reforms we changed. I think just getting some discipline back into the department on how it operated was fun and I think the only legacy that... lasting legacy will forever exist would be Battersea Power Station which I was the minister responsible for getting that going.

PR: Yes, I go past it quite often.

LM: Well, it is fascinating seeing the towers coming down and going back up again which I was utterly insistent upon and actually getting the Malaysians... they were brilliant, they are still.

PR: What about the internal relationships in the department? I mean you didn't have special advisers, did they have a useful role at all?

LM: No.

PR: I mean they were purely for Chris Huhne but they would not have...?

LM: Well every politician wants a special adviser. I think they are an absolute menace because actually if you are going to have the Civil Service working for you, a special adviser is not going to help you. I totally disagree with Francis [Maude, then Cabinet Office Minister] on this, and others. You know, you have got to work with what you have got. If they are not good enough, you have got to make them better.

PR: What about the quality of civil servants you were dealing with in the department?

LM: DECC [Department for Energy and Climate Change] had some brilliant civil servants. Some people were way out of their depth in terms of the size of the stuff they had to do and this goes back to what I was saying earlier about the fact civil servants were being expected to do things which they were not qualified for. But within the departments, there were some brilliant people, absolutely brilliant people. Young, highly intelligent, really willing to work, getting the point, we had some really excellent ones but [less so] at the top, the very senior level. They made some poor appointments.

PR: Would you bring in more outsiders in to those sort of positions?

LM: I think you have got to now because I think the quality of a lot of the really top ones is poor and I travelled, as I say... I must have done 75 countries and it was amazing seeing the vast difference of Ambassadors and their roles and what they perceived of their roles and how some were just hopeless and some were absolutely brilliant. But if it's someone's turn in the system, you know, the next lottery comes up was yours, you got it.

NH: What about your private office, you presumably worked closely with them, how did you use them?

LM: Well they acted almost as spads [special advisers] but not political spads, they acted as spads. I mean, I don't believe in the politics of it. I believe that we are there to govern and to do what is best for government. Yes, there are political elements which we have to debate and get right and there are always political compromises but there are compromises in business as well. You know, one department wants to do something, another doesn't, it does not mean you say no to one or yes to both. But by and large the compromises are very limited and actually, everyone says the coalition must have been very difficult, it was an absolute doddle; it was so easy. The reason I stopped working in DECC was because [Ed] Davey was not going to carry out the reforms that were necessary which he himself agreed to but he was just not going to be able to do them because he just didn't have the skill set. So I knew we would be rowing over it but Huhne, we disagreed on two things, perhaps.

PR: What about relations with other departments? How did you observe that? I know you worked in BIS for a short time but I was thinking Treasury, Cabinet Office and so on?

LM: It was fine and I felt that the Treasury had some good people in it. I think some of the people thought they knew more than they did but... I thought Danny [Alexander, then Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury] was an excellent minister by the way and very easy to deal with and very sensible. But no, the other departments, we all worked very fine. It largely, for someone like me, it is easy because I am not a threat to them. I do not want their constituency; I can't be Prime Minister and I have known most of them through being Treasurer of the Party and all that sort of stuff for a long time. So largely, relationships for me were easy.

PR: Is there a limit to what a Lords minister can do?

LM: No. The limit is that the Prime Minister will not promote them into Cabinet so you are limited in that you will not be a Secretary of State and you will find... Tom Strathclyde was the only minister in Cabinet.

PR: But it is interesting, Labour has given more jobs to its Lords ministers than the Tories ever have. Andrew Adonis and Peter Mandelson had substantive portfolios.

LM: Yes. But definitely I think this is the mistake Dave has made, why the Lords is not really his friend.

NH: What did you find most frustrating about being a minister?

LM: The most frustrating or is that one item or...

NH: [Laughter] you can have a range!

LM: One book! I think the frustrating thing is that the quality of people in government, both as politicians and as the Civil Service is not anything like it should be and as a result you found you were carrying a lot. If you are energetic, you just find you are carrying a lot on your shoulders for a lot of the time and then it gets to the point... I mean, the reason I gave up was (a), it was thankless, no one ever thanked you which is fair enough, you know, but you would quite like someone just occasionally say 'Terrific, thank you very much for doing that' or something like [that] but (b), and it is relentless. And it is relentless and thankless and when the thankless bit becomes relentless but also, it is when you end up realising that actually the group of people you are working with are largely only in it for themselves and, you know, on the turn of a sixpence going to say something for the sake of the aerial warfare that has no thought as to how it might affect other people, the rest of the team and of course you see, in business, you do not get that.

NH: How would you improve that in government? It seems like a systemic issue or is there something you think could be done to get everyone working more cohesively?

LM: Well the trouble is, they are obsessed by media, by how it appears on television. They are obsessed by an army of spads running around. If you have ever tried to have a cup of tea with the queen, you know, you don't go through one layer to get to the queen, you go through five layers of people and eventually, you get an answer that trickles down and the answer is no or yes and it is much easier for someone to text her and she says, 'Oh yes, let's pencil it in the diary and tell my staff'. And that is the problem, they end up carrying so many people around them doing this, that, and the other, all of which... All these spads have got their own agendas as well actually. They are not entirely the agendas for their boss, they are the agendas for themselves and of course we're all ambitious and interested in own cause but most of us go forward with the benefit of... and that is really the problem, there is too much playing the politics rather than doing the government.

NH: How would you define an effective minister?

LM: I think an effective minister is someone who is doing the job of governing and from time to time advises the public of what he is setting out to do – Parliament and the public - what he is setting out to

do and why he is setting out to do it, and then going back to implement it, subject to it having had approval and also collaborating with your colleagues. And actually, in the end, it is collaborating with your colleagues and being a team player that will allow you to flourish. And being able to delegate allows you to flourish. So, I think those sort of things.

NH: And is there anything you would have done differently in your approach to the role?

LM: Oh sure, I mean, how long have you got? I mean there are one or two decisions that I would have made differently. No I mean actually let's leave it there.

PR: Would you have more formal induction processes for new ministers coming in? Would that prepare them better for the role for the specific roles that you described?

LM: Yes, I think they need a hell of a lot of training. They are all walking into, you know, you are walking into a sort of permanent elephant trap. There are a couple of things I regret saying, you know, which I got into trouble for. As jokes, I regret saying them but by and large, I got away scot-free because (a) I did not do any publicity and (b) I could always turn round and say to them I am doing this for nothing and I am terribly sorry we have got to fire you but you know, I am doing this for nothing. So I was lucky.

PR: Would you advise other business people, people with business management [experience who'd] set-up and run companies, do the same as you did?

LM: Some but not all. I mean, the mistake they make is shovelling in all these people, you know. Sassoon was excellent but he had come out of business into the Treasury and had been there as a civil servant. [Lord] Freud has been excellent at it, even though he made one cock-up, most unfairly treated, but he has been brilliant. So there are some who understand how to do it and the art of it.

But there are others who have not got a clue and their egos are so big – and our egos are huge in business because we are all powerful you know, we walk through offices and people, you know, every one of them you are paying and if you say 'The moon is blue', the moon is blue. This is a totally... you know your ego is going to get a huge battering if you are not very careful. It is that business that if you have got an ego, which I have, as you can tell, you have to be more sycophantic.

NH: Is there anything else that you would like to add or anything that we have not asked you?

LM: I think I have said enough [laughter].

PR: One thing which follows on from what you have just said, which is do you think that people coming in, as you did, at least internally, impose a time limit on how long they can be useful for?

LM: For me, the reason I wanted to move on from DECC was because I had done everything I needed to do in three years. There was a set of tasks, I knew I had a job to do and I am better at initiating stuff, getting them going, rather than being the person who does the long stretch.

But you need to have someone who is sitting on top of you who recognises the strengths and weaknesses of the people who are working for you. And because the Prime Minister is involved in so many things and involves himself in so many things, because they have not been involved in being able to run an organisation and I am sure it would be better in the second term, you know, he ends up with too many people, too many advisers in Number 10 advising him, contrary to the advice he might be given by one of his colleagues in the department, I mean, what is that all about?

So if you have got someone who understands the team of people he has got and what they are good at, then you direct them to it and I said to the Prime Minister, 'You need a trouble shooter. You need

someone who is going to run your own office far better than it is now and you need people doing various things. You need a junior minister in each department who can run something or has run something and then you will get a government running properly. And then it really doesn't matter about the political stuff that is going on'.

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