

Ministers reflect

Lord O'Neill

January 2017



Lord O'Neill – biographical details

Electoral History

2015-present: Member of the House of Lords

Parliamentary Career

2015-2016: Commercial Secretary (HM Treasury)

Lord O'Neill was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Jill Rutter on 17th January 2017 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): I wanted to start with your coming into government. I know that you had done a lot of thinking and work on the Northern Powerhouse idea outside of government. But talk us through what it was like actually coming into the department - how you got the job and what your initial impressions were?

Lord O'Neill (LON): First of all, the Northern Powerhouse was basically my idea, it originates from when I was chairing this 12-month independent commission for the RSA [Royal Society of Arts].

So, when the election took place, I thought that there might be a chance that a new government might ask me to give some sort of advice in some way, ironically especially if it were Labour, as they had asked me in advance in a nonspecific way. At the time, I was already leading an independent review on antimicrobial resistance – probably the most stimulating thing I've ever done in my life, by the way. We'd already got into having influence and I was reporting to the then Prime Minister, so I thought there could be some kind of role and I also thought that if the Labour party won, there was a chance that they might ask me to do something.

The Monday morning following the election, I'm around my office at home. My phone rings: 'Hi Jim, it's George Osborne here'. He'd already embraced the idea of the Northern Powerhouse. He said 'I've got an idea for you - I want you to become a minister.' I said 'What?!' – 'I want you to come and be a minister in the Treasury.'

The idea of me being a minister in the first place – I was like 'Forget it!' And the idea, which we joked about – but also with some seriousness – that I'd become a minister for a Conservative government. So, it was all a bit out of the blue, it was a bit of a surprise. I said to George 'How long have I got?' He said 'A couple of hours.' I said 'I don't know; can't I just advise you like I have been doing?' He said, 'No, we need a minister in the House of Lords.' 'House of Lords!?' He said 'Oh yeah, you'll become Lord O'Neill'. I needed a couple of hours to think about it, and ask those I value about their views. But it was hard to say no.

NH: It's an interesting point you raise – on reflection now, what do you think it was that you could do as a minister that you couldn't do as an adviser or being slightly separate?

LON: I wasn't sure of course, but the ability to make decisions would be probably bigger than just suggesting ideas. Although I only realised afterwards, the extent of my power – because of what George had specifically asked me to do – actually was surprisingly big, but I just assumed that's how it was. The reason why I'd agreed to do it was that I hoped I would be able to influence things. My remit was essentially all the bits that Lord Deighton, my predecessor, was doing that I inherited as well as the fun bits – and the reason why I said yes, was of course the Northern Powerhouse and also our whole thing with China and India and owning the productivity agenda. I was like, 'Oh wow! I can actually come up with ideas that might influence that.' I thought 'Why not?'

JR: And did you also have to do things like Treasury questions in the Lords and that sort of stuff?

LON: Oh yes, yes. Yes, so in the two hours I had to think about whether to accept it, I wanted to speak to two people that understand me really well, and they told me that the Lords questions and commitments would test my patience. They both said, 'Well, how can you say no?' But one said, 'You will hate the House of Lords' – and that's why I left. This is something that's got to be changed – the ministerial duty in the House of Lords is just ridiculous.

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NH: Because you're answering questions on such a wide range of stuff?

LON: It's partly because of the nature of the Lords. I got a lot of the responsibilities given to a whip. If I had done the normal Treasury Lords duties, including all the questions, I wouldn't have lasted three months. So luckily all I had to do was whenever the Chancellor did something in the Commons, I would have to do it in the Lords, and of course major debates on economics and finance. The thing that took time, which is why I said it needs to change and is partly because of the current situation [of not having a Conservative majority in the Lords] is that I had to be around for every possible vote. So you have to completely abandon any personal life – most weeks on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. You know, for somebody who doesn't have political views, and I don't, it was boring and an inefficient use of time. How there is not modern technology for those who are in the Lords is just ridiculous.

NH: Did you get much advice or support from the department on how to handle the Lords?

LON: Oh yeah. In the private office, I had a devoted person. They were very good, although/and they are highly respectful of the system and the status quo. Over time I found myself going, 'This is what I will or won't do' – but yeah, I got advice.

NH: Coming into a government department as you have done from the economics and business world, the private sector, what else struck you as being different or surprising about government?

LON: So there's a lot of important things to mention here. Some of it, particularly the day job, ended up being a pleasant surprise. My only previous real experience of government was that I'd been a non-executive Board member, briefly with the Department for Education. Having spent nearly 20 years at Goldman Sachs, I found that DfE seemed very bureaucratic and hierarchical and I just assumed that that's what every government department is like. I had also been told, many years earlier, that since the independence of the Bank of England was introduced in '97, that all the top Treasury people have disappeared.

Now, I say all that because I found the culture of the Treasury really very good. I think maybe again, it was something to do with my style, but for the things that I was trying to do my engagement with different Treasury departments was fabulous, particularly with the younger people that seemed ambitious and eager to come up with ideas. The best compliment I could give them, and I think it was quoted in the media once, is that it often reminded me of Goldman Sachs except people had a better purpose. So I thought the culture in the Treasury was really good.

NH: So obviously, you brought in a huge amount of knowledge...

LON: Well, I pretended that I did! [laughter]

NH: ...having done work previously on the Northern Powerhouse. But are there any particular skills you think that business people from outside can bring into government that perhaps don't exist among the more generalist ministers?

LON: Yeah definitely, definitely. So, not all business people, but good business people can. One of the biggest things I learnt in my business life is something called $Q \times A = E$, that is Quality of Idea x Accessibility = Effectiveness. So your 'Q' can be 11 out of 10, so you have a brilliant idea - but if you can't put the idea over the right way and the 'A' is zero, then 'E' is zero. And there's a lot of that in government.

JR: Do you think the real problem is that the 'A's are too low or that the 'Q's aren't high enough? Is it a real problem with the quality of ideas or is the problem the accessibility of ideas?

LON: So, it's the 'A'. The 'A' is a huge problem, even in the Treasury where there's a lot more focus, it's a problem there.

JR: I think Treasury officials sometimes come up with 'A's that are negative – but anyway... [laughter]

LON: And from my engagement with other departments, which I had to do quite a bit of, I would say the 'Q' of other places were a bit murky. I remember one of the things I was asked to do was to chair a committee about the steel crisis. We would have to have meetings with very emotional and severely pressured steel employees and the trade unions and sometimes officials would turn up with rather uninspiring, bland things. I remember saying to my private office, 'You can't go through the motions of just having a meeting for the sake of ticking a box if you're going to use my time effectively.' The purpose of having a meeting is to try and achieve something and the whole system is riddled with a lot of meetings for the sake of meetings.

NH: Related to that, give us a sense of how would you spend a typical week. What would your diary look like?

LON: So, of course the other thing about a private office is that they like to fill up your day with meetings. Actually as soon as the leadership changed, my diary dramatically changed, which is a huge issue in my opinion. Huge issue. But for the first 15 months: many weeks I'd be as busy as I was during my life at Goldman Sachs. Especially because of the voting thing, my days would be extremely full. It was a combination of three things. I had quite a broad portfolio; two of the issues which [George] Osborne was completely focused on and was very excited about, so the whole Northern Powerhouse agenda and China. There was a huge buzz around those two things, which secondly would mean a lot of people would come and visit, so the pressure on my diary manager was big. Then the third thing was that there was this natural tendency in the private office to try and have your day filled up anyhow. So the idea that you could sit around for three hours doing nothing didn't exist. Sometimes I would say, 'Well what is the purpose of that meeting?'

JR: So you didn't ask them to account time for reading and thinking because the Civil Service sort of oppose a vacuum...?

LON: I mean, I'd have that kind of conversation with my Private Secretary. I had a great Private Secretary, she was really good and we had a very frank way with each other, I'd trust her advice. So they kind of adapted and learned. It was quite funny because Paul Deighton and I both came from the same institution, so everybody just assumed that he and I were the same! And we obviously have great experiences of being in the same organisation, but we're chalk and cheese. Paul is great at delivering projects, I am more of a researcher, ideas person.

JR: You were still quite different things in the same organisation, weren't you?

LON: Very different. Paul was Goldman's Chief Operating Officer. So, for example, on infrastructure which I inherited - I had four things, the three I said and I inherited and also stuff to do with infrastructure projects specifically – which I was less interested in – that's what Paul was really good at. But I had some influence on the whole Independent Infrastructure Commission: first thing I did with all that was say 'We need a 50-year infrastructure plan because everything's just stuck together with sellotape and one government comes in and changes things, so there's no strategic thought.'

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JR: So one of the big differences between business and government is that in business, people try to create effective teams whereas in government, ministerial teams are put together perhaps not with the same sense that you're trying to create people with complementary skills to give unified leadership to a department. How did that strike you, the way the ministerial team worked?

LON: So here's what seems to me to be the reality – the idea that there's a chosen team, that's for the birds. One of the big things I had confirmed – it started as my suspicion – is that a lot of these characters are motivated by where they are and where they are going in the political game.

That said, I was brought in specifically by George to do a specific thing, so there was a bit more of that then. In hindsight, I was probably very lucky because in the name of how they described me, all I was was a junior minister but, you know, I was the guy that was driving the Northern Powerhouse and I was the guy that was driving China. Again because of my Goldman Sachs experience, I was very much into the team approach, so when it came to officials I found it easy to work with different teams. But the idea of different MPs and ministers working in teams... no.

NH: And so talk us through the Northern Powerhouse then, turning that from a strategy to something that was happening on the ground. How did you go about that in the Treasury?

LON: Well importantly, George had already embraced the idea, essentially nine months before, so it had some momentum but let me say three or four things with that opening comment. The first thing is that when I appeared, most people in the country and most people inside government thought it was a bit of a public relations game. So, one part of me thought 'Well, that's a bit disappointing' but also I thought, actually, that's kind of good because to turn that into something more serious than that perception is going to be quite easy to do. The second thing – linked to much of my career – is that I just thought to try to get certain key parts of the Northern Powerhouse's dogma into key people's minds we needed to just reiterate the mantra to the point of it being boring. My experience of successful delivery of an idea is that you've got to be really focused. So that was the second thing.

The third thing was to try and extract the best I could from the brain power of the remarkable civil service system and the officials that were there. Because it had this excitement about it and the very fact that Osborne had done something like this, you could tell that had raised the excitement level for officials, so there were a lot of young, smart people who were eager to get involved. So I did the same as I used to do with some of my research people at Goldman – come up with ideas to take all of us out of our comfort zones as to what is going to make this work. So we quite quickly got into a bit of a virtuous circle. Then the fourth part is the whole interaction with local policy leaders in the north, many of whom I had got to know – but then it was me as a minister, as opposed to me, some guy with a big mouth. Quite a difference. So I had all those four things playing individually, it was thrilling!

JR: And when governments have tried to do some of these things before, particularly when it's not done it from Treasury, it's sort of fallen down because it requires lots of other government departments. So there's a question about how you run that?

LON: Looking back, the other thing, which may have come out of your other interviews, is that it so happened that there was this unique relationship between Cameron and Osborne. That close relationship probably hasn't been there in modern history between Number 10 and the Treasury. George and David worked well together and were sort of running the country together. So that gave me so much credibility; that they'd brought me in to do Northern Powerhouse and people basically believed, quite rightly, that George was going to embrace it. That helped to motivate the Treasury, who had been harder to engage when I was doing the City Growth Commission.

NH: This might sound like an odd question, but are there any ways in which having such strong prime ministerial backing and such strong backing from the Chancellor was actually a hindrance?

LON: So, of course, there was resentment amongst other ministers in other departments; yes of course, in light of the fact that I was some junior minister that seemed to basically have the ear of Number 10 and 11 and major influence on this initiative.

Similarly, the way the whole civil service works was that officials in departments, well their job was to serve the minister. They'd come into meetings with my officials and they would all try and defend their patch. I said, 'Look, do you want to be involved in something that's going to be going on or not?' And they wouldn't quite know how to deal with me! [laughter] So yeah, there was plenty of that.

JR: We talked quite a lot about the changes post the referendum. So if we could think about reshuffles...

LON: Oh my god, yeah. I was completely stunned by how the whole thing happened and remain pretty stunned. Of course it doesn't happen very often. Existing Prime Minister goes, new one comes in and the whole system is guessing who's going to be in whatever positions and then you have to basically sit around waiting for a phone call as to whether you're going to be asked to stay or not, which is pretty unnerving. I think she came in on the Wednesday and there are specific reasons why it was even more difficult in my case, but I finally got called on the Saturday afternoon about 4 o'clock. I had basically been told to be ready from Friday morning onwards and it reminded me of waiting for my 'O' level results or something!

In my case, it was particularly troublesome because George Osborne's team had planned to do another big trip to China that was due to start on Thursday, which I was going to go on, for four days. So, the new Chancellor comes in, and this trip was based around the G20 meeting, so he had to go. But I got some message while I'm waiting in limbo – unsure whether I'm even going to be asked to stay – that I wouldn't be needed on this trip. So I thought that means I'm probably out, but I didn't know. Because of my background and because everybody knew that I was the guy that drove China, I had all these people in the private sector that had been lined up to go on this trip saying 'What's happening with the China trip?' I said 'Well how do I know?' I thought the communications could have been better handled.

Anyway, I went back in to continue the Northern Powerhouse work. The style of Number 10 had changed, I think initially it was more controlling. Because of the referendum and the leadership election there had already been a long time where it felt like government policy making had been frozen, which was frustrating. I remember saying to the Lords after the referendum, 'Don't take ten weeks to choose a new leader' – the financial markets would not like that much uncertainty.

NH: You mentioned the control from Number 10, but what else had changed?

LON: I'm now three months from it, but I think Cabinet members have less decision making power than they did under Cameron. I'm not experienced enough to take a judgment of which way is right, but the contrast is there.

JR: You mentioned giving things up to become a minister, but I'm just quite interested about the AMR [Antimicrobial resistance] Review, because you had a massive influence on the review but you didn't have to give up anything presumably to do it. I'm just quite interested in the contrast of those roles of being a minister and doing a review?

LON: Yes, that's probably the most interesting thing I've ever done in my life, so I reflect on it frequently. Some part of my brain thinks, as a minister, obviously you have official ability to do something but as that review showed that if you choose to operate in a different style, or you happen to

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be lucky or whatever, you can get stuff done without being a minister. I probably wouldn't be a minister again.

JR: Would you do another independent review?

LON: Well, I've done two.

JR: If it was a different topic?

LON: Probably not, because the two I've done have been so influential the likelihood that a third one would have the same success is going to be small, so for that reason I probably wouldn't, but I very much enjoyed the experience of both. Partly it might be because each were of a known time dimension and that factor together with my personality meant that I wasn't inhibited by anything or anybody. So, once we realised what the issues were, we just went for what we thought were the right solutions, whereas of course, once you are a minister, you're part of the system and there are more constraints.

JR: I'm quite intrigued, you've experienced the range of ways in which government uses non-politicians – so you've been a non-executive in a department, you've been a minister and you've led an independent review and that's our sort of suite of options that we have. Reflecting on those and given government's got massive challenges and doesn't have that many people internally who've made it in business or have experience elsewhere – if you were advising a future Chancellor or PM on how best to bring in other talent, what would you suggest would be a good way to do that effectively?

LON: The most important, simple thing is if you are going to bring in somebody that's outside the regular system, you've got to be prepared to give them... not power, but the independence or something close to what they had in business to be effective, otherwise it's pointless. I didn't want to be sitting round in the Lords waiting for votes, unable to influence things, I wouldn't find that motivating. It makes me reflect back and I was very grateful to both David and George for what they wanted from me in the roles that I played. Non-exec? You know, it probably there depends on the exact minister or the department and how you want to use them.

JR: I think people seem to have had different experiences in different departments, and depending on whether the minister is used to using non-executives.

LON: Yes, and I found that all the non-execs I worked with at DfE approached it differently – some of them were more hands-on than others, it's very dependent on all that and on how you view your relationship with the Secretary of State.

The other thing I found myself thinking about as you asked that question is that I think the system has to think a little bit more carefully about special advisers. It's going to sound like specific criticism of the special advisers around George, but I don't mean that at all and again because I was an insider I worked well with all of them. But you get all these young bright things who have no accountability really to anybody other than the Secretary of State, and so there's the Whitehall bubble and then there's another bubble inside it and they all surround each other in this intense working mode and dream up idea after idea and try to pursue them, without always road-testing things in the real world. The relationship between spads and officials needs to be worked on, in my view. A lot of officials become scared of the spads, whereas my understanding of the constitution is they shouldn't be. But, you know, if officials were going down a path that the spads didn't like, the spads would make it very clear and an official would, rather than say 'Well, you know, I'm an official, I'm doing my job', they would say 'The spads don't like it' and stop.

JR: One of the other criticisms of Whitehall is the lack of diversity, London centrism, that whole thing?

LON: Completely true. The famous two Treasury documents on the referendum are in my mind, as you say that. I was perfectly happy about the fact that I wasn't directly involved in any of that but because of my background, obviously I had got at least as much experience about economic stuff as anybody in the Treasury, give or take. So, the first one went out and in terms of the economic arguments, it was so overwhelming that the Treasury, they owned the argument. So, when I heard that they were planning a second one, I thought it was unnecessary. This is the second one about how house prices were going to drop and all sorts about how devastating leaving would be. I said, 'Look, you don't need to even do that; we own the economic argument, the danger in doing it is there'll be something in it that you don't judge right and the opposition will jump on it' and sure enough, that's partly what happened. It's easy to get wrapped up in what you're doing and forget how the real world will take it.

NH: I'm interested in some of your thoughts on Brexit. You were saying you did stuff with China and were involved in international trade. Looking ahead now to government, what would be your advice to them on how to get trade going?

LON: Well, two other things that directly relate to my frustration. I emphasise again, the main reason why I left is because of the amount of time spent in the Lords but, you know, if there was a case for a golden relationship with China beforehand, the case is even stronger and if there was a case for a Northern Powerhouse project focus beforehand, you would think that the case is even stronger. But it's hard because it's associated with the old regime, to some extent.

I hope that we can repair the relationship with China after the Hinkley decision. What we did to change the mind-set of China towards the UK in a short space of time was fantastic and it was very exciting, so they have to keep focusing on that.

NH: What would you say, looking back over the period you were a minister to now, is an achievement or one of the things that you did that you're proudest of or that you think has had the most lasting success?

LON: Northern Powerhouse. Despite what I've just said. It has become so ingrained. Luckily I kind of felt this a bit in my bones during the early days of the referendum and I would say to people up north: 'You guys need to take more ownership of it yourself, so that whoever's in Whitehall aren't going to be able to stop the momentum'. That would be the proudest thing. This is a serious on-going thing. It would be better if this government was more noisy about it, in my view, but it lives on.

NH: What was your sense of how well government works with, not just local councils and civic leaders, but also local businesses and outside groups?

LON: Not great. So, of course in this particular case, most of those councils in the North are all Labour. So I also realised another, rather clever reason why George wanted me is because of the way I talk – I have no political opinions, but most people perceive me as being left of centre. He probably guessed that by taking me to Newcastle and Sheffield he would get a better audience than if he tried on his own. Business-wise, it's different. The power of a minister – I used to think it was amusing – even at my level, you'd turn up to something as a minister, and everyone treated you like a god!

NH: It's interesting, one of the things with previous attempts at devolution has been a bit of cultural resistance maybe in Whitehall to giving away power. You mentioned that everyone was very enthusiastic about the project...

LON: The Treasury was.

NH: But not other departments?

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LON: There were two or three different things going on at the same time. First of all, a loss of power by handing stuff over. Secondly, genuine doubt as to whether a local authority could do any better than central government which is an important point. Thirdly, lack of genuine belief that Osborne was serious. So, all those three things were going on together.

JR: And there were some rumours of a political resistance to the idea that you were creating quite a good political power base which would be unlikely to be won by the Conservatives?

LON: This is a huge issue. If the Conservatives win the West Midlands mayoral election that will help. I can see there is a political perception that having effectively killed off Labour nationally, why would the Tories want to have elected mayors if they're all going to be Labour? But if they can see that they'd win one that would help. On a much bigger philosophical level, it goes to the core of what drove me really, and still does – because I'm very involved in Northern Powerhouse stuff still – is that a lot of people don't get how the power of this stuff is cutting across traditional party lines.

Something that even during my first exciting 15 months was irritating was that everything is seen as 'What does it do for the Tory party versus the Labour party?' and the whole thing about devolution is giving power to people that are local and you shouldn't see it in those standard terms. George could deal with it but not everyone in the party could.

When we did the City Growth Commission, which is now two and a half years ago, in our executive summary, controversially, we said there are only two authorities in the country that are currently vaguely ready for the kind of powers that would make a difference: Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire. Because of Conservative politics there was reluctance to embrace devolution deals in West Yorkshire. But if you want to do something powerful with a lasting legacy you have to take those kind of risks. I suppose that's why I'm not a politician!

JR: It's quite interesting, because one of the things that we're occasionally accused of is wanting to put technocrats in charge or whatever and reduce the role of politics...

LON: They need to get it. The day after the referendum, when I came out of my fog, I sent an email to George. I said three things. Number one is stating the obvious, but what this means is that leaders in this country have no ability to connect with normal people. That's distinctly obvious, but I don't just mean political leaders, I mean lots of leaders including business and I strongly believe that, even more so since. Secondly, Northern Powerhouse and devolution were important before, they are just so much more important now. Thirdly I talked about the risks of inaction if you're sitting around for ten weeks to choose your new leader: forget about that.

At the moment, there are still not that many local authorities that are very focused and strong, it's a building issue. But Greater Manchester, which has got such clarity and such strength of conviction and evidence of success, you know, these guys could end up being a whole independent political movement. If it goes back to the economics of it, the whole rationale, of course, is to do something that would help the collective good – and yet you have a system that sees it all in terms of tribal politics, which to me is kind of nuts. But I guess that's how national politics works.

NH: You said before that you thought that the idea of devolution and the Northern Powerhouse, in spite of everything that has happened post-referendum, is quite ingrained. I suppose it is the wish of any minister for their thing to become ingrained for the long term. Why do you think it had this kind of success?

LON: George said to me when he called us in, the morning of the PM change, he called us in to thank us all and he said to me, 'Who would have dreamt that in one year, we would have ended up doing six mayoral deals? You should be so proud.' Because I did negotiate them all. It was very exciting. I had to

point out to him the irony when we went to sign a provisional deal in Sheffield that where their advanced manufacturing centre is located, in Sheffield combined authority, it's on the old Orgreave colliery. So a Conservative Chancellor signed a devolution deal, in principle, with a very left of centre combined authority on the site of the most famous pitch of battle in the coalmining dispute. That was quite an achievement.

JR: If any of your colleagues, whether from Goldman Sachs or not, were approached to become a minister, what would your advice to them be? What would your advice to them be, if they came to you?

LON: I don't know what impression I'm giving you, but I have no regrets in having done it. No regrets whatsoever and I was advised that it would be unlikely that I could do it for more than two years and the standard view is Comm Sec [Commercial Secretary]: two years, which is interesting.

I guess my advice would be threefold: first of all, make sure that you yourself have got the right reasons to why you're doing it, but if you're doing it just for the glory, you're going to be very disappointed, very quickly. That would be number one. Secondly, be sure that you've got some specific projects in your stated portfolio. And the third thing is make sure your personal family situation is such that your partner or kids know what you're letting yourself in for, because you have to give up an amazing amount of time for this thing.

NH: Is there anything else you wanted to add that we haven't asked about?

LON: When you're planning to resign, make sure you try as hard as you can to do it in a non-confrontational way. So despite the fact that I had strong differences of opinion, once I'd decided to resign, I saw no serious benefit from me trying to cause trouble. So, I thought 'No' and the Prime Minister was really, really, really gracious, which was nice.

NH: Related to that actually, you mentioned at the start something about the scrutiny of being a minister, presumably after you resigned you had the press calling you looking for a disagreement, how did you find dealing with the media and press side of things?

LON: So because of my own life, I like to think of myself as – famous last words – as being pretty experienced with the media but of course, you have this whole system and very young, inexperienced civil servants who would be trying to guide you. Because I was doing this separate independent review, half the time what they were trying to do was make sure that on days we had some big thing on the review, I wouldn't bump off the Chancellor from the ten past eight slot on the radio! It's hilarious and they said 'Oh, you can't do media on that.' I said 'Yes I can, it's an independent review'.

You know, I'd spent close to 30 years immersed in this and I think it's a huge dilemma in general that the best way to have a successful media campaign is to focus on the quality of the content and not on how the message is delivered, but the whole of the modern media approach is about selling a story without thinking of the real credibility of the content. When I left, on the BBC it was – for the rest of that day- a top story for them and they, and all the major print media were all bombarding me and I thought 'I am not talking to any of you'. I didn't want to be the source of some story of dirt about the new PM.

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