

# Ministers reflect

Lynne Featherstone



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## Biographical details

## Electoral History

2005-2015: Member of Parliament for Hornsey and Wood Green

## Parliamentary Career

2014-2015: Minister of State for Crime Prevention

2010-2015: Ministerial Champion for Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Overseas

2012-2014: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for International Development

2010-2012: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Criminal Information

2010-2012: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Women and Equalities

2010-2011: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Crime and Security

2008-2010: Shadow Minister for Children, Schools and Families

2006-2007: Shadow Secretary of State for International Development

*Lynne Featherstone was interviewed by Jen Gold and Sophie Wilson on 7th July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project*

**Jen Gold (JG): Thinking back to when you first started as a minister, what was your experience of coming into government like?**

**LF:** Well, hugely exciting but no idea what to expect. Obviously, because it was a coalition and because I am a Liberal Democrat and we hadn't really had a government in living history, there was no one to advise. I literally didn't have a clue. I didn't even know what a submission was. Literally nothing. We had some kind of meeting with the Deputy Head of the Civil Service, who just told us what we mustn't do.

And then you will be delighted to hear it was the Institute for Government, it is well documented this, that invited – I can't remember if we were all Lib Dems, we probably were in our groups – newbie ministers in for a three-hour induction, part of which was probably the most valuable thing that happened to me. Michael Heseltine and Andrew Adonis came to give us a talk, being as they were obviously big and, I won't say old, but experienced beasts of yesteryear. And it is extraordinary actually, because Michael Heseltine basically said – I mean, he put a lot more round it – you are going to be swamped, you are going to have a tsunami of work cover you, you will run round, you will do orals, you will do speeches, you will do all the duties of government, read all your papers. Five years will go and you will be a good little minister and you will have done nothing you ever wanted to do in politics. And my advice to you, I am paraphrasing, is prioritise ruthlessly, find what you want to do and make sure you do it. And then Andrew Adonis' advice, equally valuable, was trust your civil servants. He said, 'If you don't direct them, they will keep your diary full. But if there is something you want to do, you make sure that that is their priority and direct them and they will go to the ends of the earth for you. Don't believe Yes Minister, don't believe The Thick of It' – although actually it has been a bit like that.

So those two, well, that is what I diluted from those two pieces – I literally went back to my office and said to my civil servants in my private office, 'I want to do same-sex marriage'. And because I knew so little about government, it was kind of an innocent protection, because I didn't realise that not having it in the manifestos and not having it in the Coalition Agreement would be a problem. I just thought, well Michael Heseltine says prioritise, this is what I want to do and I told a couple of members of my private office. I said, 'How do I do this?' And now the rest is history, it is the law. So it just really goes to show how incredibly valuable it was for someone like me, who had no clue, had never read any books – you know, some people know politics, study politics, read up about it. I always came from a doing background. So that was an amazing bit of advice. It was very difficult to do, though, because there were not the things in place to support me.

**JG: Apart from that Institute session, were there other support systems, structures in place?**

**LF:** No.

**JG: So it was just a case of working it out as you went along?**

**LF:** Apart from 'don't do this, don't do that' from the Deputy of the Civil Service.

**JG: And was there anything that really took you by surprise in your first few weeks of being a minister?**

**LF:** I suppose just what a machine it all was, in terms of churning out – whether it was submissions or correspondence or the parliamentary duties – there is such a machine already going on, irrelevant of who is the minister, really. I think that surprised me, because I kind of thought you come in and say what you wanted, I mean you do to an extent, but nevertheless the bulk of what you do, maybe 80%, just goes round and it wouldn't really matter what party you were from or anything. And it didn't shock me but it surprised me that so much of it was automatic, if you like.

**JG: And did you feel that any of your previous roles and experiences had helped prepare you for being a minister or did you find the job very unique?**

**LF:** I think it is unique and I think that the most unique thing is that you can't guess, you can't waffle, well, you can waffle I guess but it is not very advisable, and you have to study an awful lot. I think I just didn't understand the level of prep that would be needed for almost everything I did. When you are more experienced and after you had done a bit, you can fly a bit more by the seat of your pants, but not for really if you want to do well in a debate or even in a speech you give or in a meeting. If you don't do the prep, then really it is a kind of waste of everybody's time. The person who has tried for two years to get a meeting with a minister, if you haven't looked at your brief, and I have seen other ministers do that, you are really not giving them... And obviously prep for orals, it is like I don't want to look like an idiot, so I need to know what I am answering. Until you have mechanisms in place that guard you against... You know, you pick up as you go how to do these things, but when you are a new minister, you don't know anything. So the level of study and prep I always found was huge, which surprised me. It was like going back to school, really, or worse, actually.

**JG: And so based on your experience, how would you describe the main roles and duties of a minister?**

**LF:** Well, I think they are huge, actually. Number one is the parliamentary, whatever your parliamentary duties are, whether it is orals or debates or whatever. So that was first order. I was a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State which I found out is really the lowest of the low and you end up with a portfolio that is constructed of everything that other people didn't want and you do everything that the secretary of state doesn't want to do themselves. So mine was huge. When I first started, I had the biggest portfolio in the Home Office, of Home Office duties – well, I think it was. And I had another whole portfolio of equalities, because that is how it kind of got bunged together in the Coalition. So it was a massive amount to take on, because there were things you have to do. I mean, just by rote, obviously the duties per se are your correspondence, your parliamentary pursuits, and carrying on the business of government, which as I say is that 80% that goes through.

But then you also have this amazing opportunity because you are in a minister in government and you have to discover what you can do with that. And I think there is no one who tells you what you can do with that really, apart from the advice I got at the beginning, from Michael Heseltine and Andrew Adonis. So it was how do I make things happen? Do I have to say yes to everything? I am very conscientious so I always did everything immediately, on time. So all my correspondence was always done by the end of the day, all the submissions were read overnight. I never fell behind. So I am quite organised, which I think is helpful and I didn't know what was or what wasn't important. In a sense, everything was important. But things had deadlines. So your diary was incredibly important to make sure that you had space in that each day to make sure you got through everything. So you didn't try and fill the entire day with back-to-back submissions and meetings, so that you never had a moment to catch up with phone calls or...

Probably the most important decision I made was not to have a computer in either of my ministerial offices. I never had a computer. So I was never distracted by looking at emails. I had a private office, never had that before, so I instructed them that if there was anything I needed to see, they should show it to me. So I basically cut a massive amount of my workload by not spending any time on a computer.

**JG: So they would monitor your email on your behalf and then prioritise...**

**LF:** Yes. I wasn't in the role on my own behalf, I was in the role as a government minister. And if odd things came in, they would come and ask me. It is not like you are some foreign monster or something. So I think that was probably one of the most important decisions I made.

**JG: And did that decision come out of previous experience?**

**LF:** Yes. It came with... you know, when you are, I am sure it is not just Lib Dems, I did everything, right through being a councillor, leader of the opposition, five years in the London government, I did everything myself really. And it wasn't until I became an MP that I had an office with staff. We had a little bit at the London Assembly but not much. And I made the decision that day, not that I wouldn't have a computer, that would be impossible, but that I would no longer look at my own emails. And that was the best decision that I ever made because MPs who carry on looking at all their emails, you can't really be proactive and I was determined to be proactive. So with that time I kind of decided my priorities. Obviously same-sex marriage was one, but there were others. I was able to direct them and say I want to see what has happened on this each week and remember to ask people to come back to me with what progress had been made. I found that was the only way to drive things through.

**JG: So you've mentioned your priorities, obviously you were given a portfolio...**

**LF:** Yes. They were all priorities and I did all my work on those. To the best of my ability, made the best decisions I could. The coalition obviously adds a dimension, so rows with the Secretary of State would follow asking a question. But in terms of my given duties, I was just very assiduous and did them all and made the judgement as submissions came up. And my civil servants, you know, they had already read up all about me. They were very clever. It is not as if I was some kind of foreign body coming in. I found I had a submission for a transgender action plan, which I would have done, but they had thought ahead from everything I had said on the Equality Bill. I thought how very clever. I mean, that wasn't on anyone's list but they had obviously decided that would be one of my priorities. You know, just lots of stuff like that. But that was all given. They knew what Lib Dem priorities were, so they were and submissions came up and I quickly understood what a submission was. I always felt they were quite woolly, some of them, just not very good alternatives given, not always proper thinking.

**SW: You have already touched on the range of duties involved, but thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how did you spend most of your time?**

**LF:** As a minister, the vast majority of my time was spent at my table in my office reading submissions, having meetings, all sorts of different meetings, and doing any box work I could during the day so it wasn't just left. That was the bulk of my time. But I spent a lot of my time out and about as well. I did a lot of visits to places, which I thought was very important. I think getting out and about is great. I mean, you feel like you are spending a whole day getting somewhere, making a five-minute speech, saying hello nicely to a lot of people and getting back. But actually that is how it works to encourage people, but it seems like a lot of ministerial time for that, but it is not as if your civil servants let you sit on the train without box work, so it is never misused.

**SW: Ministers obviously have a variety of demands on their time from parliamentary business to departmental business and media appearances. How did you cope with those kinds of competing demands?**

**LF:** Well, as I said, Parliament was always the first order if I was the minister responsible and I suppose media would be the priority, both because you want the things you are doing to see the light of day, which as a junior minister is not always easy, and thereafter departmental business not so much. I think, partly because I was a Lib Dem and a junior minister, it kind of lived without me. I mean, I attended the board meetings, but it is not something I really engaged in.

**JG: And what about your constituency role?**

**LF:** Well, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday constituency, Monday to Thursday government. You will notice there were no days off.

**SW: And do you have any top tips on managing time?**

**LF:** Well, my top tip is don't have a computer and don't do your own emails. I really think people spend so long either on their iPhones or on their computers. I don't have emails coming to my iPhone. Obviously there is a 'Oh my God, we can't get you'. I never look at my Blackberry, someone has to text me if I have to look at my Blackberry. Otherwise you spend your entire time looking at what other people... You know, it is just like you are somebody's dogsbody then. And I really freed myself. And people always say to me, even though I was a junior minister, I have managed to do some pretty significant things in government that were not on the agenda. And I would lay that on not having a computer, because I had the time and the will to be proactive and not just do as I was told, I guess.

**SW: And could you talk through an occasion when an unexpected event or crisis hit the department?**

**LF:** Well, the Home Office every morning, really. I am trying to think... the thing was, it was mostly Home Office stuff. It was rarely things that I was on my own, because I was Parliamentary Under-Secretary. Theresa usually stepped in. I guess the biggest one was the riots. When was that?

**JG: 2011.**

**LF:** The Tottenham Riot. It started in Tottenham, which is also in Haringey [where Featherstone was the local MP] and we all watched it on TV on the Saturday and I remember I was lying in bed on the Sunday morning and the media were saying why is there no government minister out here. And I thought 'Oh, I think I am the duty minister and I am not sure', so I rang Nick Timothy who was one of Theresa's spads [special advisers] and said, 'We need to get a minister out there and I think it needs to be me because I think I am duty minister'. And Theresa May was out the country and everyone was out the country, otherwise that kind of level of crisis would have been handled by someone more senior than myself. I had never done the media, let alone in such a serious situation. So that was a kind of 'events dear boy'. But I at least had the wits to say we need to get someone out there and two hours later I was out there and calmed the nation down, obviously. So I think that was one of the things that I personally did get involved in. But that was, as I say, because Theresa May was out the country, William Hague was out the country, David Cameron – everyone was out the country, it was summer.

And more usually when events happened, and that could be, I can't remember if there was a shooting, there were certainly queues at Heathrow, there was Abu Qatada, there was endless... It was sort of every day. Theresa had a meeting at eight o'clock Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings and it was always crisis management. So we would discuss it but I would not have to generally take a lead position on it, because there were people ahead of me and on the Home Office watch, particularly, there were others.

In DfID [Department for International Development], it was quite different. There was very little communication between the ministers. I mean, Theresa and I were quite close, quite good friends really – didn't agree with each other about anything but hey. But DfID wasn't like that and when crises erupted, they were mainly humanitarian.

**JG: So looking back, what you feel was your greatest achievement in office, or something you are most proud of?**

**LF:** Are you only allowed one?

**JG: If you have a few, then feel free to share.**

**LF:** Well, same sex marriage is the obvious one, because it wasn't on the agenda and now it is the law, which is quite an achievement considering the hoo-ha it caused. But I would also put my FGM campaign up there, which I started. Everyone wanted in on that, it was the most difficult one in the world, with David Cameron breathing down my neck and Justine [Greening, International Development Secretary] and everyone.



I was pleased to have brought body confidence into the agenda, that was me. But I think probably the longest lasting... I mean one of the things that people don't know about so much, but was equally important, was my work on disability in the developing world. It had no profile, well, it wasn't being done really by DfID or the British government. And I felt it was the great neglect of development. You know, none of the big NGOs, no one wanted to know. It was in the too difficult box – 'It is bad enough with saving people's lives, do you want us to worry about the fact they are disabled?' But what was happening is they just, if they were already left behind because they were poor or female, if they were disabled they were probably chained up and beaten. And I decided that, as a world leader, we should be leading this. Nothing was being done about it.

And two years on, it probably will be part of the Sustainable Development Goals, in terms of being... what is it called when you measure the data? I was always terrible on terminology. And you won't be able to count yourself as achieving a goal unless everyone has gone across the finishing line. And in DfID, it is now mainstream DfID, we now have a disability strategy and people who we put money through, like the Global Partnership for Education, they said we won't give you any money unless you make the governments you work with have fully accessible schools. And I think it will take time on disability, but I think it was the first real step to beginning to change that. I mean, the big NGOs should hang their heads in shame, in my view. But that was the other thing I am really, really proud of.

**JG: And what was the process you went through? How did you carve out and drive forward that agenda as a junior minister?**

**LF:** That was very difficult. I said to my private office – and private office is really your first port of call, as it was with same-sex marriage – 'I want to do this, how do I do this? What barriers do I need to get through? What hoops am I going to have to go through? Who do I need to get on side? Who do I need to speak to? What are the processes I need to follow? How can I make this happen?' That was kind of my approach. And then I think with the disability thing it was kind of... I think it is a terrible thing to say but so few people are interested in disability. It was less attractive. When I started the FGM campaign and had massive publicity, everyone kind of thought we are interested suddenly. Disability carries no publicity, so I was less sought after, in a good way. So the first thing, I had an advisory group of stakeholders, and I said, 'Look, I have come in, I have looked at my portfolio, I want to do this because I think it has been completely neglected, what is your advice?' And we went from there.

We kept it beneath the radar to a great extent until it was so successful that I understand that there was a big event last week with the Queen and David Beckham – I am informed by a civil servant who of course keeps no contact with their ministers after they have left and tell them the good news. It was praising the work on disability because it was so phenomenal in the disability world, but not broader. But I assume that she was at a disability event, she couldn't say I have done this, I mean her, because they would know where it came from. Anyway, that will hopefully be embedded. And helpfully there was a select committee who decided to do a disability investigation or whatever. And their recommendations were then very helpful, because it gave me a bit more power with the Secretary of State to say, 'Well, they say we need a disability strategy'. I think in the end we called it a framework, to get over the fact the Secretary of State didn't want a strategy, or a tragedy for that matter. But it is the same thing.

**JG: I just wanted to pick up on same-sex marriage, because in the end you had huge support from David Cameron and you said you made that a very early priority. How did you go about driving that?**

**LF:** Well, I am not going to tell you that whole story because I am writing the book so you can buy the book [laughter].

**JG: Fair enough. Thinking about some of the relationships that you forged while in government, you briefly mentioned having contact with Theresa May's special advisers. I just wondered about your interaction with special advisers in the various departments you have worked in. Did they ever become involved in your areas of work? Were they a means to an effective relationship with the Secretary of State?**

**LF:** You mean the Secretary of State's advisers as opposed to Nick Clegg's or mine? Because we didn't have any at the beginning at all. There was no link between... You know, most of us junior ministers or Lib Dems were marooned in our departments. I am sure you have heard this from others. There was no real means of contacting... and being tasked with covering six portfolios in the Home Office. It wasn't just my portfolio, I had to cover all, which is ridiculous. I mean, with the best will in the world, I had enough trouble reading everything that I wanted to do, without five other people's portfolios. So until such time as the spads – Nick Clegg got spads who looked over our department so therefore worked part for us – it was very, very difficult.

As I said, the Home Office had minister's meetings, different forms of them on three mornings a week. And I said very early on two things really to my coalition partners: I am meant to cover all the portfolios and you can hide things from me quite easily, but if there is something we are going to disagree on or would be difficult, it would be better if you flagged it up to me and let me read it, so that we can have the row first. Didn't always happen, they remained quite secretive and it wasn't really until the spads got going that we were sure that we were covering everything, because in the Coalition the worse thing is if you don't have an open relationship. But I think in the first two years, two or three years, that was a lot easier. The other thing I said was we are never going to agree on Europe. Every European directive we get, I am going to say opt-in and you are going to say opt-out. So can we have an agreement that whatever directives come down from the European Union, if we are not thinking or if you are going to say opt-out, then you have to put on the table something that is equal or better in protection for whatever the issue is in the United Kingdom. So that is kind of what happened, to an extent. So you said, what is it?

### **JG: Yes. Your relationship with special advisers...**

**LF:** Okay. So Nick Timothy and Fiona Cunningham were long term Theresa advisers and uber-Conservative and known affectionately as 'evil Tory spads', obviously, who I got on really well with. So early on, I remember on body confidence, they tried for six weeks to stop me doing it. I was just going to do an interview with the Sunday Times. But I called them in and I said, 'Why are you being obstructive? This can do us nothing but good'. I later found out that the Tories had an edict, don't let the Lib Dems do anything about women because the Tories have such a problem with women, we don't want the Lib Dems to do anything. But, you know, politics always gets in the way of actually doing...

Anyway, so eventually I got permission to do this article on body confidence and it went worldwide, it was massive and then everyone said, 'It is marvellous, congratulations, of course it is part of the government programme'. It is amazing what success will do for you in the media. So I had a very good relationship, didn't see them that often to be honest, they really kept down Theresa's end. But I always felt if I was cross, which I was, I could go up there and say 'Why have you done this?' In DfID, no relationship at all, they never spoke to me.

### **JG: And we mentioned it before, but how did you go about establishing effective working relationships with the various Secretaries of State that you worked under?**

**LF:** Okay, so Theresa, obviously very busy as Home Secretary and Minister for Equalities, so we are never going to be girly friends. But I actually found her... it was funny, I got off to a really bad start, because I was still blogging at that point, and I didn't realise blogging, for a minister, is probably not the best exercise because you are bound to break the ministerial code about every five minutes because you are not allowed to say anything about any other portfolio and I did that in the first five minutes and this thing I had written about Iain Duncan Smith went worldwide so Theresa called me into her office, like a naughty schoolgirl. And she was very grown up and she said, 'Look, I don't think you can go on blogging, it is really not appropriate'. But I mean after that, actually, as we went on, we realised that we were both very assertive and determined women and very okay in our relationships and how you deal in a grown up world. And I always found her, and I think she found me, okay to deal with. And so, I didn't see her on a daily basis. We had these ministers meetings in the morning. If there was something I could always go to her and she would come down to me if there was something that she needed to go over. And quite often where we disagreed on policy, which was quite often, except on violence against women where we were as one and she supported me on same-sex marriage, we would state case and quite often find a very



good compromise between us. It was a very good working relationship, much like you get in the real world, where you work with clients and contractors and there may be different points of view and you try and find a positive way through that is better for everybody and for the issue. So you know, there were some times I think she avoided me if it was too difficult.

**JG: I am also interested in your private office and how you made sure that functioned effectively. Because obviously you did have a bit more latitude, I would assume, in how that is set up and run?**

**LF:** I have always found if you treat people well, you will get the best out of them, so I have never shouted at a civil servant. If there is something wrong, I just say, 'This is wrong, you need to do this a different way' or whatever. And I found most of them to be absolutely excellent. So that was Home Office. Funnily enough, my Home Office civil servants were not as clever as my DfID civil servants. Probably the grades, I don't know, I never did understand the Civil Service grades, I probably never will.

**JG: They're complicated.**

**LF:** So I think I had a slightly higher grade at DfID and they were super amazing and both my head of office there were wonderful. One left because she had been there three years, since a couple of years before I came in and the new one that came in, I had met in wherever I was in the world. I mean, I spent a lot of time in Africa, I can't remember what country I met her in. Anyway, she applied for the job and then got it and she is still there. And I had a fast-streamer and a couple of excellent ones and the rest were adequate and you can drive stuff forward. And also I was getting more experienced on how to push. I actually found the Civil Service a joy and if you google, I did actually blog in praise of civil servants. I wrote a piece because I was so cross with Francis Maude, I thought he was denigrating them terribly.

**SW: And what did you find most frustrating about being minister?**

**LF:** Just having to go through so many different hoops to get things done that I wanted to. And also that civil servants are by their nature scared of doing something wrong. I found that just drove me insane. You know, they are not... and it is their job to be brave and experimental. But sometimes the level of caution and the number of people who would have to be involved and the lack of linear decision-making. And everything had to be checked everyone, before anyone got to actually see it like the Secretary of State or whoever. And I would say, 'If there is a problem, what are you worried about? I will sort of it out. I am the minister'. But nevertheless, their natural habitat is cautious.

But it was very interesting because at DfID, when I was trying to do... well, FGM everyone supported me on, that was not hard. In all cases, I should add, there has always been a huge enthusiasm on behalf of my civil servants on things I was doing to actually help me do what I was doing. And as I say, FGM was easy, same-sex marriage was very difficult, but everyone was very enthusiastic about it. I mean that nearly hit the skids I can't tell you how many times. But the disability, the change in disability, would not have happened if there were not two civil servants – I mean, you can say that about all these things – who really went to the nth degree to knock out some of the barriers. You know, they are already busy, but went above and beyond to push things through when they were getting stuck or we couldn't get a response.

**JG: When you say barriers, what are you referring to?**

**LF:** There was a lot of not getting back to me, not dealing with something I want, making sure I was strung out over time. And eventually I would do it, but I know there was quite a lot that went on with my civil servants before that, to make friends in the Secretary of State's office, to find out what the truth was between something not coming back. You know, in all of the things I've done, I've had spies all over government. You have no idea – both ministerial and civil service – because otherwise you don't really know what is blocking you.

**SW: And from your point of view, how could government be made more effective?**

**LF:** Well, it would have an element of more risk in it, because I would make it more linear. I would make the critical path much purer. I would involve less consultation across government. Obviously with that carries risk, because it just does. But I think like not having a computer and delegating to other people to do thinking has a risk, but the benefit versus the cost or the risk is huge. You do occasionally, because I am a big delegater, I couldn't do what I did if I didn't delegate and of course sometimes it stuffs up because people make mistakes and you just say, 'Okay, I am really sorry', and always take the blame and it just happens.

The other thing, I don't know if you are going onto it, is that I thought were absolutely, excruciatingly awful part of government is cabinet committees and cabinet sub-committees. A bigger waste of time I have never been to in my life. Papers arrived the night before, ten minutes before, no one cares, your civil service writes your lines for you, if you have had the chance to look at it you were very lucky. You know, I just thought a complete waste of time.

**SW: And how did you work with Number 10 and the Treasury?**

**LF:** Didn't really. We just got edicts sent down from them, yes or no. I mean, Number 10 was – obviously I had to get lots of things through Number 10. And in the end I did get it, but it would get lost in so many different things. It had to go through there. I doubt whether David Cameron ever knew anything that was going on. And I found the level of control horrific. You know, on the grid and all of those things, when you have to get permission, and it would actually harm a project or an issue or a policy or an action, because their fear – either of someone else getting publicity or maybe because it is in the coalition it is more difficult, I don't know. But that absolutely grip on doing things, I thought was more harmful than anything else.

An example of that would be FGM. Because it was coming up to International Women's Day and Number 10 and David Cameron wanted to be the front person on International Women's Day and I was announcing a £35 million programme on FGM and I was going to the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, to the work meeting of all the people involved in FGM. I was told I couldn't announce it at the Commission, because Number 10 wanted it. And in the end, I kicked up, I said this is ridiculous. So Number 10 put out a press release, with me having a quote on it, but I wasn't allowed to mention the £35 million. The figure would be kept for David Cameron. And I went, what is the term, AWOL? Off-piste? Do you know, I was sitting on a platform with the world leaders on FGM, with an audience of 600 and all the cameras and all the interest of the world on it, and I thought this is so ridiculous. And I just said, 'I am so pleased to be able to announce here today a £35 million programme'. I have to say my head of office private secretary went – you know, she was fiddling with her Blackberry, which is standard, and I just thought her head would snap off with shock. And of course, it went round the world and because we hadn't put out a press release, it was actually an announcement. So that was when the Evening Standard picked it up, who then ran it as a campaign. Channel 4, it went everywhere. And that is why it caused absolute havoc.

But boy, was I right and Number 10 wrong. You know, they later, they were always kind of raining on my parade. But that would be an example – if I hadn't done that and I had been a good little minister, it might never have reached that kind of media coverage, which is really what gets Number 10 interested in embedding it policy-wise. You know, before that, it didn't have the traction. Everyone had ignored it and I just think for goodness sake. If you are running something – it is like when you have an employer, a good employer is always pleased when their employees do well and gives them lots of credit and when you are a bad employer, you don't ever give them any credit, you don't praise them and you certainly don't let anyone else praise them. And that is what I think happened with Number 10, that is what I felt. And I thought it hurt us. I think they inhibited about half of what we could have got really good coverage for, because they were so blooming worried, either side of the Coalition, about somebody getting credit for it. So that is a very good example of that one, actually.

**JG: What about working with other departments? Because I imagine there is a few of those policies where you needed buy in from others.**

**LF:** Well, the way to do it, I found, was to make friends and allies with other ministers and then the ministers would tell the civil servants to do it or not do it. If you were blocked by a minister, then the civil servant would not be doing it, you know. So you had to kind of find a way through and either they lied to your face and they were still blocking it or not. But I generally got things done and it was very helpful because you are right, I always worked across government, hugely on FGM and same-sex marriage. FGM, as I said, everyone, well, after I went AWOL and it got coverage and then everybody... You know, I had worked for six months to get to the point of being able to announce the £35 million programme. It didn't come out the blue. Then everyone was on it and everyone wanted to be helpful, so that really wasn't difficult cross-department. Particularly once Jane Ellison became the Minister for Public Health, because then she and I formed an alliance and health was very important. She was a great enthusiast and she had chaired the APPG [All-Party Parliamentary Group] on it, so she was very important. Whereas education, when it was headed by Michael Gove, was a complete nightmare on FGM – the only place that seemed to think you shouldn't ever mention it in schools. So you always prayed to the Secretary of State. But I had David Laws in there, so I got three quarters of the way with David Laws and then I am still optimistic the rest will happen now. There are still things that aren't done.

**JG: Where did the initial impetus for the FGM campaign come from?**

**LF:** To me? Where did I get it from?

**JG: Yes.**

**LF:** Well, when I was at the Home Office, Nimco Ali came to see me. You know, people come and see you and she had started a group in, I think it was Bristol, called Daughters of Eve. And she brought a couple of teenagers with her who giggled and anyway, she sort of took me by the throat and shook me and said, 'Do you realise what this is? This is violence against women. It's child abuse'. And I really listened to her. I always try to listen to people who come to me. And firstly, she was credible. She was from Somaliland. It had been done to her. She wasn't speaking like some do-gooder who had never had anything to do with it, which I am effectively. And she'd done something about it and she had got no traction from government at all. There was a small, well there wasn't... £50,000 a year we spent on something to do with FGM at the Home Office. But there was no real drive behind it. There was nothing happening. And the Home Office at that point was losing money. So it was probably not going to give me £35 million to go and do something. But at that point, I got reshuffled or at some point I got reshuffled to DfID. And I walked in the door of DfID saying, 'Right, we are going to start a world programme on FGM and that will help us back here, because our community is intrinsically linked'. And I met Jane Miller, who was one of the leading lights on FGM as a civil servant and we conspired.

**JG: That is really interesting because you don't often hear of ministers taking a policy priority they had in one department with them to another department. But you did that.**

**LF:** Yes, definitely. Because it was how do you do this? I don't think you could have really done it without doing what I actually did. I was unable, very frustrated in the Home Office about getting anyone interested in it. 'Yes, it is awful, poor girls, having their genitals cut off. That is really awful'. Police don't do anything, Health don't do anything – there are some FGM clinics. But to get the kind of status that you need for David Cameron to make it his golden moment, whenever it was, the year after or something. And yes, as I said, finding key civil servants who know how to get things done themselves across government and through departments. That is why I always go back to Michael Heseltine and Andrew Adonis, because Michael Heseltine said think of what you want to do, and obviously FGM was going to be at DfID and same-sex marriage. And Andrew Adonis saying trust your civil servants. And they were the two best bits of advice ever that anyone could get going into government. And I think because I was completely inexperienced, I listened. People don't always listen to advice, they just think they know the answer, but I didn't know any of the answers. But both of those things, I would say, and getting rid of my computer, are the reasons I managed to do proactive stuff. And I am not going into all

the hundreds of little stuff that you do, these are the major things. Because being a Parliamentary Under-Secretary is kind of difficult. You have to lead an insurgency if you are a Lib Dem in your own department.

**SW: So based on your experiences, how would you define an effective minister?**

**LF:** Just be driven yourself, to know what you want. What do you want out of being a minister? Do you want to just give speeches and sign letters? You can. And you can go to lots of receptions. Whereas I go the other way, avoid all receptions like the plague unless you actually have to go to them, obviously. And drive through what you want to do, because it is your moment of... you will never have that power again, even as a junior minister. And for a Liberal Democrat, almost certainly, particularly after the last election, that kind of opportunity. That was a real driver for me, the whole time. I've been given this, I want to make it count.

**SW: And you have touched on this already, but what advice would you give to a minister entering government for the first time?**

**LF:** Well, listen to advice. And then I would say exactly what was said to me: focus on something you want to get done and trust your civil servants, direct your civil servants. They are there to help you. And if they don't, sack them. Because you can be meek and mild and go through and just think everyone knows better than you. Obviously, don't be horrible, like some people – I heard some people treat civil servants terribly. But that would be my advice. And treat people well.

**SW: With hindsight, would you have approached the role differently?**

**LF:** I think if I'd known that I had the power I had, I would have used it better from day one. I mean I am very lucky that I decided to do same-sex marriage. I think it was on day three or something, in my own head, and then spent a year and a half getting it before anyone else knew about it, getting it through its hoops and write rounds and all that kind of performance. But I think I might have flexed my muscles a bit more in the early days of understanding that I could actually say no, because I think this or that. Whereas I think I was a bit of a good little soldier. Obviously not that good but you know, yes.

**JG: And is there anything we haven't asked about, from your time as being a minister that you would like to add?**

**LF:** I suppose one of the things I struggled with, when people did lines to take on whatever, meetings or... I never quite knew what that meant or how close or not I needed... It was never clear to me which were the points that absolutely had to be made from a government perspective and what I was allowed to kind of freelance on because of my knowledge or experience. Now, you kind of get it as you go along, I am not saying I was an idiot. But I sometimes thought it would have been nice if you could have the real points to make and not the other 84 pages that went with them that you felt obliged to read. Because I felt that was a big waste of time. I felt that about quite a lot of things – orals prep, which I think was, you know, until I developed my own way of doing it, was very, kind of, cover everything.

What were the other things that I thought were really time consuming? I suppose it is that balance between civil servants being scared that they might have missed information that you might need and actually being linear in their advice to you, or what is critical. And even though the top lines were meant to be that it varied, you know, some were better than others. And it is like because I did a lot of trips to Africa, I think I went about 30 times, and to other countries, and I always read my brief, every word – which actually was very good, because then the civil servants knew. Because I think there is a lot of work that goes on, where civil servants write a lot and ministers don't read it. And I think either ministers need to read it or civil servants don't need to write it. But somewhere along the two, there is a mismatch in it.

I have to say the DfID briefings I thought were excellent. Home Office briefings I thought were terrible. So I don't know how things vary across in other departments and stuff, but like any human being and

any employee, there is going to be some variation. But it was quite frustrating at times to feel that obligation and then to have been stuffed with lots of unnecessary stuff because if you are a conscientious, responsible minister and you do read your briefs, then you have got too much information. And DfID did a lot of work on streamlining. I am not sure how they will be getting on with those things. You had different things, what were they called? I don't know if they were called submissions or, no, business cases, that is what they were called, for every policy and they had become so unwieldy – hundreds of pages, much of which was cut and paste. 98 different people had to read them, including the minister, and they weren't very good, they didn't ever catch the things you needed to catch. DfID has done a lot of work now on cutting it down to 20 critical pages, but I am sure that lesson needs to be learnt right across government. I think there is a lot of cut and paste from everything. But I think we ministers need to learn how to direct more, but in a good way, not by just a kind of shouting at people way. Those are general things.



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