

Ministers reflect

Margaret Beckett

July 2016



Margaret Beckett – biographical details

Electoral History

1983-present: Member of Parliament for Derby South

1974-1979: Member of Parliament for Lincoln

Parliamentary Career

2008-2009: Minister of State for Housing (Department of Communities and Local Government)

2006-2007: Foreign Secretary

2001-2006: Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

1998-2001: Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Privy Council Office)

1997-1998: Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills

1994-1995: Shadow Secretary of State for Health

May-July 1994: Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition

1992-1994: Shadow Leader of the House of Commons and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party

1989-1992: Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury

1984-1989: Shadow Minister (Social Security)

1976-1979: Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department of Education and Science)

1975-1976: Assistant Whip (HM Treasury)

Margaret Beckett was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Catherine Haddon on 12th July 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Why don't we start in the '70s when you first became an MP and then a minister? What was the experience of becoming a minister like back then?

Margaret Beckett (MB): Well it was quite a surprise, because I came in, literally as a PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary]. I'd been Judith Hart's [then Minister for Overseas Development] special adviser, and she rang me up from her count and said 'You'd better be my PPS now', because I'd been elected, she hadn't quite, but she was about to be. So I did. In January 1976, Joan Lester resigned [as Under-Secretary of State, for Education and Science] and there was a muddle about public expenditure cuts and to be perfectly frank, I don't think Joan had any intention of resigning. Actually, this is a piece of advice for an incoming minister. She went to lunch with what she thought was a friendly journalist and was too open about how worried she was and how she might have to consider her position, opens the paper next day and she's resigning.

NH: Oh gosh!

MB: So then she resigned of course. And so that's an awful warning, which I certainly took to heart. As it happened, because I'd been working for the Labour Party, up until six months or so before, I'd worked with the Whip's office, we had what we call the 'Small Committee' which was very secret, because it was thought to be quite... perhaps not quite gentlemanly. Because we got together every week and discussed what it was, the theme, that we wanted the parliamentary party to pursue, and then gave them facts to back up the points they were making and suggested, you know, how they might phrase things and so on. That was thought to be political interference with the independence of the individual Member of Parliament. So we weren't known about much, but because I'd done that, I'd worked with our Whip's office and so in the January I was asked to join the Whip's office and then having been in the Whip's office – nobody ever left the Whip's office in our governments. In the Conservative Party they always used it to train people up and then moved them on into ministerial positions, but we had not done that before. And then we began to do it, because they asked me to take on the job that Joan Lester had had and I did.

NH: Did you find it useful training, if you like, for ministerial jobs?

MB: Absolutely invaluable. Whenever I encounter a new colleague who has been put in the Whip's office, I know a lot of colleagues go 'Ugh', and I always say to them 'A year in the Whip's office is worth ten years on the backbenches in terms of learning the mechanics of how this place works, how a legislative committee works, how the handling of a bill works.' I have seen people of 25 years' experience on the backbenches lose their opportunity to force a vote on a key amendment because they didn't understand how the order paper worked in terms of when the votes would come.

NH: What was your initial impression of government and Whitehall when you first went in?

MB: Well, when I went in I was extremely defensive and the person who became my Principal Private Secretary, not straight away, [he] had been our Parliamentary Clerk, said to me, because he'd seen me... I came into a bill, it was a bill in session, and I was very conscious of the fact that I had taken a post that someone had left and that I had been promoted very early, first to the Whip's office and then into a government department and therefore I kind of walked along with my back to the wall all the time, to make it more difficult to stick the knives in. But I was under no illusions that I was absolutely on my own and surrounded by people who did not necessarily wish me well. And he said to me 'We were amazed when you came onto the committee because we were all dead keen to support you and help you and give

4 Ministers reflect

you material and so on, but you didn't seem to be looking for help, you didn't necessarily seem to need any help'. And I said 'Well, to be perfectly frank at that time the thought had never crossed my mind that anybody would be wanting to help me!' [laughter] It was simply, you know, the feeling that everybody would be wanting to do me over and so I just thought 'I'm on my own, I've got to sink or swim.' And worked on that basis. So that was the first thing.

I wasn't looking for, or expecting support, particularly. I suppose I was a bit suspicious of the Civil Service, because of things I'd heard from party colleagues in the past, because obviously not everybody's experience in the Civil Service is good. But mine on the whole was, although I did find the Department for Education as it was then – well, I'll give you a classic example, the permanent secretary who moved on very shortly to [HM] Revenue and Customs, when he was at Revenue and Customs, there was a big case, because the Inland Revenue had given a woman advice, which she had taken, and then it turned out the advice was wrong and it cost her, I think, certainly thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of pounds. And so naturally she was pretty cheesed off and wanted compensation and his attitude, as the Head of Revenue and Customs was 'Sorry, you know, that's life. Yes, OK, we were wrong, it's our fault, but never mind, too bad.' The department was very closed in, very kind of rigorous, 'These are the rules and this is how things are done' and so on. And I used to say that etched on my heart would be 'That is a matter for the local authority' because that was what you were always supposed to say!

I suppose the thing that was a learning curve for both of us was I got letters to sign and I began to rewrite them, because you know, it's my name going on the bottom of this. So, for example, don't forget there was a lot of academic selection then, I was invited to sign a letter that said 'Your daughter has not got into the school of your choice, because she's just not bright enough' and I thought, 'No, I think there's probably a better way of putting that.' And what I discovered within about three days was that if I amended letters, that came to me to sign, fully prepared for me to sign, I got them in draft. It had never crossed my mind that the department would actually supply them in draft until I began to reject what I was offered. And the other thing that I found was that if you went through all the paperwork and questioned it, the paperwork sometimes got a bit lighter. So I got used to insisting that, you know, 'No, I want to see in particular the independent inspectors reports, I want to see the stuff that hasn't come from the department.' But to be fair to the department, their experience of ministers in my position had been such that when I had been there for a whole year, my private office gave me six sherry glasses. Because they hadn't had anybody there for a whole year! [laughter] For as long as anybody could think. And they did tell me of one predecessor – not, I'm happy to say, of my party – and I never did ask who it was, a peer, who had had to have it explained to him that if he took the stuff in his in-tray and put it in his out-tray, the department could process the departmental work and initially that would be lovely, but you know, the department had to have stuff coming out of the out-tray. So they'd obviously had some ministers who were not as enthusiastic as they might be. So, you know, it was a mutual learning curve. But quite quickly I began to realise that there were a lot of very good people and that they were worthy of respect. I did respect them.

NH: If we then fast forward a little bit to the Blair government, obviously you did lots of things in between, did government feel very different that second time round?

MB: Yes. For a number of reasons. First of all, I was a head of department and that made a difference. Secondly, whereas in the '70s it had been sort of nip and tuck a bit between the different parties, by 1997 there seemed to be a general feeling in the population and including in the Civil Service, although people were very discreet, you know, very careful, but it was quite clear that everybody was pleased to have a change of government. Or not everybody, thinking about it, but most people were pleased to have a change of government. There were one or two people who found it difficult to reconcile themselves, and I remember having a meeting fairly early on with my permanent secretary and one quite senior colleague, and saying 'I've never sat through a meeting like that before in my life and I don't intend to sit through another one like it and if there are people who don't understand or can't accept that the policy of the government has changed, then they need to come to terms with it.' But that only happened once.

Well, it only happened once in the sense of a meeting in my presence. There were times when there were little bits of the department still assiduously pursuing the policies of the previous government, but you know, once there was a problem it was dealt with. And there were one or two problems which were caused by people determinedly going on with something and not doing it even very well. It's one thing not to be pursuing a policy of the government, it's another thing to screw it up. So yeah, there were issues.

Then of course there was the whole – I mean, Tony Blair has many fine qualities none of which most people will acknowledge at this moment in time, but there was never any doubt in my mind that one of his weaknesses was that because he hadn't had the opportunity to be in government, or to work in government, he had no experience of the departmental relationship and it didn't really mean anything to him. And very early on actually, I was only thinking about that this morning for reasons which will be evident given all the stuff that's going on, I remember quite early on a decision coming, nothing major, and there were three departments involved of which one was mine [Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)], and we three secretaries of state agreed and then suddenly we were told 'No, that's not what's happening' and no account was taken. I mean, there was no discussion. It was just 'No, we do this.' It was a diplomatic impact, but the Foreign Secretary was one of the co-deciders. And there was absolutely no sort of understanding that actually there are implications for these different departments and the departments have thrashed it out and the ministers have thrashed it out and they've come to a view. It was just sort of 'No, I don't agree with that.' And that happens under every government, I'm quite sure about that. But it was, I mean Robin [Cook, then Foreign Secretary] and I talked about it briefly afterwards, it was quite clear that there just was not the feeling for the different role that department heads have. And I'm afraid a lot of what is said about 'sofa government' is perfectly accurate.

NH: You were one of the few ministers at that time that had previous experience of being in government...

MB: Yes there were only about... I think there were two or three of us in the Cabinet maybe. Jack Cunningham [then Minister for the Cabinet Office] and I, I'm not sure there was anybody else in the Cabinet who had... Michael Meacher [then Minister for the Environment] – but Michael wasn't in the Cabinet.

NH: And how had that experience prepared you or indeed any of the shadowing that you'd done in opposition as well, how had that prepared you for being a secretary of state?

MB: I think it probably prepared us quite well, because you know about the relationships between the different tiers of government, you know about the relationships between the departments, you're accustomed to the [support]. I mean one of the things which is a total shock I think, to a lot of our colleagues, was the degree of support you get because of course when you are in opposition you are doing all the work, but you're doing it. And nowadays they have more help, because of the way I put the Short money up, but it's still not the same as having a whole department. But actually to be completely fair, a lot of the work that was done before we went into government was actually very good, I thought. I mean, I remember I went to a seminar that Andrew Adonis [now Labour politician] and others ran, at Templeton College [at the University of Oxford]. It was very amusing actually, because I was shadowing DTI and I had a big team, I had a team of about six, some of whom were very free spirits in the sense of firing off press releases and stuff all over the place, and to see literally the almost physical shock on their faces when it was explained to them that when you were a minister, you know your departmental head and probably Number 10 had to sign off potentially on the content of any speech, or any press release. You didn't just go firing things off and making publicity for yourself. Everything had to go through the machine and everything had to be agreed across government, cleared with other departments and so on. I mean the sheer stunned horror on their faces I thought was quite funny actually! And not everybody

6 Ministers reflect

fitted in well, because not everybody was prepared to accept that discipline. So they would kick against it and cause trouble and generally be a damn nuisance. But not for very long.

NH: If we could just, topically, briefly touch on reshuffles. So first of all, did you know any of your moves were coming before they did and then once you did move, how did you get your head into the new brief?

MB: No I don't think I knew any of them were coming. I knew I had a problem at DTI for two reasons, one is because Peter [Mandelson] was then Minister of State at the Cabinet Office I think, and he'd been asked to go round the government finding out what was in the pipeline, what were people preparing, etcetera, etcetera and [it] was heard after he'd been to DTI, well first he seemed to be favourably impressed, there was a lot in the pipeline, you know, a white paper and a whole lot of other good stuff, we'd done lots of legislation, we'd done the minimum wage and so on and so on; and secondly he was heard to say 'Margaret Beckett's got the biggest private office in Whitehall' without, I think, fully understanding that that was because of the workload. So after he'd been Secretary of State for a brief period of time he was heard to be complaining when was he going to get his weekends back and why did he have all these red boxes! But I knew that, and everybody knew Peter was trying to get into the Cabinet. He went after Chris Smith's job [at Culture, Media and Sport] and didn't get it. And I would simplify what I thought about it afterwards. I didn't particularly see it coming – Clive Hollick who was one of my unpaid special advisers, had said to me 'You ought to go and talk to Tony about what you have in mind for the white paper', which was something completely different from what we had ever done before and what anybody has done since. I worked on it with both the TUC [Trades Union Congress] and the CBI [Confederation of British Industry] and a collection of people from outside government who represented those different shades of opinion and experience. The intention was to have a joint presentation with the TUC and the CBI on the platform as participants as to how we can transform industrial policy, productivity and so on. I thought it was too early, we weren't close enough. And also I had enough respect for the workload of any leader not to take up the time of the leader unless it was absolutely necessary and after I was moved I said to Clive 'Did you know?' because Clive was very much more on the inside than I was, 'Had you heard something, did you know?' and he said 'No, I didn't know, I didn't see it coming, but I was afraid that Tony would take you at Peter's evaluation of you.' So he hadn't seen it coming and I don't think the department particularly had but what I did realise immediately was that the Prime Minister at that time had two best friends, one wanted my job and the other one wanted me out of it.

Because although I never talked about it, I had a couple, probably two or three actually, fairly spectacular rows with Gordon and with Gordon and Tony. It's [the] Chilcot [Inquiry] that's brought a lot of this back, that's why it's so fresh in my memory. It always amuses me because I don't work through the press and I've never, I've never leaked to the press and I've never told, spun against my colleagues or anything like that, so they all think I'm very quiet and very boring and just do as I'm told and that's why I stayed in government because I never rock the boat. But I do actually remember screaming at the Prime Minister and Chancellor [laughter] in a room full of rather white-faced civil servants and special advisers, all of whom were assiduously looking at the floor and saying absolutely nothing! Complete with quite a lot of bad language because they were trying to interfere, without the knowledge or experience to do so, in a decision that we'd been making about a public appointment. And I won. And as I say, I've had a number of fights with the Treasury in which I had been successful. So as a consequence I didn't talk to people about them, I didn't leak anything out because I thought 'It's bad enough if you win against the Treasury, the best thing you can do is pretend it never happened.' Certainly not go round telling everybody, 'Look at the good thing I did', you know. So I didn't see that coming.

And then when I was Leader of the House [of Commons] all the media observation had been that I'd been downgraded, although I knew the one thing that I was conscious of, Alastair Campbell [then No 10 Director of Communications] had kept on while I was at DTI, saying to me 'I want you to do much more on the publicity, cross-government side, you know, never mind whether it's in...' and he'd said this when

we were in opposition, but it was easier in opposition. ‘I want you to do much more cross-government stuff and presentation for the government’s case’, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And I would say to him ‘Look, Alastair, if I’m asked to do something and I’ve got time to do it, I’ll do it, but I haven’t got a lot of time’ so that sense it didn’t surprise me and actually Alastair was very good. I was on my way down to London to see Tony, by then having realised that I was going to be moved from the DTI, and to be honest, very much intending to resign. Alastair rang me up and said, you know, ‘How are you?’, so I said what I thought and he said ‘Look, don’t do that, you are going to be offered something else and I think it’s really important and I think you’ll do it really well and you know there are a lot of people in here rooting for you and wanting you to stay and wanting you to do this.’ I was sort of ‘Hmm’. Then [my husband] Leo said to me ‘You do realise if you do resign, you’ll be bored stiff’. [laughter] ‘Hmm!’ And, because I’d always been on the frontbench as you will have gathered, I’ve never been a backbencher. So anyway, I allowed Alastair and Bruce Grocott [previously Parliamentary Private Secretary to Tony Blair] and people to persuade me and I stayed. And then it was the usual thing, it’s what they used to say about Tony Newton actually, who was my predecessor as Leader of the House, why did he stay in the government? The fact is Tony knew he was good at his job and he didn’t rock the boat.

I didn’t see Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] coming – the whole kind of trajectory of the media commentary and so on is, ‘Well, if you’re in that job [Leader of the House], you’re on your way out.’ So I was quite surprised and then Tony said, slightly uncomfortably, ‘I see no reason why you shouldn’t go back into a big department’ and told me he wanted me to set up Defra. Part of it was that foot and mouth disease is not improving, it’s not going anywhere, somebody’s got to bring it to an end and I remember thinking also, that’s CAP [Common Agricultural Policy] reform and Kyoto Protocol – ‘This is going to be a lot of work.’ And I was forbidden to tell anybody, because not everybody whose departments were going to be merged, had been told. My equivalent to the permanent secretary was of course the Clerk to the Privy Council and I went back to the department and said ‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you where I’m going, but I’m going somewhere else.’ And, when he got the list, he said to me ‘That’s what I call a big department.’ So, you know, it was quite a change and not everybody in the new department was pleased to have it brought together.

NH: Because it was the merging of ministries...

MB: It was environment and agriculture and an increased responsibility for rural affairs, because Tony was very conscious of the fact that really nobody seemed to bother much with rural affairs. For example, we didn’t have statistics. There was the conventional wisdom about rural poverty – well, we had no information, no data. So that was that. And then when I left Defra, that time I didn’t think Tony was about to sack me, because we’d just come out of a hectic period of negotiation on the Kyoto Protocol, whether there was going to be anything after the Kyoto Protocol. And also of CAP reform and world trade negotiations, sugar regime, all sorts of stuff and I knew that he’d said something to Cabinet, although nobody told me what it was of course. But they told me Tony’s said something very nice to Cabinet about how well I’d negotiated for example the CAP stuff. So I didn’t think he was going to sack me, but I’d no idea what he would have in mind. I was fully expecting probably to stay at Defra. And I said to him ‘I’m quite happy to stay at Defra, if that’s what you want.’ And he said ‘No, I want you to still have a big emphasis on climate change, but I want you to go and do it at the Foreign Office.’ Which I had not, for a second, contemplated. And I was informed by, fortunately because I’d been around for a while by then, I knew people at various levels in the Foreign Office and I remember one of the women, a fairly senior woman, saying to me ‘You do realise that there are people in the Foreign Office who don’t think a woman should be Foreign Secretary?’ Which at that stage in the day would never have occurred to me. But there you go.

NH: And briefly before we move onto the day-to-day bits of the job, how did the different departments compare?

8 Ministers reflect

MB: Hard to say, really. I mean, DTI was absolutely action-packed, because it is such a – was then even more so – such a big department, and also we had a lot of legislation. I think we put through eight pieces of legislation in the first year, not all of it major, some of it more minor things, like payment for small businesses and things like that, but it was all there and also we produced at least one white paper which was quite controversial in the government – the trades union white paper – and the legislation, so that was very, very full on.

Then the Leader of the House is a completely different job. You don't deal with anything in depth, but you see a thin slice of everything across government. Also of course you've got your hour-long or more weekly Question Time. Tony used to say to me 'Actually, you're like me, you have to answer questions about anything' and I said 'Yes, but you've only got half an hour and mine can go on for an hour or more!' So it is a very, very different kind of job. And you deal with the legislation and so on. There we nearly had a major crisis, because we had a whole set of moves of people in the civil service, people who'd been handling legislation for like 50 years or something. Somebody disappeared and although we didn't do anything that was contrary to the advice as to what we could fit in the legislative programme, we got to nearly this point in the summer [July] and suddenly we're told 'You have to drop two major pieces of legislation from the programme, because they can't be got through in the time.' I had a nervous breakdown and an explosion and asked Richard Wilson [then Cabinet Secretary] to come and see me and said 'This cannot happen. You know, we're a government with the biggest parliamentary majority there's ever been and no government has ever lost one major piece of legislation from its programme, never mind two, and it's not as if this has happened because we overruled the advice, and didn't get...' and we were being told 'Well, there's nobody to do this and there's nobody to do that and people are going on holiday' – hang on a minute! Anyway, Richard sorted it, god bless him. And we squeaked through by the last day of the session, we squeaked the last bit through the [House of] Lords without anybody ever really realising the problems that we'd had. So that was completely different.

And then Defra, as I say, there were problems because a lot of people in the department weren't happy, they were completely disparate pay scales – Whitehall had pay freedom, and they were almost at opposite ends of the pay scale. So we had to find a way of bringing them together without meaning that people on the environment side were losing, which of course they were frightened of – and staff on the agriculture side were almost angrier, which I could never understand because they were clearly bound to win. Because they were on some of the lower wages in Whitehall, they were bound to get improvement, but they were just as angry, if not angrier, at having to be engaged in these discussions. So it was a completely different set of problems and attitudes.

Then when I went to FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] I was plunged straight into the Iran negotiations. So it was that, and one of the things I found at FCO was there was a sort of expectation that the Foreign Secretary would do this, because the Foreign Secretary always does do this, so [there] was like a little list of places you would go to and I was like, 'Hang on a minute – you've just got a set of departmental objectives worked out, on that basis what do they suggest should be the priority for the incoming Foreign Secretary and what does that say about where I should go?' Which was not the same thing at all. And they either found it very difficult to work that out or they resisted it. In the end I ended up doing it on my own with my special adviser. I had a little list of 'These are the criteria, these are the important things and which countries fitted to the criteria and how many, what score do they have at the end – OK, that's where I'll go.' And then you were fitting that in around the things that are inescapable, which were the Iran meetings and when the Security Council meets and all that kind of thing. So it was quite a different... fortunately I'd been doing a lot of travel at DTI because of all the international negotiations so that wasn't any kind of shock. It was the security that was the biggest culture shock.

Catherine Haddon (CH): Security issues or security for you?

MB: Security for us. Yeah. They were lovely by the way and very, very, incredibly competent and unobtrusive. But I remember the thing which was in the first 24 hours, and they said to me 'We'll keep

out of your way so don't worry about it, if you want to go for a walk, you know, just give us ten minutes' notice' and I was like 'If I want to go for a walk?!' [laughter] I realised that they would be with me on official engagements, but it hadn't really struck me that if I was going to the supermarket or if I was, as I say, going for a walk, that they would be there somewhere. It just – not really, you don't think about it when you don't have to do it. So although I'd had security occasionally on international visits, it never kind of impinged on me. That was one of the biggest surprises.

CH: And how did you find, in all those different roles when you were a secretary of state, how did you find using your team, the junior ministers? Did it change?

MB: Not really, no. That was where I had an advantage. Yeah because I'd been a junior minister in a small department, I was very lucky because there were, you know, the minister of state did higher education, I did all schools and so you had real responsibilities. I mean, I took decisions on behalf of the Secretary of State and I had my own correspondence trail and my own debates and all that kind of thing, even different legislation. Like the public lending rights stuff and things. But in that Wilson government a couple of years in, somebody, I forget who, Joan Lester and Frank Judd [then a parliamentary secretary] I think, set up a group, I think we called ourselves the 'Non-group' and we were all junior ministers and with the odd junior whip. We met once a month in somebody's department for a sort of sandwich lunch and to chew over our mutual problems. One of the things that became absolutely crystal clear from that is that if you were in a big department, you were liable to find yourself in a position as a parliamentary secretary, which I was, where all you did was sign letters and take the adjournment debates and do the things that nobody else wanted to do. And you never got your hands on any kind of policy. Any kind of policy. Because everything went up to the minister of state or to the [secretary of state] and you didn't necessarily see the secretary of state all that often, or have any dialogue with the secretary of state. And I thought 'That sounded terrible.' They all moaned like anything about how awful that was and I couldn't but sympathise. So when I had a junior team, my view was that everybody should have some kind of responsibilities on which they reported to me and so that they got the chance to build up experience, to have to exercise their own judgement, to judge when they had to bring things to me and not just take the decisions on their own and that's what I tried to do in every department I was in.

CH: Could you give us an idea of a crisis or something major hitting the department – I mean, I'm sure there's been plenty in the different departments, but is there one that sticks in your mind and what your role is in handling it?

MB: There are plenty, I'm just trying to think what's the most appropriate. I mean, one of the ones that perhaps has got some slightly sad lessons was the BSE crisis that hit us. In that, there had been some research going on, instigated before I was at the department, into whether or not sheep brain could be affected by BSE in the same way that cattle brain was. That research had been going on for a couple of years or more and was coming to an end. And the Permanent Secretary came to see me about half five, six o'clock one evening, which is pertinent because of deadlines, and said, for some reason, somebody had asked, it might even have been the Permanent Secretary, for there to be a small cross-check run at the end, on the material that they'd been using, by a different organisation. There was a reason for it, I don't remember what the details were. But anyway, what this cross-check had revealed was that at some stage in this period, the material they were working on had become cattle brain and not sheep brain. So the research was completely invalidated and everybody was expecting it and wanting to know what the answers were because it made a difference to what you thought about the progress of BSE and all that, I don't need to explain all the implications to you. And so Brian [Bender, the Permanent Secretary] explained this to me and I said 'Brian, this is a real Sir Humphrey moment' and he said 'Yes Minister' and then we both sniggered a bit.

But the real problem was that it was the week after the Steve Byers [former Transport Secretary] debacle, the 'good day to bury bad news', and the opposition had called a full day's debate in the House of Commons on the use of spin and so on. They didn't have enough material. I mean, don't get me wrong

10 Ministers reflect

it was a terrible scandal, but they didn't have enough material for a full day's debate. So they were looking for other examples of the government trying to manipulate the release of news which the public were entitled to know. And Brian and I knew that we would have to tell the devolved administrations overnight and that the chances were that once we'd told them it would leak, frankly. We also knew that if we sat on it overnight... our Director of Communications was adamant [that] it was too late for the evening deadlines, it's too late for the news bulletins, you've got to sit on it until tomorrow morning. And we were equally adamant that if we did that, we would be accused of deliberately manipulating, trying to keep it from the public and then it would leak overnight and it would be 'I see you're manipulating the news', so we said 'We know this now, we've got to put it out now.' And it will be in time for say, the ten o'clock news. And he was saying 'No, no, this is the wrong thing to do.' Anyway, we did it. And sure enough it got a terrible kicking. Because although it was in time for the evening news, it was not in time for the newspaper deadlines, so they said, I think they knew it wasn't true, but it didn't matter because it was a much better story. And it gave the opposition something to say. So we got a good kicking anyway. Accused of trying to manipulate the announcement, when actually we were doing the opposite, trying to put it into the public domain as soon as we could. That's not in any way the worst of the crises, but it's one that gives you an example of sometimes, it's a no-win situation and you just have to do, you know, what best you can.

CH: What about the reverse side of that then? Give us an example of what you think was one of your best achievements, perhaps a policy or something that you managed to see all the way through.

MB: Probably... I always say to people the minimum wage must be my biggest achievement, because everybody else says they did it! [laughter] Everybody but Ian McCartney [then Minister of State at the DTI] and me. Ian McCartney was the person who really did all the work and deserves the bulk of the credit for the policy. But I was the one who had to steer it through Cabinet and fight Gordon, who wanted it handled very differently. That was one of the things we had a huge row about. So it was a joint effort in the end. He couldn't have done it without me and I couldn't, it wouldn't have been anything like such a success without all the assiduous work Ian had done, mostly in opposition, to actually prepare the policy. So we are the two people who actually do deserve the credit, but Peter Mandelson says it was his proudest achievement, Gordon Brown says it was his proudest achievement. I mean, there's a whole string of people who say it was their proudest achievement, so it must have been ours.

CH: Yeah absolutely. Did it teach you a lot about the policy process in government then?

MB: Oh yes! [laughter] In fact some of it I'd forgotten actually. The Institute [for Government] did a seminar about it and George Bain came who was the chair of the Low Pay Commission and I had, I mean, I would never say so to George, he might be a bit hurt, but I had completely forgotten that he and the secretary I think had had to come out to Heathrow to talk to me in the VIP lounge – I was on my way somewhere or another, god only knows where – and they'd had to come out there to talk to me because they were going through these sort of crisis negotiations. And actually the day that it all went through, the Commission sent me a very beautiful, huge bouquet of flowers which was very nice of them. But it was a very tricky piece of negotiation. Very tricky. And, you know, I needed to get Tony on side, and did get him on side enough. The other thing about it was that there were lots of really very nasty leaks, mostly from the Treasury, although I think we started to get a bit... I remember saying to Alastair Campbell 'Look, I see all this stuff in the paper, you do know don't you this is nothing to do with me, I am not leaking' and he said 'And can you hand on heart say that nobody in your department is...?' I was like 'Well...' [laughter] So I think there was a little bit of counter-leaking, but you know it was a big fight. So that meant that there was a risk when we were finally there and I was making the announcement in the House, there was a risk that the coverage would all be about the fight and 'Didn't you lose?' and so on and so on – 'Well, actually no, nothing of significance.' So we had to sort of manage that, but in the end it was alright. I remember my driver saying to me that they had a friend who was in one of those horrendously low paid jobs, and that when the policy came in, her salary went up by something like

£100 a month. Which to somebody on very, very low pay is like a fortune, you know. So it was great, it was a great thing.

NH: You just touched there on negotiation and I suppose thinking about a very different context now, but Brexit negotiations and so on, what are your key pieces of advice to new ministers on how to negotiate?

MB: Bring back some of the people you've let go. We had, in Defra, on the environment and the agriculture side, we had some really, really ace negotiators and we had quite a number in the Foreign Office as well. I remember when we'd done the sugar negotiations, John Grant who was the ambassador to the EU sent for Andy Lebrecht and I and said 'This has been an absolutely pitch perfect way, that you would do the best you can in EU negotiations, you two should conduct seminars for the rest of Whitehall, including the Foreign Office, as to how to negotiate in the European Union because you've got it absolutely right every step of the way.' And so we got lots of really, really, really good people, some of whom have been pushed out, some of whom have retired, they need to bring them back. Because we were big hitters, we carried weight, we could get our way in Europe because of the way we handled ourselves and because we were just really good at it. I remember somebody saying to me once about a fellow member state – I better not say which one – but 'You know, you realise that X, they don't really know how to negotiate, they don't understand about negotiations, they think you just kind of roll up and say what you want' and I still can't quite get my head round that. I can't understand how any human being cannot understand how to negotiate.

NH: So did you enjoy that diplomatic side of things?

MB: Very much. I didn't know that I would, but I was doing a bit of it right from the very beginning in the DTI and then at Defra you were absolutely steeped in it. And probably more when I was at the Foreign Office than you necessarily always were at the Foreign Office, because of the Iran stuff and that kind of thing that was going on. And also all the climate change stuff which Tony still wanted me to do. I mean, Jack [Straw, previous Foreign Secretary] was very good on climate change but Tony wanted me to make it a bigger priority for the Foreign Office, which of course a lot of the people in the Foreign Office disliked very much. And it helped with the kind of, 'This woman doesn't know what she's doing, the only thing she knows anything about is climate change. She doesn't know how to negotiate.'

CH: On that, were there aspects where you were trying to modernise and improve the department, were you seeing what your permanent secretaries were doing in that?

MB: There were a couple of things. I mean, I wasn't in the FCO long enough to make that much of a difference. I felt they had too many priorities when I arrived. But I mean some of the things William Hague [Foreign Secretary 2010-14] did about refocussing the FCO somewhat I agreed with and would have wanted to do had there been more time. And I certainly would have wanted to have a really good go at fighting the Treasury over the FCO's budget, to which their attitude was absolutely ridiculous. But we were just starting that when David [Miliband] came in [as Secretary of State]. So there were things I would have wished to do and to do differently. But of course all of that goes back to your question: 'You can forget about that, we don't need to bother about the rest of Europe, we'll just concentrate on the rest of the world!' Don't think so. Not anymore.

NH: Was there anything you found frustrating about being in government?

MB: Oh, lots! As you will have gathered I did enjoy the process of trying to get your own way. Well I suppose everybody thinks what they're trying to get is the right thing. As long as you're pretty clear. I never fought people needlessly about things I didn't think mattered, and I never cared particularly about prestige or any of that stuff. I am absolutely impatient with this thing about, you know, 'I'm a big figure in a big department so I've got to have lots of legislation.' Have you got anything worth having legislation

12 Ministers reflect

about? I persuaded Tony to rewrite the process of doing the Queen's Speech, without any difficulty actually, Tony was up for that kind of thing. Because I suddenly, in my first year as Leader [of the House of Commons], I suddenly realised, I don't know if it's gone back to basics again, but how it was, was every department was asked to submit bids for legislation and there was a kind of feeling that the more bids you had the more important you were. So you get 70 or 80 bids for legislation in a programme that could only accommodate... What I said to Tony is 'Look, this is crazy.' You get all this plethora of bids that don't relate to each other in any way and then the process of negotiation is often a bit sort of 'I'm a big important minister, I've got to have this because this is my most important piece of legislation', which may or may not be the most important thing for the government. And then you try to make up a Queen's Speech which makes sense of it all. Out of a complete ragbag of things that you've arrived at by different means. Why don't we do it the other way round? Because I think this is one of the reasons why governments tend to lose their way after a few years – you know, you puzzle about why is it governments seem to lose their way?

I think one of the things is that you do the things you came in to do most urgently, and then you maybe start to run out of some of the things that seemed most urgent, so you start to pick up what were the priorities of the department, inevitably, and so you're sort of drifting into the things that are more arcane and not so related to people's lives. I said to Tony 'Surely what we ought to do is, you start off, you've got so many slots in your programme, there are things you've got to do, there's always something like a treaty or renewal of the armed forces or something. There will be some things that are inescapable, that have to be done in that session, take those out, how many slots have you got left? And then you, the Prime Minister, with the Cabinet decide what are the overall political priorities in the government for this period to come and within those priorities are there legislative priorities?' But mainly what are the political priorities? And then you tell the departments and you tell the Cabinet 'These are the political priorities of the government, this is the number of slots, what do you want to do legislatively that fits into these priorities?' Because if it doesn't fit in to those priorities it ain't going to get a slot. And then it makes people, apart from anything else, it makes people go away and think about... this may have been a bid that's been on the department's shelves for ten years, it may actually not require legislation, or maybe its legislation whose time has been and gone.

It makes people think about different ways to do things instead of just reaching for the legislative slot. Also, it means you should have a coherent Queen's Speech because you know what you're trying to do and what difference legislation can make, in this period. So I remember our second year, there was a lot of criticism because there was nothing in the Queen's Speech about the health service. Well, it didn't require legislation, so you don't put things that don't require legislation into the programme. So there was that process which we did completely change.

I also – because what really shocked me because I'd been a minister before, this made a big difference I think, when I'd been a minister before, you amended legislation a bit if you had to. And if you had to you amended it somewhat in the Lords but you did not bring in, as I found when I came back in '83, wholesale chunks of legislation that were being written as they were going through Parliament. I remember once Tony Newton had to come to Parliament and impose a guillotine on a bill which didn't need a guillotine at all, because what I used to do when I [was] shadowing social security was I would look at a bill, work out when roughly I thought the government wanted it, how much time we'd got, what are the key things that we need to focus on in that period and try and timetable our side of the committee on that basis. And I'd done that. So I knew they didn't need to guillotine it, but they guillotined it because they were cutting everything from maternity grant to death grant and everything in between, and they hadn't been ready to do this section on widows. So they had a whole section of the bill cutting widows' benefits which was not remotely ready when the bill was presented and so they could only do it by inserting it as it went through. I thought that was just awful. Bad government. Shocking! And they would do 500 amendments in the House of Lords and so on. Which, by the way, we ended up doing as we went on through government. So I did change the process and part of what I got Tony to agree to was that every piece of legislation a junior minister was responsible for and steered through and

it all had to be worked out in advance, what the problems were in the Lords had to be all worked out in advance before you brought your proposal to the legislative committee. And it did make quite a difference for a while. Except for two caveats. I think, it did gradually start to fall apart. Because of course departments found it a nuisance, it wasn't what they were used to. They were used to just making it up as they went along. It's much more comfortable to do that, but it's not good handling and it's not good for Parliament.

Apart from that... Oh! the Home Office. The Home Office was always an exception, their bills were always badly drafted, frequently not implemented in the end, but you could never get Tony to stop a Home Office crime bill in the way that he would deal with anything else. So if the Home Office dug its heels in and said 'We have to have this legislation', the Home Office got its legislation. Which was often the worst drafted in Whitehall, but there you go.

NH: OK, so reflecting back over all of that experience, distil that into your top tips, what would be the main pieces of advice you would give to an incoming secretary of state?

MB: Everything you do is achieved through teamwork. One of the most important lessons I think I learnt in the whole of this time was that there are two ways to build a team. One is you have to try and build relationships of trust with people with whom for whatever reason you have to work. It won't work with everybody, but that's what you have to try and do. Or you can surround yourself with people you already trust. The first is harder work, but it's much better. The second is easier, but it produces less good results. And all through my whole political career in opposition and in government, people always said 'Oh god, you got stuck with so and so, you won't be able to work with them' – I always waited to judge on my own experience. I took in what people said, but I never took the view 'Oh, I won't be able to work with that.' OK, we've got to work together, how do we do it? So I think that's one of the most important things. And to try and be fair to your team, don't hog all the work, don't hog all the limelight. And give people a chance to build up experience, because they are the future for your party and for future governments, and you know they need to be given their chance to build up experience and judgement.

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