

# Ministers Reflect

## Margot James



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# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2010 – 2019: Conservative MP for Stourbridge

## Government career

2018–19: Minister of state for digital and creative industries, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

2016–18: Parliamentary under secretary of state, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

**Margot James was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Dr Nicola Blacklaws on 8 January 2021 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.**

Margot James reflects on serving in government with a small majority and during the political turmoil of the process of exiting the European Union. She also discusses the role of her business experience in her time as a minister.

**Tim Durrant (TD):** Can we begin by talking about your first ministerial role at BEIS (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy), which you took on in July 2016 after the referendum [on exiting the European Union]. How did you find out about that job, what was the conversation you had with the Prime Minister at that time?

**Margot James (MJ):** Well, there was no conversation with the prime minister because I was a parliamentary under secretary [of state], I'd been appointed as a PUSS. I can't quite remember who called me with the news. I think it must have been the chief whip [Gavin Williamson], but rather oddly, I received the news in the public conveniences of Deal Town Hall, which was a very strange place to be. I was there on a private family friend type basis and a call came, and I was not exactly expecting the call, but I was certainly hoping for a call, so I was in a continuous state of nervous anticipation. So, I jumped on the phone as soon as the call came. Because it was quite a busy environment, I just rushed to somewhere quiet and that was the nearest place I could find! I was just given a few complimentary remarks and then that the prime minister wanted me to go to BEIS as parliamentary under secretary for small business. I think that that was all I knew at the point. And on my way back from Deal, I had a phone call from the person who was to become the head of my private office to explain a few things and make an appointment for me to go in and see her. That was how it all happened.

I was quite fortunate in the timing in that it was very near to summer recess – in marked contrast to the next time I took on a new job in government when it was right at the beginning of a new session. Well, it was immediately after the Christmas recess, sort of midway through January. Thank goodness it was that way round, because you have a big learning curve just because you've never been in government before, whereas on the second occasion the learning curve was the brief – at least I had good understanding of how government worked. Although it was a different department, there was a lot of similarity. So, in the first job that was how I heard about it. It wasn't until I got into the department to meet my secretary of state [Greg Clark] that my areas of policy responsibility were agreed.

**TD:** How do you go about tackling that learning curve? You mentioned that you spoke to your private secretary, you spoke to your secretary of state. Can they help you with getting up that learning curve?

**MJ:** Not really, they're too busy, but your private office are very helpful. That's the main conduit for information, policy documentation and so forth. One thing that should have struck me really, is that it's a bit like taking over as a newly elected member of parliament, in that although this is a new job to you, it is a job that is ongoing, as far as the outside world is concerned, there are expectations and there is a flow of work that suddenly you're plunged into the middle of. The expectation is, first and foremost, that you will keep those wheels turning. It's just the same when you're elected to parliament. You come in after a general election to an overflowing inbox of stuff that has churned through the election and that the previous member perhaps hadn't yet got round to attending to, and it's much like that. Obviously, it's a little bit more abrupt in that there was a person in your job the previous week and that is a good source. So, if you've got a good relationship with whoever you're taking over from, that is a very useful source which I did use and I was conscious of providing that to my successor when I left BEIS as well. I think it's very useful to have a good debrief with the former minister.

**TD:** Given you are taking on that stuff that's already been churning away before you get into the job, to what extent can you kind of set your own priorities and even identify new things you want to focus on?

**MJ:** I think it's useful to get some advice on that before you start. But in addition, I think, certainly in the first six months you're in reactive mode, which is not comfortable. I didn't like that, but it's inevitable because of the breadth of your responsibilities. I think this is the same in most departments. I mean, I had a job title which had three headline areas of responsibility: small business, consumer policy and corporate governance. That was my job title. I thought that would be it, but no, a million other things came under my remit. They were the sort of things that, probably as far as the secretary of state was concerned and even the permanent secretary, they might have been sleepy little backwaters, but as I was to learn quite quickly, a sleepy little backwater can suddenly blow up into something totally dominant.

The other thing that was quite interesting about the time I took over at BEIS was that it was a whole new team of ministers, whereas in my second job [as minister for digital and creative industries] there was a bit of continuity in that I took over from the man who became secretary of state in the same department, Matt Hancock [culture secretary, January– July 2018]. I became minister of state, took over directly from him, and he went to being secretary of state. So there was some continuity there which was helpful. Whereas at BEIS we were all new and we were very lucky in that we had such an excellent secretary of state. Because as a junior minister, you're very dependent on your relationship with the secretary of state, the chemistry, your respect for that

individual, his or her competence in the job, how he can go into battle with the Treasury or Number 10 – it can have a huge effect on your success or failure in implementing your priorities. So, I was extremely fortunate with Greg Clark’s appointment.

**TD: Let’s talk about that time at BEIS, because you came in immediately after the referendum with a new team of ministers. It wasn’t a completely new government, but it almost felt like a new government. What was that like? Business had a lot of interest in the outcome of the referendum. What was it like getting up to speed with this role in that context and dealing with those business stakeholders?**

**MJ:** It was a rollercoaster, and one was constantly finding out new pieces of information. I think that, you know, that old Donald Rumsfeld quote about the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns, that is so true of being a new minister, you really don’t know what you don’t know, and you are very dependent on people to tell you. Now, I think one of the first things that I did was to make sure that I amplified the sort of main stream of sources of information that I would be getting from the department with meetings and input from people outside the department. I think it’s very very important for ministers, especially new ministers, to make sure that they have as wide a range of input and advice and intelligence as possible. I’m also a keen reader of the traditional, mainstream media as well, and I didn’t give that up, although it was difficult to make time to do it. That was always a source of useful information. Because the civil service have a strange attitude to the media. But I saw that as very important, getting a lot independent input into my decision making early on so that you’re not wholly dependant on what your department want you to know.

Also, you’ve got to work your way around what your decision-making power is as a parliamentary under secretary. It is limited to the fields that you’re responsible for. Now some of these things will come to you and your secretary of state won’t be very interested, it’s not going to be a big priority for him (in my case it was a him) and therefore you have quite a considerable amount of scope for decision-making, which is motivating. And you know the areas where you need to check in. I was responsible for corporate governance but although Greg Clark’s priority was the industrial strategy, he also was taking a very keen personal interest in what was going on on the corporate governance reforms, which the prime minister [Theresa May] had said was a big priority for her. And whatever the prime minister’s priorities are– in terms of their relevance to your brief– they become your priorities, if you’ve got any sense. So both Greg and I were very focused on corporate governance reform which was a very interesting new area of work.

It was a great help to me, having been in business before. I was far less concerned than most of the civil servants about upsetting business. The default in government at that point was, don’t upset business. [Philip Hammond](#) [chancellor of the exchequer, 2016–19], at the Treasury, was very much of that mindset. That proved some grounds for difficulties, I think, in the relationship between Number 10 and Number 11, that kind of

default response that the chancellor always had that if anything could potentially upset business then it was to be disregarded.

**TD: As well as your previous experience in business, but you'd also been a whip and a PPS (parliamentary private secretary). How did each of those different roles and experiences prepare you for the role of being a minister?**

**MJ:** I think being a whip prepares you very well. It certainly helps you to understand the political side of your job and the importance of teamwork across government. Having been in the Whips' Office really does help in those two respects. It does also help you understand the legislative process, and if you have to take significant legislation through parliament, as I did with the Data Protection Bill, it is a great help having been responsible for that processing of legislation as you were when you were a whip. So yes, it's a good preparation, I would say, for being a departmental minister.

Being a PPS was useful preparation as well. That's like the ultimate apprenticeship really. I was extremely fortunate in being apprenticed, as it were, to such excellent ministers. And the last one was William Hague [leader of the House of Commons, 2014–15], that was a real privilege to work closely with somebody who was so adept and brilliant at government, as he was. In his role as leader of the House – again, going back to the benefits of being a whip – it was a benefit, obviously, of working directly for the leader of the House to see how the machinery of government worked in a way that isn't readily apparent to the outside. Not just to the outside world, but to most backbench MPs.

**TD: And what about your private sector experience, you said it gave you a certain confidence that some civil servants didn't have, but was that useful in the particular portfolio that you held at that point?**

**MJ:** Yes, it was very useful. Having run a small business, I had instant credibility with the business community, and we took the business community extremely seriously. Which you would hope that the business department would do that, obviously, but I think it did so particularly during that period when Greg Clark was secretary of state. He made time every Wednesday morning to meet the leaders of the main business organisations, including the Federation of Small Business, and I was able to go into any of those meetings that I wanted to, and they were very helpful for keeping your finger on the pulse and so on. And having run a business, [it] did help my understanding of what really concerns business. There was an example, while I was there, of the Treasury, quite understandably, wanting to bring in a policy of automated and remote tax submissions from business, and this was causing all manner of problems for small companies. It's just an understanding, having been there, you just know how strongly people will feel about this sort of change and how they will fear it and why they will fear it. That's not a reason for not doing it but it does help you communicate and listen. And we were successful in getting the Treasury to alter the way they brought the policy in, in

a way that would diffuse some of the concern and outrage that the policy was causing out in the business community.

I should also say that although my experience of business was historic – in that by the time I took over as a minister, I think I'd probably been out of business for almost 10 years, seven or eight years – but my partner still ran her own business from our home and was very vociferous at times on the subject of government policy and that was a really useful means of being kept in touch with day-to-day business concerns! I think people underestimate actually the role of partners in policy, it can be quite substantial. If the allegations of all the change around at Number 10 last November are to be believed, then probably the prime minister's partner [Carrie Symonds] has had more influence over this government than probably anybody else. Her and the new director of communications, Allegra Stratton [now COP26 spokesperson].

**Nicola Blacklaws (NB): You then moved to DCMS [Department for Digital, Culture, Music and Sport] at the beginning of 2018 as minister for digital policy and creative industries. How did you get up to speed with that new role and that entirely new set of responsibilities in a new department?**

**MJ:** Predominantly, in that scenario, I felt more confident in allowing myself to be more dependent on the officials in that role. Partly because I had come to understand how government worked and partly because I had a very, very pressing top priority in the area of data protection, which I wasn't anticipating at all, and in which I had very little knowledge or interest, to be quite honest. But to say the subject grew on me is an understatement. Basically, there were two big policy – more than two – but there were two big policy areas that I really wanted to get to grips with quickly. One was telecoms and broadband and the other one was data protection. The latter was really because the bill was already going through parliament. It had completed its Lords stage and it was about to come back to the Commons. And it was an area of keen interest from the prime minister because of some of the amendments that had been successfully introduced in the Lords that the government were not happy with. And of course, as you recall, the government had no real majority, apart from the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] arrangement [where the DUP agreed to confidence-and-supply support to the Conservative minority government]. By and large, on data protection, it wasn't hugely contentious as far as the DUP were concerned, although they were always willing to use anything as leverage and so one had to keep one's eye on them.

To directly answer your question, the teams of officials in both those areas at DCMS are – or were when I was there – absolutely top-notch. Both telecoms and data protection had fantastic civil servants who really understood the nooks and crannies and the policy implications. As I was about to take the Data Protection Bill through the House of Commons, I had no choice really but to have these fantastic officials and really listen to what they said. However, back to my point earlier, it's still important to get other people and their input. I'm very glad that I agreed to meet a member of the House of

Lords, who, having been frustrated by the department in trying to get a meeting with me, got hold of my mobile number and texted me directly. And I said “Oh, this woman wants to meet me”, and there were a lot of long faces in the department. “Oh, surely not a good use of your time, minister?” But if a member of the House of Lords wants to meet a minister, I believe that you've got to make time. And so I did.

That individual was Baroness Kidron, who is an absolute sensation at what she does. She wanted to protect the amendments that she had secured Lords majorities for, which I think were on the list that the government wanted to remove. Particularly the main thrust actually, which was going to make life a bit difficult for them in other areas. I met her and I thought her amendments were absolutely right and that we should proceed with them and so we did. Parliamentarians are a great source of information, and I don't have many criticisms of the civil service but one I do have is that there is a degree of disdain, I think, that the civil service hold quite a lot of parliament in. Parliament is a bit of a nuisance, you know, it gets in the way of what the minister should be doing, that sort of approach. But parliament is a huge source of intelligence.

**NB: You mentioned earlier that the ministerial team at DCMS was more established than when you arrived at BEIS. For the first few months of your time at DCMS, your secretary of state was Matt Hancock. What was his leadership style like in the department and how did he manage the ministerial team? How did that differ from your experience being managed by a secretary of state at BEIS.?**

MJ: Well, luckily, I can answer that question positively, as Matt's style was very open. He was very supportive. There was one element of policy within my portfolio that, once I became aware of it, I felt the need to challenge, and it turned out that the challenge was of quite a substantial one because the department were very wedded to the policy with which I disagreed, and it was a big effort to get that policy changed. I couldn't have done it without Matt Hancock's support, and I was very pleased, especially considering he had had responsibility for my portfolio and had previously been content with the policy. I was very heartened that he was able to change his view on it and support me, because without that I wouldn't have been able to bring about the change. So yes, he was very collegiate, very open. He had a tremendous capacity for work and detail and focus and engagement and a huge amount of energy, but he also believed in making work fun and I think that the officials enjoyed working for him and he got a lot out of people.

Contrast with Greg Clark? Well, Greg Clark is a more cerebral figure. He was perhaps more focused on a few key areas of the BEIS portfolio and had a tremendous consistency of driving the policy forward, meeting the objections, gathering the evidence, getting the external input and systematising it all. During my time with Greg, we did have a crisis in one of the policy areas for which I was responsible, a very big crisis, and he was brilliant at crisis management. I actually learned a great deal from



Greg about the whole sort of approach to crisis management in government. It was very interesting and very effective.

**TD: Could you tell us a bit more about that crisis?**

**MJ:** Oh yes. If you recall, at the beginning of our discussion, I mentioned how you can be responsible for this incredibly broad portfolio, including many little sort of backwater areas. One big area I was responsible for, which at first I thought would be a small area, was consumer policy. Another area I was responsible for were the labour markets, and I make this point because it's quite interesting that 25 or so years previously there would have been a whole Department for Prices and Consumer Protection, I think it was in the 1970s, a whole department. And then, in the 1960s, there was a whole department, Ministry for Labour. These things now had been absorbed into BEIS and then been narrowed down even further into relatively small areas of one parliamentary under secretary's brief. It's incredible really.

Anyway, the crisis was in product safety. There had been a fire in a block of flats in Hammersmith and it had been set by a tumble dryer. The first I'd heard of it was an adjournment debate. I turned up for this debate as the minister responsible for consumer policy, I'd not engaged with the brief fully by then, parliament had only been sitting for about two weeks since I'd been appointed, so I was focused on some of what I thought were the bigger priorities in my portfolio and then this debate popped up. So, I went along and officials had drafted a speech for me to give to close the debate. But when the Labour MP for Hammersmith opened the debate and made his speech and a few other people started intervening, I realised with a growing sense of alarm that the speech I had been given was completely inappropriate and could not possibly be delivered.

This is where my business experience actually really kicked in because my business was in a large part to do with public relations in the healthcare and pharmaceutical areas. So, I had an innate understanding of communications and that really helped me in those few minutes when I was sitting on the government frontbench thinking "I can't deliver this speech, so what can I say?" And then a wonderful moment – Greg Clark suddenly appeared at my side. And this is adjournment debates, they're at about seven thirty in the evening, hardly anyone in the chamber. Obviously, he had been keeping an eye on the monitor and had kind of instinctively realised that this could just go off in the wrong direction. He had been brilliant in setting us up as a ministerial team with priorities – with a focus on what could go wrong, with always being prepared for an urgent question on anything in your portfolio – all this training that, essentially, Greg had given us, really was helpful at that moment.

Anyway, that became an ongoing problem and led to a very interesting few months actually and I drew on the expertise of some independent experts that I formed into an advisory board on product safety. It was instructive to look back over that policy area

and I had considerable sympathy with my predecessor because without the disaster, it wouldn't have been high on her list of priorities, and she had had an adviser who was one of these people in public life that you come across who is very like a dog with a bone. I think she had been a television presenter on consumer affairs, and she felt that her advice had been ignored in the past and my department officials had been very lukewarm about my meeting her before all this blew up. Even afterwards they didn't really want me to meet her. I did meet her, and it was very, very helpful that I met her, of course.

So, to go about dealing with a crisis like that, you need outside expertise. Set priorities, set a demanding timeline but a realistic one. Because you don't want to disappoint. You've already got a crisis that has some seeds in poor planning on the part of government – they always do – and so you do need to have a vigorous approach to what and when you're going to deliver but you don't want to disappoint people further down the line. Because if you can, as a new minister, rebuild trust that trust can very quickly ebb away if you start disappointing and not meeting deadlines you'd previously set.

**NB: You worked as a whip in David Cameron's government and you also had experience under Theresa May while at BEIS and at DCMS, which was also a minority government. Do you have any reflections on being in those different types of government and in those different scenarios as a minister?**

**MJ:** Yes, I mean, each time you think your situation is worse than that which preceded it. So, when I was a whip in David Cameron's government where he had a majority of 20-odd, we all thought, "Oh my god, it's only 20". When we were in coalition, they had a majority of 70, it wasn't that easy. And then, of course, when the government's majority was lost, that was when I became a minister. The big problem that that gives you as a minister, I think, is a lot of it is actually driven by your own side and their nervousness at not getting the government's legislative programme through parliament. There's a constant tension over that, and as a minister, it's very frustrating because it dominates everything. What I really came to feel was that this mantra that government whips do not do policy, they're only interested in what they can get through and getting what they need to get through, I think that's quite a negative influence on the process of government. Because you have an institution within government which is very powerful, the Whips' Office, totally disregarding the policy implications of what you as a minister are responsible for, in a way that sometimes borders on contempt, and I think that is a very negative influence. I felt that very keenly because we'd lost our majority and it almost gave them the power, really, to run the show in that way, which can have very serious implications for policy and for legislation. So those were the chief things.

The other thing about the government having next to no majority, it does, in a way, give ministers a bit more licence because there is a real nervousness about rocking the boat

within Number 10. I think your position becomes more secure as a minister in that the prime minister's ability to dispense with your services is curtailed to some degree by the nervousness of the implications of having a reshuffle. All of the usual prime ministerial nervousness about people leaving government, I think, is magnified when you don't have a majority. So that gives you a little bit more licence, which, of course, you've got to use with restraint, but it does enable you to push for things a bit harder, it enables you to be more honest with the media, which is a big criticism I have of government, not this government, but just government in general.

And the attitude of the civil service to the media, I think, is inappropriate. I do think it's a big issue really. I think that department press offices can have some very good people in them, but they are constrained by the attitude that it's a one-sided communication. It's what the government wants to put across, what the government wants to say, what the government wants to announce. And if the answer to those questions is the government either doesn't have anything to say, doesn't have any good news to impart or, worse still, horror of horrors, something's gone wrong, then their attitude is "Absolutely don't give an interview, just say no". You see, I always had good contacts with the media throughout my parliamentary career and so a lot of journalists had my private mobile number. So, when they were frustrated by the department's press office continuing to say "No, the minister has no comment" or hasn't got time or whatever, they used to come, in the end, via text, to me and I would invariably do an interview. Because I believe that the government should be accountable to the public for the delivery of policy and that includes when it goes wrong. I find it incredible that people don't realise that the public are only going to be even more annoyed if they're fobbed off. Despite the rise of social media, mainstream media still has the main voice, I think. It's the main conduit for a lot of communication and so I think it's important. I think government has a responsibility to account for its actions with the mainstream serious news media.

To be honest, there was a policy area for which I was responsible at DCMS which was going badly wrong. I find this in business as well, when something goes wrong, very often it's a bit like a snowball rolling down a mountain, it gathers more and more crap on its way down, and very rarely do things suddenly go right or does any intervention you make put things right. All too often it gets worse and worse and worse before it gets better. I had this policy area which I'd inherited on age verification for online access, particularly in respect of young people accessing pornography online, and I had to introduce this as part of data protection. It was a policy which was fraught with no end of technical and other difficulties, and it was really going haywire and, of course, the news media got a sniff of it and wanted to know what's going on. That was a classic case of the department saying "No, no, no, the minister hasn't got time at all for this." And then, when I insisted on speaking to the media, a great degree of nervousness then flowed from that decision. But it was okay because the reasons it had gone wrong were

very explainable. It was a bit embarrassing, but it was completely comprehensible. In fact, really, it would be quite surprising if it had gone smoothly.

**TD: Where do you think that hesitancy comes from? Is that nervousness because the civil service is inherently cautious or is it because they're worried about political damage?**

**MJ:** It's a combination of the two, but there's no doubt that it comes from the top in the end. It comes from the leadership team around the prime minister, whoever that prime minister is, and their desire for a constant stream of good news or no news. I think it is also a product of our very male political culture – which, I'm sorry to say, still exists – and a sense that, politics is a sort of combative sport and you've got to be winning all the time. I'm afraid when you get a lot of men together you get more of that. Sensible, more moderate, more reflective male voices will often be drowned out by the dominant sort of tribal instinct and I think that's got a lot to do with it as well.

**TD: You resigned in July of 2019. Why was that the moment for you?**

**MJ:** Well, it was predominantly driven by Brexit and the impending change of prime minister, and those two things sort of collided and there was an opportunity to vote in parliament for a measure that would have made the threatened prorogue of parliament – which had been discussed and had not been refuted entirely by the incoming prime minister – that I felt it was important to put a marker down. I didn't see myself as serving in a government led by the incoming prime minister, so I thought that was the moment for me to depart. The Brexit issue – we don't need to go into all that, it's very well documented, we've all lived through it. But it had dominated that government and it had been very difficult for me to go along with aspects of the policy anyway, and I survived as long as I did really out of loyalty to the previous prime minister and from a love of the job I did.

**TD: Both Theresa May and Boris Johnson, when he came in as prime minister, had to focus a lot on party management. Johnson removed the whip from you and several of your colleagues during that prorogation battle in the autumn of 2019. Why do you think that party management and parliamentary handling was so difficult? Was it solely Brexit? What was it about that time that made that parliamentary handling so difficult for both prime ministers?**

**MJ:** Well, there are very different reasons. Brexit, and the government's approach to managing Brexit, made party management difficult for Theresa May because she was seeking a way to leave the European Union whilst protecting employment and our trading and security interests, which was more nuanced perhaps. And that did not accord with the wishes of the Brexit wing of the Conservative Party, and therefore they were not going to buy it and that's what made party management difficult. Also, the prime minister, Theresa May, was not willing to really reach across the House and get

her Brexit bill through with opposition votes. There were some overtures to the opposition. It was very, very difficult because the opposition was led by somebody that the vast majority of the public did not see as a future prime minister and therefore not easy to negotiate with. So, party management [was] difficult – obviously no majority either.

I think party management was difficult for Boris Johnson because he appointed Dominic Cummings as his chief special adviser and a group of Brexit campaigners to manage Number 10. I think that made it difficult because the style of Dominic Cummings was really to be in perpetual combat, and he had a widely reported disdainful view of members of parliament and also an approach that you need to define yourself by your enemies. Therefore, it was a combative approach to parliament, which has ceased now and it ceased when Dominic Cummings left Downing Street [in November 2020].

**NB: Reflecting on your different experiences as a minister, what is the achievement is that you're proudest of?**

**MJ:** Well, there's a few areas where I feel I really moved policy on. Certainly, in labour markets and the corporate governance reforms when I was at BEIS, I had a strong input into both of those areas. Now I'm out of parliament and one of my jobs is as a non-executive director of a financial services and banking group, I can now see the corporate governance reforms that we introduced from the other end of the telescope and I'm very pleased because there's no doubt that Greg Clark and I, and the team at BEIS, did improve standards of corporate governance. I'm now seeing that as a director of a public company myself. The reporting and what goes into that reporting. And also the embracing of other stakeholders because we were very keen to make boards more responsive to the voice of their employees, their customers, their suppliers, etc. There's no doubt that we achieved that and I'm very proud of that.

I achieved quite a bit with labour market reforms. The prime minister appointed an excellent third party, Matthew Taylor, who is chief executive of the Royal Society of Arts and Manufacturing, to assess employment, protections and labour market workings in the new digital economy. Obviously, a lot of that was looking at the rights and protections of workers in the very flexible end of the gig economy. That has resulted in some changes and some improvements. We didn't get all that we wanted through, but we did get quite a bit through. The actual legislation went through after I'd left BEIS, which is another frustrating thing about it because the government process, if it involves legislation, it takes three years and you're never in the job for that long – usually you're not, anyway. I wasn't. So, I'm proud of that, although frustrated that we couldn't get government agreement to all the reforms we wanted to bring in.

I'm also proud of the fact that I did manage to change the government's policy towards the online digital companies, which, when I arrived at DCMS, was a policy of self-regulation and voluntary codes of conduct, that they expected platforms like Facebook

and Google and so on to sign up to. It was very apparent to me, very quickly, that voluntary self-regulation would be wholly ineffective, as indeed it had proved to be for years, at least five, six, seven years. And I did manage to get that policy changed and the result is only now about to go through parliament. So, you see how long everything takes. When you're trying to change stuff, it is exciting and you have to work very hard at it, you have to get into the detail. Because you shouldn't just be able to change policy just because it's a whim or a fad. You've got to be able to demonstrate the rightness of your argument and that takes a lot of time and trouble if you're a minister because you've got so many other things on.

And you get into detail that even, sometimes, your department don't know because ministers have never asked. Going back to labour markets just for a minute, I found out that approximately a third of all the awards that employment tribunals gave to employees whose complaints they had upheld against employers, were never paid. Never paid. And there were loads of reasons for that. But that was something that the department, the labour markets team, didn't know. It was only because I was constantly asking and asking, getting under the skin of it, getting into the detail, because I was so outraged that this should be the case.

**NB: What advice would you give to a new minister who's just starting now on how to be effective in office?**

**MJ:** The most important thing is to establish your priorities and to make a plan that enables you to focus two thirds of your time on those priorities but that gives you enough vision across the rest of your portfolio, to make sure that the things that are important to the stakeholders in those areas are properly delivered and that you are sited so that you don't get too many unwelcome surprises. But you have to be quite ruthless, I'm afraid, in assigning a large amount of the policy areas for which you're responsible to that category of 'park it over there, make sure I know what I need to know, make sure the stakeholders have a system by which their reasonable demands are met and make sure I don't get too many unwelcome surprises'. Because it is physically impossible to give all the time to your responsibilities that to do a good job you need to give, really.

Surround yourself by some good people from outside your department, so make sure that you have the access to independent experts – get them in. One of the wonders of the role is that you can get to see pretty much anyone at a moment's notice so make full use of that. Set up really good quality, high calibre advisory boards, manage your time, stay in touch with the outside world. I found, as I mentioned earlier, continuing to read the media to be an important part of that. If you're a DCMS minister, do read the newspapers. I won't tell you more about that, but I do think that's wise advice. Because you are responsible for the media and for publishing and for the press. So it's no point exposing yourself to unfortunate questions that you can't answer because you don't make time for what they write and what they air. Listen to parliament, make time for

parliament. Politically it's very important. Treat the whips with respect because you have got a career to manage as well as your job to do. It's ironic I should say that – well, never mind about what I did with my own career, but, you know, I'm very alive to the fact you've got a career to manage. So, you do need to take the whips seriously. If they want you on the frontbench, get there. Get there and quick. In the end, you're a member of the government, it's a team, and you've got to play your part for the wider team as well as for your own priorities and your own department, et cetera. And make sure you make time for getting colleagues' views and cross party, as well, I think. That's very important too. Don't lose touch with your MP colleagues. So many ministers do that. I used to call it the black hole of the department. So many ministers disappear down the black hole of the department. You have to accept that you could do your work 365 days a year, 16 hours a day, and you still wouldn't get it all done. You need to learn how to say “no” and you need to make time for things that aren't necessarily urgent.

**NB: Is there anything that we haven't asked you about that you'd like to add, or think was an important part of your experiences that we haven't covered?**

**MJ:** It's an amazing experience. I'm very, very fortunate to have had it. And there's nothing like it outside.

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