

Ministers Reflect

Michael Russell



26 January 2022

Biographical details

Scottish parliament history

1999–2003 and 2007–11: Scottish National Party (SNP) member of the Scottish parliament (MSP) for South of Scotland

2011–21: SNP MSP for Argyll and Bute

Government career

2007–09: minister for environment

February–December 2009: minister for culture, external affairs and the constitution

2009–14: cabinet secretary for education and lifelong learning

2016–18: minister for UK negotiations on Scotland’s place in Europe

2018–20: cabinet secretary for government business and constitutional relations

2020–21: cabinet secretary for the constitution, Europe and external affairs

Michael Russell was interviewed by Akash Paun and Alex Nice on 26 January 2022 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

[Michael Russell reflects on his experience of serving in the Scottish government, including the challenges of implementing major curriculum and education reforms as cabinet secretary for education, and as the Scottish minister responsible for UK and EU relations during the Brexit process.](#)

Alex Nice (AN): Starting with your first role in government, you were appointed minister for the environment in May 2007. What was it like entering government for the first time and what was your first day in office like?

Michael Russell (MR): Enormously exciting. I mean, you know, I had not been in the parliament between 2003 and 2007, because I lost my seat in 2003. So I wasn’t part of the sort of inside group that had got into government. I’d also, well actually technically I had not challenged Alec [Alex Salmond, leader of the SNP, 1990–2000 and 2004–14] for the leadership, he had challenged me, because I was nominated first. But I stood for the leadership in 2004, on a very strong, I suppose you would call it modernising agenda, reform agenda. Although Alec and I had been very close and I had been his campaign manager when he was elected in 1990, I think it would be fair to say that it put some strain on the relationship, that particular contest.

When we won by a single seat [in the 2007 Scottish parliament election], it was very emotional. I remember coming back from the count in Dumfries. That was two and a

half hours from my home in Argyll and when my wife and I got home, the first thing we saw on television was that final declaration and the fact that we had a single seat [more than the Labour Party] and it was very emotional. I remember the first person I rang was Winnie Ewing [president of the SNP, 1987–2005]. I had been close to Winnie and edited her biography so I rang Winnie in great excitement and she was very excited too.

And then I didn't know if there would be a government – that was by no means certain. At the first meeting of the SNP group, we were told by John Swinney [SNP leader, 2000–04], who was running the transitional process, that those discussions were taking place, but it wasn't by any means certain that there would be a government. Nor was it certain it would be a minority government. I mean, there was a lot of talk of us possibly going into government with the Greens or whatever. But in the end, the decision was made, it took place and then I did not know what my own role would be. Clearly, the cabinet posts, in a very small cabinet, had already been allocated and I think my view was: "What would happen? Would they ask me to do anything?" And I remember Alec [Salmond] saying to me, I remember exactly where it was, it was just by the coffee bar in Holyrood's Garden Lobby, he came up to me and he said: "What do you want to do?" And I said: "What do you mean what do I want to do?" And he said: "I'd rather have you in the government than outside. What job do you want to do?" I think everybody expected me to be the culture minister. I mean, I had written on culture, I had been a columnist for the *Herald* for several years on cultural matters, you know. I was deeply involved in those.

And I said to him I would like to be the environment minister, which I think was a big surprise to him. The reason was that I felt that was an area that I would have an interest in, that was an area I felt was going to be important and I wanted to stretch myself. So he said: "Oh, fine, I will think about it." And away he went and then a few days later he met with the people he was appointing in the parliament, which was unusual. Every other reshuffle I'd been involved in or appointment process I've been involved in has been out of Bute House [the official residence of the first minister of Scotland], but that was in the parliament.

He took over one of the MSPs' rooms in the MSP block and he offered me the job of environment. I think there was a sort of view that if Patrick Harvie [Green Party MSP for Glasgow] had come into government, he would have got that job and I don't know what I would have got. But I got the environment job and it was tremendous – that was what I wanted. He asked me to take it. It was a junior minister post; it wasn't a cabinet secretary post. He asked me to support Richard Lochhead [cabinet secretary for rural affairs, food and environment, 2007–16]. He would be my immediate boss and I was to work with him closely. I think there was a view that I could provide some political weight in that portfolio and it was very exciting.

Then after the announcement had been made we were all marched down from Holyrood to St Andrew's House [the headquarters of the Scottish government] on the

first day and we were given a pep talk by the then permanent secretary, John Elvidge, which I still remember, because it was very wise. I remember him saying a couple of things that turned out to be really important. One was: “Never underestimate the power of the words ‘the minister says and the minister thinks’.” Because, you know, you think: “Well, so what, it’s just me.” But actually, [you should] pay some respect to that, you should remember that. It is not about you, it is about the job you are presently, and temporarily, undertaking. Perhaps Boris Johnson should have had that lesson from John Elvidge.

And the second one was explaining what the private office was, and he called it this: “your door to the civil service and the civil service’s door to you” and therefore it was really important that that relationship worked. That also turned out to be very good advice and at the heart of how a minister works.

And then almost like a school dance, a group of people were brought into the room, this was one of the old conference rooms in St Andrew’s House, and the ministers were on one side, and these people were brought in and sat on the other side. We didn’t know who they were until we were told that they were the private secretaries who were to be allocated to the ministers in the room.

It was like a dance, you know, you were paired off. I was paired off with a young man with a pigtail who stood out from the rest. He was the most unconventional one, that was Scott [Sutherland], and Scott was a very unconventional private secretary but entirely right for me and we ended up getting on extremely well together. It was very cleverly done. But that’s how it works and it is the most important foundation for what lies ahead. Of course the decision which is made about who your private secretary is to be is not your decision alone – in fact, usually it isn’t your decision at all.

But it is the relationship on which all the other work being done as a minister is founded. If it doesn’t work, then not much else will. I was very lucky over my years in government – Scott was followed by Darren [Dickson], then by Laura [Holton], then by Ellen [Birt] and then by Kirsty [Hamilton], who stayed with me for the whole five years of my Brexit work. All were friends and close advisers by the end of our working time together and all were vital to anything and everything I did.

Once that was over we were off and running and Richard Lochhead and myself and the two new private secretaries sat in a room and talked to lots of people about how we were going to split the portfolio. Because, you know, it was the first time we’d ever done this. We didn’t really know how to do it. We were being advised on how to do it. And it was a single-party government, so we could make our decisions.

There were a number of areas that we hadn’t decided on by the end of that first afternoon. I remember leaving St Andrew’s House and as I got to the lobby, there was a figure who emerged from behind a pillar who, I later discovered, was Bob McIntosh,

who was the head of the Forestry Commission and who had been in the earlier meeting. And he said to me: “Minister” – it is always a shock when people say minister to you for the first time – “Minister, have you managed to decide on who’s going to take forestry?” And I said: “No, we are still talking about it.” He said: “I think you would enjoy it.”

Bob was a wily operator and what he had done was chosen me; I hadn’t chosen forestry. He had decided, I think, that he wanted me to be the forestry minister. And I was, and it turned out, forestry and the work that the Commission did became a huge interest and Bob was one of the greatest people to work with.

That whole process was a superb opportunity to learn an area you didn’t know. I remember Peter Peacock, who was the Labour education minister and who was a good friend and who was a good adviser to me when I was education minister, saying to me: “Remember, when you leave government, you will never be stimulated like that again. Intellectually, mentally stimulated like that again.” And that’s the really exciting thing I remembered from the very start. You know, there was just this huge area that you had to learn about, you had to get to grips with, you had to understand the key issues. And you had to keep abreast of them. And on that occasion, because we were all new ministers, it was a fresh start for all of us. For about a fortnight I sat in a conference room down at Victoria Quay in the big Scottish government building down there, and people came in every half hour to sort of talk at me about the various areas I was now responsible for. And it was extraordinary and bizarre and stimulating and a learning experience and it was good.

AN: You say you expressed a preference for that role. Were there specific priorities you had in mind before you took on the position?

MR: It would be nice to be able to say I had this very clearly worked-out plan for the environment in Scotland but that would not be true. I was interested in the issues surrounding wildlife, the countryside, rural living and the wider environment including threats to it. I’d lived in rural Scotland for most of my life and I wanted to contribute to them [rural issues]. But no, I had no, in a sense I look back now and I was remarkably ignorant, you know, about the context, as we all were. I mean, I remember about a month after the new government was formed, somebody saying to me, you know, how we had taken to it, as a government, much better than people expected. I remember saying to him: “Well, the reason is we didn’t know how to do it.” So we just did it our way and actually I think that was the success of that first government and probably laid down the success for future SNP governments: none of us, had ever been in government before. And therefore we adapted it to ourselves and we adapted it to us. We used to go out and talk to people and it was only later on we discovered that our predecessor had got to the stage of hardly ever going out to talk to anybody. And that makes a difference.

Another big difference was the not being a coalition. I remember one of my senior officials, talking to her at the Highland Show, the first Highland Show I was a minister at. And she had been one of the people that had briefed me at the very start, during May. She'd been a bit cold and standoffish and she was much more enthusiastic at the Highland Show. I said: "Look, do you mind if I comment on that, you seem to have changed your view, you know?" And she said: "Well, we had no idea what you were like, any of you, we had no idea. And we've discovered that we can work with you and the most extraordinary thing is you talk policy with us." And I said: "Well, but surely all ministers talk policy to officials." But in a coalition that doesn't happen. It didn't happen with the previous coalition – it was the spads [special advisers] who were involved in negotiating what the policy was and they were the people who spoke to officials. That had to be agreed before ministers got involved. Not for us – I mean I could talk to officials about anything I chose to talk to them about and we could develop policy as we desired, and that's what we did.

There were big issues in the portfolio – in no particular order I can think of forestry, wildlife crime, aquaculture and its impact, land ownership, invasive species, crofting – and it was a stimulating and fascinating brief. It didn't cover climate change at that time – that was allocated to the transport department though later it came into the environment portfolio. I would have happily done it for longer, not least because I was trying to work out a way to make forestry a bigger part of climate change policy and increase planting. Making that happen took some years though.

AN: In February 2009 you were appointed minister for culture, external affairs and the constitution. This was a time of intensifying debate over further devolution, and the possibility of an independence referendum was being discussed. What role did you play in developing the Scottish government's plans for further devolution and for a referendum?

MR: I had no great desire to move on. It was the first of my four reshuffles. I was actually on my way to talk to people about red squirrels, which was one of my concerns at the time, when the government car driver got a message to say: "The first minister wants to see Mr Russell." And then I got a call from the FM's [first minister's] private office saying the same and asking me to come to the back door, which indicated that the press were aware and were at the front. I had to cancel my squirrel engagement and the car had to turn round from where it was, heading north, it was somewhere near Stirling, and head for Edinburgh.

As usual in a reshuffle, the only people who really knew what was happening were the drivers. Because they were all driving people to and from Bute House. So if you want to know what's happening in a reshuffle, you must ask government drivers, they are always the people who know. Their network tells you what's happening.

I remember Alec [Alex Salmond] saying to me what he wanted me to do. In a sense it wasn't dissimilar to the time I moved on to education. There was a bit of a crisis on the culture side. The government had just lost its flagship bill to set up Creative Scotland [a public body that supports the creative sector in Scotland]. It was not a policy that we had actually espoused when we won the election, but we had taken it on and it had got into a lot of trouble, because we were a minority. In some way we had to save that or at least find the structure for culture in Scotland. So, I was a bit surprised by it, but I was obviously clear about what I needed to do.

External affairs was also something my predecessor, Linda [Fabiani], had been doing very well. She had established it well within the government thinking and expanded how we were going to do things, and I came back to that, of course, a decade later.

The constitution stuff was difficult. We did not have a majority. We could not put a referendum bill through the parliament because we would lose it. But we had to keep that issue alive and we had to keep carrying it forward. Alec wanted to inject some new life into it. He wanted the first of the white papers to begin to look more seriously at it. He and I of course had worked very closely together when I was his campaign manager, and when I was the party chief executive. So he wanted me to take this on with me reporting to him. And he wanted me to report to him on the culture stuff too.

He [Salmond] had a real determination to try and drive this forward as well as he could, with the limitations to it. What he asked me to do, essentially, was to express the case more clearly, to begin to develop that case so that it was a case that could be taken forward in government, because it was government policy. And that's what I did. I developed the first white paper [*Your Scotland, Your Voice*], which was by no means as comprehensive as what emerged in 2014 in *Scotland's Future* [the pre-referendum white paper that set out the SNP vision for independence]. But it was the start of the process where we defined what we wanted to achieve. We did it within the context [of a minority government] – we knew that we would not be able to take that [a referendum bill] through the parliament. So it was constrained but it was necessary.

That was one of the major tasks I took on, but another one was getting Creative Scotland [a public body that supports the creative sector in Scotland] back on track, getting the cultural community in Scotland energised again to support change. I immediately took on the task of talking to the creative sector in Scotland. [We had] a big series of meetings; I dragged our then director [Lesley Evans], who became permanent secretary, along to each of those. She was very nervous about them. She sat in front of people who had been very critical of the government, in a series of meetings, and engaged them in the process of taking things forward. Those were the two big tasks I undertook and I was just getting into the stride of them when I was reshuffled again, unfortunately, and that was a missed opportunity.

AN: You then moved on to become cabinet secretary for education and lifelong learning. What were your main priorities coming into this role?

MR: Yes. That again was a bit crisis led. Alec [Alex Salmond] had said to me shortly after I became environment minister: “Look, the next reshuffle, I’m going to bring you into the cabinet, you should know that, right?” But he didn’t honour his word. By that I mean, it didn’t happen in February 2019. I had actually said to him, when he offered me the job of culture and external affairs: “You said you would bring me into the cabinet.” He said: “Don’t be so ungrateful!” I remember him saying that, you know: “I am offering you here the best job in the government.” Because of the culture side of it, and he knew I was interested and wouldn’t refuse it.

I had been education spokesperson in opposition in the first term of the new parliament and had developed the party’s education policy. Towards the end of 2009 it became obvious that we were in some considerable difficulty, particularly on the teacher numbers issue, and it was causing a lot of friction. And then there was the likelihood of a motion of no confidence in Fiona Hyslop, who was the education secretary. I think Alec had determined that if any of us were subject to a motion of no confidence and we lost it, there would be an election. It’s quite hard to have an [early] election in Scotland under the Scotland Act. So it would probably have led to us leaving government and Labour coming back in to government. So I think he decided to, in a sense, be sensible about it and reshuffle his way out of the problem.

It was the St Andrew’s weekend and I remember I was at a reception in the main hall of the parliament and somebody came over and said: “Alec wants a word with you.” I went over and he said: “I’m going to need to speak to you tonight, will you take my call?” And I said: “When have I not taken your call?” And he said, well: “You’ll know what it was about.” And actually it was midnight. I had gone to bed and I got a call and he opened it with the words: “Remember I said to you in February I was giving you the best job in government? Well, I am taking it away now.” Which is typical Alec. And he asked me to take on education.

So if you are offered a job like that, very late at night, when you are in bed, there’s nobody really you can tell. Nor should you, because it wasn’t public. I could ring my wife, who was a head teacher, and say: “By the way, I am going to be education secretary tomorrow morning.” And I did that. And then I tried to get some sleep.

The following morning – I think people find it very hard to understand reshuffles – but essentially what happened was I got up, the car came to take me to an engagement and both my PS [private secretary] and my head of comms [communications] were in the car too, and both had heard speculation that I was going to be reshuffled but I couldn’t confirm it even with them (though I did tell them that they should, like me, wait for any formal announcement that morning). They knew what I meant with that [and] spent the

journey anticipating (and complaining about) what they seemed now to think was an inevitable change.

Nonetheless, I went to the engagement as culture minister, because it had still not been announced and I remember it was at the Museum of Modern Art in Edinburgh. I had a sort of waspish conversation with Magnus Linklater [Scottish journalist and writer], which was not memorable, because it often happened so great was his dislike of the SNP and the government.

I then left the event and there was still no announcement and I was due to go to London, to a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee. And I thought, I am not going all the way to London and discover, in the air, halfway there, that I'd become education secretary. I'd just have to turn round and come back. So fortunately, the announcement was made just as I was arriving at St Andrew's House. Fiona [Hyslop] and I just literally swapped jobs and she went off to London there and then and I started on education.

I had [a] much clearer idea of what I had to do [than in environment]. We had to settle things down. We had to ensure, first of all, that the Curriculum for Excellence, which was the flagship innovation, which I had been involved in at the start of, because I was on the parliament's Education Committee at the start of the process, had to be delivered properly and the difficulties had to be overcome. And we needed to engage people cross-party again on that as it was meant to be a cross-party initiative to change Scottish education for the better.

The other main priority I had was to ensure that there were no university tuition fees in Scotland. I was determined to do that – I felt they were the wrong thing to happen. Remember, there was still a Labour government at this time. The Browne Review [the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance] had taken place. The UK government was in the process of bringing forward a set of proposals, or beginning to think about them, that would increase tuition fees [in England]. And I did not wish that to lead to tuition fees being introduced in Scotland and I had to create the circumstances in which it didn't happen in Scotland.¹

I remember it would be David Willetts [minister for universities and science, 2010–14]. I was in Hong Kong. I remember a conversation I had on the phone with him, from Hong Kong, and he rang to tell me they were announcing the next day the increase of tuition fees [from a maximum of £3,000 a year to £9,000]. And I said to him that's very interesting, [but] we wouldn't be doing that [introducing fees at any level in Scotland]. And I remember the absolute incredulity in his voice, that in some way it was impossible

¹ The increase in tuition fees in England would be accompanied by a reduction in government spending, since more of the costs of higher education would be borne by students. Via the Barnett formula, this would lead to a reduction in the size of the Scottish block grant, provided by the Treasury to the Scottish government to fund devolved services. This put pressure on Scottish ministers to introduce tuition fees as well to make up the shortfall.

to imagine that this would not happen in Scotland. And my officials thought it should happen. I remember one of the opening briefings I had on higher education, our head of higher education said to me: “You realise you will have to introduce tuition fees?” And I said: “I will not. My view is that I will not be doing that.” And I was told thereafter he went out and said to another official, whom I became friendly with: “Well, he will change his mind. He has to.” But I was determined not to do it.

It led to quite an interesting incident, it must have been in 2011 – I would have to look at the exact dates. I was in Irvine and I was about to speak at a thing which you will have never heard of, but in the Burns calendar it is very important, called the Heckling Shed. Irvine Burns Club is one of the oldest in the world, not the oldest, but one of the oldest. And it has an event called the Heckling Shed. Heckling is flax dressing and it celebrates Burns’ training to be a flax dresser. He never was, but he trained to be one. And it used to be held in the very room and shed where Burns learnt this task. That then burnt down. It is attended by only the committee members of Irvine Burns Club and one guest for each. So it’s a really interesting night. The first person I heard there was Tony Benn, who made one of the greatest speeches I have ever been fortunate enough to hear.

So this was the occasion when I was making that speech, and I was nervous enough and excited. I had gone to Irvine to do it and I was having a drink with people I knew in Irvine before it started.

Then I got a phone call from Alec [Salmond], because it was the night before I was due to go and tell the National Union of Students that I would not introduce tuition fees. I had persuaded Alec that in order to get ahead of this, we needed to stop being driven by the expectation that there would be tuition fees and we needed to put ourselves in the position of saying there won’t be, so that we were drawing a line and saying we are not going to do that. So I had persuaded him I should do this and I had persuaded him I should go and do it at the annual conference of the National Union of Students in Scotland, which was the right place to do it.

So it was the night before. And I got a phone call from Alec, just before I went in to do the speech and he said to me: “Are you sure about this?” And I said: “Yes, I am absolutely sure about this, we have to do it. If we don’t do it, the pressure will mount on us to say that we are going to introduce tuition fees and for all sorts of reasons, I believe that is the wrong thing for Scottish education.” I still believe, and am happy to debate at some stage, that it is a disincentive in terms of openness and it also is against the tradition of Scottish education, which we should value.

And he said: “I’ve had the permanent secretary talking to me about this.” Obviously what had happened is my senior officials were so worried about the implications of this policy that they had escalated up through the civil service and obviously the permanent secretary had spoken to the first minister and said: “Look, we understand this is going

to happen tomorrow, are you sure about this? Because you are hemming your government in, which may have significant financial implications.”

And I said: “No, I am sure about it, and I think it’s the right thing to do and I intend to do it, unless you tell me not to do it, in which case we’re going to have quite a dispute.” He said: “No, if that is where you are, then you should do it.” He was usually good in that way. And the next morning I went and did the National Union of Students conference, I think in Dunfermline, and announced that there would be no tuition fees – not in the language he later used, but I was pretty firm about it and just said it wouldn’t take place.

And that was an unusual event, because it’s one of the few events I’ve seen the civil service mobilise to try and essentially just stop a minister doing something. You know, with the best will in the world, I think they did it with the best intentions, but my view was, and remains, that that was an important thing that we needed to secure and we secured it.

Akash Paun (AP): By this point of course there was already quite a big difference in the student finance policy in England and Scotland, going back to 1999 or so. So it’s interesting to hear there was even consideration that you might have to follow the UK government position. This was when they were increasing from £3,000 to £9,000. So just to clarify, where did the suggestion that you might have to follow the UK lead come from? Was it just because of the likely impact on your funding, because of Barnett formula implications, or was there something else going on?

MR: It came from three sources. One was the funding implications. And quite rightly, you know, civil servants would be concerned about the funding implications. Because if you are going to do it, you mustn’t do it half-heartedly. You must be able to support the university sector in doing what it needs to do. And we did that. I mean, that was a key part of it. It would have been a threadbare policy, and a policy that would have been destructive, politically, too, if you’d done it and said the universities can pay for it. You have to be able to support it. So that was one area, there was genuine concern there.

The second one was the UK government. The UK government always finds it very difficult to believe that you are going to do anything that departs from what they do, you know. The idea of devolution is all very well, I mean at that stage, people thought it was all very well, most of them really hate it now. But you know, [their attitude was that] devolution was all very well, but, it shouldn’t mean real difference.

And of course in education, there’s very little that isn’t devolved. I’ve spent a lot of my political career shadowing Michael Gove in one thing or another, regrettably. But one area where he had very little influence on me was when I was education secretary and he was education secretary. He did not deal with higher education; I dealt with the whole gamut. But on the schools side, there was virtually nothing. So we could have

conversations, but they were irrelevant. I always felt sorry for Leighton Andrews [minister for education and skills in Wales] and the Northern Ireland education minister, John O'Dowd because they had the exams system in common [with England]. Leighton Andrews used to have a phrase, "you've been Gove'd", because whatever you did, Gove would be charming to your face and would then go out and brief savagely against you and that's just how things were and how he is. So there was a pressure there.

In higher education, there were two areas that were in common: the research councils and standards. But on fees, there was an expectation that the imperative that the UK government was allegedly responding to was such an imperative that the Scottish government would have to respond to it as well.

There were downsides and difficulties in that policy. One is that, for example, it put an additional barrier in the way of Northern Irish students to coming to Scotland, because the Northern Irish government would not meet the full costs that were involved. And that was immensely regrettable, because a lot of Northern Irish students did [come to Scotland]. Dundee, for example, had a lot of Northern Irish students. Students from Northern Ireland traditionally wanting to do veterinary medicine would come to Glasgow or Edinburgh and that route was more difficult for them. So there were some downsides and those had to be negotiated with other devolved administrations and yes, some of it was regrettable.

The third pressure was political. There was a view in the Labour Party in Scotland in favour of fees, undoubtedly. Their education spokesperson at that stage was Ken MacIntosh, who went on to become presiding officer [Speaker of the Scottish parliament]. He seemed to be supportive of student fees, I think, perhaps, because it was handy just to do what was done south of the border and perhaps because he thought that if the SNP was forced to bring them in, that would provide cover for Labour's support for them. Obviously the Conservatives believed that that's what should happen too. The Lib Dems didn't give us any visible support that I can remember, though they were against fees, a policy they abandoned of course in collusion at Westminster. So we were pretty much on our own in this one. Therefore it would be something that the opposition parties would like to have found a way to attack us on, but it was quite difficult to do it given what we were saying. So the obvious way to do it is, you know: "We support this policy but you can't afford it." So it would have been a tricky one to do.

All in all it wasn't something that was bound to succeed and it wasn't something necessarily which, although I think was the right thing to do, would always have been the easy thing to do. But we did it and still do it and we do the right thing, in my view.

AN: Aside from tuition fees, you said the Curriculum for Excellence reform was the flagship reform you pushed through as cabinet secretary. What was the central idea behind this reform and what was the problem that it was intended to fix?

MR: It would be very useful for people to remember that now, because you know people have forgotten the origins of this, but they were very, very clear.

There were two things that got this going. One was when Jack McConnell [leader of the Labour Party and first minister of Scotland, 2001–07] was education minister, before he became first minister, he was involved in a thing about the future of Scottish education – a national conversation about [what] should Scottish education look like? And it was a large-scale project and he was right to do it. In parallel, the Scottish parliament’s education committee, this new education committee, which I was a member of – I was, at that stage, the SNP spokesperson for education, or rather I was after a year as SNP parliamentary business manager: Nicola was education spokesperson for the first year of devolution and I supported her) – had done an inquiry on the purposes of education. They both came to broadly the same conclusion. Scottish education was over-examined, you know, it wasn’t focused enough on learning, it wasn’t fit for purpose and it had to change. And there was a unanimity of view about that. This wasn’t something that was imposed; it was right across the political spectrum and across the educational spectrum and across society as a view: Scottish education needed to change to get better.

The Curriculum for Excellence was a result of that. It’s not a curriculum, of course. It’s a methodology. At the start it was supported by everybody involved, you know. Of course, the problem with these things is implementation. It was going to be implemented, because it was a new approach to education, progressively over a number of years. You start that off with great enthusiasm and great commitment and then people find things to complain about and then it becomes political and you have all sorts of difficulties with it. Particularly if there’s any financial pressures on you, then that is reflected in the dialogue about it.

So I needed to renew our commitment to it. I needed to simplify it again. It had become over-complex. Things do – everything has a tendency towards complexity in government. So I needed to simplify it, to make it clear what the bones of this were and why we were doing it. And then to resource it and to support it during its continuing rollout, because it was still on rollout. I mean, I would have to go back and look in detail, but you know I think we were just coming into the secondary phase. The primary phase was well in, we were rolling out the secondary phase, we were about to come to the first set of examinations, all of those things were key pressure points and we needed to do it properly and I think we did. I am sitting here in my study at home and I can see across in one of the bookshelves the green folder. The green folder was the bible of the Curriculum for Excellence. We were determined to get it out there and to do it properly.

And it became very contentious in the parliament that was elected in 2011. Education was very contentious in the first [SNP-led] parliament, because we were a minority. And then in the second parliament, it became very contentious because the Tories particularly began to break away from the consensus on [the] Curriculum for Excellence. And education has always been a political issue in Scotland, and particularly since devolution, although we have been capable of agreeing on important issues such as the Curriculum for Excellence and in the end, tuition fees, which was a policy in the end that was supported [by all parties], except by the Tories.

AN: How hard was it to get the main stakeholders on side and to maintain their support? The teaching unions at one point did call for the process to be delayed.

MR: Teaching unions will always call for processes to be delayed, you know. That is the nature of teaching unions. It was always difficult. You needed, when you were education secretary, to recognise that it was far, far better to do things with people than impose them on people. And therefore I was criticised for being too close to the unions, but I felt it was absolutely essential that we continued to have a close and good relationship and to involve them in decision making. And by and large, that did work. I mean, I don't think I had a teaching strike during my five years, and five years was one of the longest periods as an education secretary. We came close on occasion, but I don't think we had one. I did have a very serious fallout with one of the teaching unions, one of the smaller teaching unions, but you know I tried to have an inclusive policy, so it would involve the teaching unions and it would also involve the subject associations.

For example, at one stage, we identified particular problems we thought in rolling the Curriculum for Excellence out in physics and in maths. So I tried to involve the professional subject associations and the unions and others in developing how we were doing things, so that the implementation was successful for pupils. And you've got to remember, pupils and parents were a big part of that. They have to be involved in it too. A very active engagement with the parent teachers and other such organisations. And we tried to have active involvement with pupils as well. So everybody needed to be part of it. And I think Scottish education works best when there is that collective buy-in.

I was very influenced by people like Pasi Sahlberg [Finnish professor of education]. I felt we needed to think about what education was in the 21st century and what it wasn't, because we had recognised that in the work that was done in the inquiries at the start of the parliament. It wasn't all about examinations and qualifications. It was about learning and it was about skills and we needed to recognise that.

The other area I was keen to do, and the area that caused me most difficulty, was college reform. I undertook a big programme of college reform. Colleges had been as they were in Scotland since the time of [Margaret] Thatcher. They were not responsive enough and at a time of real financial pressure, the resource had to go into essentially examinable skills, skills that had a value, that had a commercial value and produced

jobs. And that was controversial, but we did a very, very big programme of college reform and it has worked. But reform is always hard, and comprehensive reform of that nature is very tough. The main colleges union, EIS-FELA, was very opposed and that made it difficult too – it is never nice to have a motion of no confidence passed against you, but we avoided a major strike and that was important and we still got the reforms through.

I also introduced the concept of greater democracy in university governing bodies. I recall being told by the chair of one university court: “What type of person would stand for election?” To which I had to say well, I had done it and it seemed to be okay for me. You know, there was that sort of view that universities shouldn’t be affected by changes in society and the pressure for accountability. I had to try and stress that I did not share that view and that there were reforms even to higher education that had to happen and did happen.

AN: During all this time, there was the build-up to the independence referendum in 2014. What was it like being in government at the time? I imagine you were heavily involved in planning for the referendum?

MR: Yes. First, I was involved in the preparation of *Scotland’s Future*, because education was an element within that, all parts of education were in that. Also, as a cabinet member I was involved in the decision [to hold the referendum] being made. I mean, that was exciting. I think you know that I do a daily photograph on a thing called blipfoto. I have done one for over 12 years. There are one or two photographs from inside the cabinet room, things like the day on which we decided what the date [of the referendum] was to be and things like that, you know. So these were exciting times to live through.

And then as a local representative, as a member for Argyll and Bute, as the campaign got under way I set myself the task of speaking in every village hall in Argyll and Bute. There are a lot of them and that was a local campaign which I was deeply involved in. So yes, it was very good. It was very distressing to come to the end of it and to lose in the way we did, particularly as we had been ahead at one stage. But, you know, thereafter lots of exciting and extraordinary things happened. Like, you know, the membership of the party just took off, and the party itself changed very greatly.

AP: After the referendum, you then had a couple of years out of government. We want to turn the clock forward to September 2016, which was when you returned to office as minister for UK negotiations on Brexit. Having been out of government for a while, did that appointment come as a surprise and how did it happen?

MR: Absolutely. I mean, there have been one or two people since then who have come back, but until then I don’t think anybody had come back into government, certainly not in our administration. So when I came out of government in November 2014 I needed

to decide what to do next. I continued as the MSP for Argyll and Bute and over time took on a couple of other things. I went to work for Glasgow University, part-time, one day a week. A couple of people made nice offers to do that. I became professor of Scottish culture and governance in the university. I'd said: "Look, I don't want an honorary role from anybody. If somebody has got a job for me to do, that I can do while continuing to be an MSP, I will do it." Glasgow and one other university made a very nice offer. I took this up and I was really enjoying that.

I was working away and I then became chair of the parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee too. I have to say reluctantly, in one sense. I didn't feel I knew enough to be chair of the finance committee, but I was persuaded to take it on. And then, you know, in that role, I was commenting on Brexit, of course, in the parliamentary debates. But I had no thought that I would be engaged in anything as a minister again.

Nicola [Sturgeon] had announced that she was going to appoint a minister to take responsibility for Brexit but it didn't even cross my mind that it would be me.

I can tell you how it happened. I was chairing an away day for the Finance and Constitution Committee at Stirling University's Management Centre and Derek Mackay, who was then the finance minister, came to speak at it. There was some speculation that day that this appointment was about to be made and I said to Derek: "So is the appointment to be made now?" And he said: "Yes." And I said: "So who's going to get it?" And he said: "Maybe you." I said to him: "No it's not going to be me" – really as a joke because it hadn't entered my head. There was in my view no prospect at all of my being asked to do it. But what he said niggled a bit – it seemed unlike him, knowing him well, and it was clear he knew who was going to be appointed.

Anyway, a couple of hours later I was driving back to Argyll and I got a phone call from a very senior spad [special adviser], who said to me: "I am allowed to tell you this – you are going to get a call this evening asking you to come to Edinburgh to see the first minister, I hope you will say yes." And I said: "What's that about?" And he said: "Oh don't be so stupid, you can work it out." And that is what happened. Nicola's office asked me to come and see her, and when I did she offered me the job.

I was very, very surprised. I was extraordinarily surprised but pleased too of course. I had a huge commitment to Europe and to the concept of Europe. I had been a pro-European all my life. I'd actually just joined the party in 1974 but when there was a European referendum in 1975 and the party told its members to vote against, because there had been no Scottish negotiations, I ignored that and I voted for. And I think Nicola knew very well my position on it. But I was very surprised to be asked to do it and I came in and that occupied another five years of my life, I have to say. In some senses, alas...

AP: You'd previously obviously served under Alex Salmond. You then had five years, as you say, under Nicola Sturgeon. How would you compare their styles as first minister? What was it like to be in cabinet under the two politicians who were seen as quite different to the outside world?

MR: You've heard me say before, you know, one of the elements anybody needs to consider when they look at the SNP government, probably up until 2016, maybe later than that, is it was a group of people who've worked closely together, before the parliament even existed. There was, you know, a familiarity amongst John Swinney and myself, Alec [Alex Salmond], Nicola [Sturgeon], Fiona [Hyslop], Kenny MacAskill [SNP cabinet secretary for justice, 2007–14], two or three others. You know, we all knew each other and had worked together at a senior level in the SNP for many years – back to the late 80s.

There were different roles at different times, but by and large we had worked together over a very long period of time, something that Peter Housden, the former permanent secretary [of the Scottish government], commented on, I remember. That was important to understand how that dynamic worked. I knew Alec very well; I had been his campaign manager. I knew Nicola well; she had been on Alec's campaign committee in 1990, representing students. Her mum had been my constituency assistant when I was first elected, in the South of Scotland in 1999.

In terms of style, yes, a very different style. Alec didn't interfere often but when there was something that he was concerned about, by God you knew about it. I mean, he got very concerned about it. And you just had to be aware of that, that you could go for ages and ages and ages without him showing the slightest interest in what you were doing, and then there would be something that he was ringing you about every 10 minutes.

Nicola is a much calmer individual, but she is very clear about what she wants and what she doesn't want. But on the other hand, you know, my own relationship with her over the years has generally been good. We've known each other a long time and you know, she listens. Alec used to listen, but I have to say I think he listened less as time went on. He also became more remote and harder to talk to.

Nicola will take time to make a decision. She is thoughtful and wants to consider all the angles. I enjoy working with Nicola, which I still do in my role as SNP president... it's not that we haven't had disagreements but we've been able to, particularly on independence and the constitutional issues, find common ground to work on.

AP: So in that role, then, that you took on from 2016, your job involved a lot of negotiation, with the UK government, trying to make the Scottish government case and have some influence over the course of the Brexit process. What was your overall experience? Did you feel you were able to ultimately have some meaningful influence over what happened?

MR: I wish I was able to say that we had. I think that Mark Drakeford [Welsh minister for Brexit, subsequently first minister of Wales] and I were particularly close during the first couple of years and we did make some difference in holding the line and being absolutely clear that this was not being done in our name. And I think that when we were dealing with Damian Green [minister for the Cabinet Office, June–December 2017], when we were dealing with David Lidington [minister for the Cabinet Office, 2018–19], I think they were listening to us.

However I don't think it made a huge amount of difference. I know Mark thought we had tempered the worst excesses of Brexit at that time and that may be true. I also think that with David Davis [secretary of state for exiting the European Union, 2016–18], it made a small amount of difference here and there in holding back the extremists, the voices of Brexit populism and exceptionalism, which eventually took over.

Once that [Boris] Johnson gang had taken over, it made no difference at all. And I think the difference between the May and Johnson administration[s] is that there was a recognition under May, no matter how limited and grudging, of the legitimate interests of the devolved governments and their rights, whereas there was nothing but contempt for devolution from the Johnson government, expressed at every level even by the territorial secretaries of state.

The Johnson Tories, willingly or unwillingly, were absolutely on the hook of Brexit. Those who weren't true believers, or who weren't riding the tiger for reasons of ambition, were terrified of those who were pursuing it. They thought their entire political futures, probably did, depend on feeding the beast. And you went on feeding and in the end the beast ate them, but they went on doing that. And that beast – the Brexit beast – hated the very idea that Westminster was not sovereign in all things, and could not bear to be gainsaid by the devolved governments.

There were little cameos. I remember, I won't say who he is, but I remember one of the older style of ministers coming up to me at the end of an early JMC [Joint Ministerial Committee] meeting, in the exchequer room, you know the room that has the exchequer table in the middle. Just as he went past me – [the meeting] had been particularly fractious and I had been particularly argumentative about the issues – just as he went past me, he turned and said very quietly: "Keep going, we need you."

And another one: I remember going off to the loo again, I think in the basement of the House of Commons, where we used to have these awful no-deal meetings, which were

just absolutely grim, [a senior UK minister] turning to me as we went into the toilet and saying: “It is a madhouse, run by the inmates.” About his own colleagues!

You know, there was a huge, huge dissatisfaction but [also] a fear amongst many prominent senior Tories that they could not oppose what was happening. And therefore what we needed to do was constantly restate, not be browbeaten, and there was a big attempt to do that all the time by Mark and I, and then by Jeremy [Miles] and I, when he succeeded Mark in the Welsh Brexit role. And then when the NI [Northern Ireland] ministers were there the Sinn Féin ministers would be part of that – and even on occasion Arlene [Foster, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party] who could sometimes surprise in her defence of devolved interests, even if in the end she would always capitulate to Westminster.

Mark and I were particularly determined not to be ignored, but say what we needed to say, hold out for it no matter what. And that’s what we did. And you know Mark [Drakeford] – I mean just in passing – if you look at what Mark was saying just last week about Johnson and the pandemic and how his decisions are reached, that is exactly the position. We have to keep saying to these people [that] their behaviour is very, very much against the interests of the people of Scotland or the people of Wales or the people of Northern Ireland. It is, in my view, also against the interests of the people of England, but that is not a matter for me.

AP: You talked about the difference between the May period and the Johnson period in your experience. One of the big issues during the Theresa May administration was the passage of the EU Withdrawal Bill where, from our perspective, it seemed like you and the Welsh government did have quite a bit of influence and lots of amendments were made to the bill from its original form to the form that it took when enacted. Was that a case when you felt that the negotiation process was working better?

MR: I think if you go through in detail things like the Withdrawal Bill and issues like that, you can see areas where there were changes. I agree but in reality the only change that would have satisfied me – and to some extent I accept this criticism because I’ve heard it from Brexiteers – the only change that would have satisfied me would have been for the process to stop.

In fact there was an alternative, which would have given everyone something. It was in the proposals we put forward early on [in the *Scotland’s Place in Europe* white paper and in subsequent publications]. There could have been a Northern Ireland style protocol arrangement for Scotland, which would have been possible had the UK chosen to negotiate for it.

There is no doubt about that. The failure to achieve that was entirely because the UK ruled it out at the very beginning and would not countenance negotiating for it at any stage. It is clear that had they placed that on the table as an issue in the negotiations

there are ways in which it could have done so and we know that the EU would have considered it seriously.

After that did not happen then I did not see any acceptable alternative other than Brexit not happening. And that colours my view of it, because I feel, you know, we have failed in that regard to stop Brexit.

Now, people have said: “But your job wasn’t to stop Brexit, your job is to secure Scotland’s independence.” And I accept that and there is always a tension in there. It goes all the way back to Winnie Ewing, when she was first elected to the Commons and when Gwynfor Evans [first Plaid Cymru member of parliament] was there.

She tells the story, in her biography, of one day thinking about devolution proposals, which were being discussed, saying to Gwynfor: “But how can I support these? These are so much less than the people of Scotland need.” And Gwynfor said: “Where people are starving, you know, half a loaf is better than no loaf at all.”

So of course we needed to mitigate the damage of Brexit (something that was always impressed upon me by our officials, quite rightly) as well as to say this is a grade A example of why the Union does not work and why independence is so essential.

All in all, Brexit has been and will continue to be a disaster. One or two things have come out of it which were useful in process terms – for example the relationship with Wales was very much strengthened, which helped during the pandemic. I think also people saw how hard we worked to try and make the Scottish case and I think that was useful too. We were determined to articulate that and to ensure it was understood.

AP: And throughout this period there was the wider review of intergovernmental relations under way, which was reported just recently of course. What are your reflections on that process? Do you feel that is going to help to improve the way that the governments work together in the future?

MR: Under the current UK government no, because there will be no commitment to it. I mean, no matter what is written down or agreed by the current government, they will not stick to it. They will work their way round the edges of it or you will find things not being done. I mean, I have no faith in that or them.

The document that was produced is not substantially different from the material that was being discussed a year ago. In fact the original proposal from the UK government did not have a role for Johnson. It’s rather interesting, that this one does. Because you know, the current prime minister – if he is still prime minister, one has to keep checking these things these days – if he is still prime minister, his view was that he rose above it, which is just nonsensical but says a great deal about the attitude towards devolution at the very top of the UK government. He despises it and does not want anything to do with it. It is, for him, a disaster as he said because it challenges the untrammelled power

of the executive, working with a false majority obtained through an archaic voting system.

I am more than ever of the view that these arrangements only slightly ameliorate a bad situation. They are not arrangements on which you can build a future relationship. The future relationship, in my view, can only be built on equality.

That requires Westminster to do something – and you’ve heard me argue this before – which it will not do. Which is to accept that the principle of Westminster sovereignty is no longer valid. And Mark Drakeford has argued this as well, that sovereignty should really in the modern world [be] retained within each of the four nations who can choose what they do with it. And if they choose, as Scotland I think would choose, then, to be independent, to be a member of the EU, then that would be fine and should be accepted without demur by the other parts of the UK.

If the notion of Westminster sovereignty continues as it is, then there is no long-term or even short-term solution to this, because whatever you do can be gainsaid. Whatever you do can be set aside. And that is an impossible basis on which to establish a relationship. We see it, you know, on every occasion with things that take place. Even this week, we’ve seen further erosions. Joanna Cherry [SNP MP for Edinuburgh South West] was speaking yesterday in the Commons about the attempt to remove some of the opportunities within the Scottish courts to undertake judicial review. That is nothing to do with Westminster. This is a matter for the Scottish courts and the procedure of the Scottish courts. The Scottish legal system is distinct and legislated for at Holyrood. It should not be legislated for at Westminster. That is simply a continuing example of what is taking place.

AP: Coming then to the final year or so of your time as a minister, this was the time when the pandemic hit. What was it like to be in government during that period, during the coronavirus pandemic? How did it change the way that government worked?

MR: It was at first very difficult to work out what it meant and what its implications would be, I mean right across society, When you look back now, you look at the reporting of December 2019, January 2020, this thing is happening in Wuhan, a virus is spreading across Europe and then you see cases emerging in England and then in Scotland. It was strange but no more than that, at first. But then...

The first time the absolute overwhelming seriousness of this was brought to attention was at the cabinet, by Catherine Calderwood who was then the chief medical officer in Scotland. And she really put the fear of God into the cabinet. It was extraordinary. Yes we had come into a cabinet meeting thinking: “This is serious. I wonder what we are going to do.” And you know, when you hear the chief medical officer say: “This is something that’s going to require, most likely, a period of 12 weeks of complete

lockdown. There is going to be nothing like this you have seen before,” you are sitting there thinking: “No, this can’t be true – 12 weeks? That’s a lifetime.”

That was extraordinary and it struck home and that would only be sometime in early March [2020]. So although, you know, there was a lot of briefing and material was turning up and you were reading this material, that brought it home. This was absolutely out of the ordinary. And it came in a sense out of a blue sky. You know, you could see these things happening, you didn’t realise how really important it was and then it moved very fast.

There were frustrations at the very early stage. The UK – Johnson in particular but also his ministers and some officials – didn’t recognise, didn’t know and even didn’t care that the health service was fully devolved and had been since its foundation in 1948. I think that was an issue. I think there were frustrations with Johnson, who was very reluctant to do the things he needed to do. I remember a conversation with Nicola, where there was a real frustration that she realised if you are going to do this, you had to do it very seriously and very quickly and Johnson kept delaying, didn’t want to take action, wanted to hold things off and avoid things.

And then, you know, in the last week before the lockdown, I remember the schools closing, that was a big, big decision but as a former education secretary, and with John [Swinney] as education secretary, I was familiar with how unprecedented and how problematic this would be. But, you know, it was very clear that had to happen.

And then the lockdown itself, which in a sense was almost a relief that we’d accepted the reality of it. I remember being in London, I was in London about 10 days before the lockdown, and coming back on the train, I remember the guy who was serving food and stuff was wearing rubber gloves and it seemed very strange. I mean, I never seen somebody in his job doing that. And the train was very full. And I suppose now we were completely unaware of the dangers that were lurking there. But once the decision was made, the lockdown decision was made and announced, that changed it.

[I remember] walking into the parliament early the next morning, after long conversations on the phone the night before with my deputy, Graham Day, who was the business manager. I had a responsibility in the cabinet for the decisions that we reached about how we would recommend the parliament would meet, how we would deal with our business. [I was] walking in and literally – I mean the route I used to walk in from the flat was always a commuting route, very, very busy – there wasn’t a car. It was a picture I took, my picture of the day that I posted that day was this empty road. I had never seen it at eight o’clock on a working morning empty before.

I started off at that time dealing [with] the legislative consent motion for the Westminster legislation [the Coronavirus Bill] because I had most experience of legislative consent motions – actually of refusing them, so it was a bit strange to actually

approve one and also because it cut across several portfolios so was seen to fall into the generic 'government business' description. So I said I would do it and I had an excellent team working on constitutional matters that could very quickly take it on.

And it seemed to me, when I was doing that, that you know we as a team had better take on responsibility for the legislation and regulation going forward, because somebody would have to.

It wasn't that organised but I had probably more legislative experience than most, so I took on that responsibility. I brought forward the two bills that we ourselves decided we needed and then took day-to-day responsibility for seeing much of the regulation through parliament.

The staff resource was available because I had also signed a letter on the 16th of March to suspend the work we were doing on independence. Everything we had in government was being devoted to the pandemic by then. Everything was turning towards that, all the officials were. It would have been impossible to continue and I felt it was important we said so, and said so openly. So I wrote to Gove, I think on the 16th of March, and said that's what we were going to do. I suggested that they suspended the transition work on Brexit, which I still think would have been the right thing to do. But of course, they refused to do so and that was an example of what was wrong with their approach to both Brexit and the pandemic.

Incidentally on that, just one point I want to go back on, because I think it's telling in terms of attitudes. The election in December '19, when I was in London for the results, for the BBC results programme and it was obviously very clear, both in England and in Scotland. And the first meeting I had with Gove afterwards, which must have been the following week, I said to him, we had a cup of coffee beforehand – which Lidington had introduced as a sort of thing, but it was always much easier with Lidington – I said to Gove: "Listen, I acknowledge your mandate to deliver Brexit, you have that mandate. You must acknowledge my mandate to have an independence referendum. It is absolutely clear that the two situations are the same. You achieved that result in England, we achieved that result in Scotland, you campaigned on delivering Brexit, we campaigned on delivering the referendum, that must be clear."

There was no such acknowledgement, [rather] a refusal to acknowledge it, and there remains a refusal to acknowledge it and that is at the heart anti-democratic. You can't have an election that produces clear results and still say we accept one but not the other.

Actually it is worse than that. Their result was not as good as ours. And did it again at the 2021 Holyrood election.

This double standard has been at the root, since then, of the problem. It is typified in other things too. We suspended preparations for an independence referendum. They didn't suspend [the Brexit process] and then we worked totally, I mean with Nicola's focus, the rest of us focused on getting Scotland through it [the pandemic] and that was the right thing to do.

AP: On coronavirus, as you said, you helped to secure the consent for the UK legislation. Was that then a key part of your role throughout the next year, to continue to co-ordinate with the UK government, and how did that go?

MR: No. I didn't have a direct role negotiating with the UK government on the pandemic. I was not involved in that much at all. Nicola and Jeane (Freeman, health secretary) did that. What I did was I took the legislation that came from them and then our legislation and reported on it.

We developed a very detailed reporting and scrutiny structure and I took responsibility for doing that. I would also appear in front of the Covid[-19] Committee to argue for the secondary legislation, which appeared often, and to propose its passage. I think I did 25 appearances before the Scottish parliament's Covid Committee, mostly alongside Jason Leach [national clinical director of the Scottish government], but with others too. So that became a very, very big focus of what I did.

But external affairs also remained a big focus, coloured of course by the pandemic and its requirements. I had taken that over again in February '20, when Derek Mackay [cabinet secretary for finance, economy and fair work, 2018–20] left government and there was a small reshuffle. Jenny Gilruth [minister for culture, Europe and international development, 2020–22] came in and became a second deputy to me, complimenting Graeme Dey. It was a good team and she took on responsibility for Europe, as well as some aspects of international relations and aid. I did most of the external affairs stuff and I instituted regular Zoom conferences with the consuls based in Scotland, liaised with ambassadors in London as required and kept up contacts with legislators in Brussels and in other places including the USA and Canada. Graeme was parliamentary business manager and also increasingly took electoral legislation and regulations through, as well as being minister for veterans.

The one big new thing I did during that period was the review of relations with Ireland, which we published, which I think has been a very successful innovation and the outcomes of which are now being built on with other policies. I also intensified some of the Arctic work, working with the nations in the Arctic Circle and making sure that we were part of that, looking north as well as south. But the biggest part of the work I did over that period would be regulatory and legislative, to do with the pandemic.

AP: We have two questions that we ask everybody at the end of these interviews. The first one is: When you look back across your whole career as a minister, what's the single thing that you're proudest of having achieved?

MR: It must be on education, it must be the continuation of [the] Curriculum for Excellence and the preservation of free education in Scotland. Probably if I had to prioritise, the preservation of free education in Scotland, the Scottish educational tradition, which has served us so well, which has been reinvigorated by it.

AP: And finally, what advice would you give to a future minister coming into office in Scotland for the first time?

MR: I find myself being asked for that often and I always say: "Enjoy it." You must in the end get satisfaction in even a small part of every day out of doing it, despite the headaches, despite the way it impinges on your life entirely. Enjoy it and if you don't enjoy it, don't do it.

AP: Okay. And you did?

MR: Yes. I have to say I did. Most of the time, anyway. I think I was very, very fortunate to be able to do this. We haven't yet achieved independence but it is coming. I hope I have done things to make it come faster and to make the country and our neighbours better prepared for it.

I was very, very fortunate to find myself in office for such a long period of time and in such a varied set of roles. I loved being environment minister. Culture was great [but] I didn't have long enough in it. Education was an enormous challenge, but you know, it's continued to be a passion. The work on regulations during the pandemic was a bit technical and often very stressful but it had to be done. And then the Brexit stuff was unlooked for and very, very tough and the relations with the UK were difficult and at times unpleasant. But speaking up for Scotland and every one of its citizens is what politics in our country should be about – no matter who tries to shout us down, ignore us or patronise us out of existence.

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