

# Ministers Reflect

## Nick Boles



28 November 2017

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## **Biographical details**

### **Parliamentary history**

2010–present: Member of Parliament for Grantham and Stamford

### **Government career**

2014–16: Minister of State for Skills (Jointly with the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

2012–14: Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Planning (Department for Communities and Local Government)

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**Nick Boles was interviewed by Daniel Thornton and Tess Kidney Bishop on 28 November 2017 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.**

Nick Boles recalls dealing with opposition to his planning reforms, working as a joint minister, and developing the apprenticeship levy. Beyond being a minister, he reflects on taking time away from Westminster due to illness and being flattered by a parody Twitter account.

**Daniel Thornton (DT): Could you tell us about your first appointment as a minister and how that happened?**

**Nick Boles (NB):** It was 2012 and I was appointed as part of a big reshuffle. David Cameron didn't do very many reshuffles, in fact it was his first big reshuffle since the 2010 election. I had been elected in 2010. I had been PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] to the Schools Minister Nick Gibb, who is one of the great survivors – I think now the longest-serving Schools Minister ever. There are certain people, and certain kinds of minister, where actually the longer that they can last the better and I think Nick would be a great example of that. Anyway, I'd been his PPS and then I was appointed as Planning Minister in the Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG].

Some appointments in a sense are political, as in maybe you need a balance of the wings of the party, or you need a balance of intakes. And some of them are policy-driven. I think that my appointment to that specific job at that specific time was definitely a policy choice. For two reasons: first, I had done quite a lot of thinking about planning reform when I was running Policy Exchange [a think tank], and also to a lesser extent when I was thinking about implementation for David Cameron in the immediate run up to the 2010 election. But secondly, there was frustration in the centre. I think specifically and particularly in the Treasury and in the Chancellor's office, George Osborne's office at the time, with what they perceived as the reluctance of DCLG, both the ministers and officials, to actually do anything at all radical to liberalise planning.

The revision of the NPPF [National Planning Policy Framework] had happened under Greg Clark as Planning Minister, and I think was a successful reform. But it was not a dramatic liberalisation. It was gradual, gentle liberalisation. There were some other measures, particularly in relation to permitted development rights, where the Treasury and the Chancellor were trying to get some major change through for a long time and kept on being blocked and frustrated. And I think they thought, partly fairly, that Eric Pickles [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, 2012–15] was the main block, at the time, on those reforms. So they thought they'd put me in there to sort of 'put a bomb under it', which in hindsight, is not an ideal set of circumstances; particularly given that they'd briefed the papers at the time of my appointment, that I'd been sent by the Treasury to do the Chancellor's bidding. That didn't entirely endear me to Mr Pickles, who was going to be my new boss, and who's a formidable figure in his own right and a very wily operator.

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So that was the backdrop. That, I think, definitely classifies it as an appointment with a political and policy objective rather than just a sort of deck chair arrangement.

**DT: And did the Prime Minister set you objectives or say, “This is what I’d like you to do”, or just brief the papers?**

**NB:** Much less than had been given to the newspapers. Indeed, the worst of it was the newspapers had been briefed before I was appointed, like a day before.

I was the last person to get the call. The newspapers had all been told that I was being put into DCLG to shake up planning, but I had not yet received the call. I think it was that he [Cameron] ran out of time on the day he was appointing people and he was then doing it by phone the next day. I was the last phone call, I was in a lunch, I missed it... Anyway, it created a slightly awkward moment.

I’m broadly speaking a huge fan of David Cameron, but in my view, he did not give people clear enough instructions. You got a very broad sense of, in one sentence, “I want you to go in there and get some houses built”, or something like that. But what you didn’t have was, “These are your top three objectives and these are the time scales that I’m looking at,” or anything like that. I don’t think I was unique in that – I don’t think anybody ever did and I didn’t get it the next time either.

**DT: Presumably it would have been helpful if he’d said something to Eric Pickles as well...**

**NB:** I suspect the first time Eric heard was reading it in whichever paper Treasury had briefed. Frankly it was surprising how welcoming he was to me given the backdrop.

**DT: How did Eric Pickles run the ministerial team? Did you have weekly meetings?**

**NB:** I witnessed four different Secretaries of State in four different departments: Michael Gove at Education when I was PPS, Eric at DCLG, Sajid [Javid] at BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] as it was, and Nicky Morgan at Education. By a country mile, Eric uses the weekly meeting to run the show more effectively than anybody else. As a deliverer of change and reform, Michael is streets ahead of the other three, and indeed pretty much of anybody in government. But as a chief executive of a department, and a policy agenda and a political agenda, Eric was peerless and he did it through the weekly meeting. It was extraordinary. Weekly meetings with Michael tended to be random walks through his mind while he ate his lunch.

With Eric, all of the senior civil servants were there as well as special advisers [Spads], as well as the ministers, as well as the PPSs. There was a very strict agenda. There were these huge Gantt charts: mine was the planning update and then there was a housing update and a local government update. And literally, specific tasks, timetables, what’s happened here, what’s going on here. There was a section on the media. There was a brief political session at the end. It may have been very slightly over-structured, but

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nevertheless it was flipping impressive. He might project a sort of jovial, relaxed approach, but it meant that everybody knew that actually, his fingers were on every single set of reins. With a little twitch of the reins in that meeting, you knew that by the next week you needed to have a much better answer than you had that week as to why you were slipping on that milestone.

**DT: So he was actively chairing it.**

**NB:** Yes, and it was totally him. It wasn't the Perm Sec. It was the Secretary of State driving through his agenda.

**DT: And the other Secretaries of State you worked with weren't chairing so actively?**

**NB:** No. As I say, Michael's was run as a walk through Michael's mind. Sajid was assertive, but used it more as a catch up for the politicians with the Perm Sec, very few other senior officials. Nicky the same really. Nobody else used it as a management tool for a political agenda.

**DT: Were there separate meetings of ministers without officials?**

**NB:** Not really, except at the end. As I say, the officials would be chucked out for the last ten minutes, and the Spads, the PPSs and the ministers would remain. Very few meetings of just ministers in DCLG. Every now and then, he did a sort of bilateral – me and Eric – but not often.

**DT: You'd worked in local government, you'd run a think tank, you'd been a PPS; you were more prepared than many who come into government. What struck you once you became a minister about the civil service? Did it take time to learn about working with the civil service?**

**NB:** I've had a generally very positive experience in the three departments – because my second job was across two departments – in that I basically found a bunch of very bright people who were willing to engage and do the work and, in both cases, really wanted to deliver my ideas of reform. I'm aware that there are lots of people who would not say that that was their experience. I have often asked myself, and continue to ask myself, "Was I just lucky?" Because all you need is six or eight people to be pretty good, pretty switched on, pretty willing. Was I just lucky that in both jobs I had that? Or was there something about the way I was doing things that meant that I was able to get more out of civil servants than perhaps other ministers have with other civil servants?

I suspect that the answer is probably a combination of the two, but what I don't know is whether it's 50-50. What I'm certain of is that the advantage was that I had a pretty clear idea of what I wanted to do, in both cases – in planning from the word go and in skills really after I was reappointed, after the 2015 election. It was quite bold and

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particularly in the skills, quite radical and they were all quite excited. In a sense, I recruited them to a cause that they could get enthusiastic about. So I think that helped.

I had one experience, when I was in charge of the Trade Union Bill after the 2015 election, when I was responsible for implementing something that I think, broadly speaking, they didn't like. Not because they were necessarily massively anti-all trade union legislation, maybe one or two of them were, but I think they just thought it was a bit of an overkill, sledgehammer to crack a nut, a piece of political legislation. And I don't think they were wrong really. That was harder initially. But even then, once we were in the meat of it, again there were six or eight really bright people who engaged with it and engaged with the arguments on the merits.

I have many criticisms of the way the civil service manages civil servants, manages their careers, manages their compensation, and manages failure. I'm hugely critical of all of that. But as a group of individuals to implement a democratically elected politician's will, I've had very positive experiences. When you are leading radical reform, I think it's partly having enough self-confidence in your ideas that you are willing to have them constantly challenged. Not boringly constantly challenged, but that every meeting there's "Well, have you thought of this, what about this?"

The observation I would have is that there is a 'negative' attitude. But that isn't really a criticism because that's the job. If you've got a minister who has got very clear ideas and wants to get on with it then they're right to say, "But what about this, and have you thought about that, and how's that going to work, and what if people do this not what you think they're going to do?" There's a proper dialogue. It would be interesting if you had a minister who is inclined to just do nothing, whether then civil servants switch into a mode of trying to prod them. I don't know because I've never been in that situation.

So my experience was very positive. I think that the relationship worked as it should do: ministers setting a direction then civil servants raising warnings, trying to help them think through the detail, and trying to warn them off stupid errors.

**DT: Were there things by the end of your time as a minister you wish you'd known when you started, in terms of getting the civil service to work well with you?**

**NB:** Not really, no. I think my instinct about how to play it was the right way to play it. There certainly are things that I think about in terms of the politics of trying to make changes. I rushed out all guns blazing on planning, and though that was fun on one level, I think it did me quite a lot of political damage that probably reduced my impact. Whereas if I'd been a little bit cannier I might have been able to get further.

**DT: Was that inside the party or with stakeholders, or both?**

**NB:** Inside the party largely, with MPs but also crucially councillors.

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I think I did rush to the end of the branch and start jumping up and down on the end of it, with predictable consequences. I had a mission from God. [laughs]

**DT: The Prime Minister?**

**NB:** No, funnily enough, the Prime Minister didn't agree with my mission. George [Osborne] did. The Prime Minister was a little bit more nervous about it. He understood his party better than I did. But I was seized by this mission, because it has always been my major political obsession. It was an advantage to giving me that job. George probably worked out that I'd be braver in it than anybody else would be, but that was ultimately to my cost. Now it seems like everybody agrees, but back then they certainly didn't.

**Tess Kidney Bishop (TKB): Did that experience change the way you then approached the skills job?**

**NB:** The difference is I didn't have a mission when I came to skills. I didn't know anything about it and it wasn't a job I particularly wanted. I spent the first eight months of doing it, which was before the 2015 election, really just saying to myself, "Okay, I'm not going to make any changes or do any policy really, I'm just going to sell our achievements on apprenticeships politically." So I ran around the country saying, "Isn't it amazing how many apprenticeships we created?" as an electoral exercise. During the eight months, I got to know it and got interested in it and also developed some ideas about how to improve it. So when I was reappointed after the election, I did have a bit more of a mission. But it was a mission that I'd acquired on the job, so it was slightly better adapted to the system.

But also it's just a much less political area. The problem with skills was trying to get anybody interested in it, any politician or journalist interested in it. It's not that you're wildly pissing off your colleagues, it's that they just all think it's a huge yawn. That's the real challenge.

**DT: How did it work being a joint minister?**

**NB:** It was great. This is a secret, and I suspect this isn't how it's meant to work, but I worked out that the beauty of being skills minister across two departments was that neither Secretary of State was my boss, completely. They might be my boss on some stuff, but not on other stuff. It wasn't like the stuff was completely separate, because the way it worked is that adult skills and apprenticeships were in BIS, and 16–19 skills and apprenticeships were in DfE [Department for Education]. It was made more so by the fact that my two bosses were both friends of mine who were elected at the same time as me, younger than me. It wasn't like Eric Pickles. They were not inclined to throw their weight around and tell me what to do.

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I obviously also had an advantage that I had a close relationship with the PM [Prime Minister] and Chancellor, who had just won an election that nobody expected them to win. So they were both, as it were, at their peak of power and were inclined to spend the political capital they had just accumulated.

So the stars aligned in a way in that I came up with a biggish idea – the apprenticeship levy – and neither of my immediate bosses were in complete control of apprenticeships policy, and I knew that I could sell the idea to the Chancellor and the PM. I tried not to be tricky. I wasn't actively trying to play off one against the other, but I did absolutely make maximum use of the freedom of manoeuvre that the joint appointment gave me.

More broadly on joint appointments, if you interpret them as having an office in two departments, it can become a huge waste of time. I used to refuse to go to the DfE except for the weekly meeting. This idea of having two offices and a private office, all moving when the buildings were 150 yards apart, I just thought all that was nonsense. It can become a sort of *pro forma*, perfunctory, classic Whitehall bollocks. But if there's real substance in it [the joint appointment] that you can make more happen, then I think it's worth doing.

**DT: Can you talk us through the process of developing the apprenticeship levy?**

**NB:** Well, we had delivered two million apprenticeships in the 2010–15 Parliament. So in the manifesto process, there was a classic exercise in “Well, okay, what are we going to promise for the next Parliament?” There was this feeling that you can't say two and a half million, that sounds a bit tame, nobody would be excited by that, so we're going to say three million. Then three million is really a lot of apprenticeships, it's big growth.

Where's the money going to come from? In advance of the election, we were lost in the noise and fury, as it were. I hadn't expected or wanted to be reappointed, but when I was reappointed I was quite aware that we had a bit of a challenge here.

I'd read a paper by Alison Wolf [cross-bench peer and economist], whom I know reasonably well and admire, and was an adviser to Michael Gove for a long time and I continued to rely on quite a lot. She had written a paper just before the election, I rather encouraged her to write it, about the idea of a levy. So I thought, “Ah ha! This is my moment.” I've always been quite interested about the idea of hypothecated taxation and whether you can get greater acceptance on the part of people paying the tax if they know what it's going towards. And then even greater acceptance, if not only do they know what it's going towards, but they actually in some sense control what it's going towards. This seemed to me both a way to raise money and a way to test out my theory about that kind of taxation.

Politically, it fell on very fertile ground because the Chancellor and the PM felt that, in a sense, this was the time to cash in our chips with business. We'd won the election with



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a surprise majority in part because of the economic story; ‘long-term economic plan’ until we were blue in the face. The business community, both large and small businesses, were clearly strongly behind our re-election. We had cut corporation tax for business year after year after year and had more years that we were promising. At some point we needed to get something, and the time to do it is early in the Parliament.

So when I presented the idea of the levy to George first, I could see, immediately, his eyes lit up. He thought, “Now that’s great”, because it solves how we get the three million and how we pay for it. It raises the quality rather than cutting the quality in order to get the number. It’s a business tax but isn’t corporation tax. And this idea that businesses are going to spend their own money is interesting. So he was happy.

I mean, the way it actually worked is that I wrote a two-page paper, which I first shared with Michael Gove, who was then Lord Chancellor. In the late May bank holiday weekend, he and I went to stay with another friend and I shared it with him and he liked it, thought it was good.

Then I said to Sajid [Javid], who was my boss, “I’ve got this idea, it’s quite a big idea, I want to propose it to the ultimate bosses, but you’re my boss.” I’ve really admired him and been grateful to him for how he handled it. Most secretaries of state would have said “No. Either it’s my idea and I’ll present it or it’s not going to get presented.” His response was, “I’m grateful you bring new ideas, I don’t actually like this idea that much, I’m not initially persuaded, but I’m happy for you to push it forward”, obviously totally privately. I thought that was incredibly big of him, because not very many people would allow an underling to route an idea that they didn’t initially like. But he thought, “Come on, we’re at the start of the Government, we’re trying to do stuff, this is a well-argued proposal even if I don’t instinctively like it.” So he allowed me to put it up to the two of them as did Nicky [Morgan]. And it went from there.

It happened quite quickly because he [Osborne] announced it in the Autumn Statement. So we didn’t have long, and there were no iterations. At that point we got civil servants involved, but civil servants weren’t involved at all in the initial pitch.

**DT: One of the things that the Institute is focused on is making sure that implementation people are involved in discussions about policy in early stage.**

**NB:** It’s a very good idea. To be fair, they got heavily involved before it was announced – not before the original pitch by me in that two-pager but quickly thereafter.

It then became a pretty intense process with the Treasury about levels, the size of business that would be covered. It got announced in very broad terms in the Autumn Statement and then the detailed proposal came in the Budget. Basically, in the Autumn Statement was ‘there will be an apprenticeship levy, we will consult on the levy,’ but then the detail of who had applied, how they paid, how much money they got, how to

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control the money, what could they spend it on, all of that was left. That involved a huge amount of work with the Skills Funding Agency, key officials, key Treasury officials, and also Cabinet Office, so John Manzoni's [Chief Executive of the civil service] people. As soon as it became clear it was going to happen, I said I want as many people in this, their hands in the fire. But I was also trying to make sure that we devised something that worked. It wasn't the same as pension auto-enrolment, but it has some similar characteristics.

**DT: And at what point did you talk to business about this?**

**NB:** I can't remember exactly but quite early. I'm not sure if there was much conversation before the Autumn Statement trail but there was a lot in the run up to the Budget, and obviously following, at all levels. It's now being implemented and that has all of its normal hiccups, but the funny thing about it is that it's quite hard for business to attack. And I think that remains the case. You could sense that they wanted to be able to attack it in a full-fronted way, as an extra burden on business. But given that they had spent the previous X years complaining about skills, and because of the way it had been set up so that they were going to control it and they would get to spend it on what they wanted, I've felt like they've never been able to be wholeheartedly opposed.

**DT: Looking back on it, is there anything you would have done differently in the process of establishing the apprenticeship levy?**

**NB:** I'm going to say no. It's not because I think it's perfect, at all, but I think it was such a bloody miracle that we got it away that I wouldn't want to second guess whether one could have got an even better version away. It was vanishingly unlikely to get the stars to align as much as they did, and so frankly, whatever we got is probably the best that one could get. I'd be very nervous about thinking that one could have had a more consultative process or whatever. The political timing was crucial, the position in terms of the revenues and the spending review, the way in which Sajid swung behind it when he realised that it was actually a big contribution towards his spending review total. Having been through all of the other options of what to cut, if he didn't have this it was just totally impossible. Everybody jumped on board for their own reasons and it all happened and that's so rare. I suspect it will never happen to me again in my political career. God knows, I hope it works. I think it will work but it was big and risky.

**TKB: On the planning side though, you did have a bit more pushback. How did you deal with it there?**

**NB:** There the pushback was different. There was official pushback, and then there was political pushback.

The official pushback was particularly on the permitted development rights. There's quite a strong sense among officials that the planning system is this perfect judicious

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and quasi-judicial control process and short-circuiting it is wrong. They see a permitted development right as a short-circuiting of the planning process: if you want people to allow things to happen, then you should write planning policies that suggest that they should allow them to happen and then they will make their planning decisions. If they make decisions that are inconsistent with policy then they can be appealed and overturned, and that's the right way. If offices aren't being converted into homes, that's either because the owners of the offices don't want to or because there's a good planning reason why they're not. Of course, that wasn't my view and it wasn't George's view. Our view was that actually, planners over-manage and over-control and are naturally 'small c' conservatives. They're inertial and first say no, then yes. You need something as bold as a permitted development right that just says it's okay automatically to get stuff done.

There were two examples. We created a permitted development right for offices to residential, which has been a big success with a huge number of residential units created. We did do that in a relatively crude way. We effectively created some exemptions for the City of London and the West End. We went through an elaborate process of asking everybody to apply, but we didn't really want to make many exceptions. But in terms of the way the permitted development right operates, it's pretty straightforward. We tried to do it with agricultural buildings, with permitted development rights for taking over an old barn and turning that into housing. There, the officials persuaded not me but other more senior colleagues that we needed to have a prior approval regime. Actually in hindsight, councils have used these to effectively re-create planning. They don't get a fee for it, but it still gives them almost as much licence to say no, and as a result there have been very, very few conversions.

So I think my conclusion from that is that vis-a-vis official opposition, it was right to drive through a simpler, cruder version of it. With the political argument about housing development and planning, applying the NPPF quite strictly and having lots of appeals, my instinct was ideally to get houses built unless there are bloody good reasons why not. On that, I don't think that we could have been braver and made more progress, but I also don't think that we would have got anywhere if we had been less brave. In terms of my own political career, it probably did me harm and limited my further progress. If I'd been more cautious, my career might have been different, but I'm sure that we would have had even less success. We've seen net additions higher this last 12 months than for a long time. You sort of needed somebody to be a bit '*harakiri*' to make any progress at all, because it's such a sort of bog of resistance, lethargy and obstruction.

**DT:** You know the Institute pretty well, and the work we do to help prepare ministers for government. What's your reflection on the work the Institute does, or how other institutions could prepare ministers better for their work?

**NB:** I attended a couple of things after 2010 at the Institute and some earlier to help think through what the Institute was going to do either side of 2010 as well. There's no

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substitute for learning and hearing from other people who've done it. I remember there were sessions where various former ministers, Heseltine or whoever, gave a talk to newly appointed ministers. Those sorts of things are helpful. There's nothing like the fresh personal experience of somebody who you know has been successful and asking how did they do it. But how much difference it makes, I don't know. You might feel as the incoming minister that it's immensely helpful but will it make you that much better? I don't know.

Most jobs in government, most of the time, are public administration, steady as she goes, keep the show on the road. We're an old, rich, free country. We're quite clearly not getting everything wrong, and you don't want to be endlessly changing everything. At some deep level that's got to be true. A government has its priorities for reform and ministers in those areas learning from other people who have done reform successfully is immensely important. But if you're one of the three quarters of ministers who aren't in charge of a major reform, who are just keeping the show on the road, you would need a very different kind of preparation and instruction.

If every minister was trying to be a reformer, it would be a nightmare. None of the reforms would ever happen because the political system can't cope, the media couldn't cope, and the machine couldn't cope. One of the things we face with Brexit now, is that many of us would like the Government to be doing more on domestic reform. But maybe it's just not possible to ask the machine, whether it's the civil service machine or the political machine, to do more.

Firstly, I think it's about making the right appointments. A prime minister needs to know who are the people who know how to deliver change, politically how to deliver it as well as managerially; and put them in the jobs where you want change, not in the jobs where you, broadly speaking, just want the show to be kept going. Then equally, you will probably have a longer list of people who are very fine public administrators, who can make sure the budgets are under control, that the SIs [statutory instruments] are going through, and that the system is working. I don't know how many of them ever think about it in that way.

**DT: So you're pretty active on social media.**

**NB:** Off and on, yes. More so at the moment.

**DT: And you have also had a tribute band of sorts running in General Boles [parody Twitter account]. How did you find that?**

**NB:** What happened to General Boles? None of us ever knew who he or she was. Now he's gone away again.

It was kind of an odd feeling actually, partly because whoever it was clearly knew me incredibly well. There were some freaky moments where General Boles would tweet

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something that I'd just thought, and I was absolutely certain I hadn't expressed the thought to anyone. That was very troubling. But then there was also the fact that quite quickly, he became much more popular and certainly much more amusing than me.

There was a moment where I was like, "Oi, I want my identity back." But, I think it was broadly flattering. Not that he was trying to be flattering but just the fact that somebody thought it was worth the effort is, I guess, flattering.

**DT: You never had any idea who he was?**

**NB:** No. I speculated endlessly, as did lots of people here [in Parliament] and lots of journalists, but none of us ever managed to pin it down to anyone.

**TKB: In your last half year or so in government, in the lead up to the EU referendum, did you feel that there were changes in the way government was operating?**

**NB:** Yes. My two big things in that job were the apprenticeship levy and then the technical education reform with the Sainsbury Review. Though it's more of a slow boil, I do think the technical education reform, if it's done fully and properly, will end up being as significant a reform as the apprenticeship levy, and complementary – the two of them support each other. That was something I took a lot of trouble over and was unfolding in the six months before the referendum. I kept on wanting to publish it, and kept on running into the fact that there was not a single slot in the grid because the grid was full of the referendum.

I had also quickly identified that I wanted to spend a lot of time campaigning on the referendum in the place where I had the most locus to do so, which was in the FE [further education] sector. So I organised a tour of FE colleges in which I would go and talk to students about the referendum and the different reasons why I was backing Remain.

Government definitely didn't grind to a halt but it got utterly consumed, at least in terms of the public political agenda, by the referendum and by announcements that were geared to the referendum. So getting any policy ideas out was quite hard. In the end, what we managed to do was get the Sainsbury Review and the Skills Plan published just after the referendum, but within days of the change in Prime Minister, which is when I also left office. In hindsight, that's worked rather well, because as a result it got released with no fanfare at all. As Tony Blair once said, you can announce you're invading a country but bury it in a speech about skills and nobody will notice. I'm not suggesting it would have got much fanfare even if it had been done in a way that was attempting to get fanfare, but it really did slip out completely unnoticed, even though it was up on the website.

What was rather brilliant about that was the new team around Theresa May could then pick it up and make it theirs. Nick Timothy is a passionate believer in it. Neil O'Brien at

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the time was at the Treasury, and I'd worked most closely on it with him as a Treasury Spad for George Osborne. He then moved into Number 10 as their productivity and Industrial Strategy Spad in the Policy Unit and he picked it up. So it was something that survived the change of leadership. In a weird way, if it had had more fanfare as a Cameron announcement it might not have got picked up. It was fairly fully-formed and it gave Theresa May's team something that then in the Autumn Statement they were able to announce that they were funding. They then came up with this brilliant idea of branding these new programmes T-levels, so that made it a story. So it did survive the transition, and I would have thought there were relatively few announcements in the three months before the referendum that survived.

With the apprenticeship levy, I suspect that there were lots of people who would have quite liked to have rethought it, and possibly question whether we should do it. The beauty there, something that I had long identified, was that they'd quickly run into the fact that it's going to raise £2.3 billion and unless they can think of another way to raise £2.3 billion in a very, very tight spending review then it's here to stay. For me that's the thing that makes it a permanent change. Who else are you going to raise that amount of money from with less ruckus? The answer is nobody. It's impossible.

**DT: If you're comfortable talking about it, as you mentioned earlier, you were ill. How did you find taking time out of politics and coming back in?**

**NB:** It's weird. It's happened to me before, before I was an MP. I'd left Policy Exchange and was thinking of running to be the party's candidate for Mayor [of London], before Boris decided that he would do it. So I'd been through the experience of being on one track and then falling off it temporarily. So in a sense, it wasn't totally unfamiliar.

Slightly less so last time, but this time, it was quite an aggressive cancer and the treatment was very aggressive and it was a total suspension of all involvement. I didn't go to my constituency for nearly a year, 11 months. I was able to manage my team but very arm's length. A week would go by without any communication between us, especially when I was going through the main treatments. Then towards the end of it, an election was called. I was in hospital and stood for election from my hospital bed as it were, without ever going to my constituency. It was quite surreal. I did come back for the Article 50 vote in March, but otherwise I didn't set foot in Parliament.

It changes your perspective. That is not specific to politics, that's just being ill. For me, it did two things. One is it gave me a year to read and think quite deeply about where the country is, what its problems are, what the future holds after Brexit, and what the Conservative Party should stand for, what we should focus on, how can we maintain our popularity given that we've already been in power now for nearly eight years and will have been in power for 12 by the likely date of the next election. I was able to think quite deeply about all of that in a way that's hard to do when you're stuck in the middle

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of things. Even just as a backbench MP, but certainly as a minister, it's very hard to do. I'm writing a book in instalments that synthesises all of that stuff.

The other thing it has done is just made me think quite hard about what, if anything, do I want to do in politics, in whatever time I have left. The further I get from it, I do think that my experience post-the 2015 election of being Skills Minister, doing the apprenticeship levy and the technical education reforms, was so close to being the ideal experience as a minister. It's quite hard to see how you could improve on it, if you're somebody that likes coming up with ideas and implementing them. Therefore, there are relatively few jobs that I want to do where I feel like there would be any chance of having the same impact.

There is one: housing. It's always been my obsession. If someday Sajid is promoted to an even bigger job, the job that I would most love to do in government is his job. Although I would immediately request that the department changes its name to Department for Housing and Communities rather than a name that doesn't even mention housing. But that's the one job where I feel like, "Okay, that's a mission." And as it happens it now really is the mission of government, whereas previously it was always a fight to get it on people's agenda. It's now squarely on there, and for the Conservative Party, probably at the top among domestic priorities. It's probably higher than education right now in the political priorities. So that would be a dream come true, but it almost certainly won't happen because that's not how life works. And if it doesn't then the skills job, if we can deliver the Sainsbury reforms and the apprenticeship levy, I'll think, "Well, that was worth doing."

**TKB: Has that changed how you see the job of being a backbencher in the meantime?**

**NB:** I don't know if I know the answer to that yet. I haven't been a backbencher for that long since I was ill. I left the Government when David Cameron resigned, then there was the summer, and then I got ill in October. I only had a few months and I was very shell-shocked after the referendum and the leadership election and everything else. Then I was ill. Now I'm back but I'm writing this book. So I haven't done proper long-term as a backbencher. I don't know how I will find it or how I will approach it.

I did briefly consider trying to become chairman of a select committee and I put myself forward for the Education Select Committee. I think, in hindsight, it would have been a mistake and I'm faintly relieved. I think they made a much better choice in Robert Halfon than they would have done if they had voted me in, because I don't think it's a natural fit. So much about select committees is scrutinising what the Government does and holding it to account. That's tremendously important, but also completely not what I'm interested in. So I think it's better that other people do that.

But if you're not doing a select committee, and I'm afraid, I'm well on the way to becoming a senior backbencher, what's the right use of you? I don't know. I won't have

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to start answering that question until 2018 because the book will keep me occupied, but I'm going to have to think about that one. Somebody who has made a big success of it is Nick Herbert, who dedicated himself to a couple of big causes, global TB [tuberculosis] being the biggest. I think he's made a huge impact, carved out a huge reputation, and got a whole life around global TB, which, in a sense, only tangentially involves Parliament. That might be a model to follow.



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