

# Ministers reflect

Nick Harvey



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## Biographical details

## Electoral History

1992-2015: Member of Parliament for North Devon

## Parliamentary Career

2010-2012: Minister of State for Defence

2006-2010: Shadow Secretary of State for Defence

*Nick Harvey was interviewed by Tom Gash and Jen Gold on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.*

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

**Nick Harvey (NH):** Somewhat chaotic. Obviously it was the first coalition in peacetime in many decades. Although everybody has congratulated themselves on the smoothness of all of that transition, the reality at times was slightly different to that, in particular the fact that the Lib Dem leadership hadn't really got a proper operating base, the Civil Service didn't seem to have anticipated Nick Clegg not taking an office of state, but instead wanting to set up an Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. You know, that took so long to set up and become functional that there was a slightly rudderless sense to our component of the Coalition at that time and I remember speaking here [at the Institute for Government] and saying that in those first months I had felt rather as though I had been parachuted behind enemy lines, with absolutely no instructions, no communication link back to headquarters, was simply foraging off the local countryside and doing what I hoped central command would have wanted me to do. That was my overwhelming sense – just of being completely on my own, living by my wits and working out what I thought anyone at central control who would have cared might have wanted me to be doing in the circumstances.

**JG: And what kind of support, if any, was available to you?**

**NH:** Very good private office I inherited from my Labour predecessor, who were very keen to help. They had read the handbook on how to be a good minister, I think again produced by IfG [Institute for Government] and made a great point of telling me that they understood the various different constituencies to which I had to appeal and I said that was very nice, had they worked out the hierarchy of these constituencies and they looked a little non-plussed and asked me what I meant so I said, 'Well, you only get to participate in politics at all if you keep your family happy, you only get to be the candidate if you keep your local party happy, you only get elected to Parliament if you keep your constituents happy, and you only get chosen to be a minister if you keep your party in Westminster happy'. And by the time I had kept all of them happy, I was at the disposal of the Department.

**JG: And how did you feel your previous roles – obviously you had shadowed Defence beforehand – prepared you for that position?**

**NH:** Quite a good grounding in the subject matter, but no insight really into the practical realities of being on the other side of the fence. Also the Ministry of Defence [MOD] is a most unusually opaque, perhaps even secretive, department. I suspect that those shadowing other government departments have a much better insight as to what's going on inside them and probably much better access to facts and figures. Under the veneer of national security, the MOD gets away with running a very secretive set up. So it is actually very hard for anyone shadowing it to have very much insight as to what's going on. After I came out, I found exactly the same thing – you go from being completely starved of information to being utterly saturated with it and back to starvation the minute you're outside again.

**JG: So did you have a sense of priorities in those early days?**

**NH:** I did, but unfortunately most of the priorities we had put forward during the 2010 election campaign were just chopped off at the head on the basis that they couldn't be afforded and they were not necessarily Conservative priorities. Better housing for the Armed Forces and better mental healthcare for the Armed Forces, which were two of the things we had majored on, better pay for the Armed Forces were just not possible in the financial context.

**JG: From your broad experience how would you describe the main roles and duties of a minister?**

**NH:** That is an interesting question. Gosh... Taking a regular flow of executive decisions over operational matters, which one would do under advice from officials and submissions that sat in front of you – this is all fairly micro stuff. I suppose secretaries of state look at the macro picture to a greater extent - but it's all very linear, it's all very compartmentalised. Each department has, you know, four, five or six ministers with silos and the sausage machine produces little sausages for each of them to chew on.

**Tom Gash (TG): So in what way did the – very interesting under the Coalition – the ministerial team work together on things and discuss things collectively?**

**NH:** It did a bit, but both the Secretaries of State that I worked under, Liam Fox and Phillip Hammond, gave every impression that they found other ministers in their department a slightly tiresome extra they could have well done without and if anything, they were probably more accepting of my being there from the Lib Dem side than they were of having fellow Conservatives there. So I wouldn't have said, in all honesty, that there was a strong sense of teamwork. Meetings of the ministerial team were supposed to happen on a regular basis but were regularly cancelled because something more interesting had come up in the Secretary of State's calendar and when they did happen, they had a tendency to be a bit short-termist and slightly chaotic, rather than being strategic and forward-looking. The better sort of discussions happened in meetings where you had also got officials and Armed Services Chiefs in there: better debates, better discussions, better decisions really when everybody was in the room, rather than just the ministerial team.

**JG: And what approach did you take to trying to establish effective working relations with the Secretary of States?**

**NH:** Regular one-on-ones, which happened more reliably than the team meetings. Escalating things to the Secretary of State occasionally, referring things to the Secretary of State which I suspected he would want to get involved in and not have me sign off without him knowing.

**TG: Were there things that worked particularly well, in terms of getting that relationship working effectively?**

**NH:** During the Strategic Defence and Security Review [SDSR] throughout the summer and early autumn of 2010, I think Liam Fox very much appreciated the fact that I and my private office were coming up with separate lines of enquiry and challenge to the officials and the Chiefs. I think they felt that it added significantly to the arsenal of the ministerial sort of interrogation of the orthodoxies as it were. During Phillip Hammond's time, he and I were the two ministers on the department board. We had a 'Maude board' [departmental boards including Non-Executive Directors] with outsiders in it as well as insiders and there were things on that that we sort of danced a bit of a duet on, because we had got a similar view of them and were trying to steer things to the same end.

**JG: Thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how was most of your time actually spent?**

**NH:** A very full diary of sort of routine meetings with officials and Service Chiefs, plus visits out to all parts of the Armed Forces, plus trips aboard. You have an incredibly full diary of meetings, followed by a few hours of piles of correspondence and parliamentary questions and so on which you just have to grind your way through or else the whole thing would crank to a halt. But just meetings from dawn til dusk, sort of the whole time and if you didn't push back at things, it literally would have just been nose to tail all day, every day and the military, God bless them, like to start quite early in the morning and the whips, God bless them, like to keep you going quite late at night, so very long hours!

**JG: So in terms of competing demands on your time, were there any aspects of your role with particular tensions?**

**NH:** The MOD had very little respect for Friday, the concept that you ought to be in the constituency. They kept saying ‘Well, can’t you be in the constituency at the weekend?’ and you were trying to say, ‘Well, you know, the hospital Chief Executive isn’t really there working on a Saturday and Sunday, nor was the Chief of Police, the schools aren’t open, the factories aren’t open, all the things an MP does have to be done on a Friday. I shouldn’t be here on a Friday’. But when you have got secretaries of state with absolutely rock solid safe seats who are far more interested in and driven by the work in the department than by anything in their constituency, they couldn’t give a stuff about that. Liam [Fox] also, during the SDSR, was very keen on lots of weekend meetings. So Saturdays and Sundays had quite a lot of working sessions as well. I would occasionally be down to as little as a 24-hour weekend in the constituency which with two small kids was not ideal.

It’s funny, I don’t think this was particularly everybody’s experience in other departments - I think it was something slightly peculiar to the MOD. Certainly when Kate [Harvey’s wife] was talking to Steve Webb’s wife and a few of the other spouses at some gathering or other, she got the impression that mine was a slightly untypical experience. I remember we came to the summer recess one time and I talked to one of my colleagues in another department, who apparently had sort of checked out of the department that day and wasn’t expected back there until the House returned in the autumn and I gawped at them in incredulity and they said, ‘What do you mean?’ And I said, ‘Well, I am allowed a fortnight off. I have to negotiate the fortnight that I get, other than that they expect me there full time, throughout the whole summer recess’. So just totally different expectation from the drum beat of the different departments I think.

**TG: How did you go about prioritising the different things within the huge length of time that you were actually working?**

**NH:** I was very reliant on the Private Secretary and APS [Assistant Private Secretary], who were very good, very bright characters who had their own ideas, which I was heavily dependent on in the early days and as time progressed they got a sense of what I thought were important and what were not and you had to just take a lot on trust. People who you rated and you thought were making sound judgements you increasingly had to let get on and make those judgements because if you tried to supervise and micromanage everything that came up under my remit, well, it couldn’t be done, it wasn’t possible.

**JG: Could you talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department and how you went about dealing with it?**

**NH:** You would occasionally get things where the Secretary of State got a sudden need to be abroad. You know an impromptu meeting of NATO defence ministers or something of that sort, which would basically entail me having to step up and cover his diary as well as covering my own. So some fairly brutal decisions would have to be made as to what was going to be jettisoned and what was not and that was not uncommon. In fact, I even got to a point of having in my cupboard an overnight kit and my passport in there, because it wasn’t at all unknown for me to be suddenly told, at lunchtime, you need to fly to X or Y this afternoon and you basically had to be ready for that.

**JG: What do you feel was your greatest achievement in office?**

**NH:** I think I opened up the possibility that we could have done something different in the nuclear deterrent sphere. My tenure didn’t last long enough to see that through to that conclusion and ultimately that was a fruitless path, but I think opening it up was quite something. I contributed to some of the quite tough decisions of the SDSR in 2010, but I think we got more of those right than we got wrong considering the hurry that it got taken in. And I think collectively that team put defence in a much better place than it had been in when we arrived.

I think that having quite a forward leaning attitude towards some of the riskier operational things in Afghanistan, I probably helped create some momentum out there which probably helped improve the situation a bit on the ground in Helmand but I don’t know that there is anything particularly lasting, all from a relatively short spell in there really.

**TG: Is that timing thing important then, do you think, in terms of how long ministers need to be in those roles?**

**NH:** I do. I do. I mean, I think we have got a problem that good reforms and changes, good decisions, really take a number of years to work themselves through, to be proved, perhaps, in tests and trials and so on and perfected and then done. The maximum any minister has got on the clock at any point is five years. And then as a consequence of that, ministers have a nasty tendency to try and push things to happen far more quickly than they ought to and I mean you can never predict the outcomes of elections, but less chopping and changing of ministers in the mid-term I think would help. In fairness to Cameron, he did rather less of that in the last government than his predecessor had tended to and intriguingly, he has picked quite a lot of the same people in the same posts post-election as were there before. I mean, more than I would have expected.

**JG: Because from your experience, how long did it take to really get up to speed on the brief?**

**NH:** You know, even coming in with having shadowed it, I would have said the best part of 12 months to be really up to speed, yes.

**JG: In terms of relationships in the department, what interaction did you have with special advisers?**

**NH:** Okay, but they were there as Tory special advisers, they were very tribal. They are not bad people but they were there to prosecute the Tory agenda. I cooperated with them when there was a mutual interest in doing so, but there ought to have been a mix of Lib Dem and Tory special advisers and there wasn't. I think a lot of it stemmed from the personalities though, I mean the Tories had just brought in some quite tribal special advisers. Actually [Phillip] Hammond, when he arrived, brought some less political ones with him. Arguably they were less effective, but they were probably easier to work with.

**JG: And did they have any sort of direct role in your brief or support you in any way?**

**NH:** Yes, occasionally. Yes, they would, they would sort of charge in to see me if they had something they wanted to say or suggest or occasionally I would ask them to come in and work with me on something. But I wouldn't say it was part of my daily pattern of working.

**JG: And you briefly mentioned your private office – how did you go about getting that to function effectively?**

**NH:** Well, I was largely in their hands to begin with. They had seen it all before and I hadn't and I was blessed with a very strong team. I think they had found working for my predecessor, despite the fact that he had chosen them all, quite difficult and they were sort of excited by the coalition dynamic and the fact that they had got a wider brief than they might otherwise have had. I don't say that worked as well as it should have done, but it worked a bit and they were very good at being out in the bazaars as eyes and ears, listening and hearing what was going on. And I think they probably had a slightly enhanced status in the eyes of the rest of the department, because of the coalition dynamic and I think Chiefs and officials, who weren't necessarily getting their point through with the Secretary of State or the Tory ministers would come round and have a second go with me to see if I could help get things looked at a second time around.

**TG: What about your interaction with other officials in the department?**

**NH:** Pretty good. They were very impressive, very bright people who would come in and give me presentations on financial issues, legal issues, quite sort of hush-hush security issues and I was always impressed by the calibre of them. I remain mystified by the whole process of the Civil Service, moving people around quite as quickly as it does but be that as it may, I was very impressed by the calibre of people in the Civil Service and in the Armed Forces. Really when you consider we had had a booming



economy for 20-plus years, some very good people were forsaking the greater lure of the private sector to remain in the public service and thank God they were.

**JG: Were you interacting with other departments at all?**

**NH:** A bit. I'd go to the Home Office quite often for security related meetings, would go to the Cabinet Office for, sort of, interdepartmental meetings in COBRA [Crisis response committee - 'Cabinet Office Briefing Room A'], committees of the National Security Council, security exercises, dealings with [the Department for] Culture, Media and Sport over the 2012 Olympics and then some sort of basing issues with Northern Ireland Office, the Scottish Office, the Welsh Office and so on, yes.

**JG: And were there any challenges in those relationships? Or was it all very smooth?**

**NH:** Some of it was quite challenging. The Northern Ireland Office, some of the sort of historical stuff, they would have a slightly different agenda from the MOD's agenda and sometimes I would have to sort of eyeball ministers from other departments.

We would occasionally have to lock horns over relatively small sums of money with other departments. I remember Michael Moore, when he was the Scottish Secretary, complaining that something or other we were scrapping about would scarcely make a dent in the MOD's coffee budget and as we walked back across Whitehall afterwards, one of the civil servants said to me, 'I have been giving a little bit of thought to this and I think he is probably right – this would make no dent whatever in our coffee budget!'

**TG: In terms of some of those mechanisms, you referred to them as cabinet sub-committees, and also the formal channels as well, what sort of ways of working across departments did you find worked best?**

**NH:** I think the greater the involvement of the civil servants the better, because if you just put ministers face to face and didn't allow the civil servants to be there or to speak fully, ministers could make a deal that seemed to make sense politically, but might not make sense administratively. So actually I think you needed both elements to be speaking across the table together. And there were occasionally things where I was unleashed to talk to a minister from another department one-on-one and sometimes I'd be ticked off about the deal I had made, and on other occasions I'd be told I made too good a deal and that this wasn't really sustainable from the other department's point of view, sort of thing.

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

**NH:** I think I was just constantly reminded of the quote from an American politician, that every time I climb another rung up the political ladder, power seems further away and I was just astonished by the extent to which Number 10 and the Treasury and the Cabinet Office stuck their nose into departmental affairs. I mean, I had made speeches in opposition about Downing Street, under Gordon Brown's Treasury, meddling. The reality was far worse than any of my rhetorical flourishes. I had just no idea the extent to which they micro-managed and nosed into departmental affairs. I was absolutely horrified by it to be honest.

**TG: Were there some particular things that you thought were excessively micro-managing?**

**NH:** Well, I think the problem was that the MOD was on the naughty step when I arrived there. It had been deemed to be financially incompetent so the Treasury would be sort of almost wanting to count out paperclips. I mean it was just extraordinary the extent to which they stuck their nose into everything and applied a totally different logic to things from anything which anybody within the MOD would have applied.

Downing Street's spin-doctors wanting to micro-manage what was said about anything came as a bit of a shock too. I remember one Saturday getting a phone call in the constituency from a Number 10 press person, referring to something I was working on and saying, 'Well, we are going to have to publish that

tomorrow' and I said, 'Don't be ridiculous, we can't possibly publish it tomorrow, the thing is only three quarters done, there is all sorts of detail yet to be fleshed out, numbers crunched and sign-off secured'. 'No, no, we are going to have to do it tomorrow', he said and I said, 'Well, you know, we can't. I can't even find the Civil Service over the weekend to get onto the case, I need to discuss it with other ministers, possibly some in other departments. You know it can't be done tomorrow, this is nonsense'. And he said, 'No, no, it has got to be done tomorrow' and I said, 'Why has it got to be done tomorrow? Has something popped out of your grid and you are desperately looking round for something to put into it?' And he said, 'Oh, it is a fair cop, gov. Yes, that is broadly what has happened'. And I said, 'Well, can I make a suggestion?' He said, 'Oh, yes please, what is it?' I said, 'Tomorrow is Sunday, can I commend a nice walk in the countryside, a pub lunch and I don't think the nation has any need to hear from its government tomorrow, come back on Monday and you will probably find we have got another two points in the opinion polls because everybody appreciates a bit of peace and quiet'. Suffice to say I never had any more calls from the Downing Street press office at any point thereafter but they have just got a completely different drum beat going and you know they don't care about what is going on in the department.

The Cabinet Office was a complete revelation to me. I think it is wholly misunderstood in Parliament. In my time in parliament, it was always perceived that anyone who was either sent to the Cabinet Office as a minister, or assigned by their party to shadow it, had been put into the political graveyard and I had an impression of the Cabinet Office that it was about a dozen officials who staple together the agenda for the Cabinet Meeting. The idea that it was this great beast that basically had the entirety of government in its clutches was a complete revelation to me. So Downing Street and the Treasury I had reckoned on, though I had wholly underestimated their propensity to meddle. But the whole Cabinet Office thing came as a complete shock to me, that there were these three beasts over the road who seemed to me to be an obstacle to good government.

### **JG: So what interaction did you have with the Cabinet Office?**

**NH:** Endless. I mean, because they had security within their remit, more or less anything in the government's realm seemed to go through the National Security Adviser. Fortunately Peter Ricketts was quite a decent guy to work with but, you know, the National Security Council is stuffed full of ministers from other departments. They could make some utterly daft decisions about things affecting defence and you used to think well, you know, why do they have ministers from the Department of Energy there, who know nothing about this and not have more of us in there when we are dealing with all of this all of the time? So broadly I think the National Security Council and the National Security Adviser and the National Security Strategy and the Secretariat were a good idea, but that doesn't mean they always got everything right by any stretch of the imagination.

### **TG: Were there occasions when you felt that those 'three beasts' at the centre added value?**

**NH:** Not a lot. Not a lot.

### **JG: Based on your observations then, is there anything you think that could be done to make government more effective?**

**NH:** Government is ludicrously over-centralised in Britain. You know, we are running things from Whitehall that the whole of the rest of the democratic world would determine at a much more localised level. So the whole thing is unwieldy and beast-like and power is concentrated in a very narrow place.

What would make it better? Probably more transparency, more sunlight shining in on it. I think the way the Civil Service is only there to serve government is a bit odd. I know a lot of people take it for granted and find the suggestion it could be any different is odd, but go into other countries, the relationship between opposition MPs and their civil servants seems to me to be completely different and civil servants deal with and answer questions from all parliamentarians in a lot of other countries. In fact I think you will notice if you go over to Northern Ireland it was quite a different culture there as well and certainly in Australia and New Zealand and places like that a totally different culture. But I remember



years ago, when I would thumb through the Civil Service Yearbook identifying the official I thought was dealing with something and ring them, I would get snotty letters from ministers saying ‘I hear you have been worrying my sheep, all enquiries to this department must come via me.’ So in the end, ringing from the Commons to government departments seemed to come through on an internal phone system, which rather gave the game away, so I would go back to my flat, ring them and pretend to be a post-graduate research student and normally the civil servant would sing like a bird, happy that someone was taking an interest in what they were doing.

**JG: Based on your experience, how would you define an effective minister?**

**NH:** I think an effective minister is one who has got an agenda of things they want to change, that the agenda has been reasonably well debated politically and there is a propitious constellation of the stars for those changes to be made and there are realistic timescales and budgets to achieve those changes.

In the main, I think this is only really achievable by Secretaries of State, but there are notable exceptions. Look at the radical pensions reforms of the last parliament, which Steve Webb very much took on himself. I mean Iain Duncan Smith was clearly happy and comfortable with them and let him and encouraged him to do that but he’d very much got the expertise and the agenda to drive and pursue that and I think it is one of the lasting features of the Coalition Government. That pension reforms will still be talked about in 30 or 40 years’ time. But I think that is the exception rather than the rule.

**JG: Was there anyone you looked to as a good role model?**

**NH:** Well, Steve Webb would have been, but it would have been very difficult to emulate that because he was coming at something with immense expertise and having clearly established a relationship with Iain Duncan Smith, where he was given the space to get on and do it. And I think Vince Cable allowed Tory ministers in his department to really grab pieces of the agenda and run with them. But many secretaries of state really just don’t look at the world that way at all.

In the MOD, they had moved from a situation where Geoff Hoon came within, I think, six weeks of being the longest serving ever Defence Secretary to a position where they changed Defence Secretary more or less every year for about five years and the uniformed services and the Civil Service said to me the lurch from one modus operandi to another on a sort of annual basis was just extraordinary. Some viewed the whole thing in a very, sort of, collegial, team like way and others just wanted to do their own thing and everybody who disagreed had to get out of the way. You know, it is quite intriguing that the system allows for such a divergence of operation, just on the personality and whim of the person heading up a department at a given point in time. And I don’t think that has necessarily got anything to do with party politics, it is just personality I think.

**JG: Do you think in hindsight you would have done anything differently?**

**NH:** Oh, I suppose if I had known how little was going to be achievable in the era of austerity I would have probably identified some even very, very small things and made a bit of a theatrical point of getting those things done, so that you could point to something specific, because that seems to be the way the political world looks at it all.

**JG: And what advice would you have for new ministers coming into office?**

**NH:** They have got to have a strong private office and they have then got to trust them to get on and make judgements on their behalf. If they don’t think they have started out with or inherited a strong enough private office, take immediate steps to change it and get a stronger one. You have got to see the wood for the trees, you have got to decide which are the areas you want to impose yourself upon and which are the areas you trust people enough to more or less sign off what they are doing, subject to sort of period spot checks or whatever.

## **JG: And any particular advice for junior ministers?**

**NH:** Well, you have got to establish a good rapport with your Secretary of State. There is absolutely no point trying to pull off in a different direction to where the Secretary of State is trying to go. It is just not going to work. If there are bits of what the Secretary of State is trying to do that you are less sympathetic to than others, you will just invest your time on the things where you are broadly in agreement, unless there is some big political game in play where showing a little bit of rancour or dissent might serve more of a medium to long-term purpose.

But, you know, in the terms of being in the job while you are there, it is just a question of the art of the possible, and prioritising what limited time and influence you've got to try and determine what happens on the most important things to you. I mean, it is intriguing that when two-thirds of the globe was pink, because we were running the global empire, we had about two dozen ministers and now we are a small island in the North Atlantic, we have 122 and they are still working like whirling dervishes. How much good it all does, I don't know.

**TG:** There are a few things you mentioned during the course of the discussion I will just come back to. The first one is what can we learn from the Strategic Defence and Security Review, the SDSR, the first one in 2010?

**NH:** Well, it was done in a terrible hurry. I mean, we had to make a decision, at the outset, whether to take the 18 months that it probably needed to have been done properly and with adequate intellectual rigour and proper number crunching, or whether to get it concluded on a quick and dirty basis, ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review [CSR]. And the fear was that if we took our time, we would just be given a cash envelope in the CSR and would then have to devise a defence policy to fit that cash envelope. Whereas if we got on with at least the headline stuff, we would equip ourselves with the arguments to deploy at Number 10 and the Treasury and the National Security Council to try and bid up the size of that envelope. And I think probably, when you look at the scale of cuts across Whitehall departments, it was probably the right decision to get on with it and do it on a quick and dirty basis. Unfortunately we look as if we are now on a five-yearly drumbeat and the same thing happening, in that after an election a government does conduct a Comprehensive Spending Review and we are now seemingly on a five-year cycle of SDSRs in that first summer after the election. The reality is it would probably be better to do the SDSR in the mid-term and to involve the opposition in it – at least up to a point to try and ensure a degree of continuity, or some sort of common understanding of the parameters of the debate.

A good example was the question of the aircraft carriers having cats and traps from which you would fly a conventional aeroplane rather than a jump jet. The time we got in there, we queried why we were creating ships of 65,000 tonnes and only intending to fly jump jets off them, which you could fly off a ship half that size. It was clearly too late to change the size of the ship, because the first one was coming together and the second one had already had metal cut. So the question arose, would it be worth putting cats and traps on, even at additional expense, in order to fly the more capable aircraft off it. So the MOD concluded it would be worth having one last look at that subject. It needed a study of about a year, but their back-of-a-fag-packet guesstimates said maybe it would cost about £500 million to put cats and traps onto one carrier, bearing in mind the policy was going to be to tie the other one up. It would delay the whole thing by about a year, but you would get the more capable aircraft and in any case the jump jet version of the aircraft was in serious trouble over in the States, it was in special measures and might never happen.

So all in all, it seemed a perfectly rational thing to have one last look at it. We were told that, you know, those were very, very quick and dirty guesstimates, to look at this thoroughly is going to take about a year. And that was the state of the thing when it left the MOD. Of course, the SDSR belonged to the Cabinet Office, it didn't belong to the MOD and when that proposition got to the other side of the road, I don't know whether it was Downing Street, for presentational reasons, the Treasury in exasperation that we were re-opening this thing yet again, or the National Security Council just thinking it all looked dithery or whatever, but somehow or other that promulgated itself into a firm policy decision, where you

were going with cats and traps. Now we went ahead and did our one year piece of work, while in the meantime we were making an assumption we were going for the cats and traps, which led to some practical changes at the shipyard.

By the end of 2011, that study comes back saying whoops, terribly sorry, whereas we said it was going to cost half a billion, it is actually going to be £1.9 billion. Whereas we said it was going to delay the programme by a year, it looks like it could be as much as four or five years. The electromagnetic cats and traps system that the US is evolving has run into all sorts of trouble of its own, therefore even that delay of a four or five year period isn't entirely robust. And oh, by the way, the jump jet version of the plane is back from the dead and has overtaken the conventional variant in the production line. So while it had seemed a perfectly rational exploration at the beginning, now it seemed, again, entirely rational to our board to go back to the plan for having the jump jets. And the brouhaha and the ridicule that was poured upon us for all that was quite notable, but absolutely a function of doing something in such a hurry in the beginning.

**TG: When you say the ridicule, was that from...?**

**NH:** The media, the defence world, the retired admirals, so-called bath tub admirals. You know, everybody taking the piss and saying the one good thing about the SDSR had been the decision to go with cats and traps and the conventional plane and now we had gone back on the one good thing we had done. The Labour Party were having fun about it. Lord West [Labour peer and Admiral] was in his element, you know. But we ended up back with a flat top boat with no cats and traps and the only prospect of ever flying anything off it being the US joint strike fighter plane because the Harriers, meanwhile, had been crushed for parts and flogged off around the world, which is the only other thing you could have flown off them on an interim basis. So there was a fair degree of embarrassment all round.

**TG: Yes. And the other thing you mentioned was the departmental boards...**

**NH:** Yes. The Maude Boards.

**TG: How well do you think they worked?**

**NH:** I think the Defence Board worked extremely well. I think the old board that had been chaired by the PUS [Permanent Under Secretary] didn't work well at all and ministers, I felt, were shut out of debate while the officials and the Service Chiefs haggled and bartered. And then PUS would make a great merit of the idea that they would bring us a united view as to what should be done. And I said to Liam Fox, 'No, no, no, I don't like this at all. I want to hear the debate. I want to understand where the three different services were coming from. I want to understand where the financial arguments came into this, where the policy and the doctrinal arguments came into it. I want to be exposed to the whole debate and not to be told this is their concerted view, knowing that two or three of them, but I don't know which two or three, are sitting there absolutely wincing because they don't really agree with it'. And Liam said, 'Well, this is Francis Maude's new idea, that you have a board chaired by the Secretary of State, with a mixture of ministers, officials, Non-Executive Directors'. And I thought that worked really well.

**TG: And were there particular things that that was good for – particular types of decisions or discussions that it helped with the most?**

**NH:** It was really good looking at strategic things and the Non-Executive Directors were very high calibre people and when Lord Levine came forward with his programme of reforms, for example, there was really the intellectual firepower and the experience around the table to debate that and decide what should be done off the back of it. It was a small board, I think there were nine members of it and that is good, you know, a board oughtn't be too much bigger than that.

**TG: Were there sort of things that were best left out of that board meeting that sometimes crept in?**

**NH:** Micro stuff you didn't really want to get in there. Small decisions about basing got taken there, which I wasn't absolutely convinced they should have been. But certainly big picture stuff, whether we were going to turn the Defence Equipment and Support Operation into a 'Go-Co', a Government Owned Company and so on. I mean, these were big level decisions and it felt, to me, the right place for the decision to be taken. I mean ultimately, all these decisions are actually taken by the Secretary of State, but there was a really good quality, meaningful discussion at those boards and I kind of doubt the Secretary of State would have gone off completely at a different angle from what the board had concluded. On the other hand, I suppose the board knew that the Secretary of State ultimately made the decision and probably understood where the Secretary of State was coming from.

**TG: Is there anything we haven't asked you about that we should have done? We have obviously got your actual publication out there to refer to, but any other ideas or thoughts?**

**NH:** The press operation wasn't very good. I don't mean to disparage the people in the MOD press office, but an awful lot of them were civil servants just doing a tour of duty in there and the guy who was running it when I was first there had suddenly gone and I discovered he had been rotated onto his next job and he was now the Deputy Head, or maybe even the Head of Defence Intelligence, which was an utterly bizarre thing to me. I think government communications aren't brilliantly good and it is no wonder that Downing Street political spin doctors are so all-dominant if the departmental press offices are quite as sleepy as that and don't have comms professionals in them.

**TG: And does that relate to any wider things you have seen in the Civil Service, in terms of people shifting between different jobs without necessarily the specialisms?**

**NH:** Well, I actually think the principle that you move around a bit and you get a broad experience is good, but I think they tend to move them too fast. My military assistant, when I was first there, a naval captain, said he had done his stint of duty at Abbey Wood, the Defence Procurement HQ and he said he well remembered an occasion when a brilliantly intelligent but slightly eccentric civil servant was late to work because she had been baking cakes for somebody's leaving party and she arrived late and breathless with some very nice cakes and was then in charge of a multibillion pound negotiation with BAE who all drew up in BMW seven-series cars with sharp suited, commercial lawyers and so on and she proceeded to conduct the negotiation and [the assistant] said he was just sitting there, at the back of the room, shaking his head and thinking dear God, no wonder the whole defence procurement thing is such a disaster. And it wasn't that she wasn't intellectually capable of doing it, actually he said she was a very bright woman. If she had spent her career there, she would have been a match for the suits but she was just on her tour of duty through, like everybody else. So I think that is why I was personally very sympathetic to Bernard Grey's [former Chief of Defence Materiel] desire to put that whole operation onto a more commercial footing and hire their own commercial and legal experts to sort of set a thief to catch a thief, as it were.

**JG: Did you ever feel, in terms of your areas of responsibility, that you were inhibited by that turnover of civil servants?**

**NH:** I don't know. I think I just accepted that that was the way it was. I mean I think occasionally actually it might have been an obstacle to something. But I can't think of one.

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