

Ministers Reflect

Nick Hurd



11 January 2021

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2005–19: Conservative MP for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (formerly Ruislip-Northwood)

Government career

2019: Minister of state, Northern Ireland Office

2018–19: Minister for London

2017–19: Minister of state for police and the fire service, Home Office

2017–19: Minister for Grenfell victims

2016–17: Minister of state for climate change and industry, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

2015-15: Parliamentary under secretary of state, Department for International Development

2010-14: Minister for civil society, Cabinet Office

Nick Hurd was interviewed by Dr Catherine Haddon and Jo-Anna Hagen Schuller on 11 January 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.

Nick Hurd reflects on his experience working in five departments, for three prime ministers, over nearly a decade. He also discusses working on David Cameron’s ‘big society’ initiative and the government’s response to the Grenfell disaster.

Catherine Haddon (CH): Can we start then when you first entered government in 2010 as minister for civil society? Could you talk to us about the conversation you had with the prime minister and what your first day was like?

Nick Hurd (NH): I don’t think I had a conversation with the prime minister on that appointment. I’d been a shadow minister [shadowing the Cabinet Office] for two years before then, and I can’t remember whether it was Ed Llewellyn [chief of staff at Number 10, 2010–16] or the chief whip who told me about the appointment. I don’t think it was David [Cameron]. That appointment and my subsequent time in the Cabinet Office were unusual in my experience. I’d done two years in opposition in the same role and had almost five years in government, working with the same boss [Francis Maude]. You know how rare that is. I had a cycle of six, six and a half, almost seven years in the same brief in opposition and in government. So, I went through a whole cycle from planning policy, to implementing policy, to refining policy. You never get that. That, for me, made it one of the most rewarding and differentiated experiences in government. But no, I can’t remember. It may be my memory, but I don’t think I spoke to David about the appointment. I think that’s because it was a junior appointment, I think it got dumped down the ranks.

CH: ‘Big society’ [the flagship policy of the 2010 Conservative election manifesto, aiming to empower local communities] was a big part of David Cameron’s agenda but you came in as a coalition government. Did that change any of the priorities? You’d done a lot of thinking about how to implement policies but what happened when you actually went into government and started thinking about putting it into practice?

NH: My boss was Francis Maude [Paymaster general and minister for the Cabinet Office 2010–15] and we were sitting in the Cabinet Office. So immediately in the centre of government and that mattered. Francis had his own agenda, which was the efficiency and reform agenda, which I supported him on. But he basically left me to the big society stuff. He was a really excellent boss in the sense that he was there when I needed him and was happy to take the blame when blame was needed, but just basically left me to do the work. Our coalition partners weren’t that interested in it. They had other priorities. There was only one policy area where we’d had to kind of engage with them through a process of persuasion.

But they had other priorities and big society was kind of seen as David’s thing, and I think people were quite happy to let us get on with it. But, of course, what was very different about that government was the Quad [the senior decision-making body,

consisting of David Cameron, Nick Clegg, George Osborne and Danny Alexander] and everything going through the Quad. My sense is that most people found that a very positive process. So, my memories of the coalition government are all positive.

CH: What was it like becoming a minister and what support did you get? Presumably this was an area that the civil service had worked on in preparation and had done some thinking about implementing. How were you working with them, thinking about the priorities, getting action to start things happening? What was that experience like?

NH: My experiences of officials at the Cabinet Office were very positive. You're never really prepared for government. We did our best in opposition to do a bit of preparation and training, but nothing really quite prepares you for it. As you suggest, they had an idea of what we wanted to do, and we were pretty clear about it. There were some big flagships like the National Citizen Service. What I found was commitment and enthusiasm and very variable levels of quality in the civil service. Where there were problems of quality – I'm thinking of one specific area of really important policy making where it was quite clear the civil servants weren't up to it – we eventually got the changes in people, but it is a slightly painstaking process to rearrange personnel.

But on the whole, though, again, what was really differentiated about the Cabinet Office for me is that the Office for Civil Society – the team that I worked with – were not just very committed and hardworking but because we were launching things and building things you felt, to be honest, a bit like a start-up. I was incredibly lucky with the entrepreneurial civil servants who got the agenda, [who] seemed to be quite genuinely enthused by it. Because we were setting up National Citizen Service and this thing no one had ever done before, Big Society Capital, I think it was interesting for them. We had a very good team spirit but – I'd run my own business and done things beforehand – it did feel like a kind of entrepreneurial start-up. It's my only experience with that in government, I have to say. I felt very well supported. Once we'd changed the personnel who clearly weren't quite there, once the team had settled, I couldn't have felt better supported actually in that process. We did a huge amount. We did an absolutely huge amount.

CH: Can you talk us through a few of the achievements because you were there for quite a period of time. Some of them – as you say – were effectively starting up new networks, new services and so forth. There's also the Big Society Bank. What were the challenges that you hadn't realised in opposition? What were the things where work in opposition really helped to get things to happen quicker?

NH: I can't underestimate the value of the work in opposition, because it meant that when Francis and I walked in there, we had a very clear idea of what we wanted to do. Now, inevitably, few plans survive any contact with reality. But it meant that we did have a plan about what we wanted to do. In terms of the specifics, something like National Citizen Service. We'd done a pilot in opposition – again, very rare. On Big Society Capital, before the launch of that, we'd done a huge amount of engagement with stakeholders. We knew the design framework around it. So we were really quite

well prepared. But then when you're building something from scratch— which those two flagships were – the plan goes wrong. Things go wrong, you have to adapt. Of course, when you're in government, you have to deal with a kind of vested interest and people who are opposed to what you are doing. No one's opposed to what you're doing in opposition because, on the whole, people don't care. But in government people have a view and the whole process of managing that was perhaps something we'd underestimated.

At the Cabinet Office during that time, we took over £ 50 billion out of the cost of running government over five years. We led the UK to be number one in public digital services, number one in the world in open government. We launched National Citizen Service. We launched Big Society Capital and made the UK the world leader in developing this new concept of impact investment, private investment motivated by the combination of financial return with social impact. We set up a community organiser programme, we set out a community first grant programme, we led the development of so-called public service mutuals, spinning out mutual social enterprises inside the public sector. We took the Social Value Act [2012] through parliament. We did a huge amount which tells you something about, a) how prepared we were, b) how effective a team we were because we worked together for so long and c) and how well supported we were by a really good group of officials. There wasn't a great deal of political opposition to it. I mean, there was some and there was a whole bunch of noise around the big society, questions of "What is it?" There was lots of noise, but there wasn't kind of hard opposition to what we were doing.

CH: Did the key individuals who were also associated with it, such as Steve Hilton [special adviser to David Cameron, 2010–12] and Lord Wei [peer appointed to advise government on implementation of 'big society'] take a continuing role? Was it a public role very or was there a lot behind the scenes?

NH: Steve was very much behind the scenes. The main positives and the negatives around the 'big society' agenda was that it was supported by the prime minister. It meant that the whole Whitehall system knew that whatever this thing was – which they probably didn't quite understand – David Cameron cared about it. It did mean that sitting in the centre of government, as a Cabinet Office, implementing the 'big society' agenda, we had the system's attention. And when there is any incoming, either internal or external, chances are Steve Hilton would crash around shouting at people or convening people to sort things out, which he did on a couple of occasions. And Nat [Wei] was brought in as an adviser, new to politics, but was helpful to me.

CH: Helpful in what ways?

NH: You'll know this very well, but when ministers go into a department, they will get compliance. They will get a bunch of people who are listening very carefully to the minister, trying to interpret what the minister is saying and then trying to implement them to deliver and trying to make life kind of easy. The challenge comes from parliament and the opposition and stakeholders if they don't like what you're doing. But

actually, what Nat – and that kind of adviser role – sometimes brings to a minister is some creativity and some kind of original thinking and some stress testing and challenging. Which, on the whole, in my experience – I’ve worked in five government departments – you didn’t get a lot of.

The mission of the system is to try and implement the minister’s wishes. Very rarely did I have a comment saying “Minister, have you thought of this”, or “Are you mad?”. And the civil servants don’t see that as their job. My ministerial life wasn’t too troubled by advisers over the eight or nine years, but I can see some value in the role, as I saw with spads [special advisers], for example, working in the departments I worked. It’s just slightly different DNA, if you follow me, which when it doesn’t work, it screws things up – but when it does work, it just clicks the jigsaw together quite nicely. It’s tricky for the system to deal with. It’s quite a difficult relationship for the system to accommodate. It’s a long time ago, but I remember Nat being a net positive.

Jo-Anna Hagen Schuller (JH): As you said, the role was in the Cabinet Office, which sits at the centre of government. But civil society is a cross-cutting issue. Could you talk about how you worked with other departments, especially considering this was a priority for the prime minister?

NH: On National Citizen Service, we worked with the Department for Education for a while, and then after a while Michael Gove [education secretary, 2010–14] kind of basically said “Could you just do it? Because I want to focus on school reform.” But that was set up at the start as a kind of partnership. The other agenda around civil society was a desire to try and open up more space in public service commissioning for charities and social enterprises to bring the value that they bring. That did involve discussing commissioning and procurement practice with other departments. For example, taking through the Social Value Act, which would require commissioners to consider social value in their processes. It was a private member’s bill. We adopted it, had to persuade the rest of the system to adopt it – get their agreement to it. Of course, taking a bit of legislation through is only one piece. You then have to try and look at the systems and processes and the capability building that you need to do to actually get people actually to do something, to try and develop best practice in this area. That required co-operation across the system.

Another specific would be this idea of public service mutuals. The instinct was, if we want to increase productivity inside the public sector – which was a priority – the starting premise was to see that there are entrepreneurs inside the public sector. But they’re kind of stifled by the system that they’re in, so why don’t we liberate them and encourage them effectively to take some ownerships and control of the business through the kind of mutual model? We had actually quite considerable success in that. Most of those were in the health sector. It was a slightly challenging process of engagement with the NHS to encourage them to let go. That wasn’t easy for them.

CH: You left government in July 2014, and then came back as parliamentary under secretary for international development about six months after the 2015 general election, where you'd got a majority government. How did the appointment come about? How did you get your head around the new brief and think about what your priorities were, in a different department away from the centre?

NH: That appointment, I did get a call from David Cameron – from Malta, from memory. And it came about because Grant Shapps [minister of state for international development, May–November 2015] had had to resign over something. I can't remember what. So, David asked me to come back in and go to DfID [then Department for International Development]. Exactly as you say, you're in a completely different department. You're in a department with a large spending budget, arguably a high-profile, controversial spending budget. You're suddenly pitched into learning a whole bunch of stuff that I'd had only very limited exposure to before. I had a responsibility for a continent, Africa. I then had responsibility for all kinds of thematic areas, education, water and sanitation, climate change. The list goes on. I was very reliant on the department who briefed me and got me up to speed as quickly as possible. Because part of the minister's job in DfID is to sign off on very large business cases. Pretty quickly, you're into the business of signing off £20, £30 million worth of taxpayer money on the basis of 20 sheets of paper given to you by civil servants, in an area where you don't have any experience or – largely in my case – depth of experience. I was a junior minister, so I had to rely quite heavily on the system there and very heavily on a private office.

Now, we haven't talked about the private office, but you'll know from many other interviews that they are the key to any minister. I was brilliantly served in the Cabinet Office, and I was brilliantly served at DfID and they got me up to speed really quite quickly. Again, I couldn't have had a better private office. Well, some caveats, but I had a really positive experience at DfID in terms of the quality of the people there, the commitments of the departments and the mission. It was a really exciting place to be. I remember bumping into Jeremy Heywood [cabinet secretary, 2012–18] in Whitehall and he congratulated me on the move. And I said that, yes, I was really delighted. He told me "Well, you've joined a world class organisation." I genuinely think that it was. It was a very difficult mission, but they got me up to speed very quickly.

CH: You had a lot of freedom in the Cabinet Office to pursue your agenda. Was it a different working style? And what was Justine Greening [international development secretary, 2012–16] like as a secretary of state?

NH: Well you're right. One of the striking things about ministers is that there's no template, there's no playbook. Every one of my experiences was completely different. Francis was a different generation but he and I worked together brilliantly for close to seven years. Justine and I came into parliament together so we were mates to some degree. That sometimes helps, sometimes doesn't. In my case again, she gave me a lot of freedom. She was different from Francis obviously. She was probably more into the detail when something she was interested in something. Francis really just let me get on

with it but I always knew that he would get into the detail when he felt it necessary. Justine sometimes needed to intervene a bit more. If there was something I wanted to persuade her of, we had to – quite rightly – go through some good processes to make an argument and eventually win an argument. She was clear about what she wanted to do.

But I wasn't going into a department with an agenda I'd constructed. I was inheriting manifesto commitments and it was really about delivering on the manifesto commitments and then I developed a personal passion around a campaign called Energy Africa and kind of made that my own and persuaded Justine to support that. It was a combination of implementing manifesto proposals and running with the ball that I could see and cared about. And doing the basic job of a DfID minister which is processing business cases and quite a lot of diplomacy. It was a job with a lot of travel, again, stark contrast to the Cabinet Office job. I was on the road a lot and it was only when I stopped that I realised how knackered that was. You shouldn't underestimate that. Ministers come back from a trip, go into parliament, go to the constituents. You just keep going until the music stops. I was in Africa every other week basically.

JH: After DfID, you moved to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in 2016 as minister for climate change and industry, with a new prime minister this time. Could you reflect on that and what it was like to be in government in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum?

NH: It was a promotion. I had mixed feelings about it because I really enjoyed DfID and I hadn't been in DfID very long. So you can imagine the situation. I'd been in one role for almost five years in government, two years in opposition before and then I went to DfID for less than a year and suddenly I'm being asked to change again and do something completely different. In this case – I don't think Theresa [May] designed it this way – I ended up as minister for climate change and industry and climate change was the thing that I had as a backbencher going into parliament in 2005 decided to focus on this myself.

CH: Was that a decision then, do you think Greg Clark [business secretary 2016–19] had put in a word?

NH: I don't know. I remember asking Theresa, "what will I do?". And there was a classic, rather long Theresa pause and it was quite clear that that was for Greg to decide. Again, this was a case of me working with and for someone I had to come into parliament with, who was a friend. He and I worked on climate change. He'd been my predecessor in the civil society brief in opposition. So again, I was very lucky. I was working with someone I liked, knew I could work with. I was his deputy, effectively. His priority then was Brexit, managing relationships with the business sector in the UK. In particular forging the new industrial strategy and I supported him on that. That involved quite a lot of time sitting on the sofa in his office, talking to chief executives of car companies and other companies about Brexit and trying to manage their anxieties about that.

So again, you move from being in Sierra Leone to being in Victoria Street talking to the head of Toyota about Brexit. That can happen the space of sort of three days. What's striking is, every department has its own culture, its own kind of DNA. The whole experience of working in each department is completely different. It just takes a little bit of time just to find out how it works. We should never underestimate that, how different each department are. It's a new private secretary, it's a new private office, it's a new set of colleagues, it's a new set of officials, a new set of issues etc. And it was climate change and industry and within industry I had four or five sectors that I led on, as well as those Greg worked on across the department.

CH: Climate change is one of these very long-running issues in governments, where we've seen these step-change moments of the government really pushing the agenda forward. You've got things like the Paris agreement, the industrial strategy and so forth. How much do you feel you were making progress during that time across all of these issues? How difficult was it?

NH: There were difficulties. There were occasional bumps in the road. Actually it was the same bump. It was concern about the cost of what we needed to do on climate change in terms of cost to consumers and cost to businesses and what that might mean for competitors. The industrial strategy was in many ways about sharpening the competitive edge of the UK. There were voices inside government saying, well fine, but one of the problems we've got is our relatively high cost of industrial energy and what we're doing is going to run the risk of increasing that. The most difficult conversation was with Number 10 about that. I never felt we had the full throttled support of Number 10 at that time. It wasn't necessarily the prime minister. I don't think it was her issue, but the advisers. And Greg was very skilful at kind of managing that. But it certainly wasn't kind of the full steam ahead that we're seeing at the moment.

CH: It did become a legacy issue for her, when she committed the UK to net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

NH: I think by the end – and once the negativity had gone – she completely saw it and was very committed to it. I don't want to sound too negative, there were entirely rational debates. Post-Brexit, the priority is to make sure that our businesses are competitive. Are we sure we know what we're doing here in terms of the cost of energy for our businesses? And, of course, there were plenty of people, the industrial lobby, who were raising this as well. So it was an entirely legitimate debate at that time. It didn't mean that it was full throttle green. David Cameron was hugging a husky at the start and Theresa was embracing net zero at the end, but there were bumps on the road in between and part of our job was to manage one of those bumps. In time, we did ratify the Paris agreement. It was an internal debate. It was never external, obviously. It was an internal debate.

CH: Again, you were there for a relatively short time, just under a year, before you moved over to the Home Office to be minister for police and fire service. Talk us through what you know about the decision to move you over. It was the aftermath of the election and then immediately the Grenfell fire hit. What was that like? How extraordinary was it and what was the sort of crisis handling that was going on?

NH: In terms of the appointment, it was a call with Theresa. She and I went back a long way so it was a very friendly call. But I did push back for the first time ever because I was a bit frustrated about the chop and change. Climate change was my issue and I was very committed to the industrial strategy. I'd introduced the clean growth pillar of the industrial strategy. That was about trying to mainstream the climate change action into the industrial strategy, coming back to our previous conversation. So I felt we'd won some hard yards with that and I was really keen to implement it. I didn't know anything about policing and the fire service other than my own constituency.

CH: Did she listen when you were pushing back?

NH: Yeah, she did. Theresa is a good listener. But she basically said, "I hear you but it's a promotion and I'm keen for you to do it". Theresa had come out of the Home Office, she'd spent all those years in the Home Office. I'm not sure that she would fundamentally understand why someone might resist the chance of working there. So it was a very short conversation. But I was a bit frustrated at the churn. My formative experience of government was this incredibly long period, a full cycle of policy development and implementation and refinement. I was getting a bit frustrated about the chopping and changing. But the Home Office is one of the great offices of state. So I ended up embracing it.

Grenfell was day two actually. Nothing could prepare you for that. I was as shocked and appalled by the sights on the TV as anyone else. But I was minister for the fire service. Of course, the police were also heavily involved that night- responding to the fire, trying to control the crowds. My first instinct was that Marsham Street [Home Office HQ] was the wrong place to be and I needed to be down there. There was all kinds of confusion around that. But I eventually went down there; spoke to the fire fighters and then got involved. Quite quickly, I was asked to chair the emergency services committee and then Theresa asked me to be the minister for Grenfell victims, which is a unique role. Well not quite unique. [Tessa Jowell](#) [Labour culture secretary 2001-07] did something similar after 7/7 [the terrorist bombings in London on 7 July 2005]. In terms of experience in government, that's not normal.

It was undoubtedly the most challenging experience of my ministerial time just because the context was literally traumatic and having to manage a lot of trauma around me and near me and with no training for it at all. Just a really, really demanding situation where you had to try and start a process of trying to build some trust where there was none. How could there be? There was zero trust. Again, it was unlike anything, anything that I'd done before. I think unlike anything that any other minister, other than Tessa Jowell,

had to do before. There was no playbook and no real instruction or guidance from Number 10. How could there be?

Theresa had just had an instinct, quite rightly – from her experience with Hillsborough [the 1989 disaster at Hillsborough football ground, a review of which was conducted during May’s time as home secretary], I think – that the journey of recovery to a new normal was going to be a very long one. Chances are, the media were going to lose interest at some point or it was going to come and go and that we had to build a relationship with the survivors and the bereaved and the traumatised community, in order to do what we needed to do to support them. Without any trust or engagement, that was going to be impossible. That was my job. I worked with a team from the Department of Communities and Local Government. This was a challenge that they would never have expected to work on joining the civil service. There was no playbook and there was nothing to tell them what to do. We were having to sort of create it as we went, sort of, build it as we went along. And they were brilliant. I was just incredibly lucky I had people with the right emotional intelligence, the right levels of commitment.

We had another very challenging period where the system was really tested at the Home Office, around medicinal cannabis. You might remember, there were some very high profile cases. That was the process that led to us legalising use of medicinal cannabis. I led that with Saj [Sajid Javid, Home Secretary 2018–2019]. Again, that was a situation where the system was being challenged in a very direct and confrontational way. The rules were being challenged and how the system coped with that was, in the short term, very difficult. We got there, but again I was frustrated at the start by the bureaucracy and the inflexibility and ended up being impressed by the commitment to try and find a way through.

CH: You say, on both fronts, that there was no playbook. Do you mean that the civil service didn’t have any hinterland in terms of the policy decisions so you’re making up new policy, or are you talking about just the activities that you’re having to do are very different?

NH: As you can imagine on Grenfell, there was plenty of contingency planning for disasters, just not that one. Because no-one imagined that we were going to have a towering inferno. In 2017, buildings weren’t meant to behave like that. The system wasn’t prepared for that. Nor is the system brilliantly constructed to deal with the rawest human emotion in trauma and difficulty. It’s a system that has systems. The question I asked behind closed doors was how difficult was it for us to get our arms round 300 families. It was hard.

In the case of medicinal cannabis, it was quite clear to me and I think Saj – I can’t speak for him – that we were in the wrong place on the law. The law needed to change and we were having to manage a very emotional, very difficult confrontational situation, knowing that we needed to change the law but we needed to manage the short-term situation. The system did eventually respond. But it wasn’t anywhere near the comfort zone of anyone at that time. To their credit, they ended up responding in a good,

creative way. Once they were clear of the ministerial direction, we went and changed it and then the levers were thrown. I think those two were in some ways quite exceptional circumstances. Very, very challenging circumstances for the system, Grenfell more so the others. I just happened to be there for both.

CH: You were also joint minister for London for a year. Others who held that post, Jo Johnson, have been a bit critical, almost cynical about the role. But how did you find it?

NH: There's no brief for it. I took over from Jo, so I spoke to him. It's a very hard role to define. Fundamentally, the mayor of London is a very important political position – London is very important to the country. If the mayor is of a different political colour than the government, then there's a relationship that needs to be managed there. I just took it upon myself – I was a London MP and frankly a pretty non-tribal politician, and I just saw a relationship that needed managing. I knew Sadiq [Khan, Labour mayor of London] a bit. He and I got on well. Basically, I was given a blank sheet of paper. My view on it was the most important thing is to help manage a potentially complicated political relationship here, the best way I can to make sure that there's collaboration as well as challenge. And to manage some of the difficulties behind closed doors.

Jo aligned it with his other job, which was department of transport – I aligned mine with the Home Office job. So, I made it about Grenfell and I made it about knife crime because those were the two issues that were kind of at the top of my in-tray in the department. They were the two, frankly I thought, biggest London issues at the time. In the limited bandwidth that I had, that's what I focused on there. But I didn't feel that it was a tokenistic role because relationships matter in politics and the government needs to be able to talk to the mayor, other than through the TV screen if you follow me.

JH: Your final ministerial position was at the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), just after Boris Johnson became prime minister in July 2019. This was during a time when the Northern Ireland executive was not functioning, the Northern Ireland protocol [governing trade between Britain and Northern Ireland] was introduced and the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act [2019] was passed in parliament. How did you get to grips with the unique political circumstances that the NIO faces?

NH: That was, again, another big, big change. And, of course, Northern Ireland was on the centre stage in a way that perhaps isn't traditional in terms of, sort of, UK political dialogue, because of the Brexit situation. So, it felt important. Again, it was a new boss [Julian Smith, Northern Ireland secretary, 2019–20]. I'd had at the Home Office two home secretaries. So, a new boss, himself a secretary of state, a minister, for the first time – he'd been chief whip. That was a new experience. And, of course, as you're suggesting, whole different layers of complexity and sensitivity and just a sense of lots of mines that you could step on if you got it wrong. Huge sensitivities around Brexit and particularly no deal. I kind of led on no-deal Brexit and I led on a couple of the very sensitive, Troubles-related issues, including victims' pension payments. I was involved in the no-deal planning and I was part of the XO cabinet committee that Michael Gove

[chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster since July 2019] chaired every day – well, it felt like every day – and representing the Northern Ireland Office.

Again, it was a completely different office department. You're moving from the Home Office in all its scale and thousands of people to an office which is kind of [a] few rooms in the bowels of the Treasury and a few rooms in Belfast. But a very impressive group of very committed civil servants. I was very impressed by the commitment and the experience and, on the whole, the quality there of the team that supported Julian and me through those difficult – and they were difficult – months. Julian, of course, was trying to get the deal [to get the Northern Ireland executive running again], trying to get them back at the table. I was trying to handle the no deal, because obviously the implications of no deal for Northern Ireland were terrible and had a very significant security risk component to them which was different from the rest of the country. Part of my job was to make sure that decision makers in London understood that. I felt very lucky, I did incredibly different briefs. Most of them at that time had some kind of high levels of political relevance, the Northern Ireland Office at that time had just that.

CH: How much of a shift was it under Johnson? Northern Ireland became a big part of the different approach he took to Brexit for the time through to the 2019 general election. Were you facing a shift in policy? Did you have much contact with him and Number 10 in terms of sort of shifting position and so forth?

NH: It's worth noting that that was my third different prime minister and not many people served all three. I didn't really have much contact, apart from the initial conversation when he was keen to impress to me how important it was to him. Julian handled that relationship and the relationship with Number 10. At times it was quite difficult. Because obviously there was a tension between the negotiating stance and the instinct that if the EU didn't believe that actually we would go ahead with no deal, then that would affect negotiations. Whereas we knew that no deal was very bad news for Northern Ireland and we were obviously keen to be part of the advocacy to try and avoid that.

The other issue on Northern Ireland was around the use of legal protection for soldiers, and again the other Troubles-related situation where the prime minister and colleagues in Westminster had strong views about the desire to give more protection for our veterans from the armed services who had been involved in the Troubles. Our job was to manage the other side of that argument. That was very much part of my job, working with the attorney general and the armed forces minister around that. [It was] Julian who led the relationship with Number 10 on that issue.

CH: As you say, you worked for three different prime ministers. You also worked for five different either secretaries of state or senior ministers. How do either of them affect you as a more junior minister? Is it more about your secretary of state than it is about the prime minister?

NH: Oh, yeah. I could count on the fingers of one hand probably, my direct engagement with prime ministers on any of the issues that I was working on. Apart from Grenfell

actually. Theresa was very involved, and she and I worked closely together on Grenfell engagement with the relatives and the bereaved and so on. David was obviously involved in the 'big society' and therefore there were moments. He'd launched Big Society Capital, we had a roundtable, there were touchpoints for David on 'big society'. To be fair on Boris, I was appointed in July and decided to step down in December, so there wasn't much overlap.

Your most important relationship, particularly as a junior minister, as a minister of state, is with your secretary of state. I can't cite any, but I know there are situations where that is really difficult. Everyone does it differently. Of course, part of my genetic experience is my dad [Douglas Hurd] was a secretary of state [from 1984–95]. A number of the people that I work with – Francis, for example – worked for him. I remember Francis telling me – and David Davis – very different people – telling me why my dad was such a good boss. It's the same instinct, which is trust someone to do the job. Be there to support them if they need it, either to take the blame or take the heat mainly, but basically trust them to do the job. Be clear about the objectives but give them freedom of manoeuvre. That's what Francis took into the role. That's what most of my secretaries of state did. One was a bit more controlling than the other and took a bit of time to let go. But if you're working with someone, it requires quite a high level of confidence at secretary of state level. Of course, none of them received any training, as far as I know, in how to manage juniors. This wasn't the case for me – but most junior ministers believe they'd be much better at the job than their secretaries of state. So, it's quite a difficult dilemma. There's no playbook, there's no rulebook, everyone does it differently. There doesn't seem to be great feedback mechanisms. Occasionally the chief whip might take an interest. But basically you're kind of left to it.

The other thing worth mentioning is that it's not just the bilateral, it's the approach to the team. With Francis for most of the time it was him and me – so different. Greg Clark was extremely collegiate and collaborative. Almost to a fault in the sense that he was very painstaking in trying to involve people. It meant Greg was a huge pleasure to work with. He went out of his way. On the whole, most were. But again, there were different styles in the process and a different degree to which people felt part of it. Some secretaries of state, the team is just about the political meeting. Others, it's much more about the business of the department and then you're trying to develop a sort of collegiate approach to that. But I never felt I worked for a bad secretary of state. I very, very rarely felt I worked with a really duff set of officials and, on the whole, I felt genuinely well-supported. On two occasions – the 'big society' and then the Grenfell role, I felt brilliantly supported. Persistently, my private offices were great. I may have just got lucky. But they were consistently brilliant, and they matter so much.

JH: What advice would you give to a new minister taking up a role on how to be effective in office?

NH: It's a good question. I was very conscious of and learned very quickly that civil servants watch and observe and listen to their new minister very, very carefully indeed. So, my advice would be, be very clear about the signals you're sending right at the start.

Be conscious of this. Be very clear about the signals. I've got enough feedback from the people I work with. The common theme is, I think, civil servants respond very well to ministers who are genuinely committed and care about the brief because, on the whole, they tend to be specialists. They've committed to that area. Now, the reality sometimes, new ministers will go in and not want to be there. I told you one case where I had to be gently persuaded, but I ended up loving it. Those early signals are important and just a bit of advice – you will get most out of the machine under you if you demonstrate and persuade them of your commitment and your genuine interest and hopefully passion for the subject.

We haven't really talked about parliament in this, but a minister detaches himself or herself from parliament at their peril. Therefore, finding the time to manage the relationships in parliament is important. In my experience, the civil service aren't very understanding of parliamentary process or the reality of that bit of a minister's job, let alone the constituency. That's still a failing in the system. But the umbilical cord to parliament and to colleagues is absolutely critical.

I think the other bit of advice would be to insist on that time with your secretary of state, to push him or her to be really clear about your objectives and what he or she expects from you. Some of them have never managed people. Some of them are kind of lone traders by instincts themselves, if you follow me. And if you're someone who likes objectives and likes to make your mark and be clear about what you're going to be judged on – success or failure – investing that time at the start and insisting on it is something that I probably should have done a bit more of. In hindsight, I would give that advice.

And value your private office. If you've got any doubts about people in the private office, ask for them to be changed. Because that machine is what keeps you going, is your eyes and ears, is so much of the difference between you being a success or failure in the role. Do not underestimate the importance of that. Within that, the importance of the diary manager, who is often the most junior person in the team. In a new team, I say the most important person in the room is the diary manager because management of your time as a minister is absolutely critical, I think. The system wastes so much of your time in meetings and the instinct is to fill your time.

One bit of advice my dad gave me – he'd been a minister for 16 years – was make sure they give you time to think. They don't because there's always people outside who want your time. Very early in the Cabinet Office, I handwrote a large sign – displayed it prominently – with the words "What is the point of this meeting?". And at every meeting, I used to point at it. If people couldn't explain this, it was a short meeting. It's that discipline of managing your time. You may be in a post – as I sometimes was – for less than a year. Do not waste that time. Do not waste that time. Be clear about what is expected of you. Then ideally find something in the brief that floats your boat, that allows you to communicate some enthusiasm. Because then you'll get more out of the system. They're watching your every move.

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