

# Ministers Reflect

## Richard Harrington



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# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2010 – present: MP for Watford

## Government career

2017–19: Parliamentary under secretary of state for business, energy and industrial strategy (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)

2016–17: Parliamentary under secretary of state for pensions (Department for Work and Pensions)

2015–16: Parliamentary under secretary of state for Syrian refugees (Home Office, Department of Communities and Local Government, Department for International Development)

**Richard Harrington was interviewed by Tess Kidney Bishop and Tim Durrant on 11 June 2019 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

Richard Harrington reflects on his time as a joint minister across three departments, working with businesses to prepare for a no deal Brexit and the different styles of various prime ministers and secretaries of state.

**Tess Kidney Bishop (TKB):** We’re mainly going to focus on your time as a minister but let’s start with your role as apprenticeships adviser for a few months in 2015. What did that role involve?

**Richard Harrington (RH):** Well, David Cameron [then prime minister] called me one day and asked if I would come and see him. I was quite a strange person as far as David was concerned because I knew him quite well before he became prime minister. I was involved with the [Conservative] Party as treasurer, and he knew that in business terms I was good at delivering in operations. I’m not a financier, I’m not a policy person. So when I was first offered a job, which was as a whip, I politely said “Thanks, David, but I don’t think I’m any good at it”, which of course caused great consternation...cos they’re not used to that kind of thing at all. And I just said: “Look, all the things that you need to do as a whip, I am not fit for. I know myself.”

**TKB:** And that was in 2015 when he offered you that role as well?

**RH:** That was before then. He later said: “Look I’ve got an operations job for you to do.” So, I went to see him with Sajid [Javid], who was the secretary of state at BEIS [the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy] at the time. They had basically promised 3 million apprenticeships as a political promise, which is quite legitimate, but they were uncertain of the way they were going to deliver it. Particularly because they had not got buy-in from a lot of big companies and other big employers, who had their own schemes but not necessarily apprenticeship type schemes. So, I agreed to take on that role and become his adviser on apprenticeships. Which really was an excuse to give me a Number 10 business card, which I’ve still got a packet of and will never use again. It allowed me to help set up an Apprenticeship Delivery Board and basically spend my time going round big companies and government departments as well. Now people at MoD [the Ministry of Defence] and Home Office are really big users of the scheme. That morphed into doing some work on an idea of mine which became the apprenticeship levy, which is the way of funding apprenticeships. So that’s when I got involved. And it was actually quite a pleasure not being a minister, something I didn’t quite understand at the time, because I could concentrate on that project. Which I was pleased to do.

**TKB:** And what was it like when you were first appointed as a minister?

**RH:** One night, it was a Saturday night at 10pm. I was in a restaurant in St Martin’s Lane with a few friends and Ed Llewellyn [David Cameron’s chief of staff] called and says:

“The boss wants to speak to you.” It’s a funny thing to hear at 10 o’clock on a Saturday night...I said “What’s it about?”, and he goes “Well, it’s good news but what’s the latest he can call?” So I said it was all a bit mysterious and Ed explained that the prime minister was at Balmoral with the Queen and you can’t, by protocol, use the phone until she went to bed.

And then Cameron phoned me at midnight. And he said: “Look, you’ve done a good job on this, I need your help. I’m making a pledge to bring Syrian refugees over here, and I need to make sure it’s delivered properly and you’ll be the first minister in three different departments, International Development (DfID), the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).” He told me, he said “You’ll have three offices”, so I said straight away “David, I can’t, no one can have three private offices, it’s all got to be under one roof.” And he said: “I’m not bothered about the detail, speak to Ed.” By this time, it was the middle of the night so I phoned Ed in the morning. I then realised why it was urgent for Cameron, it’s because he was flying to Jordan to a refugee camp and he wanted to make the announcement there.

So, I became attached, I was the minister at the three departments but I set up something which was unusual in the government at the time, which was that they were all under one roof at the Home Office. I had said the Home Office because Theresa [May, then home secretary] was the senior minister so I was responsible to her. Not that she was bothered with the project, she wasn’t against it but she needed another minister like a hole in the head. She was concentrating on her immigration, all the other things, which is fair enough. She was never obstructive towards me, she just didn’t want me to be there. Not because it was me, but because she didn’t want the other [ministerial] role. The civil servants didn’t want it either because they wanted to do it themselves. But I quickly gained a good rapport with the civil servants from the three departments and we set up one group, it was really like an independent group of civil servants. They were really good calibre ones and we were all under that one roof at the Home Office, to deliver this target.

And it was interesting because it was...if it wasn’t humans it was actually like an import and distribution mechanism. So, forget the individuals, and it sounds very heartless, but I don’t mean it like that. So, the sourcing of, let’s call it ‘the product’, if I’m using a business analogy, a tragic and terribly afflicted product. We had to sort out from hundreds of thousands of people how the 30,000 or so were to be selected, making sure it couldn’t be fiddled, that it was fair, humane, that we identified the most people that we could help the most here. And so that was the international development side of it. And that was all done in Lebanon. I went to Syria and it was terrible, it was worse than anything I’ve ever seen in my life and it’s more akin to holocaust type newsreel film of that day than it is to a normal suffering of people queuing up in lines, there were many more with personal tragedies and things like that. So that was that side of it.

And the Home Office bit was, again please excuse the analogy, but it was like the importation side of it, so we had to make sure that there was the correct legal basis for them to come here, could they work? Could they not work? How long was the visa for? What happened afterwards? I mean, there were tonnes of things like that, given that the Home Office has to deal with a lot of people pretending to be Syrian refugees. I organised the finance for this from the Treasury, who were under orders from Number 10 to make sure that it had priority for financing, because I was determined that these people wouldn't just be dumped in places.

And then there was again, what somewhat heartlessly I could call the distribution side of it. That is, where are these people going to settle? And I was determined that it would not be just the big cities which had taken a lot of [refugees], wonderful cities like Bradford and places like that, that it wasn't going to be 'round up the usual suspects.' So I took the decision to disperse them in smaller numbers so that every area could have some. Which seems strange to many. I mean, why should somewhere like Witney in Oxfordshire, which was Cameron's constituency, take 10 families? Actually, it was brilliant because they really... the whole community helped them and everything like that. But nevertheless that took quite a lot of work. That's where the DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] bit came in.

So that's what I did. And it was, I feel, the most fundamentally worthwhile thing I've done in government. No question about it, and it became more than 30,000 people and I felt that I had done – please don't think I'm just singing my own praises, or I'm building my own book up – but I feel proud of it. Because not one of them has committed any form of crime. 90% of those who were fit to do, are in work – and remember a lot of these people come from very tragic backgrounds. Obviously, some people had disabilities and things. We helped with language classes, with getting firms that were very nice to help them get into work, even at quite a low level at the beginning. I had a retired professor of languages from one of the universities in Syria who was quite happy to work in McDonalds while he was learning his English. He'd lost his wife and two out of four of his children and he was just pleased to live [here]...unfortunately, although he was a professor of languages, English was not one of them. They had proper work permits and everything, it's not like the refugees who can't work even though many of them want to. Because these are a people who regard benefits as a form of humiliation and charitable donation. Not like an entitlement at all.

**TKB: So, you were working with three departments, as well as local authorities, NGOs and private companies. How did you co-ordinate between all the different departments?**

**RH:** Well, I did it like a business really. I had myself and then the three heads of each group of civil service secondees reported to me. So, I just used a management structure like a business management structure. The civil servants that worked there were all volunteers, which meant they were frankly decent people. Because many of them didn't realise it would be a good career move. But when it went out on the intranet in all three

departments, there were people who thought well maybe this will be very constructive. Particularly in the Home Office where a lot of the stuff they have to do is quite negative. It's basically saying no. No immigrants, no this and that. And [the Syrian refugee programme] became a good place to work.

The only thing is Theresa never felt comfortable with having a minister doing the job. Cameron did and it was his decision, and she respected it, but she felt it could have been dealt with administratively by civil servants. I asked Cameron why he appointed me to do this as a minister, both me particularly but also a minister more generally. And he said because he knew if a minister was doing it, it would be a priority otherwise it would just be dealt with in a load of figures and he would in the end get egg on his face for not delivering what he said. Secondly, you know all this talk of rapists, murderers, you know this rubbish that you read about refugees, well, he felt it would be the victim of the *[Daily] Mail* and the *Express* and that kind of stuff and he didn't want that at all politically, forget the actual humanitarian [side]....

But thirdly, quite strangely, he had a particular reason for why he wanted me to do it. I mean, he was quite flattering about my operational background and everything, but he said because I'm Jewish he felt it was a good thing for people that were brought up to hate Jewish people to see that somebody could help them. I am Jewish, not that I'm a very religious person or anything but it's in my Wikipedia and all that stuff. I'm not in denial about it, it's just not a particularly important part of my life. But actually, I once...I went to Bradford once and did a round table and a man said to me in broken English, he said: "We were brought up to believe that you Jews would kill our children, kill our first born and drink our blood." Which is one of the blood libels. And I thought actually Cameron was very instinctive saying that – because they were...I wasn't after compliments but – they looked to me as the person that had brought them in. So I thought, yes, that was a very nice thing for Cameron to do.

The day after he resigned, after the referendum [in June 2016], his last visit he did in Witney was to visit a group of refugees from Syria. And he sent me a picture of him with them and he text me, saying "You should be very proud of that", and I was quite touched by it. The role wasn't a huge office of state or anything like that, it was my little self-contained corner. But I just think, I just know there are people today whose lives have been [changed]...I wish I could have done hundreds of thousands but I couldn't. I could only deal with practical reality of what he felt was deliverable politically. Given the background of a million people entering Germany, all this kind of stuff.

**TKB:** Then in 2016 you moved to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to a more usual departmental minister role. What was the adjustment like to working in a department in that way?

**RH:** Well, first of all it wasn't dissimilar in one way. Now, Theresa [May] has a system of running things which I did not like – I don't know about as prime minister but as secretary of state, it was what the Americans would call a silo system. So, yes, I could see Theresa May every week on my subject, but I had no idea what the other ministers [in the Home Office] were doing. Incidentally, my friend Greg Clark [then secretary of state for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy], who I also worked with at DCLG, he and I had been friends for many years, we were in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) together. His is a very collegiate and different system. Which I noticed differently at DCLG.

But when I went to DWP [Department for Work and Pensions], Damian Green [then secretary of state], who I've known a long time, Damian signed me up at Freshers' Fair...but because the only ministerial experience he'd had was under Theresa [May] at the Home Office, he ran a very similar system. So, I had all the access to Damian I wanted, course I did, he's a friend apart from anything else and certainly very approachable. You could just pop your head around his door and ask "Can I have a word?" But his system again was you report to him, this minister reports to him, and it wasn't...there was no difference between their system from that point of view at all.

But the DWP job appealed to me in one major way, and that is I felt because I was in business most of my working life, I at least had some value to add. And it wasn't just learning completely from scratch. Although I didn't know much about the actual structures and everything like that, at least I felt when meeting asset managers and fund management people I could speak their language. That's all. Whereas when I went into the refugee thing, I didn't have anything to clutch on to. But the [ministerial appointment] system is entirely...there's no HR function, there really isn't. It's a cab rank system really. And I don't like that. I'm used to people being given a job because they have the right CV, or they've interviewed for it or whatever. I mean, you know it wouldn't just be 'he seems alright, I owe him a bit of a favour so I'm going to put him into science' or something. But it is like that.

That reminds me... I did a good job, even if I say so myself, at the party when I ran a marginal seat campaign for the 2015 election. And David Cameron said basically through the next reshuffle you'll have a ministerial job. Well, I didn't. That first reshuffle after the 2015 election I did not get a role – this was before I got the apprenticeship job. So, next time I saw David, I said "I'm not complaining, but you promised...", and he said "Do you know, I completely forgot. I'm really sorry, don't be offended by it I've got a lot on my plate. Frankly, after the first few Cabinet appointments, George [Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer] and I got bored and left anyway." They don't care who does these ministerships, they really don't care. So, I realised that that was the game.

To go back to the pensions job, I was pleased that I at least had something I felt I had some experience in...I mean, I ran a business with a pension fund at least, I knew the kind of basics to it. But really it was just a job. I was determined to go to do the job in the business department because it was the thing I really felt I could add some value [to]. And it took a lot of wangling. I mean, Greg [Clark] asked for me when he got the job there. I was phoned up and offered another job which I turned down, so Greg then phoned...anyway I got the job, at BEIS. And incidentally, after Theresa May's first reshuffle in 2017, she phoned me up, she goes "Good news I'm promoting you to Department of Transport", and I said "Well, thank you very much Theresa, [but] it's not for me." So she said, a bit irritated, "what do you want?" And I told her "I'm very happy with what I'm doing with Greg. Can't I stay and do that?" Given that I'd spent a year trying to get some expertise. Any other business or job you'd think the taxpayer's paid a lot of money in management time, in civil service time to get me to a level where I knew what I was talking about. Then to say I'm going off to another department.

And she said "Well, I can't promote you" a bit snappily. So I said "Well, I'm just happy", and I stayed [at BEIS]. But I think it shows what a ridiculous system it is. I finally found a job where I felt I had some real value to add, because of my years in business, and I'd had all this time with civil servants teaching me a lot. And they do, they're really very good. Although they're very hamstrung by their system of moving every three years, which is potty. People just get up to a certain level of expertise and then they're moved. So take, for example, the policy area I was working in, the automotive industry. Civil servants are dealing with industry professionals who know the ins and outs of it. Not just the executives but the lobbyists. And then they're just getting to a level where they have a close relationship, where they phone at home at the weekend and all this that you get, and then off they go because they can't get promoted otherwise.

**TKB: How did you find the support that the civil servants provided?**

**RH:** I found the private office system pretty good I must say. I like – this sounds very patronising – I like working with young people, I always have in my business as well. I'm not one where experience means everything, so to have people in their mid-20s who are having a crack at this, with a bit of experience, is absolutely, is very good indeed. One of my closest friends is Leigh Lewis, a retired perm sec [permanent secretary]. And he was perm sec at DWP and the Home Office. But if you ask Leigh which job he enjoyed the most, it was when he worked in a private office 30 years ago, not when he was a director general...and a lot say that. So, I found the private office system pretty good.

But I found civil servants generally more mixed. And I was asked once to attend a breakfast of predominantly retired perm secs to discuss the difference between the public sector and the private sector. I had five minutes to talk, so I spoke about two differences. I think there's only two differences as far as I can see. It's nothing to do with the calibre of people. I mean, the [civil service] fast streamers are as good as

anyone that goes to Freshfields or Deloitte or Goldman Sachs or whatever. I don't quite know what the selection procedure is but pretty rigorous I would have thought. So it's not that.

So, I found the differences are two things only. One is a bit of a cliché that they are almost unsackable. They've got this ridiculous nonsense – rather than getting to grips on the HR side with something, as one would in a business, which is basically saying look this is not acceptable you've had two written warnings, very sorry, that's it. Or you're in your 50s, you've had a good run with us...I mean, many of my friends now they might have got to a senior management position, but their firm will say "Look, we're going to pay up your pension and give you a couple of years salary" ...cos they want to make room for people coming up. In the civil service, there's no way that would happen. So it's demoralising for bright, young, hardworking people who are prepared to put in the extra to find out that the person sitting next to them goes home exactly on the dot of five o'clock and basically doesn't do anything. And so I said that is the number one thing.

And the other difference I talked about is that there is almost no delegation of responsibility. Every single thing goes up four or five levels, which is very demoralising for junior people. I have a silly example. I went on some visit, on Thursdays there was usually a visit, some factory. The tweet that the press office person I was with, and it was basically "here's a machine, here's this...and great to visit X, Y, Z limited, great young people working", something like that, the usual cliché, that nobody looks at anyway. It went through five different people before at four o'clock in the afternoon it was cleared. Even Number 10 have a view...and it's nonsense. So it's very demoralising.

Whereas my management technique from when I was in the hotel business, running operations basically, was based on what the Americans call 'inverting the management pyramid'. So, normal management pyramid is, to use a hotel example, you are a 22-year-old receptionist in Spain, someone comes and complains about their apartment, room, whatever. And normally it's "Well, my manager will be on Monday morning...", by which time you're dealing with a furious client. But if you invert it, the receptionist would be empowered to upgrade the client, give them a free dinner, whatever it took to make them happy. Well, I know that's on a trivial scale but in the civil service, people write stuff, they spend months on it and they've no idea what happens to it.

And I tried to counter that myself by, for example, bringing in a rule, which caused ructions in the civil service, but I only wanted to see the person that wrote the submission. Whereas normally they don't let people like that anywhere near ministers. And people said to me in these weekly stand-ups that I used to do with Greg, they would say how good they found that. And the managers grinned but actually didn't like it at all. Greg actually didn't agree with it, because Greg is a management consultant by background. He was at Boston Consulting Group – he's a brilliant guy, but they're very structured. So his view is you want to see the bloke or the woman at the top.

But I just felt I always want to see the person that wrote it. It's much more my style. So I found that quite frustrating. And I found that when I explained this to a couple of friends, contemporaries of mine who went into the civil service, they said 'yes but you haven't seen it when things go badly. Because then it cascades. Ministers will not take responsibility for it and someone at the top has to and we protect the people lower down the line'. But I still think there are benefits to empowering people... You want to feel that something you're doing means a difference. Certainly young people volunteering to go into public civil service, they're not doing it for money typically otherwise they'd have gone to your Goldman Sachs or whatever. So that's a big frustration of mine.

And I had a good relationship with the Permanent Secretaries that I worked with. When I resigned I got a very nice note from Mark Sedwill [Cabinet Secretary, previously Permanent Secretary at the Home Office], a very nice note from Melanie Dawes, [Permanent Secretary] at the DCLG, and one from Ollie Robbins [former Chief Europe Negotiator and former Second Permanent Secretary at the Home Office] on a personal basis, so it wasn't personal animosity. But I don't think they saw my point. My continual complaints about the generalist approach in the civil service: it seems to me that if the only way you can get promoted is by moving, there's something fundamentally wrong with that. So if you're Deputy Director of Automotive, and you do a fantastic job at it, you've got to get promoted to the next step without leaving automotive policy in my view. Or at least get the pay rises and gradings after a couple of years, whatever it might be, but the civil service will not do that. It's a very old-fashioned system I think. When I've travelled abroad, I went to the State Department quite a lot to deal with the refugees, I've always asked how they do it. And foreign civil services are much more specialist as far as I can tell.

**TKB: As a minister at DWP, how much contact did you have with frontline staff? As that's the majority of the people employed by the Department.**

**RH:** Not enough at all. The reason in my case is probably because I wasn't dealing with Job Centre Pluses. Now were you to ask the Employment Minister, or indeed probably the Secretary of State, then they would do it a lot more. I wasn't in the retail side of it. So I think that's not a criticism. It just wasn't a big part of the pensions job.

**TD: Could you tell us more about how Greg Clark ran his ministerial team and how that compared to the other departments you worked in?**

**RH:** Yes. Well I must confess at this stage, I am a Gregorian aficionado! I think Greg has almost divine qualities, both politically and personally. So I should disclose that: I see him with a bit of rose tinted spectacles! Seriously though, Greg is very collegiate by nature. He believes that his ministers should have the discretion to attend any of the meetings. So for example every week there's an energy meeting. Now there may not be things on it that were in my area, but if I felt I had some value to add to something,

I'd get the papers and I'd be very entitled to attend. Similarly we had one on Brexit and on the business portfolio that I was doing. So other people were included. Which I found very, very good indeed. And no one was resented for getting involved in things that weren't specifically within their portfolio. And that's how I ran my management side of it when I was in business and I believe in that. Again it comes a bit more to empowerment. The only disagreements I had with Greg were around this point of him being a lot more hierarchical in his dealings than I was, which could be because he had very little time to do anything properly because there was so much pressure on him in that job.

But actually it was a total pleasure to work with Greg. It really was and I would welcome the chance to do so again in life. I don't suspect we will, who knows what's going to happen in the leadership election. But I'd think very carefully about accepting another appointment with anybody else. He motivates me. And the thing about him, it's not...when I say he's very hierarchical with the civil service, he's not very hierarchical with colleagues at all. He wasn't interested in who was Minister of State, who was this, who was that, and I became more of an advisor to him. And I appreciate that. He'd phone up and say this isn't in my area, but what do I think of this, this and this. I like that. It's the way I ran my business and for me that's very inspiring.

But one of the things that I do find frustrating is that so many things change with the Secretary of State, or indeed even a junior minister, and the civil service have to continue the machine. And sometimes they get a new minister and it's completely different. So if a new CEO comes to a big firm, I'm sure there'll be changes of style and policies, but more or less it's the same kind of systems. Whereas you get some ministers that won't read anything, you get other ministers who literally go over every single detail and minutiae and even spelling and grammar. I'm certainly not the latter. And then you get civil servants that try and bamboozle ministers, or civil servants who are punch drunk with having so many ministers and a new one to please every time.

Then you get jumped up squirts of ministers for who the biggest kick they've ever got in their life is a few sarcastic fast streamers calling them Minister and sitting in the back of a Toyota Prius. It's like the biggest thing that's ever likely to happen to them in their whole life! And some of them are awful to civil servants. They think they're so special because they've got some poxy ministerial job. People that keep drivers waiting for hours, because they can. Not that a driver's got a home as well as everybody else. But that's, I'd say that's not true generally.

The point is that the system is not based on any form of rational HR. People are given no form of assessment, no form of testing. Now you could say, well your gene pool is limited because it's like that when you become a Member of Parliament - you're not trained then either. But I'd say just as when I became an MP, I had absolutely no idea what the job involved really. There is no manual or training guide with what the job as

an MP is. Well there isn't to be a minister either. And you feel very much...my first day at the Home Office felt very much like the first day at primary school for a kid.

**TD: If we move on to Brexit, could you tell us a bit about what your role in preparing for Brexit was and who you were speaking to?**

**RH:** Well Greg asked me in an act of rare sadism, to be No Deal Minister. I'm joking about that, I have often said to him that you must not really like me Greg! But each department had to appoint a No Deal Minister and I was it. So I began to work with a group of really well motivated, seconded officials to do that. I was annoyed that they were doing that because it was a waste of their time. It's not what they were recruited for and they didn't want to do the job any more than I did. But we accepted we had to do it. And I met with them every day for probably four or five months. In some areas we achieved a lot, for example getting all the statutory instruments through, because that's what civil servants are good at, they knew exactly what they had to do.

Others, including getting businesses prepared, we were not very good at because we didn't have any power to do it. And most businesses did not know what to expect and we couldn't really advise them what to do. We got officials involved in some ways, for example talking about things like rules of origin. We had experts in, very good, and some of the people we had were very good indeed. But I was annoyed and irritated the way that people were seconded to this and not doing their jobs. It's caused massive disruption and it says a lot to the civil service's credit that they managed to do it. So no criticism there. Other than the fundamental point was we could not prepare for what we didn't know would happen. Because all business wants to know is what the rules are going to be and we couldn't tell them. Yes you can get a freight forwarder, yes you can get advice on this, yes you might have to have a tariff but if you don't know those things how do you prepare businesses?

**TD: And how did that request for certainty go down in the rest of government and across the Party?**

**RH:** Depending very much on people's politics. Greg and I met every Wednesday morning, in fact I still attend that meeting, with what we call the BRO's, that's Business Representative Organisations. Which is basically Carolyn Fairbairn of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Stephen Phipson of MakeUK, Institute of Directors (IOD), Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and British Chambers of Commerce. And that was our conduit to the top-level information. Basically, the Brexit ministers and ministries felt that [businesses] were seeking to shock. It became like the kid that cried wolf, that all the time they were doing it they'd think 'oh yeah a complaint from business again'. So it was our duty, for which I was criticised a lot, to distribute their message. And people used to call me the Minister for the CBI. Well actually, yes the CBI represents hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people's employment and pays the vast majority of taxes in this country etc. But yes there was that I'm afraid.

**TD: And how did you maintain those relationships with businesses themselves as part of that no deal planning?**

**RH:** I think because we communicated a lot with the businesses, I think they accepted we were on their side. That's a bit over simplistic but yeah.

**TKB: And did you feel that any of your other work, say doing sector deals, was being delayed because of Brexit?**

**TKB:** Yes very much so. Brexit has sucked vast amounts of management time out of the civil service. And all this stuff about transferring people from other departments is nonsense. You can have as many people from [the Department for] International Development as you want but they've got their own specialities, their own jobs. And moving them across Whitehall and giving them a new brief for three or four months, I mean they're not superheroes. And they all did their best. No one groaned and said, 'I'm not going to do it', they really did their best. But the whole thing was ridiculous. And I don't blame Theresa May and the Cabinet. I think they did their absolute best. Had we had the [Brexit] deal through, and we had the transition period [if the Withdrawal Agreement had been approved], I think it would have all come into its own. With a proper period to know what the rules are going to be. But that's the tragedy of the whole thing really.

**TD: You joined government in 2015 under David Cameron's majority. Could you talk a little bit about the difference between majority government and then a minority government after the 2017 election?**

**RH:** Yes the main difference as a minister was that you had certainty that if you had legislation, it would be passed. It would be criticised, it would be amended, but it would be passed. Now after 2017, every bill we had to fight through and we had to consult a lot and we would avoid primary legislation if we could. So the atmosphere legislation-wise changed tremendously, completely changed. And that meant that everything had to be [agreed with] the Leader of the House [of Commons] and the Leader of the House of Lords. The Leader of the Commons was Andrea Leadsom who I've got no time for politically, but she did an absolutely first-class job as Leader of the House. Really. And so does Natalie Evans [Leader of the House of Lords] now because she's doing the job of getting stuff through, knowing what will be accepted, what will not.

And my style of negotiation and conciliation helped a lot. Because I didn't have the muscle behind me politically with not having enough people to vote [in favour of Government legislation]. I'm a great fan of the House of Lords in so much as I found their opposition to be constructive and there's enough people there who know what they're talking about. In the House of Commons, they all get briefed by the lobbyists and all that stuff, it's not the same, it's nowhere near as analytical. In the Lords you get people, whatever the subject of the legislation I've done, pensions, Euratom, I go through a list and there's always people that have done it or been at it or practiced in it

and that's why as an institution I think it's pretty good. I mean you wouldn't design it from scratch like that but it's much better than a lot of political hacks who are there to oppose or not as the case may be.

**TD: And did the switch from majority to minority government affect how much time you were physically in Parliament?**

**RH:** Yes, it did. And it became quite ridiculous because we've got whips all the time [requiring ministers to vote] and it stopped things. The public, people and companies understood it because it was all in the press about the drama. But it made a fundamental difference and it would not be fair to say that it was business as usual because it wasn't.

**TKB: You resigned in March this year, but you had spoken about the possibility of resigning a bit before that. Why was March the moment for you?**

**RH:** Because Oliver Letwin and Yvette Cooper decided quite correctly that they were not going to get the Cooper–Letwin Bill passed, which I felt was the insurance policy for no deal. And in fact, when Sarah Newton [minister of state at DWP] and myself, and [Ali Burt](#) [minister of state at the Foreign Office] resigned to vote for the Cooper-Letwin Bill, I think we only won by one vote, so I did it for what I felt was the right reasons.

**TKB: To sum up, what preparation or support do you think would help make ministers more effective?**

**RH:** Well, first of all I think the main thing would be having an HR function as soon as MPs hit Parliament to find out what experience people have got, what areas of expertise have they got, and different ways of working with ministers. So, I had not worked with ministers at all, I'd not been a PPS [parliamentary private secretary] and I had really no idea what a ministerial job entailed. Since leaving, I've tried to bring as many Members of Parliament as possible into my office and talk to them about the job to help them. But there's no system that does that. So, I would have a much more mature HR position to do it.

And I also would have training for MPs who want to be ministers, without making promises, from civil servants about what a private office is, what they can expect from the civil service, what they can't expect from the civil service because I think learning it on the hoof is not the right way of doing it. Now, I know it's not perfect and reshuffles come and elections come and everything like that, but if anyone wants to be a minister, they should at least be put in a room with other people that want to be a minister and given a series of voluntary courses or lectures or round tables, call them what you like, from experienced people. And civil servants I've spoken to will be very pleased to do that and people who are no longer ministers, because they've been sacked or retired or resigned, they could offer to do it with MPs who are just starting.

But the converse is also true in so much that civil servants have quite an ignorance about Parliament and I was quite amazed how many had never even been to Parliament despite having perfectly good careers in the civil service for 10 or 20 years. They don't quite understand the pressures on a minister. So, just to trivialise it: the diary! The diary secretary in the department, their role is to fill the minister's diary. And that's the priority. The diary secretary that deals with your life in your constituency, or indeed other parliamentary things, for example lobby groups coming in to do with your constituency and things, is total second fiddle to the one in Whitehall. But he or she doing it from the constituency point of view is continually frustrated by the one in Whitehall saying "Well, he's got to go on a visit to here", so you have to try and find a way through. Which for someone experienced in business, on the operational front like myself, is not that difficult. But for people that have been journalists, barristers, anything like that who have had no experience of this, it is very difficult.

So, practically, I think people have to know a little bit more what to expect. In terms of what the civil servants were like in terms of their ability, they try and give ministers what they want. That's part of their job. They know that. But they don't sort of understand the other pressures on ministers. For example, giving up a Friday, if you've got a [constituency] surgery, if you're visiting a local school, if you're visiting a couple of businesses, the arrangements for those are just as important to an MP's life as "Well, I'm going to visit British Aerospace up in somewhere or other". I'm not trivialising either of them but there is no perspective.

But in the end I think our system is better. I compare it to the American system where I, for example, met several different Cabinet members. Take Wilbur Ross [US Secretary of Commerce] as an example, who I dealt with on steel and things like that from time to time. And this is no reflection on him, he's a hugely successful industrialist in his own right, it's not like the man's stupid, he's very smart. But in the end, his opposite number here, say Greg Clarke, or I to a lesser extent, we have to face our constituents on Fridays and Saturdays. We have to go to Tunbridge Wells or Watford and listen to what they have to say. He doesn't. Because his only link with the democratic system is via the president, who once every four years obviously has his own, or her own, things to deal with. But our system is better. It has disadvantages, the clash of responsibilities and the time [constraints].

**TKB: And if you could give one piece of advice to a new minister on how to be effective what would it be?**

**RH:** Learn from people that have done it before, and feel the civil servants are an ally to you. They are not people trying to catch you out or bring you down. People watch *The Thick of It* too much – I love the programme – and they watch *Yes Minister* too much. In practice, I think it's much better than that. And I think that as a minister you have to accept the fact that you don't know anything at the beginning. But it's not like a graduate scheme where you get a course, some training, or indeed even with the fast

stream in the civil service where you go round different departments. You have to learn it on the hoof and your only chance is to learn it from people that have done it before.

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