

# Ministers reflect

Robert Neill

December 2015



# Robert Neill

## Biographical details

## Electoral History

2006-present: Member of Parliament for Bromley and Chislehurst

## Parliamentary Career

2010-2012: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Department for Communities and Local Government)

2007-2010: Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government

Robert Neill was interviewed by Peter Riddell and Jen Gold on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

**Peter Riddell (PR):** When you were appointed minister, what was the experience like? What kind of support did you have? Had anything prepared you for it?

**Robert Neill (RN):** I suppose I was hopeful because I'd been shadowing local government during the run up to the election. But obviously with the creation of the Coalition everybody was a bit uncertain. I certainly remember sitting in what was then my fairly grotty office after the election and noting first of all that Caroline Spelman, who had been my boss, wasn't going to DCLG [*Department for Communities and Local Government*]. Then that Greg Clark was actually doing the Minister of State's role which I'd been shadowing, so you start to get a bit twitchy. And then I think it was on the third day [that] my researcher said, 'You've got a phone call'. I think by that stage the Prime Minister was so busy he'd delegated it to the Chief Whip.

So [I] got the phone call and actually rang Eric [Pickles, the newly-appointed Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government]. I had said to the Chief Whip, 'What do you want me to do now?' And he said, 'You'd better ring Eric up really'. So I duly did and Eric was sitting in there with Sheridan [Westlake], his special adviser and nobody else pretty much.

And Greg [Clark] and I, we found that there was a bizarre scenario. We spoke to the Permanent Secretary who said, 'Well essentially, of course we know you're ministers but we've got to have the fax from the Cabinet Office to say that you are'. And that took us 24 hours before Greg and I could actually get into the building, which we all saw the funny side of, and sat there drinking endless cups of coffee until about seven o'clock when we went and had a drink because we thought that was the easiest thing to do and we would turn up the next morning.

**PR:** How well had the fact you were a shadow [minister] prepared you for what you actually did?

**RN:** I think in my case, pretty well. But I am not sure that that was the case for everybody. And the reasons for that, I think are two-fold. Not necessarily a great merit of mine, but the fact that we had done a lot of preparatory work in the CLG [*communities and local government*] team in opposition. It had been a big part of our devolution offer, the localism stuff. And so with Caroline [Spelman] I had been really closely working up the policy documents that we had done – the open-source planning one, which then later then became part of NPPF [*National Planning Policy Framework*] if you like, and also the broader devolution agenda. So we'd done a lot of work and it also helped that although Caroline had been shadowing the Secretary of State's job for the latter half of the parliament, Eric was himself a sort of specialist and the work had been started on his back...

**PR:** Sure, yes.

**RN:** ...and Sheridan, who was our special adviser, had been [helping]. So we probably had a lot more continuity than some teams had.

**PR:** What about in terms of actually preparing to be a minister as opposed to a policy brief?

**RN:** The nuts and bolts, nothing systematic. Caroline and I had one, probably two meetings with Peter Housden, who was then the Permanent Secretary [in DCLG] on the usual terms beforehand. But again, that was pretty general in terms of its conversations.

The funny side was, I think the shadow ministers fell into two camps: those who read the Chris Mullin book [*A View from the Foothills*] beforehand and those of us who thought that might bring bad luck and sort of crammed very rapidly thereafter. I do remember reading Gerald Kaufman's [book, *How to be a Minister*] years before when I went on the [opposition] frontbench. It was actually still very good. And I

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was lucky I suppose that I had a few chums who had been ministers, old lags around here [*Parliament*] if you like.

**PR: So what did you pick up from them?**

**RN:** Well I think the importance of getting control of your private office, having a pretty clear set of priorities to give to the civil servants before they give you the department's agenda. Just some of the nuts and bolts I suppose about the write-around process, which even then came as more of a shock than you think. So there was a little bit of that. Certainly the importance of getting the private office right. As it is, I inherited the guys who had been Barbara Follett's team, and they were all good guys and in fact I didn't feel any need to make any immediate changes. I think one or two of my colleagues did. But the fact that you knew you could do that was quite important and the fact that it was important we knew to go to Peter [Housden] and talking to the DGs [*Director Generals*], 'Here are the bits, the sections they've tasked me to do and this is what we want to do'.

**PR: I suppose you were in a better position than a lot of other people because you did have clear priorities on coming in on what you wanted to do.**

**RN:** I'm sure that's true. I think it was very fortunate. I think Greg was the only person who hadn't been in the shadow team at some point in opposition. Because obviously there was Eric [Pickles], myself, and Grant [Shapps] had been doing the housing brief. Andrew Stunell on the Liberal Democrat side knew it all inside out and of course Joan Hanham up in the Lords, so actually we were in a much better place.

**PR: What advantage was your own local government background for being an MP?**

**RN:** I think that helped a lot. I always found it helped me as an MP, because you are used to some degree at least to knowing where the strings are to pull, who to go to, what the sort of broad processes are. There are differences of course, but you were used also to actually giving some direction to officials, because more and more have started doing that in local government if you are holding some senior cabinet-type posts.

**PR: Did you have any role models as a minister? Did you have anyone in mind to say, 'I'd like to be like that or not to be like that'?**

**RN:** I think given that we had been out for a long time of course, the memory was probably a bit faded around that, though you could think of people who had been in towards the end of the Major government who I thought had been good ministers. I am a good chum of Alistair Burt, we come from the same end of the spectrum in the party, so I knew he'd been a very effective departmental minister. That's to pluck one name out of the air, but equally there are plenty of others that you also come across, who'd done a pretty decent job over the years.

**PR: What did you see as the roles and duties of a minister? You seemed to have quite a clear set of priorities for officials. How else did you think 'Ah well, here's what my function is'?**

**RN:** I don't think it's a great process of sitting down and doing it systematically, Peter, but over the years of what I'd done in the London Assembly and so on, you do know that if you're in control of anything, be it in a council, be it London, be it government, you've got two bits to do, haven't you? You've actually got to get a grip on the machine and do your best to make sure it actually does deliver what you're seeking to do. And the other bit is that you've got to make the case. You can't stop making the argument for what you're doing. That obviously was slightly complicated than we might have planned because of a.) by the Coalition. And b.) the fact that obviously the whole of the deficit stuff was more acute in terms of political imperative than we thought, so we had to do some adjustments.

But that meant we had to make a political case to do that. So the communication strategy was hugely important and again we had help in that case from Giles Kenningham, who was the other spad [*special adviser*], because Giles had been doing that for Eric when he was [Conservative] Party Chairman.

**PR: Yep, of course. He moved across to do that.**

**RN:** Yes. So we had this view between us already that we had to be pretty quick at doing the interviews, explaining what we were doing, making sure that we kept Andrew [Stunell, Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State] very close – that was Eric's initiative to be fair. And actually just saying to the Civil Service this is not business as usual, there are going to be some rather radical changes. The best of the civil servants got that, but not everybody I think got the extent of it.

**PR: And when you were there as a minister, it was when the size of the department was cut dramatically.**

**RN:** Exactly, yeah. That's where we took out nearly 40% or so. And then the rest of the programme followed on down. So yes, that was the really tough stuff. We just had to start shedding people really quickly.

**Jen Gold (JG): Thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a government minister in DCLG, can you give us a sense of how your time was actually spent?**

**RN:** I was lucky because it was a very big portfolio that Eric gave me. It's not glamorous and I think most junior ministers, in particular, do an awful lot of the routine stuff, the nuts and bolts. I spent probably a reasonable amount of time in the department just by the nature of it, but it's the junior ministers that get the bulk of the correspondence, the adjournment debates, all that sort of stuff.

We all know that that is the treadmill stuff that you do. What I tried to do generally was to... we were one of those departments where we kept the cars and I think that wasn't a bad move as I was living in Chislehurst. So I used to get the car to pick me up at seven o'clock in the morning and I could work on the box. I would have meetings from about 8.30 onwards which gave me a bit of time before I came down to the House because of the new hours.

**PR: When did you used to come down to the House?**

**RN:** Pretty much when the Whip cut in and we would have to move the meetings of course.

**PR: Especially because you were far away...**

**RN:** Yeah, it wasn't a good position. It was about as far as you went really wasn't it?

**PR: By Victoria Station.**

**RN:** I remember Greg giving us a lift in his electric car [once]. It was terrifying. He got it up to 40 down Victoria Street [*laughter*]. It felt much more actually. But yes, so you had to structure in that sort of way. And that's why it suited me actually, to get the paper work done first thing when I was on my way up and then probably take stuff back home with me obviously in the evening.

And I had one of the offices in Star Chamber Court [*Palace of Westminster*] that most of the under-secretaries [of state] had so that would mean that I would plough through that stuff. Probably the inconvenience for the civil servants was the fact that they all had to plough down here quite a lot and sometimes into quite cramped meeting rooms.

**PR: What about the constituency? How did you balance that out with your ministerial duties?**

**RN:** I think probably the expectation that they'd see me was different and they were pretty understanding of that, which was certainly a plus. Perhaps I was lucky that Eric Forth of course had always been someone who had spent a lot more time in Parliament [and] saw himself for different reasons focused here. It was a slightly different kettle of fish to some, but I was doing surgeries, which was helpful. So I used to make sure that the Fridays were fairly well blocked out. Though probably again,

because I was nearest, it was usually Grant or I who would go in if something needed doing [in the department] on a Friday. Or Joan [Hanham, DCLG Lords minister] to be fair from time to time. Actually, I didn't mind doing that. I quite enjoyed going in on Fridays, sometimes a bit unannounced which used to ruffle a few...

**JG: Keep people on their toes.**

**RN:** ...keep people on their toes. Twenty minutes from Bromley South. You would get the occasional 'Well, we didn't think you were coming in Minister', you know. People sort of suddenly appeared about half an hour later.

**PR: Yes, you could get straight to Victoria couldn't you, yes.**

**RN:** Absolutely. I could bowl straight in. So that was a bit of devilment on my part sometimes. There is a great resistance to fixing meetings on Fridays with senior officials. I'm sure they have a lot of catching up to do.

**JG: I wonder if you can talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department and how you went about dealing with that?**

**RN:** I suppose let's take the South London riots for example, there is one that we could think of where that's happening pretty much overnight. A bit of it in Bromley as it happens. So we had a heads up pretty sharpish from the private office that the Secretary of State wanted to know where everybody was and so on. We got together, that was fine. Eric [Pickles] rang me I think in the course of the evening. By the next day we'd worked out that some of us wanted to do a number of visits, so Eric I think went to Enfield or Croydon. I went and did a visit to Woolwich because it was down the road from me.

And then obviously we were back in after that to work up some of those programmes that we were doing for some of the emergency funding for the councils. If you remember they had to fork out a bit. And there was this issue about the delays in payment for people under the Riot Damages Act (1886). These poor chaps would wait for bloomin' years on it. We had to go straight into some arguments with the Home Office about the delays in payment.

**PR: That was a problem which was shown up by some of the '80s riots wasn't it?**

**RN:** Yeah, exactly. And it had never been corrected. Some of the Councils were prepared to some advance money but they were taking a risk on it themselves. So they wanted some reassurance around that, so there was a chunk of that. And I was doing the Fire Service as well at that time. So we made sure that there was always a small control staff on the fire and the emergency services side down in the basement [at Eland House] that can be activated. So we made sure that was in. Ken Knight who was the chief adviser was in, I think, by the middle of when it was all happening.

So I thought that moved fairly swiftly, as far as you can imagine it to do under the circumstances. But that's one example, that's a serious one. Other things, it's completely unexpected stuff like one of our local councillors has been caught doing things or taking pictures of things they should or shouldn't do and you just have to go and make a quick phone call to central office to say, 'This guy is suspended, he's not coming into this meeting' and that sort of stuff. In a sense, that's political, you tend to keep that away from the department.

**PR: Yeah.**

**RN:** We had to send in the Commissioners to Doncaster, I had to sign that off, because Eric was out of town and I was on duty...

**PR: Actually you touched on a very interesting issue, which is the role of lawyers. Presumably on that decision you only moved with very careful legal advice.**

**RN:** Yes.

**PR:** How did you find the legal advice aspect of it? There is a debate about the lawyers either handcuffing you or the now more common tendency to say, 'Well Minister, the risks are this, it's up to you to decide where you would be on the risks'. How did you find that?

**RN:** I think there was a bit of a shift in the course of the time. They knew I was a lawyer I suppose. And again, Eric was a very good boss. He delegated a lot to the junior ministers, so he essentially said, 'I want you to sit in on the legal stuff that I have and take an interest in the legal services directorate'. So I did a couple of floor walks and got to know some of them.

They were initially quite cautious in their advice. There was a bit of a change around that, and that was partly because we were saying to them 'Actually we are prepared to push the envelope a bit'. Sometimes we got our fingers burnt like that attempt to remove the regional spatial strategies very swiftly, where if you remember we got JR'd [judicial reviewed] on it. But there was a political imperative to do that. And okay, there was a bit of a row because 'this shows what a wretched lot these lawyers are who stand in the way of the will of the people'. A bit of political flannel but we were able to do that.

And I think gradually you had to build up a bit of confidence and you have to use a bit of your own common sense and without ever breaching any of the requirements for confidentiality about the facts of what you're doing. I suppose the fact that you might have a hinterland of your own outside the Civil Service and outside government who are lawyers themselves. I think it was a big help to us, and we have a little team of people who'd helped us in opposition purely in terms of principle rather than fact, who you could occasionally try a second opinion on.

And I think that enabled us to actually move some of the... because there's quite a significant restructuring, partly because of the downsizing, that enabled us to get rid of some of the...

**PR:** The kind of 'don't do anything' people.

**RN:** Exactly, yes.

**PR:** What's your greatest achievement in office do you reckon?

**RN:** It's probably got to be the Localism Bill and the NPPF [National Planning Policy Framework] really. I mean I took virtually the whole of that through committee stage on the Bill together with Greg. And Andrew actually, we had three on the Bill. And then I was the Bill Minister on the Local Government Finance Bill, which was an unsexy bit of work that starts to pave the way for where we've ended up now with the full local retention of business rates. And that was something I wanted to do for years.

**PR:** So it was very much parliamentary implementation.

**RN:** For me, most of that was. Though equally on the non-parliamentary side, knocking the NPPF into shape and the third thing which was much more administrative, getting out of the regional fire control centres contract, which everybody told me couldn't be done without costing vast loads of money. We got out where they actually paid us. Not a vast amount, I think they paid us about £20 million, it's on the record. And that's because I insisted and got Eric's support to go to the perm sec, who I think might have been Irene [Lucas] by then, to bring in independent commercial lawyers because there wasn't the in-house resource to deal with that level of complexity of contract, which is how we got into the mess in the first place. So that was quite a big win, because that had been dragging on for 10 plus years and nobody managed to get out of it, so I was quite chuffed about that.

**PR: Two more brief [questions] if I may?**

**RN:** Yeah, sure.

**PR: One is on cross-Whitehall working. Jen?**

**JG: I believe you had the Olympics in your portfolio?**

**RN:** I did, yeah.

**JG: We wondered whether you had any observations on cross-Whitehall working such as with the Olympics. Did you come away with any lessons on how to do it effectively? Or how well you thought it worked?**

**RN:** It's still a bit hit and miss. I think we're still far too siloed. The Olympics I suspect worked better than some did because there was an imperative to it. Everyone knew that we had to get it right but there were still difficulties. I used to quite often stand in for Eric on Cobra [crisis coordination committee – Cabinet Office Briefing Room A] and that worked again pretty well because there was a structure to it.

But when it was on a more ad hoc basis, things like trying to get better alignment between fire services and some of the blue lights, then there wasn't really a structure for that and you felt you ran up frequently against departmental agendas. I still see it as we need to do more work on that. There was an issue around an unwillingness for departments to sit down on a more systematic basis.

**PR: What was most frustrating about being a minister?**

**RN:** The time it took to get anything serious implemented. That's where the write-around process was frustrating. I was warned of its existence but it was much slower than I thought. And the other frustrating thing was Civil Service processes itself. We had 25 transactional steps to answer a bit of ministerial correspondence when I came in.

[Also] the unwillingness sometimes to take outside advice. When Greg and I were doing the planning stuff, there was an awful lot of expertise, practitioners out there who you deal with without any conflicts of interest. But you have policy wonks who were undoubtedly charming and very bright people who have probably never actually seen a planning application in anger in their lives. And eventually, as you probably know, we set up a sounding board, which mirrored some of the people we talked to when we were in opposition. But again it was a dickens of a fight to do that, which in any other walk of life including in local government would have been obvious. But I actually found central government more rigid actually than the local government was in terms of its willingness to change procedures, bring people in a bit more, which surprised me.

**JG: How would you define an effective minister?**

**RN:** A minister who knows what they want to achieve and works with officials to deliver that, who takes decisions clearly and quickly and sticks by them, and who can effectively communicate why he or she is doing them to the broader public.

**JG: What advice would you offer to a new minister entering office for the first time?**

**RN:** Set clear priorities for officials, keep control of your diary and leave time for thinking, effective good relations with your opposite number and the department most relevant to you and never take the House of Commons for granted.



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