

# Ministers Reflect Sam Gyimah



6 April 2020

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2010–19: Conservative MP for East Surrey

## Government career

2018: Minister of state for universities, science, research and innovation

2016–18: Parliamentary under secretary of state for prisons and probation

2014–16: Parliamentary under secretary of state for childcare and education

2014–15: Parliamentary secretary at the Cabinet Office (minister for the constitution)

2013–14: Government whip

2012–13: Parliamentary private secretary to the prime minister

Sam Gyimah was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Ketaki Zodgekar on 6 April 2020 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sam Gyimah reflects on working across two departments, dealing with prison riots and the government's relationship with universities. He also talks about the importance of boldness in politics and his eventual resignation over Brexit.

**Tim Durrant (TD):** Can we start by talking about your first ministerial job, when you became parliamentary secretary for the Cabinet Office and parliamentary under secretary of state at the Department for Education (DfE) in 2014? What was your first day like and how did you find out about that job?

**Sam Gyimah (SG):** Well, I found out about the job when I was invited to Downing Street, which I was no stranger to because I had been the prime minister's parliamentary private secretary and then I'd been in the Whips' Office. So there was an element of familiarity, going back to No.10 to be told "okay, these are the jobs you've got".

What surprised me was that I was in two departments, and I remember initially thinking "where do I go first? Is it the Cabinet Office or should it be the education department?" And, where does my private secretary sit, in which department? So, although I'd been interested in the policy area of education for a while, the immediate reaction when I was given this promotion that I was very privileged and happy to get was how do I navigate the logistics of being in two separate departments with two separate private secretaries, with two separate private offices? And I had briefs that were incompatible, in the sense that there was constitutional affairs on the one hand, and in the other department I had early years education. So, whilst it was flattering to be asked to be in two departments, and clearly the prime minister thought I was dextrous enough to master two completely new briefs at once [laughs], it created a lot of challenges in terms of getting things done.

**TD:** Did the prime minister give you any sort of guidance or explanation as to why he thought it made sense for you to do those two briefs together?

**SG:** Yes. I had expressed an interest in education and that was my wish, to be in the education department, but I was also one of his ministers who, because I'd been in Downing Street previously and had worked well with the coalition – and Nick Clegg was essentially the head of the Cabinet Office as DPM (deputy prime minister) – I was one of the Conservatives who could be in the Cabinet Office and work smoothly with our coalition partners.

So, [working in] the Cabinet Office was solving a political problem and [working in] education was solving a policy issue. I think that's the challenge in government, it's often when these decisions are made it's not always clear or apparent which problem you are trying to solve.

**TD: Absolutely. What was it like getting up to speed with both of those briefs? Did you get much support from officials?**

**SG:** Yes. In my experience, officials are very, very good at trying to get ministers up to speed on a brief. They enjoy putting together the briefing packs and they enjoy the kind of audition of every senior official who is within your remit coming to see you to present what the key issues are. But what is more challenging, as a first-time minister, is getting very quickly to the priorities you need to deliver. Within about a week of being a new minister, you get a letter from your secretary of state, saying “what are your priorities?” And you’re like “well, I’m actually still getting up to speed with the briefing, and I’ve got to come up with a list of key priorities!”

So, I think that’s the big challenge. Getting well briefed is fine, but it's really by identifying what the priorities are... by which I mean not the technocratic issue that needs to be dealt with in a brief, but the real challenges that are there, that are political, that you need to deal with. And it also depends on when you’re appointed. I was appointed to this position in 2014 with the expectation of a general election in 2015, so if you are appointed to a ministerial job with a general election within sighting distance, the requirements of you are very different to if you are appointed earlier on in the parliament, where you can shape new policy.

**TD: Yes, how did that affect the role? Did you always have one eye on the upcoming election?**

**SG:** Yes. The upcoming election affected everything I did in multiple ways. For example, in terms of my dealings with Liberal Democrat colleagues, this was a time when the Liberal Democrats were trying to show distance from the Conservatives, so we ended up having kind of policy rows over the issues that I mean, you might not really have a policy row over. For example, in the Cabinet Office brief, you’re dealing with organisations that register people to vote, you know, so which organisation gets how much to register people to vote becomes a contentious issue. But you’re kind of all aligned, we all wanted to improve our democratic process. These weren’t big battles, but they were the sorts of things that probably more energy gets spent on than otherwise would have been spent. Or, an important piece of legislation in the Cabinet Office context was the Recall [of MPs] Act [to allow constituencies to recall their MPs] which had been promised by David Cameron at the previous election – he was determined that this would become law before the next election. He didn’t want to go to the next election having any outstanding promises. So, we spent a lot of time on recall. Whether that was the most important thing for government to be spending time on at that time or not was irrelevant, but that’s government, it has to satisfy the election criteria.

Then, on the education side, the early years side, I found there was actually very little space for new ideas and new thinking, either because of the parliamentary timetable, but more that a decision had been made as to where it was going to sit in terms of the

priorities of the government, and in the party, come the general election. So, you had to sort of fulfil that. These are the things you're not always told when you're first appointed to a ministerial job. You figure out quite quickly in the first few weeks how to manage and navigate those issues. And also, what kind of mark you can make individually as a minister on the brief.

**TD: How easy is it to make a mark at that stage, when you're taking on things after big decisions have already been made?**

**SG:** Well, the mark you can make becomes political rather than governmental. So, it's political, as in you're very good at selling the positives in the brief, or you're dealing with stakeholders who by that time were not very happy. In childcare, there was a number of stakeholders that were not happy with some of the policies that had been pursued or attempted to be pursued before I was appointed. So, how do you make sure that you manage that stakeholder relationship, because you don't want to go into an election with any significant group of stakeholders against you, if you can help it. So, you make your mark, as far as your political masters are concerned, by coming up with political answers to the challenges that you face. But it's more challenging to make your mark in terms of new legislation or a new idea that really moves the dial in a policy area, at that stage.

**TD: After the 2015 election, one of the policy areas you were responsible for in that role was the 30 hours of funded childcare. That was a major government project. What was it like, delivering such a big change?**

**SG:** For me, I absolutely enjoyed it. It was a flagship manifesto pledge, I had the responsibility of taking it through. Firstly, devising what the policy actually was. Thirty hours of free childcare was very, very high level, but who is eligible, what are the eligibility criteria? Is the supply side capable of meeting the uplift in demand? How much is this going to cost and how do we negotiate the funding envelope with the Treasury? Do we need any capital [funding] to make sure that we boost early years demands? All of these things were aspects of it and had to be done within the [2015] spending review and then the budget. So, that's what you want to be a minister for, to be able to really get stuck into these things.

But again, you sort of realise... you look around your department as a minister and one of the things that you've got to do when faced with a new policy like this is immediately work out whether you've got the right resources in the right place, in terms of your ministerial team, in order to deliver. So, the early years team in the Department for Education had very much been focused, before the Conservative government, on Sure Start Children's Centres, and there they deliver the initial 15 hours of free early education. And now we're talking about childcare, and childcare is not just an educational issue, it is what it says. So how do you get the Department for Education to really think beyond early years provision and consider the childcare market? I set up a market division in the department to, therefore, understand the dynamics of what is going on outside, because

I realised that with almost everything else that the Department for Education did, it was within the confines of government – with a big ‘G’, you know? You’re dealing with... if it’s schools, you’re dealing with local authorities, and local authorities fund schools and schools are controlled by central government or the local authority, and even with academies there’s a huge amount of control in place.

Whereas here, government is funding something that is delivered by private enterprises in the main, so you need a different set of skills to assess all the opportunities and what you need to do to deliver. I felt that, as a minister, your ability to make that assessment quickly, to work with the permanent secretary [the most senior official in a department] and the secretary of state, to make sure that you’ve got the right people in the right positions is very critical to actually making a success of the policy. That is beyond actually getting legislation passed in the House of Commons.

**TD: You mentioned how you’d been parliamentary private secretary to David Cameron and you’d also been a whip. How did both of those experiences inform your time when you became a minister?**

**SG:** For me, they were essential grounding, in parliament and government. So, as parliamentary private secretary, I attended cabinet, I was in the 8:30 meeting with David Cameron, George Osborne [then chancellor of the exchequer], Jeremy Heywood, who was cabinet secretary at the time, Ed Llewellyn, the chief of staff, and the head of communications. And that meeting was the clearing house for all the major decisions across the government that day. We had to identify difficult issues that were coming up and then come up with an action plan to deal with them. Then there was a follow-on meeting in the afternoon for a selection of what had been discussed at the 8:30 meeting. So, for someone for whom this was my first job in politics, being part-participant, part-observer, to all the key decision-making processes in the coalition at that level really grounded me in how to get things done in Whitehall.

And being a whip, which is dealing with what I call the ‘parliamentary plumbing’, you get a well-calibrated sense of what you need to do to get things done in parliament. In both cases, I got a sense of not just the Conservative parliamentary party but across parliament, a sense of different MPs, what their motivations were, what their interests are and what you needed to do to align them behind a project. And I think that is essential grounding to being an effective minister.

**Ketaki Zodgekar (KZ): Then, in July 2016, Theresa May appointed you as parliamentary under secretary of state for prisons and probation. When you entered that role, what did you set out to achieve?**

**SG:** [Laughs] Well, I entered that role and, my first thought was “why me?”. Let’s face it, it would be very rare to come across a parliamentarian who says “what I really want to do is to be prisons minister”. It’s a fair question you ask, why me and why prisons? I went into the department and rapidly realised that basically this was a grenade. The prisons

were overstretched, understaffed and there were regular riots, or what are euphemistically called ‘episodes of concerted indiscipline’. And as the minister responsible for this, if you didn’t get a grip of this you could end up resigning. I mean, what I set out to achieve was conditioned purely by the situation on the ground rather than what I wanted initially to do with the prison service. I would say one of the skills of being a minister, because in most departments you come across something like this to a greater or lesser degree, is getting to grips with whatever situation you face, but then building on it and actually making a difference. I think that is what I managed to do effectively in that job. In part, it was because I was in the job for a longer period of time than the other jobs.

**KZ: How did you navigate making those changes over your time there? What were the sorts of things that you pursued in trying to improve the situation?**

**SG:** I think the first thing is an honest assessment of what the problem is, and there is a temptation to treat everything you are told by officials and civil servants, especially where it’s to do with “there isn’t enough money”, to treat it with scepticism, thinking “did they try this on with the previous guy?” But I think [you need] an honest analytical assessment of what the challenge is, and then an action plan to address it. So, I think you’ve got to be quite technocratic about that kind of challenge. It meant approaching the Treasury for new investment in the prison service and getting all the data that was available to persuade the Treasury, which at the time was still very much committed to fiscal consolidation, to loosen the purse strings for prisons (where there were no real votes to be won).

I managed to do that successfully and really re-think the organisational design. Here, I think, is where ministers have to show leadership in the department, to signal that the organisational re-design of prisons and increasing the number of prisons was the most important challenge of the department. What I did is, I created a space on the 9th floor, where the ministers sat, for the team that was doing this work and blended in that team with some of the people from the private sector who were helping us. They all sat in the same place, we had progress charts on the wall, I went to see them twice a day, I had meetings with them regularly. And that sent a signal to the department that this was really important, that ministers were taking it seriously. Our secretary of state would pop over and say hello to these people. By giving it that level of prominence and focus, we made huge strides in delivering our objectives.

One of our key objectives was 2,500 new prison officers in 18 months, and we did that seven months ahead of schedule, and that’s because there was a relentless focus on the task and the outcome. There was clear measurement that involved getting the Prison Officers Association on board with it, but also involved getting over a hundred prison governors on board saying ‘you’ve been doing these things in one way, you’re now going to do it differently, this is why and this is what it’s going to deliver for you’. And that was my job to do as the minister.

While doing that, obviously, that's not the only thing you're doing, there are a number of other priorities within your brief. In this case, there was electronic monitoring, there was the [National] Probation Service, where we had huge problems with the contracts, privatised contracts, that were re-negotiated. On the national security side, I had more to do about radicalisation in prisons. And what I managed to do effectively, again, it's... I think, in any executive role, identify your best people, persuade the secretary of state and the permanent secretary to make sure that the best people are aligned in the right way in the key priorities in your brief, and just relentlessly focus on it. And make it very clear, what the objectives are.

But also, be ambitious. People like a sense of ambition. When we set out to create, for example, separation units for terrorist offenders – and that was completely new within the prison system, to have prisons within prisons specifically for offenders that were at risk in terms of national security and radicalisation – it raised lots of questions: what does this mean for the Human Rights Act? How do you identify who goes into these centres? How long are they in the centre for? What happens when they come out of the centre? We had to answer all of these questions on fair principles, and I think officials enjoyed really getting to grips with a proper problem that wasn't about the minister just seeking headlines but actually addressing a problem in the system. They responded very positively to it.

By this time, I had relaxed about being the prisons minister, I was enjoying it, because you could see... I would say it's one of the few jobs in government where you have real, direct operational responsibility and where you don't really interface a lot with other departments. There was a little bit of overlap with the Home Office, a few issues, but it meant that, as a minister, you could get your arms around the brief. And I think that is key to a minister being effective in a job. Can they get their arms around the brief and know what they need to deliver as opposed to fighting turf wars with other departments in government, which are always a distraction from delivery?

**KZ: You mentioned that you were in post at the Ministry of Justice for a relatively long time – how did that longevity help you to get things done?**

**SG:** You get to know the team, you build trust, get a certain trust in the team. You have time to work through problems. Often your first answer might not be the right one, but you can only get to the second or third answer once you've worked through the first one and not been successful. It gives time for solutions to bed down. And in terms of your ability with stakeholders, it improves the longer you've been in post. As with anything, you just... you can become better at seeing around corners. I was minister at the time, as I said, when there were a number of riots, and by the time you've seen your third or fourth, you know how things play out.

And in my case, there was one of the biggest riots in 25 years at Birmingham Prison. I happened to be in the department on a Friday when an official said to me "by the way,



there's been an incident in this prison and some prisoners have just yanked keys off a prison officer" (this was a privatised prison). And I said "that doesn't sound like good news! They've got the keys to the wing". And the official said, "I'm sure they will bring it under control". I was due to go to my constituency that day and I just thought "you know what, I'll just see what happens in the next couple of hours", so I sat in the department. Within the next hour, the violence had spread from one wing to another and immediately we had to move to intervene in this situation. All my instincts around that had come from the fact that I had seen these before, so I stayed in the department, I alerted the press office that we may have to put out a statement. I was the one who had written the manual for how to deal across government with any large-scale indiscipline in a prison; would you ever use the military and, if so, under what circumstances? When you have a conference call, who has to be on the calls? And I had managed... I was in that position because I'd been in that job for long enough, and there were some very key, important judgement calls to make at key points during what was a destructive strike. And I think I was only able to make them because I had been there and seen other incidents before.

**KZ: You moved to your next role in 2018, as minister of state for universities, science, research and innovation. You were appointed by Theresa May this time; what was that conversation like? Did she approach appointments differently to David Cameron?**

**SG:** I think my reward for having survived prisons was this job, because up until my time as prisons minister, I don't think any prisons minister had been promoted. Most of them got fired after being prisons minister! So, I had gone from... the job had gone from being a political graveyard to being a stepping stone to other things. And, as an aside, I remember coming out of Theresa May's office after I'd been appointed and bumping into Rory Stewart, [prisons minister 2018–19] who is a friend of mine, and I said "okay, Rory, what have you got?", and he said "I've been given prisons", at which point I just laughed. I said "oh, don't worry, Rory, it's the new stepping stone" [laughs]. But it's because... I think that was because of the job I had done. They could say to people "look, you go to prisons and you do what Sam Gyimah did, it means you get a big leg up" – which is pretty much what Theresa May said to me.

So, in terms of my relationship with Theresa May, I had just about survived the deep clean post the David Cameron regime, when Theresa May became prime minister. I clung on and got sent to the prisons department and then she had promoted me. And it was different, in terms of the actual interaction with Theresa May. How best to put this... she wasn't very forthcoming about what she wanted from me in the job, so I had to subsequently find out was because she wasn't very clear at the time of appointment. Obviously, the job had been a cabinet-level job. All the ministers before me had attended cabinet, the Conservative ones – [David Willetts](#), Greg Clark, [Jo Johnson](#) – had all attended cabinet. She relegated it from a cabinet job to outside of cabinet because she didn't want two Johnsons in her cabinet, because Jo Johnson held the job before me [laughs]. So, the appointment kind of... I was sitting there and all that was going on in the back of my mind was "well, this is a fantastic job and I would love to do this, are you going to say anything

about cabinet?” [laughs]. But I then got completely thrown, because she kept on saying “I’d like to appoint you as minister for universities”. So, I sort of found myself rather than going down the route of “what about the cabinet aspect of this?”, actually trying to make sure that “when you say ‘universities’, you mean it obviously includes the science, research and innovation piece?”.

I think that is one of things about these reshuffle moments, that how the job is communicated, what is expected of you, what your deliverables are all depends on the nature of the prime minister doing the appointment and their interest in that job. Sometimes, in some of these jobs, the only interaction you have with the prime minister in that job is to be either fired or promoted again. I think that is an unfortunate quirk of our system, that you have people occupying key jobs, but they have to kind of figure it out. Or, people put in jobs that, at the start, the prime minister doesn’t see as jobs that are going to be critical but then become critical because of events. And there is no real relationship between the minister, or what they are like, and how they work. There is no such system as “I think you will be great at this job because you’ve done X, Y and Z, and this is what I want you to deliver”. In Cameron’s case ... I mean, David Cameron had never been a junior minister, or a cabinet minister, so he kind of didn’t really, I don’t think, instinctively get what it was like going into a department and not really knowing the specifics either.

**KZ: What was the step up like to your first minister of state position and how was it different to your parliamentary under secretary roles?**

**SG:** Oh, I loved it. I was in my element! I was in my element in part because I think I had done probably one too many parliamentary under secretary of state roles. I think what had happened is, because in prisons you have a lot of autonomy for the reasons that I’ve already outlined, I had sort of honed my individual approach as a minister: “this is how I operate in getting things done as a minister”. And so, by the time I got into a minister of state job, I was more than ready in terms of what I wanted to achieve. And I think I was definitely more naturally better suited to science, research and innovation in terms of my interests. I worked hard at prisons and I think certainly the area of social reform and thinking about social reform of prisons is one that I was passionate about. But I love the area of technology, I love innovation, and I’ve always been interested in universities. And it was a broader canvas on which to paint, that’s what I love about it. And it did also seem to me that I’d gone from one burning platform to the other, from prisons dealing with tuition fees.

Once again, I was in two departments, BEIS (the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy), and the Department for Education, but I had been in the Department for Education before, and so I had quite clear views on the department. I changed the way I operated this time around, so I sat in one department rather than sitting in two departments and splitting my time half a week in one department, half a week in the other. I decided to have one private office and one private secretary rather than having

two. And so, you see the benefits of experience in that I was very clear on how I needed to set myself up to be effective from the get-go.

**KZ: Did you think that it made sense for the education department to be responsible for universities? Did you feel like it was a natural place for that role to be?**

**SG:** That's a very good question. I think it was wrong to split it the way it had been split, the way it had been split by Theresa. The education department, as I said before, the DNA of the department is schools, so when they think of universities, they think primarily of undergraduate tuition and instinctively treat them as bigger schools. Whereas universities are much more complex beasts as institutions. You've got undergraduate tuition, you've got research, you've got international partnerships, you've got innovation going on, you've got lots of... you've got multiple funding streams that cross-subsidise each other; they're autonomous public institutions. It's very, very different. I think DfE instinctively, I always thought, didn't really appreciate the full complexity of universities, especially when the research, innovation and science bits sat in another department.

That was the first problem, and the other problem is if you sit in the Department for Education, your priority will always be the mandatory parts of the education system, and so if you are the secretary of state for education negotiating your budget with the Treasury, your instinct is not to be asking for more money for the non-mandatory part of education that 50% of 18-year-olds go to and are kind of questioning whether it is value for money anyway. So universities are always going to have a hard time in budgetary terms being in the DfE than being anywhere else in Whitehall.

The final thing, the universities have a role as anchor institutions in their local area: they're big employers, they have ties in some places with FE [further education] colleges and local businesses. And the DfE is not set up to really understand all those interactions and those levers and what they mean for the institutions. The DfE would hold most of the budget as far as tuition fees are concerned... so I always thought that it was better sitting in BEIS rather than being split.

**KZ: As a minister of state, did you feel that your relationship with the secretary of state was different from your previous roles? How did the various secretaries of state that you worked under manage their ministerial teams?**

**SG:** Very differently, as you would expect. I've got to put this very diplomatically because a number of them are still around! I think the secretary of state that I found best working with was the secretary of state who was very clear in what they wanted and what other ministers were supposed to be doing. Because a secretary of state doesn't employ you as a minister, the secretary of state was not responsible for hiring or firing you as a minister, so it's a very awkward relationship. They are senior to you, but you don't really owe your career to them. And I, therefore, found secretaries of state that were very effective were the secretaries of state who knew what they wanted to do and had very clear boundaries

between what they wanted to do and what they wanted other ministers to focus on. And were very good communicators with the team.

When things didn't work well, [it] was when the secretary of state makes a decision that is in someone else's brief and fails to communicate it so you find out about it in the newspapers, or a secretary of state who is not confident enough in articulating what they want from the brief, or a secretary of state who actually doesn't really take seriously the serious matters of policy and wants to play politics. I think, in my experience, that is when you have a sub-optimal relationship between that secretary of state and the other ministers.

**TD: One thing we haven't yet talked about is Brexit, and obviously that was going on in the background to your time at the Ministry of Justice and at BEIS. How did the Brexit process affect your time in government?**

**SG:** I left [laughs]! It ended up with me terminating my own ministerial career. I mean, I accepted it. I campaigned for Remain, but I accepted the referendum result. In the Ministry of Justice, I didn't really have much interface with what was going on in Brexit at all, but in the science, research and innovation role I became involved in aspects of the Article 50 process [of leaving the EU] and the negotiation on space technology, particularly Galileo and Copernicus [EU space programmes], on the Erasmus student exchange programme, but also EU research funding. The more I looked at what we were trying to do, the more I realised we were at best creating a facsimile of what we had before, whilst saying to the public "it's going to be better than what we had before".

But I think specifically how it affected me was on the Galileo programme. Very early in the Article 50 process, we received a letter from the EU saying the UK was going to be shut out of the programme. And that was the first early warning sign that despite our view that somehow the negotiations were going to be easy, they were not going to be that easy after all. And I was very much at the heart of this process, drafting our response to the [European] Commission, meeting my counterpart in Brussels to explain that the EU didn't really want to do what it was doing because the programme would cost the EU more and it would be delayed and they needed our 15% budgetary contribution.

In fact, they needed the expertise of British companies that could only bid for contracts under their new regime if they relocated to the EU. And British companies were responsible for... I mean, Galileo was kind of the EU's version of GPS [Global Positioning System], but it's also used in military operations, and the UK companies had been very critical to the encryption aspect of it. And it was at that point, when the EU commissioner looked at me and said "well, you are leaving, and this is what leaving means". And, for me, it was the first time I realised that, whilst we were behaving politically, we expected the EU to behave economically and rationally. But actually, what if they did the same, they behaved politically? This becomes a massive lose-lose situation for us.

We're talking about March 2018, but if you fast forward to November 2018 and Theresa May's deal [on leaving the EU], I felt strongly about it because I had the experience and almost the language to assess what she had put in front of us. And I could just see what had happened with the Galileo programme happening again and again and again, when of course we were going to leave the EU and then negotiate a future relationship in which we had no leverage. And if we were in the EU's position, we would do the same, right? So, we had no leverage, and as you can see our interests, in my view, were getting repeatedly hammered in that process, just as I had seen with Galileo.

I think very few MPs and ministers go into politics having learnt how to analyse a constitutional treaty. And you expect that what you're told about the treaty is what it is, and how would anyone know the full implications of science funding and the second and third order implications of science funding when you've never looked at the area before. But because of the job I was in, I'd worked out what these really mean, because I was part of developing some of the policies. And I resigned because I felt that it was such an important issue that the people have a right to know what exactly we were signing up to. If they decided that yes, they still wanted to go ahead, then fine. But they had a right to know. That is why I resigned from a job that, for me, was the best job in government.

**TD: So as you say, you resigned in December 2018. The 12 months after that was very eventful: there was a change in Conservative leadership, and you then became a fairly high-profile rebel against the new government's approach. You then lost the party whip and you contested the 2019 general election for the Liberal Democrats. What was it like going through that massive change in just 12 months?**

**SG:** [Laughs] Well, I'd gone from being in David Cameron's... you know, sort of in the bunker, to being minister for the constitution, to being a rebel. Well, as far as I am concerned, I just got bolder and I was willing to make the case, rather than having actually changed my political position. But I saw that the Conservative Party had put achieving Brexit above everything else and I had thought that, when confronted with the realities of it, maybe there would be changes... people would think twice. But actually, when confronted with the reality, people doubled down and wanted more Brexit, harder Brexit. And it was an extraordinary time. But I felt that it's one of those moments where you've got to be true to yourself, there's no way ... you can't second guess where things are going to end, you've got to be true to yourself and to the people who you're there to represent. Without wishing to sound too sanctimonious, I had the simple view that when you go into politics you say "I want to serve the country" and that's what you should do. And a lot of my friends who are still my friends, who had exactly the same views as me, decided to do something else. But I couldn't look myself in the mirror if I did that. Maybe that's not how the political game is played, but then it's not just a game.

**KZ: What achievement are you most proud of from your time in office?**

**SG:** I was proud of the fact that I resigned. I was proud because given that it was a fantastic job, it required of me personally a lot more than implementing any policy would have required of me. I had to explain to my family why I was doing this. I didn't come from a traditional Conservative background. I got into politics, got myself to becoming a minister of state, and sadly I was going to leave. But, for me... I do feel, in politics, that we don't talk enough about the human qualities that are needed in politics. No matter your policy successes, if someone else has come up with a different policy – one parliament can't bind another parliament – they could come up with a different policy next time around. But being true to yourself and behaving in an exemplary way was even more challenging. So, that would be up there, and I suspect that if people were commenting on my political career, that's probably what they would discuss more than any individual policy issue.

**KZ: In hindsight, is there anything that you would have done differently?**

**SG:** Ask me when I'm about to go into the grave [laughs]. Yes, in hindsight one thing I think I would have done is been bolder, sooner. I think too often politics at the moment is about... you're taught to manage your political career. Don't say this now, toe the line now. But I believe that the stakes that we face now are so much higher. Politics is better off with people who are bolder and clearer, and I wish I was more like that sooner in my career.

**KZ: What advice would you give to a new minister on how to be most effective in office?**

**SG:** Be very clear on what you want to achieve. You can't achieve more than one or two things. No matter what you think, it's unlikely you'll be in the department for very long, so throw yourself into it as though it's the last job you'll ever have in government. And have the secretary of state on side, because if you don't have the secretary of state on side, it's very difficult to move the department in your favour.

**KZ: Is there anything else that we should have asked?**

**SG:** I try not to reflect very much on the time, so this has been an interesting exercise. I mean, one of the things I always did is, I used to find ways of bringing the private sector, and ex-private sector people, into government. Not because they were better or know better, but as a way of challenging our thinking. Because I've found that after a while in a ministerial job, the officials kind of know roughly where I am as a minister, I know roughly where they are, and one of the most challenging things, I found, is getting real creativity in policy thinking and ideas, and it just made sense in bringing random people together. And you may not agree with what they say, what they say might be totally outlandish, but it's just got all of us thinking more creatively. That is, for me, one of the most important things about government, how government can be more entrepreneurial and more creative.

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