INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Ministers reflect

Simon Hughes

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Simon Hughes

Biographical details

Electoral History

2010-2015: Member of Parliament for Bermondsey and Old Southwark
1997-2010: Member of Parliament for North Southwark and Bermondsey
1983-1987: Member of Parliament for Southwark and Bermondsey
1983 (Feb-Jun): Member of Parliament for Bermondsey

Parliamentary Career

2013-2015: Minister of State for Justice and Civil Liberties
2009-2010: Shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change
2007-2009: Shadow Leader of the House of Commons
2006-2007: Shadow Lord Chancellor and Shadow Secretary of State for Justice
2005-2006: Shadow Attorney General

Simon Hughes was interviewed by Jen Gold and Nicola Hughes on 24th September 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Nicola Hughes (NH): So if we can think back to when you first started as a minister, which I think was 2013, what was your experience of coming into government like?

Simon Hughes (SH): From June 2010 I'd been Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and in that role had been quite close to government, although not in the government. So I had quite an interesting run up to being a minister.

In my Deputy Leader role, I would have fortnightly meetings with the DPM [Deputy Prime Minister] - official meetings at his office normally in Whitehall, sometimes his office in Parliament, occasionally elsewhere - as well as phone calls from time to time. And we'd have a formal agenda and that would cover issues across all departments.

For example, one of the very first issues that arose I remember was the issue of the Government's first budget in June 2010. One of the controversial issues for us was the proposal that people who had been on JSA [Jobseeker's Allowance] for a year should have their JSA reduced by 10% if they hadn't found a job. I know the party were entirely unhappy about this and I was unhappy about this too. And so that, for example, was the subject of an early conversation in which I made clear to Nick [Clegg] that I didn't think it was deliverable from our people. And so although it was going to be in the budget announcement as a proposal, by agreement with him I would make clear that this wasn't something the parliamentary party would be likely to support and vote for and so on. And therefore we had to make sure between the announcement and the Finance Bill coming to Parliament that it had disappeared - and it did disappear. So we dealt with those sort of things which were topical and specific but quite important.

The next big one (I'll just give two more examples), the next big one that came chronologically was when I was holding the fort when DPM was on holiday in August and the Prime Minister took to the airwaves to say that the Government was thinking of changing rules about council tenancies including considering that there shouldn't in future be any tenancies for life. In this case without disturbing Nick on his holiday because the deal was that he would not be disturbed unless there was a life or death issue, I made clear that it would be entirely inappropriate suddenly to make all present or future council tenancies insecure. It would be acceptable potentially for councils to have a choice if that's what they wanted to do, but not for it to be imposed. And as a result, although I wasn't a minister in the DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government], I worked with colleagues in DCLG and went and spent a happy few hours in the office of Mr [Grant] Shapps [then Housing Minister] going through the draft housing policy and writing things that should be in it and taking [out] things that shouldn't be.

So I had the good fortune of being able to be engaged closely with colleagues and sometimes with civil servants, and therefore that was a good experience across government. I probably didn't go and meet with colleagues in every department, but probably by the end of my time as Deputy Leader, which effectively ended when I went into government, I'd been into most.

And then a second experience that was also helpful was after the drama of tuition fees, which was in December 2010. It was agreed by the PM and DPM that I should be what's called the 'Advocate for Access to Education'. This was a role in which I was commissioned to prepare a report over about six months, backed up by colleagues seconded to me from BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] to look at what, in the light of the decision about tuition fees, we could do to make sure we weren't going to lose people from disadvantaged backgrounds from applying to university. So I had a sort of quasi-ministerial role for six months with various members of staff and access to other members of staff and regular meetings with ministers. That was quite good preparation for government too. [I] produced the report - and happily most of it, or at least many of the recommendations, were subsequently accepted. I had the experience of having to chivvy about them and chase them and make sure that they happened rather than they just sat on the desk.

In addition, was there was a little bit of a lead in to my appointment because, as you may remember, I took over from Tom McNally when it was announced that Tom McNally was to go to be the Chair of the Youth Justice Board. And therefore when he'd decided to apply for that, there was then an internal conversation about who would take over and there was a conversation between the DPM and me when I was asked if I would be interested in doing that job - to which I said I definitely would.

I can't remember how many weeks it was, but there were a few weeks ahead of the announcement. So it wasn't quite as sudden as many of my colleagues' appointments and that gave me the advantage, for example, of having an in-depth conversation with Tom McNally and having a meeting with him, privately, and his private secretary, just really to flag up the issues on the agenda. [I was also able to have] a meeting with the ubiquitous Sue Gray [a Director General at the Cabinet Office], whom I had met previously, and who was obviously central to all these things in many ways, which was helpful. (I had had dealings with her before about other things but that was about government process and procedures.)

So I had three interesting and fairly unusual windows into the system before I went in.

I inherited the same private office team as Tom left. It was just before Christmas. And so the fourth advantage I had was that in effect Parliament was about to stop for a break. I can't remember exactly what day I was appointed on but I think Parliament stopped the next day or the day after. I did not have to perform in Parliament at all before Christmas. And so I had the opportunity over the Christmas holidays and certainly after Christmas Day itself when the family and constituency running around had stopped, to read myself in and look at the paperwork. I had a session or two with my private office beforehand and a session with the Permanent Secretary beforehand, before Christmas, just to sort of have a steer. So that was all very helpful really and it gave me a much softer landing than might have been the case.

There was a bit of negotiation about what I would do in the department because it wasn't taken as a given that I would do exactly what Tom did and there might be some reallocation of responsibilities. So there was some negotiation with the Secretary of State. I bid for certain things and I was advised to definitely not bid for other things. I think most of that was resolved satisfactorily. The one thing that I don't think it would be a secret to say that I bid to do and which I didn't do [was] youth justice. And there was actually a perfectly good reason for that which was that given that Tom was going to do youth justice [as Chair of the Youth Justice Board], the Secretary of State thought it probably wasn't clever for both the minister and the Chair of the Board to be colleagues from the same bit of the coalition, which was fine.

I received good departmental support.

The other bit of support that came with the system was part of the time or a share of the support from a special adviser called Alex Dziedzan, who worked for the DPM and also on Home Office matters. He was a special Adviser to the DPM because the structure was that there were DPM special advisers who were then deployed in specific departments and he was deployed to justice and home affairs. Alex was very good, and remained with me all the time until the election. The disadvantage was the DPM could call him in to do DPM stuff and the Home Office was a pretty demanding department as well. So Alex would admit that by definition he could give me some time and help and support and advice but not as much as I needed on a day-to-day basis, which was a disadvantage. Obviously not many colleagues had full-time special advisers other than cabinet colleagues.

There was a dispute and negotiation which went on throughout the whole of government when I was there, because I was seeking to have a full-time special adviser, given we had controversial legislation and lots of other controversial issues in the MoJ [Ministry of Justice]. And as a relatively senior minister of state, I thought it would be helpful to the wider party. In the end I didn't win that argument. We tried to propose various arrangements but always had to make arguments that worked in the context of an agreement about the numerical balance of special advisers between the parties, although the numbers varied. Even after I had been appointed, somebody discovered a Tory minister of state even later in the Government had a special adviser given to him and so on. There were lots of goings on. But in the end

my efforts never came to anything. And so I then appointed and paid for a political adviser to join me, who was sort of a quasi-special adviser, particularly to help with media and communication. This person had been a special adviser actually in the previous Labour administration: he was Peter Hain's special adviser and worked with Peter when he was Europe Minister and in Northern Ireland, and had been involved to some extent in the teams working for Shadow Cabinet members and Ed Miliband. He'd been a Liberal in the past had gone off to Labour and came back. And so I added him to my team. And that was valuable because he had experience of government across several departments and special adviser relationships and so on, and had a historical perspective which was helpful.

My private team members were good. The only disadvantage over the whole time with the private office team was that there was quite a big turnover in the private office even in the 18 months I was there and I found that really quite frustrating. Of the team I had at the beginning, one of them went within weeks, I mean literally weeks. I don't think that had anything to do with me but he went within weeks! And then the guy who did the diary he went fairly quickly somewhere else. The person who took over from him was great and stayed to the end. Then we had a very good fast-track Civil Service graduate scheme person who came but she didn't stay all the time. The only person who stayed all the time was my private secretary who stayed throughout. So this churn wasn't ideal. And there were gaps and therefore people filled in when one left and the appointments sometimes had a couple of weeks between them. So that was one of the frustrations of the system. Obviously members of private office have careers and I understand it. But especially if you're there as in my case for 18 months only and with an agenda to deliver, having a big turnover of people, whatever their competencies and qualities [was difficult].

Generally the strategic advice given about how best to work the department was good. I had my list of priorities and Tom [McNally] handed over his list of things that he had been working on and I decided which of those I'd scale up or scale down. I guess my view throughout was that in general terms, the Permanent Secretary and my private office were cautious in a 'Yes Minister' type way rather than bold. And obviously negotiating some of the coalition issues was therefore tricky. The Secretary of State in the department was a Tory, Chris Grayling. We got on personally very well, so that wasn't an issue. And I think we only had two disagreements - by which I mean personal and process disagreements as opposed to political disagreements - and therefore only two periods of difficulty in the whole of the 18 months, which is probably not what at the outset anyone would have expected. That was good and I think Chris Grayling would say the same.

But it obviously did mean that there was quite a big sensitivity about what things were deliverable given he was the Secretary of State and there was a Tory majority in the Government. So my private office was probably more cautious than I would have wished them to be. And of course, they were going to be there after I was gone, after they thought I would be gone. So you're always conscious that sometimes civil servants are mindful that they have a career beyond being in a private office and that they want to make sure they don't queer their pitch or put holes in their boats or whatever.

NH: So as you said, you'd been around ministers and had a smoother transition than most, was there anything about going into a department that still surprised you?

SH: Yes. I guess, again, given that I'd been in Parliament for nearly ever and obviously had often dealt with ministers as an opposition spokesmen and had had Privy Council terms conversations more recently and done a lot of the other things, I was quite surprised that there were things that took me by surprise. I was impressed by the detail behind every single decision, no matter how small the decision appeared to be. So that was a plus and really credible. And I was confirmed in my view that there were lots of very good and very bright people who were around and available at your service and that actually if you showed an interest and were willing to lead and engage with them they really liked that. And that was very positive and they would blossom and flower. So those were expanded concepts of what I expected.

I probably hadn't expected that there would be quite a variable degree of willingness to deliver and ability and enthusiasm to deliver within the same department. So with some teams, for which I was responsible, it was harder work getting them to see the strategy and see it through than others. Some would absolutely say 'Yes I understand, we'll go away and come up with ideas' and would do so quickly

and enthusiastically. For others, and I can think of one area for which I was responsible, where we really struggled to get them to understand that I wanted things done differently and more quickly and so on and so forth. And then there was another where they were just quite conservative in their policy advice.

NH: Small 'c' conservative

SH: Small 'c' conservative. And I found it difficult. My special adviser had to have sessions with them and my private office had to have sessions with them and basically say, 'Look, we want to go further and faster' and we were more impatient on that. The Secretary of State and I would meet generally weekly. We had a very good ministerial arrangement actually. And I think Chris Grayling led the ministerial team internally very well. I gather ministers in some departments never met together for weeks at a time. We met weekly, privately - ministers and special advisers or just ministers in term time, and we met weekly with our PPSs [Parliamentary Private Secretaries] and private offices regularly as well, as well as individual meetings.

NH: And what sort of things were you covering then – information sharing, progress catch ups?

SH: Yes. So every week we would have normally a Monday meeting which would be a review of the past week, a review of the press in the past week and over the weekend, [and] a look forward to the diary for the week, sharing what we each had as priorities, sharing what we saw as the pitfalls and risks and so on. Obviously, if there was legislation going through, talking through the strategy for the legislation, making sure we covered each other, making sure we were in the chamber to support each other, if somebody was doing something. I mean all the practical stuff. But all very functional, all well organised. We had a proper press grid and events grid and so on. And that was all done in a very open way. The Secretary of State was very comfortable about everybody having their say and both responding to things and contributing so that was very good. It started off at being at 10 on a Monday and then because one of the team had to come in from further away we moved it to 12 on Mondays. And I think it happened invariably every Monday when the House was sitting. And then we had a Wednesday meeting in the Secretary of State's parliamentary office, 6pm on a Wednesday, for the ministerial team between 6-7pm - special advisers and ministers but no other civil servants there. Occasionally the private office might come but generally it was a political meeting. And that was really just having the political conversation. And then I would normally have a weekly meeting with the Secretary of State at which we would identify in advance by negotiation the things on our agenda. [I had] about once a month a bilateral with each of my other colleagues, each of them, just to make sure I knew what they were doing and they knew what I was doing. Obviously it could be arranged more quickly. And [I] probably [had] a two-monthly bilateral with the Permanent Secretary.

Then I dealt with six major work streams I suppose and would expect to deal every week, to have an in-depth session on at least one of them with the Director and the head of the team. This was to make sure, for example, on Freedom of Information where we were going, or on data protection and the European regulation negotiations how this was going, or on women offenders… So there was a routine of meetings and reviews and progress-chasing and decisions.

There was always the temptation that I was mercifully aware of for suggestions that the diary will be filled up with things that keep ministers occupied and might not allow them the freedom to do more important or controversial things.

So I was very rigorous about that. I was rigorous about making sure that I was on duty outside London, outside the department, doing things at least one full day a week. And that we saw through. We were rigorous right to the end I think, until the last week before the election. I say outside of London, but of course there were some London visits. Nonetheless I tried to go out from London once every week as much as possible and [I] felt good about that. So, for example, as somebody looking after women offenders, I went to every single women's prison at least once and for a decent amount of time.

And I was very disciplined, because obviously it was the run up to the general election, very disciplined about not swanning around the world going to do ministerial jobs. So I didn't bid for lots of visits which,

had it been at the beginning of Parliament I might have been willing to do, and I limited myself to doing only things in Europe and for relatively short times. I looked after rule of law and justice and improvement of justice issues in the EU, the Balkans and the EU accession states and so on – Poland, Ukraine, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, [and] Macedonia. Yes, I think those were the only ones.

Jen Gold (JG): And just on that subject of how your time was spent, obviously you had a whole range of different roles: parliamentary business, departmental business, constituency, the media. There were various competing demands on your time. I just wondered how most of your time was spent. Did some roles take over others?

SH: Very good advice was given at the beginning that you needed to negotiate that very clearly with the department. And that was both advice from our whips office and from my special adviser and so on. So we literally did that. And there was a negotiation involving the head of my constituency office and my special adviser and the department, I think even before the Christmas holidays when I was first appointed. And then I think it was only ever revised twice. And obviously as we got nearer to the election when there needed to be more time doing party political campaigning or campaigning for us in government, so I'd occasionally do visits around the country which weren't MoJ visits but were visits for us as Liberal Democrat ministers when we were launching regional development funds or whatever it was.

So it was negotiated very tightly and it was roughly agreed - I can't remember the exact number of hours - that Monday was entirely a departmental day. One morning during the week, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday would be kept for doing stuff in the constituency, normally Tuesdays up to the time the House sat. And then I'd be in the department/Parliament for the rest of the day. One day a week would be allocated to departmental visits outside the department and so on. That would normally be a Thursday because that was least likely to conflict with parliamentary business which would have me called back. Friday would be constituency activity. And Wednesday I would do government and parliamentary business until seven o'clock and then come down to do constituency things in the evening. So a very rigorous and properly understood diary – everybody knew, all the teams knew. It worked well. We stuck to it. If we needed to negotiate, we negotiated swaps effectively between the times. So we were rigorous about that. And as I said, as we got nearer to the election there was a general understanding in the department that all ministers would be out campaigning on Thursdays round the country doing party activities. One departmental minister had to be covering Parliament to deal with the risk that there might be an urgent question in the House or something. So we'd take it in turns to be the duty person in the House on Thursdays when there was campaigning.

Obviously I had the advantage of having a constituency nearby. So I could occasionally, for example, if there was MoJ business on a Friday which was rare, volunteer to do that and then swap that for a colleague for whom it would be less convenient because they had a constituency in Cambridgeshire or wherever else it might be. So very rigorous, very worked out, very planned and very organised.

And on Mondays, I would start at nine in the department and I would do MoJ stuff right through until I left the House at 11 at night – or later. Then obviously lots of the paperwork would be done in the Palace of Westminster, lots of MoJ paperwork, because if there were votes and debates and things like that for any minister then it's just easier to have your departmental meetings there. So we had lots of meetings in the House of Commons rather than in the department because it just meant that I was more time effective. It did mean I did have to ask civil servants and others to come to meet me there. But the rest of the department was really quite near. As with most departments that wasn't too difficult.

JG: That gives us a sense of your routine. I just wondered if you could talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or even a crisis hit the department. What did it mean for you and how did you go about dealing with it?

SH: Let's think of the best example of unexpected events or crises. There were predictable difficulties always, as there always are in any department, such as if you have a bill which you know is going to go to

the Lords and be in trouble in the Lords and so on. So the Criminal Justice and Courts Bill was one such bill. And particularly all the issues to do with judicial review where the Lords were going to defeat the Government and so on. So there was predictable uncertainty and a lot of negotiation to be done. And that required extra meetings and meetings with Oliver Letwin as the policy manager of the Government and the leader of our party in the Lords and the Leader of the House of Lords and so on. So the most intense and complicated cross-government issues were obviously to do with legislation, as is normally the case.

The most difficult issues which weren't crises but where you suddenly discovered they were taking a lot of time and it was fairly intense was where we were negotiating over policy where there was significant disagreement between the two coalition parties, such as knife crime and the proposal for 'two strikes and you're out' stuff which the Tories were very keen on. Another example was charging people who'd come through the criminal justice system for the cost of the Courts Service which was a new Conservative initiative, and making sure the formula for that was worked out as fairly as possible. So those were fairly intense conversations including on our side David Laws and then Oliver on the other side [both then Cabinet Office ministers].

Unexpected developments: because we met regularly and had a good relationship and communication was very good, I think most things we saw coming, we were always prepared for. So there weren't great dramas and crises in that sense. Sometimes an illness of a colleague would require a bit of reorganisation of responsibilities; Shailesh [Vara, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State] was ill for a little while and ill suddenly. And so there was the normal consequence of people having to pick up this work.

The most difficult battles to fight, again they weren't crises, but the most difficult battles to fight were obviously delivering Transforming Rehabilitation through the department, which obviously had much opposition from the Probation Service or many of them. And that really required a lot of work by the Civil Service and it was the biggest project we had in the department when I was there. And that had lots of obstacles on the way.

Legal Aid negotiations with the risk of barristers being on strike and solicitors being on strike: not my direct responsibility, but that was obviously difficult. And then there were individual difficult things like the new youth offenders' centre in the East Midlands, which in the end didn't get completely signed off by the election, because the Treasury sort of blocked it and which has been dropped since the election.

Interestingly I don't think that internally in the department there were too many dramas and crises or changes of timetable. I think we managed ourselves well. We covered each other well. We could be fairly adept at doing that, including obviously covering for colleagues at Question Time and so on.

The bigger issues were often cross-government, cross-department things where as our person in the MoJ there needed to be a shared line between me and my colleague in the Home Office, whoever it was at the time, and things like immigration law changes and asylum, which related to MoJ business because it related to detention centres and so on.

So I'm afraid I can't give you graphic and exciting examples of 1am crisis phone calls -which is good really. It actually meant I think in terms of organisation, it was a well-organised department and if people, as in any good workplace, needed to work late they would. Very, very rarely was there need for many people to come in at the weekends to sort things.

NH: On a slightly more positive note, what do you think was your greatest achievement? What is the thing you're most proud of?

SH: Collectively, the biggest policy that I inherited and we delivered together was Transforming Rehabilitation. [It] was the biggest policy we collectively delivered in the department - which was to make sure every single offender when they come out of prison would have support, no matter how short their sentence, and which had never been done before.

NH: What was it you think that contributed to that success? What were the factors involved?

SH: Phenomenally good work by the Civil Service. I mean very high-quality work by the Civil Service – real commitment, real skill, real ability. There were technical issues, there were IT issues, there were personnel issues, [and] there were strategic policy issues of dealing with the external opposition. But it was very, very high-quality Civil Service support and commitment to the project. And when we had our thank you party, I was very impressed when I talked to lots of people who had been involved and I was amazed to discover how many said this is the most worthwhile bit of work they had ever done in their professional life. I mean it really engaged people because they saw the benefit of the policy if it could be delivered. They knew it had a deadline for delivery and so on. And it was delivered in time. So that was the biggest thing.

JG: And just on your role on that.

SH: Yeah.

JG: Specifically, what demands were placed on you?

SH: I mean it wasn't my lead because probation reform had started before and it was led by the Secretary of State who took a personal interest and another Tory colleague. However, everything all the way, because it was so controversial and so on, required lots of agreed planning of the strategy, the strategy of how we dealt with the unions, [and the] strategy of exactly how it would be implemented and when. There was an issue to do with an apparent conflict of interest of the wife of the Head of the Probation Service who worked for one of the people who got the contracts. And there was all the secrecy around the contracts.

I was involved in the discussion of the process, the delivery in the sense of giving advice, making sure that I was comfortable all the time and able at all times to make suggestions. So I was very much part of the political team delivering it. I had to sell it to my party colleagues because some of my colleagues were quite uncomfortable about it. More of my colleagues were uncomfortable about it than Tory colleagues. So we had quite a big delivery exercise. So that was probably my biggest specific role – colleagues in the Commons, colleagues in the Lords, making sure they were briefed, up to date, informed, given the information to deal with constituents and lobbying and so on. So that was the biggest project.

I had three things that were more specifically mine, which I was very pleased about. I was able to complete the work to make sure we implemented one united family court, which had never been the case before. Family business used to be spread over three different types of court: magistrates' court, county court, high court and all are [now] brought together in one new court. For the first time the family services were coordinated across the country and all sort of things flowed from that. And it was obviously happening at the same time as Legal Aid had been reduced so there were other issues. It meant putting in more support for litigants in person and mediation to take people away from disputes. So that was a big bit of work. And I think we did well. I think the family courts are working really well. And I think we've managed to alleviate some of the pressures that were caused by budgetary reduction.

The second was a little ring-fenced thing but really important - delivering legislation to change the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. It was the first time it had been done since the '70s, meaning that you don't now have to declare your relatively minor misdeeds committed when you were young for nearly as often or for as long time as used to be the case. And that hugely helps lots of people's lives. So that was a very positive piece of legislation.

And the last was really delivering across the women's prison estate what we called the objective of making every women's prison a resettlement prison, so that there were the proper facilities there to prepare their release into the community. So it meant lots of new building outside the prison walls where women could meet with their families and have children and partners visit and prepare for work and do apprenticeships and training and so on. And that is in place now, physically in place, in lots of prisons, which it wasn't when I started. And is in place in delivery terms and the rest.

So those were the three biggest things, not the most important things but the biggest things. And it was very good that when you were able to deliver things like that. People were clearly encouraged by them and positive: the prison governors were positive and the prison staff were positive and offenders were positive and even people from the Howard League who are not always government's best fans were positive and parliamentary colleagues were positive across the House. Most people ended up saying yes that's really worth doing. And you felt yes, good, tick the box.

NH: You've already mentioned the turnover in private offices…

SH: Yeah.

NH: …and occasional small "c" conservativism. Was there anything else you found particularly frustrating about being a minister?

SH: It was surprising how long it took, you've heard this before and I wrote something about it in the last few months, it was surprising how long it took for people doing work for me to produce letters in a way I wanted. I was quite surprised that I had to have about six months of struggle just to get… I had very simple principles at the beginning. I said, 'Please I want short letters rather than long letters. I want short words rather than long words. I want no foreign words in it at all because that's not [me]. And so please use the test of how people speak on the Old Kent Road'. It took quite a lot time.

NH: How did you communicate that? Through your private office?

SH: I did it in various ways. I did it through the private office, I did it also through the Permanent Secretary. I went to talk to the Correspondence Team. I did a briefing for the wider communications team. And it was variable, as you'd expect really. It was variable because different people were doing different bits of work. Obviously some people got the message fairly quickly. I was there for 18 months: in the second nine months I rarely had to send stuff back. In the first nine months I had to send stuff back quite a lot.

And the other thing that I really had a battle on, and it was a battle right to the end, was my obsession about us keeping to our published commitments for timekeeping both for answering oral and written questions and replying to parliamentary colleagues' correspondence. And that was a real battle. And indeed when I was there, we got hauled up before the Procedure Committee for being bad at answering parliamentary questions in time. The issue to be honest was that the Secretary of State's special advisers used to sit on them. I am not saying they sat on them passively but they didn't want them to be published until they absolutely made sure they were presented in the way the Secretary of State wanted. But it often meant that they were held for too long. And I said that to him. In the end, ministers were called to account. I was the minister who went in to bat first. But they soon had the Secretary of State before them afterwards as well, to give him a ticking off to put it gently. And in my view those sort of things are really important. I think it's really important that we give timely answers to colleagues both public ones and in correspondence. And that if we can't give all the information, then we must say 'This is what we've got now, we'll give you the rest later'. And there's a happy medium between not presenting carefully all the information so colleagues get the whole picture, and taking so long because you just want to get it perfect.

The other thing that was not a skill generally of the department, and I wasn't really able to deal with it internally, was that generally people would give me very solid briefs for speeches in the House or speeches outside the House, but they often weren't politically clever. And I pretty well always had to rewrite the material I was given. So I don't think I ever gave a speech in the House, with one exception, where I used without major change the brief I was given. Which added some tension, of course, to the whole operation, because I would always ask to have early sight of whatever the suggestion was for parliamentary questions and answers in the House or speeches in the house and speeches outside, to have it early enough electronically, so I could rewrite it. And Phil who became my political adviser helped greatly with that. He obviously couldn't see the source of the material because that was confidential and when with me he was not a civil servant. And he had the political nous to know what the

issues were and so on and so forth. So in a way that wasn't a problem. But he sometimes found it a bit frustrating because he would want information back from private office or wherever to be able to give me the material I needed. I think it was fair to say private office quite often resented that there was somebody who was 'double guessing'. And whereas the special adviser could go in and say this must be done, somebody who didn't have the authority couldn't, so special adviser Alex had to pile in on occasions.

So the two frustrations were delay in information, delay in responses, which I don't think is excusable apart from in very exceptional cases, and an understandable failure to understand the politics of presenting material. And the most interesting example of that was the very first very first debate I did which was called by David Anderson, the Labour MP for Blaydon, who is an ex-miner, and was all about the Shrewsbury pickets in the '70s, where people had been arrested and sent to prison for picketing and so on. The documents are held by the Cabinet Office confidentially in the national interest and haven't been released, and the belief was that it was all because the Government thought (it was under Ted Heath's government), the Government thought this was a communist-infiltrated plot, and so the debate was about releasing the documents and so on. And so the very first debate I had - as I predicted - was effectively going to be a debate led by somebody from the Labour left and all the other harder line Labour left MPs were there. It was a Thursday afternoon I think and there were probably 60 Labour MPs, who would all be from the Tribune Group of Labour MPs pretty well. I think there was, apart from the whip on duty, I think there was one Tory in the House and one of my Liberal Democrat colleagues. And the speech given to me was not a speech that would ever have kept them happy and would probably have left them at the end of the debate more angry than at the beginning. Well I wasn't willing, especially with my first debate, to end up alienating a whole set of colleagues when I could do positive and constructive things. So it had to be fundamentally rewritten and obviously…

NH: Because it was technocratic?

SH: I mean it was minimalist. It sort of said - this is the position, these are the rules for the release of documents, it's reviewed every seven years by the Cabinet Office, [and] these have been turned down. The Secretary of State has looked at them and the previous Secretary of State and so on. I'm sorry that's all we can do. It didn't have anything to do suggesting that trade unions were a good thing. Or that it was right that people should battle for worker's rights or that the cause behind it, health and safety on building sites, was important. So none of the sort of empathy about the cause, which obviously again I had to put in. And nor was there anything to really be helpful and constructive about what they could do. So I was able to put that in - this is the process and there is an opportunity for review and this is what you need to do, and I'm happy to come and talk to you about it or you can come to me and talk about it. And there's a Cabinet Office process and there's a National Archive's process and there's a department process. And as a result they went away, not happy but much happier and there was an ongoing conversation and the minister had been constructive.

JG: And based on your experiences, how would you define an effective minister?

SH: Somebody who has read enough of the papers to be able to be on top of the brief pretty well at all times. Somebody who knows their own priorities and makes sure they determine the timetable of the week and the month and the year and you don't get hijacked by other people's priorities. Michael Heseltine has often been the clearest when talking about this in recent times - saying you come with your back of the envelope and you have your six priorities or whatever.

I tried to do exactly that. Having talked to Tom McNally and talked to the private office, I wrote a document at the beginning and then about twice through my 18 months. We looked at it together, going back and moving things around and so on. So being really clear with your team what your priorities are. Gaining the confidence of your civil servants so that they see you're working together in a partnership which may sometimes mean you are tough with them. And being able to work with colleagues in government and in Parliament to make sure that you build the coalitions necessary to deliver things. So not just seeing yourself as in your own little box but anticipating what may be coming down the track and knowing where to go to get the support, whether in my case it was in the Quad, for example, or in the Cabinet to deliver some things. So there's four things. I think they are the four.

NH: As you said earlier you'd been around Parliament for a long time and worked with ministers for a long time, was there anyone you that took as a bit of a role model that you thought was a particularly effective minister?

SH: I mean there were people who became ministers before me in our government, like Steve Webb [former Pensions Minister] who was masterly both in his knowledge of the subject, because that was his special subject, and the way he therefore worked in his department and in the House. And he was hugely respected across the House, an excellent performer and no nonsense and so on. Steve was a friend of mine, and was sort of my model of how to do it well which I had seen most recently and how to do it well as a Liberal Democrat in a coalition government, where you were both having to keep your Tory colleagues happy and, as far as you could, not alienate the opposition. But be robust where necessary and both talk truths to power and talk truths to the opposition. So he was a model minister in the first part of the Parliament who I think everybody emulated or sought to emulate.

I had always thought that William Hague was very good in parliamentary terms, authoritative, clearly on top of his brief but also knew where to add humour and would answer the question and wouldn't back away from saying some quite tricky things for the Government. So I thought that was a good model. Don't be imprisoned by what you think are the general constraints. You have to be careful you don't suddenly announce policy that's completely not government policy or opposite to government policy but you can indicate where you think government policy needs to move or change. He was always a good role model.

And the other ministers who I appreciated were ministers who would collaborate with the opposition when I was in opposition, intelligently and constructively. And so, for example, in the Labour administration, Baroness Scotland was in the Lords dealing with the anti-terrorism legislation, and obviously the Government were in difficulty about that. And there were lots of negotiations to and fro. And I was leading for us, and David Davis was leading for the Tories at the time. And she understood the need to come and talk to us and negotiate.

And good ministers are those who understand what needs to be done to deliver the legislation and don't play silly games with you. There's always the danger, which I've seen over the years and I've argued against in the department on criminal justice of course, where the Government offers a little tiny concession in round one and knows it's going to have to offer other concessions. I've always argued that's a little bit of a nonsense. If you're going to shift your position you might as well come clean early on and say to the Lords: 'look, okay, we're willing to concede this if you don't like it', rather than play games and so on. So I respect government ministers who are willing to be bold enough to say 'we're not going to play games'. And that's normally the case if the ministers have had a bit of parliamentary experience, and less likely to be delivered if they are new to Parliament because they haven't seen how frustrating the system can be.

JG: With hindsight would you have approached your ministerial role differently in anyway?

SH: The only thing I would have done would have been to try harder to have delivered and secured a full time special adviser from the beginning with me in the department. And that's probably the only thing.

NH: Could you just expand a bit on what it was you were getting from special advisers that you weren't getting from the Civil Service and what would be their contributions?

SH: A combination of two or three things. Firstly, the ability to present arguments politically. So as I've indicated in parliamentary answers and speeches and so on. So the ability to turn the core material of the department into politically acceptable presentations.

Secondly, the ability to spot things that internally in the party or across government were just not going to be acceptable and say so at an early stage and say so robustly. Alex could look at a proposal and say

'This will never pass, either the DPM or others won't sign off on it or colleagues will never buy this'. Or 'You do realise if you really, really wanted to argue this, you'd be in trouble'. So that political understanding of the deliverability of things and the acceptability of them would be the second thing.

And the ability to work out strategies that sometimes bluntly had to bypass the Civil Service. So, for example, I wanted to as one of the prisons ministers to get on the record the fact that I believed that with the right policy we could reduce the prison population over about 10 years by nearly half. I was never going to get that as a government policy, because that wasn't a policy of my Tory colleagues. And so we then have to work out the strategy for making sure that message was out in the media appropriately but managed back into the department and choosing the right time to do it. Now you couldn't do that with civil servants because they would feel a duty to share with their colleagues in the private office of the Secretary of State and so on: 'Simon's about to make a big speech on prison reform'. Obviously this is particularly difficult in a coalition government and it would be different if it was a single party government. But that was a specific characteristic of coalition government.

NH: Okay. That's it from us. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

SH: I don't think so immediately but when you send me back the draft I will no doubt suddenly think I should have told you this.

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