

Ministers reflect

Stephen Crabb



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Stephen Crabb – biographical details

Electoral History

2005-present: Member of Parliament for Preseli Pembrokeshire

Parliamentary Career

March – July 2016: Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

2014-2016: Secretary of State for Wales

2012-2014: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales

2010-2014: Government Whip, Lord Commissioner of HM Treasury

Stephen Crabb was interviewed by Emily Andrews and Nicola Hughes on 24th October 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Let's start with your first role as a Minister in the Wales office and I think you were sort of part-timing as a Whip as well?

Stephen Crabb (SC): That's right.

NH: What was that experience of coming into government like?

SC: It felt like the natural next step. Because I'd been in the Whips Office and the Whips Office does get involved in discussions about ministerial promotions, there was a bit of career progression that I could see ahead of me. None of these things are certain, but from discussions I'd had with the Chief Whip, you know, I understood that the realistic next step for me would be the junior Wales Office job. What I didn't expect was to be asked then to do this curious double-hatted arrangement where I stayed on as a Whip and tried to do the Parliamentary Under Secretary job as well. There is a curious history to why that happened, basically, it was a compromise fudge between Andrew Mitchell who came in as Chief Whip and wanted to hang on to me in the Whips Office and the PM who wanted me to go the Wales Office. So that was my first step into ministerial life and the truth is that being Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Wales office, one of the smallest departments in Whitehall, you're not rushed off your feet.

So in a sense, it was quite good that I had the Whip side of the job to really stretch me and keep me occupied. What I would say is that I think the Whips office is a great training ground for ministers. We always used to say this when we were in the Whips Office under Patrick McLoughlin, how the ministers who'd been in the Whips Office seemed to have a far better feel for mood amongst colleagues and also for how Parliament works and understanding the plumbing of Parliament a bit better than ministers who come in without that.

To do the junior job, I felt, you know, I genuinely felt that was my apprenticeship. So, yes I got stuck in where I could, where there was opportunity for me at the Wales Office in terms of issues that I cared about. So, for example, it was obvious to me that the Wales Office weren't doing anything around what's called energy intensive users, the big steel companies. I was aware of steel companies in South Wales back in 2012 who were really feeling the pinch and felt that we as the Wales-facing bit of UK government should have something stronger to say and be seen to be more visible on this issue. So I kind of started that initiative. I felt there were a couple of things, practical things, that I kick-started when I went there. But really, I was sizing the place up for an opportunity to become Secretary of State. Again, you don't know that these things are going to happen for sure, but yes, quite deliberately in my mind, I was thinking 'Well, what would I do differently if I ran it?'

NH: And so, then doing that step up to Secretary of State, although it's still quite a small department and quite a different one to some of the bigger spending or policy departments, how different did that feel as a role - being part of Cabinet and being able to set the direction for the department?

SC: Totally different. In a sense it doesn't matter, at one level, what job you're doing in Cabinet because you are there at the top table and you certainly become interesting to the press lobby here in Westminster, for example. You become interesting to senior colleagues who perhaps haven't showed you much attention previously. And you get brought into the heart of government discussion. In the Wales office, you're obviously not sighted on everything going on but you see all the Cabinet papers but where David Cameron was excellent was in encouraging all his Cabinet ministers, when we were discussing things on a Tuesday morning, to speak out and not necessarily be restricted to their departmental brief. You know, he wanted people to have something to say on each other's issues. So that was great and I responded very well to that. So, yes it was a big step and it was a very, very different role. I always say to people that no matter how interesting their Minister of State job is, you know, you could be Minister of State at the Foreign Office or doing quite a crunchy, exciting role, but being a Secretary of State, even for a department like Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland is, I would say, a step above that because of the

4 Ministers reflect

expectation that you are at the top table and you need to be contributing to the national debate on a Tuesday morning.

NH: What were your big priorities as Welsh Secretary?

SC: So, let me go back to July 2014, when I was appointed. I didn't feel that the department had been working particularly effectively. I think it had acquired a reputation for being quite fractious with Number 10 but also with the Welsh government as well. The view that I had was that if the job of being Secretary of State for Wales and the department of the Wales Office had any purpose at all in 2014, then it needed to be acting as a bridge to a devolved government rather than being a source of friction and argument.

So my first priority was to be seen quite visibly to mend relations. I think it is fair to say, and not through any fault of his, but under my predecessor at the Wales office relations between the UK government and the Welsh government had hit a low and it was playing quite badly in the Welsh media. So I felt that the job that I could do for the Prime Minister was to fix that: be seen to fix it, put ourselves on the side of being reasonable nice guys and do a job for the PM and that's what I set about doing. The Welsh media responded instantly, so we had some good write ups, good profile pieces. OK that doesn't sound much, that's not policy but then a department like the Wales office is much more about projecting a voice and a face of UK government and then representing Welsh interests back into UK government around the Cabinet table. That is the essential purpose of it and I felt I did very well in that role, generally changing the mood, setting a different tone and then setting myself a couple of benchmarks of things I wanted to achieve. That was reviving the electrification deal that had kind of almost fallen through; I wanted to be able to hold up something to show that there is a dividend to come from repairing relations.

Also we were in the run up to the NATO summit that was going to be held in South Wales in September 2014. So, everything was devoted to working with Number 10 on the NATO summit and that passed off incredibly successfully. After that, we were into the Scottish independence referendum and that changed the show altogether because on the back of the Scottish referendum, David Cameron made that announcement of a new constitutional conversation. So, suddenly I was given my mandate by the PM to pick up a stalled devolution agenda that had slightly run into the sand and warm it up a bit and do something with it. So that's what I did: we set up the St David's Day process and began drafting a bill to do some of this stuff. So, yes, at that level then, I had my chance of really getting my hands on serious policy, having to negotiate with Cabinet colleagues and parliamentary colleagues and work out how we strike the right balance of what was going to be acceptable to our devo-sceptic colleagues and to those who were absolutely fanatical about devolving more powers down to Cardiff Bay. Then, of course, there was also the General Election in the middle of all of that which I led for my party in Wales.

NH: I'm interested, you were talking about having a bit of change in direction when you started as Welsh Secretary and kind of setting the tone. How did you get the department behind that and how did you communicate what it was you wanted to do with the staff?

SC: As I said, when I was doing the junior job I had quite a bit of time on my hands to think about what it was that I wanted to do and also think about the kind of people I could work with. So when I got the call from Downing Street in July and the PM appointed me as Secretary of State for Wales, I knew that I couldn't leave that room that morning without having got him to agree to some two senior personnel changes I wanted to make. I told him why I wanted to do it. One was a special adviser [spad], one was a senior official. If I was honest, I wasn't quite sure what ground I was going to be on in terms of being a new, incoming Secretary of State, do they have the authority to say 'Right, I want that person?' I knew I could do it with spads. So I explained my plan and the PM was four square behind it and he said 'Do it quickly and do it in the first hour.' So, there was a kind of initial shock at the Wales Office because it was a very small department, there are only a couple of dozen people who work there, so it must have felt quite brutal but that's what I felt I had to get done to build a team that I wanted to work with and reflected the kind of style that I was trying to use: more consensual, more bridge-building. So that sent out, I think, quite a strong signal to the department.

I think I invested a bit more time than perhaps others have done in just trying to build the team around me. You can do this in the Wales office in the way that you can't with other departments - you can literally get your whole team in front of you, you know, you've got your Principal Private Secretary can

send an email out and at 4.00 pm, you can have your whole departmental team in front of you! And then you've got to go down to Cardiff and do it with the Wales office, civil servants there, because it is split on two sites of course. So I did quite a few of those, where I just gathered them all around. I did that when we were preparing the Wales Bill as well, just to say thank you to people, any excuse really to kind of have a glass of wine or something. I kind of invested in that whole...I don't know how to describe it, you know, building the sociology of the department really? And when you do that, when you spend time with people, they're not normal meetings are they? They almost feel a bit more social, but through chatting to the staff you can work out who it is you think is talented and who you can work with. It was quite a good way for me to find out who the high performing civil servants were and just a bit more about them.

There was one guy who had been seconded to the Wales Office from the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office, he seemed to have a bit about him and I co-opted him to become a civil servant and then I ended up making him a spad. With small departments, you have got a bit of flexibility I think.

NH: I'm sure we'll come back to some more things in the Wales Office but I want to move on to Department for Work and Pensions [DWP] because that call was probably a little bit more out of the blue!

SC: From the smallest department to the biggest department!

NH: Yes, so a huge change, it is a massive organisation, you've got lots of operational delivery, big budget, I mean, talk us through the first couple of weeks in that job, how did you get your head round it all?

SC: So it was quite an extraordinary period really. We were thick in the European referendum campaign, that was the context for Iain Duncan Smith's departure, and there was this enormous row going on about cuts to Personal Independence Payments. So, unlike July 2014, where David Cameron was doing a clean out, this was almost an emergency appointment, really. Now, I had spent enough time with David Cameron to talk to him, in quite general terms, in the back of his car about the kind of jobs I might like to do in the future. He knew that I had quite an interest in welfare reform, but I don't think either of us expected the opportunity to come up quite so quickly.

So he rang me up on Saturday morning and I was appointed. One of the things I really benefited from at the Wales Office was having a quite clear understanding of where David Cameron was coming from in terms of his general approach to devolution issues. You know, there were a few fixed principles and then in the meantime he just wanted the secretaries of state for the territories to get on and do the job, with quite a lot of latitude and quite a lot of trust towards us, really. With DWP, obviously, it's much more technical, much more controversial. You know, if a couple of million people don't get a benefit payment, that's a major political headache, whereas if the Secretary of State for Wales falls out with the First Minister of Wales on something, who cares, you know! It is a different order of magnitude. I asked him, "Well what do you want me to do, Prime Minister, is there anything in particular?" He just said 'Fix the relationship with the Treasury, just fix it.' He was very aware that relations between the DWP and the Treasury had hit rock bottom. You know, he wanted me to do a job of working much more closely with George Osborne and getting the officials to trust each other and the department and the spads as well because these things all work as a three layered approach, the ministers, spads and civil servants.

NH: Did you inherit Iain's spads at DWP or did you get new ones in?

SC: I did. I did and I didn't do what I did at the Wales Office which was going in changing the staffing. I thought about it, I thought about changing the Principal Private Secretary and bringing in mine from the Wales Office who I had worked extremely well with and she had been a Deputy Principal Private Secretary to Iain Duncan Smith before she came to the Wales Office, so I had thought about bringing her. But when I went in on day one, which was the Sunday, I spent the afternoon in the department just to work out the lay of the land, it became obvious that I would need a pretty strong and stable team. So I took the judgment to rely on the team around me. I didn't feel strongly enough about it, in terms of the crisis that we were in.

6 Ministers reflect

I knew I would have to make a statement on the Monday about the Personal Independence Payment cuts. I spent that weekend basically in negotiations between Number 10 and the Treasury about what we were going to say about the Personal Independence Payments cuts and any other welfare changes. We talked about how to use my appointment to basically press the reset button and get back some goodwill from some of the disability organisations and calm down our backbenchers, who were all kicking off. So, there was a bit of initial firefighting and what I didn't have, going in there, was a well thought-through five-point plan of things I wanted to achieve in the first 100 days or year. I would say that over the coming weeks that emerged; it became pretty clear to me what my agenda would be but, yeah, there was that initial bit of firefighting to do.

NH: So you're picking up lots of policies that you'd inherited from your predecessor and obviously you've got Universal Credit being rolled out; how do you go about making decisions on, right what that have come in to you do I drop, what do I keep; how did you go about that process?

SC: So the Private Office at DWP, within 24 hours, had produced a pretty sophisticated introductory note for me. My very first impressions of the civil service at the DWP were that I was hugely impressed with what they managed to put together for me in terms of an induction pack and they did produce this paper which set out what some of the key decisions would be. You know, you've got policy decisions to make and one of those was 'Do we press on with the full roll out of Personal Independence Payments?' and there were a few contractual things you have to do with big contractors. But you've also got these huge ongoing delivery issues, as you say Universal Credit being the biggest one, auto-enrolment, pension changes. With those, what I had to make some decisions about was what would reassure me that we're on top of things. What will I need them to be providing me with each week or every two weeks to make me feel like as a Secretary of State I'm sighted on key issues of potential controversy?

The idea that a Secretary of State for DWP runs the DWP is a nonsense, in my view. It's very large, it probably has the biggest footprint of any UK department in terms of its reach. Almost every significant high street in the country has a job centre. It's a massive organisation and generally speaking, the people running it know what they're doing. The people running the networks of job centres know what they're doing and the very last thing an organisation like that needed, after losing its Secretary of State who'd been there for six years, was some young upstart coming in and thinking right, I'm going to do this, this and this. So, I almost had to play it very differently from the Wales Office which was to say, right I will begin by just trusting people and slowly form a view of what, if anything, needs to change.

NH: Obviously at DWP you've got a much bigger ministerial team and among them some ministers of state who are quite big hitters or whatever. How did you – having previously been a junior minister yourself – how did you manage that team; that must have been very different from the Wales Office?

SC: Yes, working out what they each did was a week one task as well. I made sure I had time in the diary with each of them individually and you'd also remember that that weekend, when Iain resigned; there was some public friction between some of the junior ministers on Twitter and things.

So as part of the whole calming down exercise, I had to basically say to each of the junior ministers: 'You won't do that again; you don't take to Twitter or to the airways to criticise each other.' Actually things like that were a good opportunity to have a one-to-one with each of them and instead of a vague 'Hey I'm new, tell me what you think', actually I had something very specific and direct to say to them about how I wanted them to conduct themselves. It wasn't very clear to me that the ministerial roles had been divided up very well. I seemed to have three junior ministers who all seemed to be responsible for some aspect of the Work and Health Programme. In fact, when it became evident that there was going to be a new Prime Minister this July, one of the things I did was sit down with the Permanent Secretary and we drafted a note together to the new incoming PM and Chief of Staff about how you can get more rational divvying up of ministerial roles. Although I didn't stay on to see it, there has been that. So that's very pleasing.

It was clear to me that the ministerial team was basically quite a competent one. Shailesh Vara was doing half a job at the Ministry of Justice, but was nevertheless making a good contribution. Justin

Tomlinson was fantastic with the disability lobby, it was very clear that they loved him, that he was doing a good job.

NH: I mean, was being Secretary of State at Wales Office good preparation for that or perhaps not because the team dynamics were so small?

SC: Not really. Obviously, when I was Secretary of State, I had two junior ministers doing half the job each, the Liberal Democrat and Alun Cairns, and then after the election Alun Cairns and Lord Bourne. Yes, by instinct anyway, I'm somebody who is quite collegiate; I like to build a team and I thought I did quite a good job in the Wales Office in making our team meetings meaningful. One or two complaints you hear around the place is that some of the weekly Prayers meetings, as they call them, that some departments have aren't a particularly good use of time, you just get teams sitting around for the sake of it. If we are going to bring the team together once a week, then let's actually have something that we want to talk about and decide on, as a team. So, to that extent, yes probably it prepared me but DWP was completely different.

NH: And just finally on this bit, you have spoken about your experience in the Whips Office as being helpful, I mean, you have also had experience outside of politics, which not everyone has. What, if anything, was useful that you brought from your prior experience of government?

SC: So I had about ten years of working before I was elected. I was elected at 32, which I think is a good age because I'd had a little bit of experience, but I am never somebody who claims that I had an amazing career before coming into politics. You know, I had ten years of doing a few different jobs. I also took a bit of time out to do some more study, a couple of years before I was elected. I did an MBA which I think was brilliant. The place where I did my MBA they like you to have done at least five years' work experience before you go and do it, so that your lectures and tutorial groups become much more practical and real-life relevant. Some of the things I learnt on that course have been very useful.

The best module, and everyone says this who has done an MBA, aside from all the finance courses and things like that, was managing organisational behaviour, when you look at the theories of teams and incentives and leadership. It is easy to pooh-pooh that kind of stuff but actually, there's a reason why it's in every serious MBA programme around the world. It's actually really important and I would say that some of the stuff I learnt on that has been very, very useful indeed. I keep using the word team, I just think it's so important and I think David Cameron, he set the tone really. He was a good leader of the team in that he trusted his team; he wanted us to think of ourselves as a team around the Cabinet table and I think he was looking for secretaries of state to take something of that and bring it to the departments.

Emily Andrews (EA): Thinking about your day to day activities of being a Minister. Obviously, you've got to deal with a lot of competing demands: parliament, media, the department; so how did you actually spend your time on a regular day?

SC: At DWP? I would get collected outside my flat at about 7.30, 07.45 each morning. I would spend my time in the back of the car finishing my box. One of the things that was a huge change from the Wales Office was the volume of work, you know, it just doesn't bear comparison. At the Wales Office I had a box every weekend and in truth, I could whistle through it in an hour and a half. At DWP, you're getting a box every night and it's full. There are ways to cut corners, but if you are doing the job seriously you need to be doing the paperwork and I would do part of it in the evening and then finish it off in the car going in, in the morning.

One thing I started at the Wales Office which I took across to DWP was an early morning huddle which could involve different people but typically, a spad, media spad, Head of Press, maybe the Principal Private Secretary and just review what's coming up for the day and anything that happened overnight, any urgent issues that need to get kicked around before the formal, structured part of the day begins. So, we always built in some time for that and if we didn't need to have that, we wouldn't and I would spend a time just looking at the press instead, or phoning the kids, all that family stuff which is important and shouldn't get overlooked.

8 Ministers reflect

Then in terms of the diary, it was really, really regimented. I had an amazing Diary Secretary at DWP who just ran a really, really tight ship in terms of getting the most out of the day. There was a bit of trial and error. I did say in the first couple of weeks, 'Look, don't put too many meetings in in the afternoon: if something comes up in the Chamber I want to be there for and sit on the front bench, you know, alongside the PM giving a statement on the back of the European Council or whatever.' If you're clogging up the diary, if you fill up the afternoon with meetings, it is very difficult. After a bit of trial and error we got a structure that worked well.

In terms of what those meetings were: clearly you have a couple of regular things. So for example, we were talking about big delivery challenges, one of the things I insisted on every week was a meeting with the key team delivering Universal Credit to get a report on any emerging issues. You have a few fixed things like that. The other slots in the diary were one-to-ones with the ministers, I tried to do that every week, not always, but I tried. Then it is whatever the flow of the business required really. Quite a lot of meetings with other secretaries of state. We had the Tata Steel crisis blow up, so there were at least two meetings a week during all of that, focused on Tata Steel.

EA: That was going to be my next question actually, so when your daily structure is disrupted by something like Tata Steel, can you talk us through what you did when that crisis hit?

SC: Well the business of the government would have carried on in terms of Tata Steel, whether we were a major player or not. In a sense you have to kind of fight for your position. We felt that we had a very distinct position that needed defending at DWP. I think one meeting had happened already, involving the Cabinet Office, Treasury and BIS [Business, Innovation & Skills]. And don't forget, as the person who was talking about steel back in 2012 when I was a junior minister I kind of felt, hang on, I've got something to say here both from a Welsh perspective and also the departmental and pension side and potential job losses, so we had various angles that we came in at. You get your private office to insist that there won't be any more inter-departmentals unless we are there and you push yourselves forward into that. Of course it displaces other activities, so the work I had also started on a new green paper about disability and employment, I would say that slipped a little bit, inevitably, because it was just sucking up so much time. Even with a big department, actually, you don't have an infinite resource in terms of private office or spads, so something had to give. But the PM was determined, absolutely determined that Port Talbot Steel Works shouldn't shut on his watch and so it came directly from him that we should make this a priority.

EA: Thinking about that or maybe another example of when a crisis hit the department, how did you go about balancing, responding to the media challenge but also fixing the problem in the department?

SC: I would say I did far less media at DWP than I thought I would do, going into a big controversial department. When I was in the Wales Office, there's lots and lots of major opportunities with the Welsh media, so I was always going on the Welsh news and things. At DWP, Number 10 managed that far more tightly: why do we want our Secretary of State for Work and Pensions out there on these programmes? Actually, I found myself needing to devote less time to media. I would say more time in terms of understanding what was in the media and giving direction to the department and directing the press office on how to respond, but it didn't need so much of my time involved, apart from prep for things like Question Time.

EA: I want to ask you what you think your biggest achievements were. You mentioned maybe the Bill when you were Welsh Secretary, but what achievement in office are you most proud of?

SC: The Wales Office, I think I can summarise it quite easily, you know, we did a fantastic NATO summit; the PM loved it; the Welsh media loved it; Obama loved it. It showcased Wales at its best. OK, a lot of the organisation had already been done but I like to think that the tone that I was trying to set was perfectly reflected in what happened that NATO weekend. Getting the Valleys Line electrification deal done; that was purely because I, as the new Secretary of State, decided we were going to pick this up and

you know, I had the argument with the Department of Transport; had the argument with Number 10 and Number 10 came down on my side and we got it done.

Key to all of this was understanding Number 10 and this is what I would say to any new Secretary of State is the key to their success is understanding what freedom you've got from Number 10, where you need to deploy Number 10 and understanding who the key relationships are, because it's a court over there and you need an understanding of who in that fast-moving court you need to get to and get them on side. If you can't get direct access to the Prime Minister, it's absolutely key.

Other specific achievements obviously, politically, leading the party in Wales to the best election outcome since 1983 was good. The Wales Bill which is currently going through; eventually we got it knocked into a reasonable enough shape. It's not perfect but you know, I'm pretty proud of the work that went into that.

At DWP I wasn't there long enough to really see the fruits of my labours but I'm hoping the green paper that gets published in the next few weeks around disability and employment reflects the early drafts that I did and the steers that I gave. I'm pleased with the negotiated outcome of that first discussion with the Treasury and Number 10 that we wouldn't be going ahead with the PIP [Personal Independence Payment] cuts and that there would be no further cuts to the welfare budget in this parliament, which is the crucial bit that I got to announce on that Monday. So, I think it's going to be very hard, even if the new government wanted to, to unwind from that and I feel like I used my early opportunity of being appointed to throw my weight around a little bit and get a policy position established which I felt comfortable with.

EA: So other than the relationship with Number 10 and negotiating with the Treasury were there any other key factors in that success?

SC: No, in terms of that first statement we had to make on the Monday, we had to dampen down this raging fire and almost retreat with some grace, really. You know, I like to think that we achieved that and I was able to bring something distinct in tone of voice and understanding the politics of it. I mean, there were still some people on our side saying: 'No stick to your guns, press ahead, have the row' and I just felt like that was the wrong decision. That initial 24 hours, the first flurry of phone calls, you're on the phone to lots and lots of people. I just felt I played it very well and got to a good place with Number 10 and the Treasury.

EA: So my last question is about how you make a policy decision. It would be great if you could talk us through examples from either of your secretary of state jobs, how you went about making policy decisions. You get a submission and then what next?

SC: One example from the Wales Office days was the decision to devolve income tax to the Welsh government, or a portion of income tax which is proving controversial, still, with some of our backbenchers. I would say the Conservatives have more of a problem with it than any of the other parties, but I took a view when I became Secretary of State for Wales that we would have to do this. For me, it was about understanding where the prevailing view with this was within the department, how strong is the position against it? Was it just because my predecessor didn't want it, or actually was there an enormous body of work behind it that the department was fixed on? What I realised quite quickly is that actually the views within the department were quite fluid, which gives you an initial bit of encouragement that this is a position that can be undone.

David Cameron wasn't a great fan of U-turns and reversing positions but like I say, one of his real strengths, particularly when it came to the devolved areas was trusting his devolved ministers that they knew what they were doing, so he gave me a hearing. Well, the initial conversations were with spads, with Andrew Dunlop who then became a Scotland Office Minister but he was then the spad advising the PM, so I spent quite a bit of time talking to him, just to get a sense of him of what the PM's view might be. I was encouraged by the spads' responses that this was probably something that the PM could be persuaded on and it was about building a case, but making sure that I was not moving too far away from my backbench colleagues otherwise they'd be kicking off. I mean, they did, eventually, some of them. But it is just understanding the lay of the land really and when I then did have my sit down with the PM,

10 Ministers reflect

he'd been briefed; he'd had a paper on it and my department were behind me with what I was trying to do and we got it agreed quite straightforwardly.

The mistake I made in that was not fully involving the Treasury because the Treasury then felt bounced, because they felt this was something that they led on, income tax policy – well of course it is! I would say that with some of the subsequent policy issues we had to deal with when it came to the Treasury, there was a bit of prickliness and there was a bit of history there, because I think they felt they were being taken by surprise. So, looking back, I would have taken a bit more time to loop in the Treasury guys.

NH: Was there anything that you found frustrating about being a minister?

SC: Time. It is the biggest constraint on anything and my constituency is five hours away. When I was Secretary of State for Wales it wasn't so pressured but DWP, that is a full time job. I would be in the office from around 8.00 through to 6.00 every day, apart from votes and then a chunk of the weekend to spend on your department work but I lose ten hours a week travelling to my constituency and back here and just the pressure of time, I would say, is the biggest frustration, feeling like you haven't quite finished everything. It's like when you're revising for finals or for A levels, you think there is always more that you could have done, another paper you could have read, never feeling that you've finished all of your week's work.

NH: There is probably not a huge amount that one can do about that but are there any other ways that you think government could be made more effective?

SC: I felt I was very well served by my Private Office at DWP. I had a Principal Private Secretary, Deputy Private Secretary and I think four other PSs. What I didn't get was a sense of how well my private office integrated with the private offices of the other ministers. I felt I was working quite hard to build collegiate relationships with the other junior Ministers. I didn't always get a sense that the private office worked like that. So, you know, if there was an issue I felt a minister needed to be sighted on, I felt like I almost had to go out of my way to make sure that they'd been briefed, rather than the private office giving me initial peace of mind. I don't think it always came easily to them.

I don't think I always got access to the really key thinkers and doers, in terms of a policy area, because it is pretty hierarchical. The Wales Office wasn't, by the way, because there were so few people you knew everyone. At DWP I'd spend a lot of my time with Directors and DGs and wasn't getting access to some of the people with the real expertise who had been there the longest. Quite a lot of these senior people have churned through other departments. It was only when I insisted on a walkabout, I got them to put on a tour round Caxton House for me, that I'd actually get to meet the people who had been working on things under Labour secretaries of state. That kind of corporate memory, I think, is quite important for some of these long term initiatives like welfare reform.

NH: I wanted to touch on a couple of big contextual things that happened when you were in office. The first is obviously that you went from being a coalition government to a single party government, did that make a big difference to you as a minister?

SC: I have got some thoughts on this. I think that the coalition government was a pretty healthy place to be. I say that because almost in every department, there was a Liberal Democrat influence as well, so there was a party political tension which, I think, on the whole was a good thing. It meant that issues and policies had to be fought over a bit harder and I suspect - I don't really have any scientific proof of this - but I suspect that by the time things reached the Cabinet or got floated in the press, it had been thought through a bit more. Having that quad process where the really contentious stuff got batted up to the PM and George Osborne in discussions Danny Alexander and Nick Clegg, actually built within it a kind of tension which had a way of resolving things, it was quite healthy. The fact that the coalition government gave us a 70-odd seat majority in Parliament created the basis, I think, of quite a stable, solid government.

When we came into government as a single party government after the 2015 election, yes there was the initial euphoria of getting a majority but it became quite clear, and Theresa's team are getting to see this now, that a 17-seat majority ain't really a majority. By the time I got to DWP and I was having those Day One arguments with the Treasury and Number 10 about what we were going to say about Personal

Independence Payments, I said and Ed Llewelyn [then Chief of Staff] got it straight away and the Treasury were a bit resistant, I said 'We don't have the majority for further welfare cuts'. You know, regardless of what we said on our manifesto, if our backbenchers who've all been elected with narrow majorities aren't happy about it, we don't have a majority. It's not like another coalition where you could have a rebellion of 20 Tory MPs on one issue, 20 Liberal Democrats rebelling on another issue, actually, you've still got your safe majority. So that was a big change but I think structurally within the nature of the coalition government, there were good, healthy tensions there which made for good policy making. Not that we got it right all the time, there were plenty of U-turns over forests and things like that, but I think it provided structural stability.

NH: And did you have a sense immediately after the election, you came back to Wales though not very long before moving to DWP but did you have a sense of refreshing the agenda, it's a new term, or did it just feel more sort of like business as usual?

SC: It didn't feel like business as usual. Well, in the Wales Office where I went back to, I knew what I was about; I had my Bill to do, that dominated everything. As a government, I think David Cameron was quite keen to create a sense of freshness, but I think the elephant in the room was always the European referendum, which came upon us very quickly.

NH: Yes. Talking of that, did it make it harder to maintain focus on other areas of policy?

SC: Yes it did, no question. The closer we got to the referendum, the bigger the impact it had. Number 10, I'm not saying it is the PM but some of the people around him obviously were very nervous about anything that was said that didn't positively contribute to the referendum narrative. So getting clearance from Number 10 for certain things became a bit more difficult whereas months before, we would tell them what we were going to do, they'd say 'Fine.' It came to be a bit more locked-down. Then at DWP, because obviously Iain and Priti had both been Brexit Ministers, they didn't want the department getting involved in anything that contributed positively to the government position, which was a remain position. So things like discussion about contribution of foreign workers and things like that, there would be no interaction between the DWP and the Treasury and Number 10 on this stuff. So, I tried to change that a bit but it was quite late in the day by then.

NH: Thinking back over all of that, what would your top pieces of advice be for a new minister wanting to be effective?

SC: Coming in with an idea of what it is you want to do is just so important. That isn't just with the big policy changes because actually with mid-term reshuffles, you're not brought in to change policy, by and large, you're brought in to deliver things, but it's always useful to have an idea of what it is you would want to change if you could. Therefore, for junior ministers or whips, what I would be saying to them is think about the departments you want to go to. It isn't enough to say 'I've got an interest in defence', well, have it in your mind what it is that you would want to do; how would you do things differently from how it is currently being done? So that's the first piece of advice: know what it is that you're about and that might not necessarily be about policy change, it might be about a tone of voice for a particular message that you're looking to improve how we deliver on.

I would say get to know the people that you can work with and keep them really close to you, the people that can make things happen for you in the department. There is no easy science on that, it's trial and error and different scenarios. Work out which people are going to be effective alongside you but do not neglect the wider team building, particularly when it comes to the other ministers, create an esprit de corps if you can because you'll need them in those difficult moments at the despatch box: you want your team next to you, really cheering you on.

Don't be afraid to say no to things in the diary. At DWP, some of the meetings they put in just went on so long so I had to say, 'There is no reason why we can't do that in half the time.' Be clear about what the meetings are there for and what is expected at the end of them. And get out and about. The one thing I loved about DWP and Wales Office, but particularly DWP because it wasn't expected of me, was to get out and see the organisation, in the far reaches and at the far-flung job centres and the Bristol Benefits Processing Centre and you know, there you would meet people who have been there 40-odd years doing pretty much the same job for decades and they really appreciate it and there's a value in that. It might

12 Ministers reflect

not make any difference to delivery in government, but as a Secretary of State and a leader, I think that kind of stuff is important.

NH: Is there anything we haven't asked about you'd like to add?

SC: As I was saying earlier, knowing your way around and how to get things done is important. I don't know if that is something that can be taught but my predecessors at the Wales Office and the DWP, they didn't do it in the same style that I did. I think Iain's view was that he had a strong enough position, he was clear enough about what he wanted to do that frankly, he didn't really care what the position of the centre was. Whereas, I was brought in by the PM to do a particular job at a moment of crisis, I felt it was quite important actually, working quite closely with him. In the Wales Office, relationships and knowing how to manage those relationships effectively is everything, and it is the same as any large organisation. Again, I don't know how you teach that.

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