

Ministers reflect

Stephen Timms

July 2016



Stephen Timms – biographical details

Electoral History

1997-present: Member of Parliament for East Ham

1994-1997: Member of Parliament for Newham North East

Parliamentary Career

2010-2015: Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions

May-Oct 2010: Shadow Financial Secretary and Shadow Minister for Digital Britain

2009-2010: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Digital Britain (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and HM Treasury)

2008-2010: Financial Secretary (HM Treasury and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

Jan-Oct 2008: Minister of State for Employment and Welfare Reform

2007-2008: Minister of State for Competitiveness (Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform)

2006-2007: Chief Secretary to the Treasury

2005-2006: Minister of State for Work and Pensions

2004-2005: Financial Secretary (HM Treasury)

2002-2004: Minister of State for e-Commerce & Competitiveness

2001-2002: Minister of State for Schools

1999-2001: Financial Secretary (HM Treasury)

Jan-Jul 1999: Minister of State (Department of Social Security)

1998-1999: Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department of Social Security)

Stephen Timms was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Ines Stelk on 28th July 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): So we start the trip down memory lane in I think '98, which was when you first became a minister? What was your experience of coming into government for the first time like?

Stephen Timms (ST): Well, it was a great shock! Completely unexpected as far as I was concerned. In fact, I remember that somebody rang me up and told me their name and said 'I'm from Downing Street, we'd like you to come over.' And the reshuffle was going on, so it was fairly obvious what this was about. I put the phone down and I suddenly thought to myself 'How do I know that's somebody from...' – I thought it might be a hoax! [laughter] It was completely, completely unexpected and I think what happened though was I started to get congratulations coming in and, you know, nobody had told me what this role was. I gathered that I was being appointed to something or was about to be appointed to something, so I think my name appeared on a list before I'd actually met the Prime Minister. So it was all rather bewildering. Very exciting, I mean, it really was a wonderful, certainly from my point of view, a wonderful moment. But completely unexpected.

NH: By that point the government was a year in, a few people had been ministers for that time – did you feel it was different for you coming in once things had already got started, as opposed to coming in day one in '97?

ST: I didn't have a strong sense of that because I was a PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] from '97, so I already had some sense of what was going on and who was who in the government. So I didn't feel that I'd missed out. As I say, I was completely astonished to be appointed. I was PPS to Andrew Smith, the Employment Minister, to begin with and then after about seven or eight months, Mo Mowlam [Northern Ireland Secretary] asked me to be her number two PPS in Northern Ireland, so I did that for a while and basically my job was to sort out the budget for Northern Ireland in the first financial spending review, so I suppose it was kind of a half ministerial job in a way. So I probably ought to have realised that this was a sign that I might become a proper minister before too long, but I was completely oblivious to that and I certainly wasn't aware of having missed anything out at all. I was too excited to be given a role!

NH: How did you feel that the PPS role and then also the roles that you'd done previously, as a councillor and outside of politics, how well did they prepare you for being a minister?

TS: Well, to some extent they did. I mean, in particular doing the budget role in Northern Ireland, I felt that having done a local authority budget was quite good experience – the numbers were rather bigger, but the nature of the task was, I thought, really quite similar. That specific bit that I did before becoming a minister myself. Becoming a minister then at DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] I wouldn't say that I had had any particularly good preparation for that anywhere. I once did, because I worked for a management consultancy company before I became council leader, well I think I was already at the council at the time, and we tendered for this project to model the effects of the rate support grant and so preparing for that study I'd spent several days going through government documents about how the rate support grant worked and at the end of that period I had a sort of lightbulb moment and I understood it. And the project was to look at how the transfer of housing benefit from the then Department of Social Security [DSS] to local authorities was going to affect local council grant settlements. So that was the limit of my exposure really to the DSS. I hadn't done anything else previously other than that one study when I was looking at the DSS and then spent a bit of time with DSS civil servants and so on. So I think you can say my preparation was pretty minimal.

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NH: Let's think about your first few weeks and months then. Was there anything that was particularly surprising about the role?

ST: Well, it was all surprising, and it was all very exciting. I don't think anything went badly wrong, in fact at the end of the six months, I was promoted in the department to Minister for Pensions which was equally exciting. That actually happened while I was out of the country at that time – my wife is Singaporean and we were in Sabah in Malaysia – and suddenly the call came through, 'The Prime Minister wants to talk to you', and it was amazing to me how on earth they'd managed to find me, because I hadn't left any notice about where I was! [laughter] I probably should have done, yeah. So that first job, that was the disability benefits job actually. It was hard work. All those jobs are hard work, they're quite a gruelling sort of pace. Then when I got to the Treasury that was more gruelling still. So, you know, I only did that first job for six months, then I did the pensions job for six months, drove me crazy. And then I went to the Treasury...

NH: Yeah. So you moved around a bit – the Treasury, DWP...

ST: I did move around – but then we all did, didn't we? Treasury, DWP, I spent a fair amount of time at the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry] as well and I was Schools Minister for a year.

NH: How did you find the different departments compared?

ST: Well. They differed a lot I would say and it's interesting, because I'm now on the Education Select Committee so for the first time in 15 years I'm looking at what the Department for Education is doing and it still seems to me that the Education Department is a well organised department. The thing that strikes me very forcefully is when I table, as I was doing for five years, questions to the DWP as shadow employment spokesman, it was pretty clear [that] the person who was drafting the answers, their main objective was not to give away any information. Whereas tabling questions to the Department for Education, I get the distinct impression that whoever is writing those answers does actually want to communicate some information and is sincerely trying to answer the questions.

Now, I don't know whether 18 years ago the Department of Social Security was trying as hard to avoid answering questions as they are now, I hope that wasn't the case then. I think it is the case now, but I thought then, and I think now, the Department of Education seems a good, a well-organised department, where people know what they're doing, where people feel very committed to it, enjoy their work on the whole, they're not just grinding through it as it were. So I was impressed by the Department for Education. I mean the Treasury I was impressed by as well, in a rather different way. And I think the kind of intellectual level of people working at the Treasury is very high. It's a very stimulating place to work at for that reason. But I think in some ways the Department for Education did strike me as the most enjoyable of the departments to work in, with the commitment and enthusiasm, and conscientiousness of the people who were working there.

NH: When you did move to a new department and you got a new brief, how did you get your head round this new brief that you've suddenly got out of nowhere?

ST: Yes, well it is a bit of a nightmare. I mean, people often say it takes six months to get on top of the job and, you know, there were a number of occasions that I moved after six months! And all you can do, really, is read endless briefing, which is what I did. Given huge great folders of briefing and I read them. Spent hours doing it. But that was just about enough to enable me to avert disaster. Which sometimes felt like the yardstick for success. If it wasn't a disaster then that was alright. I'm not sure, I mean, clearly just reading all that briefing wasn't enough for me to become an accomplished minister, but it probably was enough to avert disaster.

NH: What would you say then are the main roles of a minister? It might be different in different departments...

ST: Yes. Well, the main role... I mean, certainly it was different for me in the different ministerial roles that I held. Part of it is about presenting the department's policy, making speeches at conferences, presenting ideas and policies and being an advocate for them. I think that's a significant part of the role. Obviously there's all the stuff in Parliament itself: taking legislation through, which I did quite a lot of. Taking bills to committee as well as answering questions and opening and closing debates. But I think the real heart of a minister's job must be deciding what the policies are, rather than simply presenting the policies that someone else has chosen. And the extent to which I was able to do that did vary from one role to another. Inevitably, if you're only doing a job for six months then it takes most of that time to get on top of what it's all about, rather than devising a new policy within that period.

I had longer periods in the Treasury, I was in the Treasury for four times in fact. I sometimes claim that I have done every ministerial job in the Treasury apart from one – which I think is true. [laughter] Although it was called financial secretary three times, but those names just move around. So I had all the three junior treasury briefs and I was Chief Secretary for a year as well. So I was at the Treasury I think long enough to get on top of things and to be able to make some things happen, particularly in the last stint, running up to 2010. I spent a fair amount of time at what we called the DTI and I think changed before I finally left it for something different. So I think I was able to take some initiatives then and make some things happen. I wouldn't say really in my first six months as Pensions Minister I was able to do anything very original, I was able to do a bit more when I went back as Pensions Minister in 2005 to 2006, having known the terrain from the previous stint.

NH: Was some of that as well – how much decision making you did and that sort of thing – was some of that driven by the secretary of state and their style? How did you build up effective relations with your ministerial colleagues, in particular the secretary of state?

ST: We invariably had a team meeting once a week and that was enough at least for a basic minimum level of communication. But if I wanted to persuade the secretary of state to take on a particular policy then that obviously needed more, so I'd ask my office to try and get a slot in the secretary of state's diary and probably the degree of enthusiasm the secretary of state had for the meeting would depend on what enthusiasm or not they had for whatever it was that I was proposing. But on the whole that was fine. I mean, Gordon [Brown] was quite a difficult person to get to talk to, because he had so many other things going on, but the others, generally speaking, if I wanted to raise something with them I could. I was able to have a very good relationship with Alistair Darling as Chancellor in the final stint I had at the Treasury. And yeah, on the whole it worked reasonably well. I enjoyed working with Alistair.

NH: Related to that, were there any ministers that you had seen and thought 'That's a really effective minister?' Is there anyone that you saw as a role model even?

ST: That's an interesting question. I don't think I saw them as a role model exactly. I mean, I can certainly think of people... it always strikes me that somebody like Ian McCartney was not greatly celebrated, but he achieved an enormous amount. He was the minister who sorted out the national minimum wage policy. Against all sorts of odds stacked up against him, somehow, I've no idea how he did it, he managed to square everybody off and when the policy finally took effect, CBI [Confederation of British Industry] and senior directors sort of said 'Yeah, we can live with this' – which I thought was a rather remarkable achievement. And then later as Pensions Minister he set up the Pension Protection Fund, which I think was a hugely significant step as has since become clear with people like BHS [British Home Stores]. You know, if the Pension Protection Fund hadn't been there... Rover, that's another big company that went down, nobody expected it to, went down and the fact that Ian had put that in place. I don't know Ian particularly well, he certainly wasn't a friend of mine, I've probably had no more than four or five conversations with him and he left Parliament and I've not heard from him again, but I've often thought that what he achieved was pretty remarkable.

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David Blunkett I enjoyed working with, and I did that a couple of times [at the Department for Education and DWP]. He was just an amazing person I thought and what intrigued me – I used to sit in his team meetings, I didn't speak, I was a PPS when I was attending those at Education, but it astonished me that he had an hour for the meeting, you got the impression that everybody had their say and then after an hour, on the dot, it finished, and I never quite understood how he managed that. And part of it was with David, I think he had a brail clock or something so you wouldn't know it but he was checking the time the whole time and in the Chamber, it was always amazing that because he could read through his fingers, he could look at you in the Chamber, look directly at you and read while he was speaking to you. I thought he was amazing and very impressive as a Cabinet minister.

I was very impressed by Gordon. When I went to the Treasury, I hadn't understood until Gordon made it clear the depths of the schism between the Treasury and Number 10. I was a rather naïve young minister, I think, when I first arrived at the Treasury and that fairly quickly became clear. But Gordon's achievements, I think, were immense. And his abilities. So yes, I don't think I can claim that any of those were role models, but there were lots of people I admired. I was a cabinet minister for a year, but essentially I was a junior minister for almost all that time so my peers were junior ministers rather than cabinet ministers, but it was, I think, it was on the whole the cabinet ministers that I was most impressed by.

NH: I suspect some of this is due to Chris Mullin's book that there's a view around that junior ministers are there to do the routine parliamentary stuff, but actually a lot of people we've spoken to through this process have said that actually this is where the real policy implementation gets done – even if they're not always as grand figures as the cabinet members.

ST: I think that's true. I think, you know, we did the spadework. We talked to lots of people, we talked to all the stakeholders who explained to us why what was being proposed was impossible. Then we aimed to come up with variations in the policy or modifications of one sort or another. And went back to them and there was a lot of that kind of spadework, talking to MPs, going to meetings. You know, not the sort of thing that attracts a great deal of public attention, but very important spadework, I think. And I enjoyed it. I was a minister for 12 years. It was very hard work, always. There was not really ever any time off, even over the summer although the pressure was off a bit, but you were always a bit worried about the next things that needed to be done. But I loved it.

Ines Stelk (IS): We talked a bit about the different roles and duties you had. Thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how was your day spent?

ST: Well, I made a fairly early start, so I was usually in my office about 7.45 and would generally be there until 10 o'clock at night. And the content of the day, obviously, would vary depending on what was going on, but I might well need to spend a bit of time in the [House of] Commons, in the chamber, in a bill committee – that was a particularly busy time going through a bill, because a huge amount of briefing to go through, and to get on top of. And if you weren't on top of it you could very quickly be exposed as not being on top of it and simply reading the brief wasn't enough. So when the bills were going through that was very time-consuming.

I needed also to keep some time for doing my constituency work and looking back I do wonder how I managed to do a minister's job and a constituency MP job. In fact, I wasn't at all sure, I think, in the last term – 2005 to 2010 – I wasn't at all sure I was doing a particularly good job as a constituency MP. I was barely keeping the thing under control. But then, in the 2010 election, I got the biggest majority in the House of Commons so I thought 'Well, I must have been doing alright then.' [laughter] But I've always been very committed to my constituency work and it was a worry about juggling the two [which] was always a bit of an issue for me – whether the fact I was doing a minister's job meant I couldn't really do the MPs job properly, and that seemed to work out alright, but it did require huge numbers of hours. So

7.45 in the morning... and of course, reading the box, going through the box in the car on the way in as well and on the way home, Monday to Thursday. Usually on Friday I was able to do my constituency role, but often on a Saturday I had a surgery and then Sunday afternoon and evening was going through the weekend box. So, you know, the hours were pretty long.

IS: Yeah. You also said you managed to avoid disasters, but just thinking about a time when a crisis hit your department, how did you manage that?

ST: Well, what crisis should I alight on? I mean, I suppose the biggest crisis I was involved with was the financial crisis at the end – I mean, I wasn't at the Treasury when Lehman Brothers went under, but I did return to the Treasury I think in September 2008, just as the scale of what had happened... So I remember I arrived at the Treasury just in time to bump into ashen-faced senior bankers who Alistair Darling had summoned in to tell him what on earth had been going on. So that was a huge crisis, very severe threat to the world economy and it just so happened we had the chairmanship of the G20 for the following year, 2009, so I spent quite a lot of time with Alistair and with Gordon – by then as Prime Minister – in planning for that summit. He sent me round the world to speak to half a dozen finance ministers and central bankers, we had fantastic civil servants who were very, very impressive in the Treasury who had a clear idea of what needed to be done. And we were able to stick together then a communiqué, which emerged in the G20 summit in April 2009. So that was a huge crisis. It wasn't the kind of crisis that happened one day and ran for a couple of days and fizzled out, it was something that we were able to plan our response to and I think actually we did quite a good job. We didn't get much credit for it, because it was such a ghastly turn of events. But I think the way in which the Treasury responded to that kind of crisis was quite a good one.

IS: And so did that time at the Treasury feel quite different to the times you'd been there before – the fact that they were in on-going crisis mode?

ST: Yes, it was different – for that reason and also because Alistair Darling was Chancellor rather than Gordon, that changed the nature of how the institution operated. Alistair was more open to ideas than Gordon was – or to my ideas anyway! I think when I was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2006 to 2007, that job was supposed to attach a special adviser, but as soon as I arrived it was clear that the person who was nominally my special adviser was actually working for Gordon, not working for me at all. [laughter] That was just how things were in the Treasury. Whereas when Alistair was Chancellor, that was different. So yes, it was certainly different.

I'm trying to think of other crises, were there other crises I had to handle...? I don't think there were – I mean, there were minor things like there was a big worry when I was Schools Minister about teacher recruitment and people were projecting that we were going to have a very serious teacher shortage and I stood up at a conference and said 'I thought we were going to be OK', and I was absolutely lampooned for it. In fact, I was sitting in my office the following morning looking through the newspapers as I often did and I turned to the Daily Mirror and I looked at page two and there was a picture of me, a half picture of my face, and alongside it a large picture of Herman Munster's face and the caption was something like 'Minister or Munster?' or something like that, you know, spot the difference or something, and making the point that I look rather like Herman Munster, but also the level of stupidity in my comments was obviously evident as well. So that was a bit of a crisis, although it very quickly passed. And actually it turned out I was right, we had sorted out teacher recruitment provisionally for the following September – but those kind of things that at the time were quite anxiety-inducing, but passed.

IS: And what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office?

ST: Well, that's a very interesting question. When I ceased to be a minister I wrote a list of what I thought I had achieved. I mean, one that's in my mind quite a lot at the moment is I introduced Teach

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First, which I think, and certainly looking around schools in my constituency, has been a very effective mechanism for raising the quality of teachers in inner city schools like in the area that I represent. So that was I think a big achievement, took a bit of doing. The Department for Education – for all its qualities which I praised – wasn't very receptive to that idea, it was a bit against the grain. It was very strongly supported by Number 10 so I can't claim it as my sole achievement, but it was certainly a significant one, I think. I think my contribution to the G20 summit, to some of the things that we managed to do on tax evasion at that summit as well as the contribution to the wider communiqué at the summit and the very substantial boost to the global economy that came out of it. That's probably a bigger thing.

NH: Just to pick up on the G20 summit, because obviously with Brexit at the moment, a lot of people are thinking about how to do effective negotiation. How did you find it working with counterparts in other countries and what are your tips on effective negotiation?

ST: Well, the key was to have a really well worked out strategy that we believed in, that we could advocate to others. And that I think is probably the difficulty at the moment, I imagine, for people in government that it's not at all clear what we want or what we think realistically we can get out of these negotiations. So I think Theresa May is absolutely right not to rush to Article 50. I think the government needs to have a pretty clear idea of what it wants to get out of these negotiations before it starts the clock ticking on the two year period. But that's the key, having a clear, well worked out set of ideas that you're confident in and believe in that you can advocate to others. And without that, you're lost.

IS: What did you find most frustrating as a minister?

ST: Most frustrating... Well, I mentioned the long hours. There was a huge amount of work to do and simply avoiding disaster, getting all the letters signed, doing all the things that must be done is an enormously time-consuming task. And so, you know, in a number of those periods when I was minister, I would say I wasn't making any very creative contribution, I was simply administering the system. And I don't complain about that because I think the system did have to be administered, but that could certainly at times be a frustration. Whether there's any way round it – I don't know if there are less time consuming ways of doing things. There are an awful lot of letters that need to be signed and quite often I would spend my journey home signing letters and my journey into the office signing letters and then a fair chunk of the weekend as well, signing letters. I wouldn't advocate though that letters shouldn't be signed, I mean, you obviously can come up with ways of doing this that avoid ministers having to sign letters, but from an MP's point of view having a letter signed by a minister is quite a big deal and from a constituents point of view as well, so despite the hours of pain that it inflicted on me, I wouldn't argue that it ought not to be done. But yeah, that's what I would point to I think as a frustration probably.

IS: You were in government for quite a long time – how do you think it changed over the time that you were there? What were some of the major changes you might have observed?

ST: Well, obviously the change from Tony Blair to Gordon was a significant change. I always thought that when Gordon became prime minister we would have a really clear set of objectives as a government. And actually I don't really think we did in those final two or three years. The clarity that I had thought that Gordon would bring to the role of leading government didn't really emerge, perhaps because there were so many difficult things going on and the economic crisis to be tackled and so on. I think, I mean I do think Tony Blair led a good government. I think the way in which government worked for that period was often quite impressive. I think people who were working in government knew what they were trying to do, the objectives. Although to me, they sometimes didn't feel that clear, I think to civil servants they were clear and we were able to achieve in those ten years that Tony was prime minister, a very great deal. Those final years were dominated by tackling the crisis and that did have a different feel about it,

whether that was because government had changed or just because the external circumstances had changed, I'm not sure. We obviously used technology more towards the end than we did at the beginning. I don't think I had a mobile phone at the beginning. Got one of those eventually, came to depend on it. So there were those sort of changes going on. But I remain of the view that that government was the best in my lifetime. Not a view universally shared, but yeah.

NH: It may have differed under Tony and Gordon, but how much did Number 10 – when you were in departmental roles probably more than the Treasury – how much did Number 10 get involved in your policy areas or interact with you?

ST: Well, not hugely, but it did depend on the area. So Number 10 was very interested in education and Andrew Adonis as the Education Adviser at Number 10 spent a great deal of time in the Department for Education. He was a big fan of Teach First, as I mentioned. So I found his interest very supportive. But I think others in the department, like Estelle Morris [then Education and Skills Secretary] found his presence and the Number 10 presence more difficult. When I was at DSS, DWP – less interest from Number 10. Tony was interested in broadband, I was the Minister for Broadband for a while so that, there were a number of opportunities that I had directly to work with him at that stage. I mean, it wasn't of huge interest for him, but it was something he was interested in and so we had discussions about that. And then when I was at the Treasury as Chief Secretary, I wouldn't say there was very much... because Gordon so dominated the Treasury and guarded the relationship with Number 10, that I didn't really have much directly to do with Number 10 in that period.

NH: As Chief Secretary you must have been quite involved in the budgets and spending reviews and things. Again, how much did your previous experience in the departments help that? Did you feel that you had a sense where they were coming from?

ST: Yes, I think so, because I had been involved as a schools minister, for example, in making bids for funding for initiatives. And so being on the other end of it as Chief Secretary was helpful. But I think also having previously been a council leader and having to say 'No' to bids from some of my council committee chair colleagues was probably useful experience, too.

NH: It's one of those roles where you are sort of looking across government, did you think in general cross-government working was effective?

ST: I'm not sure you can say 'in general'. There are certainly examples where cross-government working was very good, but I would say that it was probably fairly isolated. I think generally cooperation between different government departments is quite difficult and I think that's why they keep on reorganising governments – because some issue it becomes clear is not being well-handled between the different departments, so they reorganise the departments to handle that particular issue well and then it turns out there were other issues that you then split up and it's much harder. I think if you have a committed group of ministers with a clear brief then you can do it, I think. Clear brief, good civil servants, everyone agrees what the shared task is. The different ministers willing to trust each other, then you can do it. But very often those conditions aren't met and it's a problem. The way we've gone with skills, I think skills within the Department of Education and Skills when I first worked for it in 1997 and then we had the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and then the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and now skills has gone back to the Department for Education again and I think this is all... you know, apprenticeships are a classic example where different departments need to work together. It is about education, it is about employment and it is about industry and trying to get those bits working successfully together is quite hard and has not always succeeded and I expect it isn't succeeding at the moment on apprenticeships, I suspect we are not heading for three million apprenticeships in the course of this Parliament – and hence the latest reorganisation.

NH: So finally, what would your main pieces of advice be to an incoming minister on how to do your job well?

ST: Well, I think probably the most important single determinant of whether or not you do a good job is your private secretary. So I suppose my tip would be 'Get a great private secretary.' Now that is easier said than done, because very often they may not be your choice, or if it is your choice it's quite difficult to know exactly what to choose if it's an area that you don't know anything about and you've just arrived in the department and so on. But nevertheless, I think that would have to be my top tip, because if you've got a good private secretary, you can achieve a great deal more, just be a lot more effective than otherwise.

NH: Just one other thing that we haven't mentioned, we talked a lot about relationships within Whitehall. Some of the areas that you were responsible for were also quite operational, how much of that implementation side did you see as part of your role? Not just setting policy, but actually ensuring it gets delivered, working with outside stakeholders, all that sort of thing?

ST: Yes. Well, there were quite a number of instances of that. So at the DWP, I was responsible for the pension service. At the Treasury, in my last stint, I was responsible for HMRC [HM Revenue and Customs] and spent a fair amount of time... I didn't spend a huge amount of time visiting, I spent a bit of time just looking at people in operations around the country, but I didn't spend a huge amount of time doing that. I did spend a lot of time talking to senior officials telling me what was going on. But I think it is quite difficult to manage operations on that basis. In the end, I wasn't managing operations, it was the head of HMRC or whoever who was managing the operations, but I did find those aspects of the job quite hard to feel properly on top of, because the HMRC had nearly 100,000 people when I was there. You've only got a pretty hazy idea of what's really going on. You have to hope that officials are telling you the right thing, that you're not at all sure and as you say, administering that was only a fairly modest part of the job, so it's quite hard I would say.

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