

Ministers reflect

Theresa Villiers



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Theresa Villiers – biographical details

Electoral History

2005 – present: Member of Parliament for Chipping Barnet

Parliamentary Career

2012 – 2016: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

2010 – 2014: Minister of State (Department for Transport) (Rail and Aviation)

2007 – 2010: Shadow Secretary of State for Transport

2005 – 2007: Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Theresa Villiers was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Oliver Ilott on 15th November 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): You first became a minister in 2010, straight into the Department for Transport [DfT]. You'd shadowed Transport in opposition, so what was the experience of coming into government like?

Theresa Villiers (TV): It was high pressure. I think you have to learn a great deal very quickly. I came into the role as Transport Minister with quite an in-depth background knowledge about transport, but I still had a great deal to learn about making things happen in government and working with civil servants. One of the difficult things, I found, was that I was quite keen to continue to engage externally with stakeholders and experts, which you do in opposition, but it becomes rather more difficult in government; you get much more dependent on the advice of civil servants. I think that was one of the things that took quite a lot of adjusting to, in the early stages.

NH: How useful was knowledge of the brief? Did you go in knowing exactly what it was that you wanted to do with it?

TV: I did, yes. Much of what I wanted to do eventually did come to pass. Transport tends to have very long lead in times, so interestingly Chris Grayling [current Transport Secretary] was announcing developments on HS2 which I was quite involved with eight years ago. I think it really helped me that I had been doing the transport brief for about three or four years before going into government and I knew what I wanted to achieve and quite a substantial amount of that, I was either able to deliver or I started the process and progress is being made now. Not everything, but a substantial amount of what I had hoped would happen is now underway.

NH: OK, I think we will come back to HS2 and how you did that later as it is very interesting. You mentioned getting to know how government worked and how you got stuff done as being a bit more of a challenge as opposed to the policy brief, so how did you get your head around that stuff - how the Civil Service operated and the role of being a minister?

TV: I think one of the difficulties I found was no longer having support, because special advisers [spads] obviously worked to the Secretary of State and I was the Minister of State. In opposition, I had a number of political advisers around me - I suddenly had that taken away and that meant that I was much more dependent on my own political judgement. That took some getting used to. I suppose it was partly because when you first arrive in government, you tend to be quite suspicious of the advice civil servants are giving you. It took me a while to get to know the civil servants and to get a better understanding of their outlook on life and get to a point where I trusted their judgement in a way that I had not previously.

NH: Do you say suspicious because you just didn't know them at that point or because of it was a change of administration, or something else?

TV: Suspicious is perhaps too pejorative a term! I think it was partly a hangover from opposition: whilst you may be opposing the politicians, the reality is you are very often scrutinising and opposing the institution, the department. So having been on the outside saying 'You're getting it wrong!' for the previous few years and then suddenly being on the inside and being advised by them took some adjusting to. I think the other thing, that I found probably the most demoralising thing about being a minister for the Department for Transport, was the grind of the correspondence. It is really important that an MP's correspondence is right. If it goes out in a way which is substandard or there's a mistake, it can have very significant consequences, not just for me as the Minister but also for the MP concerned. Throughout my time at the DfT I was forever doing quite significant re-writes of correspondence. I remember going to an Institute for Government seminar actually, in my first few weeks in office and all of us, a selection of ministers, were all tearing our hair out about the hours and hours and hours we were all spending turning responses to MPs' correspondence into a form that we were happy with.

NH: Did it improve over time?

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TV: To some degree, when you can provide a bit of guidance. But I still was doing significant amounts of re-drafting. In hindsight I think now I would just keep sending it back and also I would say ‘Don’t give me any letters which are longer than a page and a half’ because they had this frustrating tendency to produce six pages of obscure and rather impenetrable text and I probably should have been a bit firmer in just rejecting it until they came up with a better draft, rather than re-writing it myself.

NH: Yes. Moving on to the Northern Ireland Office in 2012 - did you know that the move was coming? Was it a job that you had wanted?

TV: I had been in regular discussion with any contacts I had at Number 10 as to whether there was a chance of me going into Cabinet. I was starting to get a positive impression that the prospects looked OK. Nobody had ever talked about any particular post, but the Northern Ireland brief was one I had thought might possibly be one that they would consider me for. I am not quite sure why I did that, but certainly before reshuffles you tend to consider and look at the different roles that they might conceivably be reshuffling, so that was one that I had considered.

NH: It is quite a different sort of department to DfT; less operational and more about relationships and bridge-building between Westminster and Northern Ireland. How did you get your head around the new brief and also being a Secretary of State?

TV: I felt that transition was not that difficult actually. It was far easier than the transition from opposition to government. When I arrived they gave me the whole transition set of papers, including a history of the island of Ireland from 1171, which says a lot! Some people think that is when the trouble started and others say it is much earlier than that. I was certainly relatively cautious at first in terms of saying anything in public, but right from the start I enjoyed the role. I found it really interesting and it was great to be at the higher level. There are lots of ways in which DfT and Northern Ireland are different, not least that the Northern Ireland Office is tiny in comparison to other government departments and it was good to get to know some good people they have working there. So it was, as I say, a much easier transition than the previous one I had taken on.

NH: And although they are quite different departments, what would you say are the key differences between a minister of state role and a secretary of state role?

TV: Well you have the ultimate responsibility for the activities of the department as a secretary of state. How do I best describe this? As a minister of state, you can, depending on the department, get quite a lot of responsibility, but ultimately you are working for the secretary of state and so you can frequently be over-ruled. That didn’t happen a huge amount of the time at DfT. But as a secretary of state, yes you can get over-ruled by the Prime Minister occasionally, but it’s a very different role. You have the chance to make judgements and take decisions in a way which you just don’t as a minister of state.

NH: What were your big priorities at Northern Ireland Office?

TV: The economy was always a very high priority; I think partly because I wanted to change the mind-set of the department. Understandably, it had tended to be focused on maintaining political stability and that was crucially important, but I thought it was also good to remember that the UK government has very significant economic responsibilities for Northern Ireland, even though some economic matters had been devolved. I was always emphasising that we needed to keep doing everything we could to work with the [Northern Irish] Executive on economic matters and also bring in inward investment, have the debate around Corporation Tax and things like that. So that was a key priority and then, of course, there was the continuing priority in terms of economic stability but also trying to persuade the devolved institutions to focus strongly on community cohesion and trying to eliminate some of the sectarian divisions which still exist in Northern Ireland; that was a particular priority for David Cameron. The difficulty is that almost all the levers for affecting those kind of matters are devolved, but it is still an important political job to try and keep them at the top of the agenda.

NH: How did you arrive at those as your priorities? How long did it take you and what was the process you went through to determine that the economy was the thing to focus on?

TV: I think it was by having a lot of conversations. I always find with a new role, one of the best ways to work out how to do it is a series of introductory meetings one must do and they were particularly useful in relation to Northern Ireland, because everyone comes in to their meeting with the Secretary of State and they have their two or three key issues. So that starts to give you a pretty good understanding of where the pressure points are and where you need to prioritise.

One area where it took ten days or a couple of weeks to make up my mind on was the debate which had been taking place for a couple of years on the devolution of rate-setting powers for Corporation Tax. My predecessor, Owen Paterson, had been a great supporter of it but when I arrived it looked as if it was going nowhere. I had to take a decision whether to carry on where Owen Paterson left off or to subtly move away from it because it didn't seem likely to happen. After talking to people and thinking about it, I decided that actually it could be a very powerful economic tool to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy and I took it up and supported it with enthusiasm. I decided I was going to make up my own mind on that, I did not rush into it because that is what my predecessor had done. I looked at the evidence and decided that he was right that we should go for it. And indeed, it may well happen now.

NH: Out of interest, in Transport or Ireland did you ever do any sort of handover or discussion with predecessors? Or even another minister maybe to get advice from who was there to support you or be a role model?

TV: No, I mean I wish there was more of that really, particularly when you start out in a new government. There wasn't really anyone I talked to about transport matters when I took over, except Philip Hammond who was the Secretary of State, so that was quite useful that we'd had a good working relationship previously. If I was really stuck, I had him to go to but there was no kind of mentoring system for new ministers and I think it probably would be helpful if there was. The thing is, you are not realistically going to go to previous Labour ministers for advice and it was so long since the Conservatives had been in government that there weren't many ministers who could give direct advice on transport matters. I think if the Institute for Government can come up with any ideas or suggestions on that kind of mentoring, that would be quite helpful.

Oliver Illott (OI): One of the questions that people in the public often ask is, what is it that actually fills a minister's day? I wondered if you could talk us through, thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how did you actually spend your time?

TV: OK, I always find that quite a difficult question to answer. It is rather different between the two jobs I did. At Transport, I suppose, it was very often responding to a debate in Westminster Hall. A further proportion of the day trying to get out to see transport projects, talk to people on the ground. Always a succession of meetings with officials to help take decisions. In the role I did, there were multiple decisions on franchising and various different transport projects. So a lot of my diary was filled with, for example, meetings with officials on decisions to be made on different franchises. Then a fair bit of time grappling with responses to Parliamentary Questions, redrafting those, redrafting replies to MPs, then also physically moving from the Department to the House of Commons later in the day, to carry on doing a lot of the DfT work but doing it in the Commons so I could vote at the same time. There was a lot of engagement with other MPs, frequently they would want to come and talk about a particular issue within their constituency, that kind of meeting was pretty regular as well.

With Northern Ireland, similarly there were a fair number of meetings with officials to take decisions. Because, as I think you mentioned, it is slightly more of a political and almost diplomatic relationship-building role, so there were lots of discussions with members of the Department about how to approach relationships with the Executive and engage on particular issues. Sometimes crises had come up, those kind of discussions took up quite a chunk of the day. Again, being out meeting people in Northern Ireland, visiting community projects, talking to people who were dealing with the consequences of sectarian separation that I was talking about before. Travelling took up a fair chunk of my time at the Northern Ireland Office. Less parliamentary work than in my previous role and an awful lot of meetings with Northern Ireland elected leaders, over and over and over again. There was a series of problems like the issue around [On the Run](#) and then the budget crisis, problems with welfare reforms and in almost all of those instances, I as Secretary of State had very little power, so the only way I was going to try and ensure we had a sensible outcome was by persuading the elected leaders of Northern Ireland that we needed a sensible outcome. A big chunk of my time was spent meeting and discussing important issues

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with the First and Deputy First Minister and the different Northern Ireland parties. If it was a parading time of the year, meeting the loyal orders and the residents' groups who were involved in the sensitive parades. That covers quite a lot of the work.

OI: Thinking perhaps, specifically on your transport brief, you were describing the work you do in Parliament, speaking to MPs, doing letters to constituents, meetings in the Department and going out and about. How did you strike the balance between those things and looking back, do you think that the right balance was struck between those competing demands?

TV: It was absolutely exhausting, it was just non-stop. Certainly one of the advantages of Cabinet rank is that you are slightly more in control of your time than you are as a minister of state. As a minister of state you get everything thrown at you and you just have to swallow it and get on with it. Whereas, as a secretary of state, there are some options to delegate. I did find both roles had their exhausting moments, but particularly at the Department for Transport, I am sure it didn't do my health a great deal of good because once you squeezed in all the departmental work and maintained a busy and active constituency campaigning diary it didn't leave a great deal of time for anything else. I probably could have handled it a little bit more effectively, but I just worked massively, massively long hours. I wouldn't say I had a great deal of work-life balance. I certainly think that once you have been in a particular role for a while, like with any other job, it gets a little bit easier. You work out what you need to do and what is possible to delegate, but there is no doubt those minister of state jobs in places like DfT or the Home Office or Health are phenomenal in terms of the workload.

OI: Would you have advice for someone else who was going into that role in terms of how they could manage those things?

TV: Get yourself a good private secretary, that is a very important role. I inherited a private secretary from my Labour predecessor and I think I was much more effective when there were some changes and I was able to choose, from a shortlist, a new private secretary. Having someone effective who was on your side, which a private secretary is, is just crucial. I would say that would be my top tip: when you arrive in a department, if you feel that your private secretary isn't the right person for you then ask to change and demand that you have a reasonable shortlist of good candidates from which to choose.

OI: You mentioned as well, with regard to the Northern Ireland brief, dealing with the unexpected, or crises. I wonder if you could talk us through a specific example of where something unexpected or a crisis happened and how you dealt with it.

TV: Right, where do I start? I suppose by way of illustration, the On the Runs [OTR] issue. The first I heard of this was when I was told an individual called John Downey had been arrested at Gatwick Airport in relation to the Hyde Park attacks back in the 1980s and had referred to a letter in which he'd been told that he wasn't wanted by the police. Subsequently, he was charged with the Hyde Park bombings and the trial was dismissed as an abuse of process because Mr Downey had been in receipt of a letter from the Northern Ireland Office, under a previous administration, indicating that so far as they knew, he was not wanted by the police. But the reality was that he actually was wanted and a mistake had been made; he should never have received one of those letters. It transpired that there was a scheme which operated to inform individuals as to whether or not they were wanted by the police. In essence how I and my team dealt with that was to engage extensively with the individuals affected, in particular the victim groups, who were obviously very concerned about what had happened. There was a lot of misunderstanding about what this scheme involved. It was never an amnesty; it was simply a scheme to inform people who weren't wanted by the police of that fact. It caused a huge amount of upset and concern and the First Minister of Northern Ireland was on the point of resignation because of this. Within 24 hours or so we had put together a proposal for a judge-led review of the scheme so that exactly what had happened could be fully examined. I had some lengthy discussions with the Chief Justice who finally was persuaded to release Justice Heather Hallett to conduct that review. She had also done the 7/7 inquest and so she was an expert in such things. She reported and was very clear that the scheme had very significant flaws and the risks weren't managed, as was illustrated by the fact that unfortunately a very serious mistake had been made in relation to Mr Downey. She also identified that there were some 36 cases which should be re-examined as a matter of urgency, just in case another

mistake had been made. But she found no evidence of political interference with the prosecution process.

There are groups in Northern Ireland who continue to be very concerned about the scheme, but having had it properly examined and making it clear that there was no amnesty and that no-one should rely on these letters in future was important. If there is evidence that comes to light, then people will be prosecuted in the normal way regardless of whether they have received a letter under the scheme or not. That took probably about six months, it dominated my time to a considerable degree and I think I had some of the most difficult discussions in meetings that I have ever had in my life with groups who had lost relatives as a result of terrorist attacks during the troubles, who were anxious and believed that there was an amnesty. Trying to reassure them and trying to explain to them what the scheme did and didn't do was extremely difficult. It is difficult to really describe the extent to which it was all-consuming and also as a part of the process we were engaging with the Irish Government and the US authorities to some degree, both of whom have a continued interest in political stability in Northern Ireland. So that was also part of the challenge. And of course, engaging with Northern Ireland MPs, backbench Conservative MPs just to reiterate and emphasise that (a) all of this happened under the previous administration and (b) it was never an amnesty anyway. So that is a very broad brush summary of the OTR issue.

OI: If you think about the first 24-48 hours as that crisis was breaking, what was the division of your time between trying to manage the media and trying to turn your attention to fixing the problem?

TV: It's always a dilemma. We had quite some time to prepare for this because there was a considerable gap between the notification of the arrest of Mr Downey and the trial and then the subsequent collapse of the prosecution case, so we had thought very carefully about how we would respond on the day. I suppose on the day itself my time was mainly taken up with talking to people in Northern Ireland about what had happened, managing and dealing with the problem. I don't remember doing a huge amount of media. I probably did do a handful of news interviews but the real focus was trying to provide reassurance to those who were understandably upset by what looked to them like people somehow being let off. So it was very important for me to try and talk to as many people as possible amongst the opinion-formers, just to explain what the scheme was about. I did also spend some time talking to some of my predecessors who were in office at the time to explain what was happening as well.

OI: How do you think the Civil Service performed under the pressure of that crisis? Did it come off well?

TV: It was mixed to be honest. On the whole, I think they pretty much rose to the challenge. There were some instances where again it comes back to correspondence; there was some correspondence that was drafted in quite a thoughtless way, which if I had not picked up on it and rejected it then I would have been sending out something that was misleading. It wasn't intentionally misleading, but the way it was drafted was sufficiently ambiguous that it would have misled people. So that was a concern and also, as the Hallett Review had identified, the scheme had not been well managed. It was not well documented; it was quite difficult to uncover the facts. Heather Hallett did it, but in terms of the work of the civil servants did at the early stages it was not terribly easy to work out the scale of the problem and the risks. Not because the civil servants were at fault, I think that was due to the systemic issues which Heather Hallett identified in relation to how the scheme had worked under the previous administration. There weren't proper rules set out, it wasn't properly documented, it wasn't properly managed and there wasn't a proper risk assessment. That meant that trying to pick up the pieces in the midst in the Downey crisis was not easy. There were some times when things didn't go terribly well, as I say, there were one or two instances where I was not happy with the proposed drafting of the correspondence in relation to the OTR issue.

OI: Moving on from the crisis question, if you think back on your achievements in office, either at DfT or Northern Ireland, what are you most proud of?

TV: I think I am most proud of the Stormont House and Fresh Start cross-party agreements. Without securing agreement out of those two sets of cross-party talks, I think the devolved settlement would have collapsed, albeit it would have been temporary but it would have collapsed and would have seen a period

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of direct rule, which I think would have been a significant step backwards. I think the cross-party talks that I had chaired that delivered those two agreements really averted a serious budget crisis and I think it has got the Northern Ireland institutions back on a stable footing, so much so that they are a bit of beacon of stability at the moment in a rather unstable political world. I think that is in some contrast to the way they were when I first became Secretary of State where we had the flags protests, then OTRs, then a budget crisis and the concern over welfare and ultimately, a crisis over suspected IRA involvement in a paramilitary murder; all of those issues conspired to produce a significant degree of instability. But the talks I chaired have helped deliver quite a resilient set of devolved institutions. I would almost hesitate to say so, because that might tempt fate, but they are working very well now. We have now had the longest period of unbroken devolved government since the 60s and I genuinely feel that chairing those talks was not easy and that personally I did, I hope, play a quite a significant role in delivering a successful outcome to those two sets of negotiations. There have been many, many instances over the years where cross-party negotiations have failed to reach any agreed outcome in Northern Ireland. We only tend to remember the ones that are successful; there were many attempts which were unsuccessful.

OI: Thinking about your preparation going into chairing those talks or your performance during those talks, what do you think it was that contributed to that success? What were the lessons coming out of that experience?

TV: I suppose I have always felt that whilst I have very clear views about Northern Ireland and its status within the UK, I also feel that I may want to understand different perspectives and work with people who have a different outlook and to try and be fair and make sure that their concerns are listened to, as well as the concerns of people with whom I might have more in common politically. I think that patience and determination is really important. Every morning going in and making the same points, going over the same ground and hoping that today will be the breakthrough. I think George Mitchell [former US Senator] described it as 500 days of failure and 1 day of success. Perhaps 500 is a slight exaggeration! But he did five years of cross-party talks and it is not an easy process. I think just being prepared to keep on and on and on and on and not be pushed off your ground and trying to keep the conversation focused, keep it going in a particular direction is important. Also trying to keep everyone at the table. One of the most difficult things about cross-party talks I found, is setting them up in such a way that you actually get people there. Once you get over that hurdle and you have got everyone turning up, that is a huge achievement. In both the two sets that I chaired it was very touch and go as to whether we would get all the parties turning up. And in fact, in the first one, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party got up halfway through the meeting and everyone immediately started wondering if this was the first walkout. But it turned up he was just getting up to take his jacket off.

OI: You were saying there were lots of policy decisions that had to be made at DfT. I wondered if you could talk us through one of those examples and how you made a policy decision; what the process was, what evidence you were consulting and how the civil servants presented it to you?

TV: I suppose one illustration might be the Olympic Route Network. This was the system for segregated lanes for Olympic-related traffic which operated throughout the Games and it was something I was most unenthusiastic about. It is contrary to everything Londoners think is just and fair: the idea of particular road space reserved for Olympic big-wigs. I am not sure that is quite the appropriate word. But I went through this in detail, I talked a lot with a range of people about it and it was pretty clear that if you want the Olympics, you have to have this system of segregated road space. I kept trying to find reasons not to do it but ultimately, I could see that there was just no alternative, it was a compulsory requirement. So, slightly through gritted teeth, we went through and did the various statutory requirements and as you may recall, it turned out to be fine. The background to that decision was obviously a lot of work going on in relation to traffic management generally: encouraging people not to be driving their cars at that particular time, encouraging people to shift their travel patterns - it was part of a much bigger project to try and ensure that London kept running smoothly during the Games. So that is one particularly difficult decision that I remember having to take.

The Olympics was this classic instance where because it was successful, my role in it is completely invisible but if it had gone horribly wrong I might have been one of the people who had to resign, since my signature was on the bottom of the orders that created the Olympic Route Network.

OI: In that specific example, did you look for advice or evidence outside the Civil Service? Were there third parties that you were talking to about that decision?

TV: As I said, that is one of the problems as a minister, it is very difficult to engage seriously with external third parties because you cannot show them any of the documents. I found that really frustrating, initially. When I first arrived at DfT, I found it very difficult because I had no spads, so no political advice and no ability to take sensible advice from external experts because I wasn't allowed to show them any of the documents. So I was very dependent on civil servants and that continued, but you just get used to it and, you work out that actually some of them can give you good advice. I certainly talked through some of these issues with people who also did Olympic-related stuff, like some of the TfL people that I met in different contexts. We ran consultations as well, so I would have seen the feedback on them, so I did have some external input. But again, it was just a case of gritting my teeth and I did all I could to try and minimise the impact it would have on London.

OI: On this example or potentially on others, how easy was it to make policy decisions where you needed the input of Treasury or of Number 10 and to coordinate that decision making process?

TV: I worked a lot with Treasury on my Northern Ireland stuff and to some degree on transport as well, particularly on the run up to a significant fiscal event – an Autumn Statement or a Budget. Interestingly, contrary to what one might think in a period of austerity, they were always quite interested in transport projects that they could talk about. It was often a question of compiling wish-lists, almost the reverse of what people expect from the Treasury. With Number 10, David Cameron ran a government where to a significant extent he did trust his Cabinet members and ministers to take many of their own decisions. I suppose there were the same issues that governments always have: sometimes Number 10 would engage at the last minute when you had done lots of work to go in a particular direction and then suddenly Number 10 says 'What's this all about?' but usually, after a flurry, you generally end up in broadly the same place. At Northern Ireland, it was slightly different in that there were so many sensitive political things that I and my team were forever going back and forth to Number 10 to make sure they were happy with it. Also obviously, there were continuing negotiations between us, Number 10 and the Treasury about the Corporation Tax debate as well. It was a different relationship at Northern Ireland because, as I say, the vast bulk of the endless grind, the conveyor belt of decisions at Transport largely would not be things that Number 10 or the Treasury were particularly interested in whereas a lot of the sensitive political decisions at the Northern Ireland Office we would certainly flag up with Number 10 and get input on before a final decision was taken.

NH: To take another transport issue, it seems from the outside like there are always delays over issues like airport capacity in the South East. Having done the job what are your reflections on why decisions like that seem so hard in government? Is it because you have competing evidence, political aspects of it, as well as the policy decisions?

TV: Well in my view, the reason why people have been talking about a third runway at Heathrow for 40 years and not built it is because it is a very bad idea. My views on this are fairly well known. I think, genuinely, that there is a problem with airport capacity in the South East because the establishment is hung up on the idea that 'Oh, we must expand Heathrow as that is the best way to deliver economic growth.' And (a) it isn't and (b) it is such a difficult project to deliver it is going to be impossible. So people keep trying to build a third runway at Heathrow; Geoff Hoon did, for example, and that hit the rocks with a change of government. Each time the government of whichever persuasion tries and fails to expand Heathrow, that means another five, six, seven or eight years where no additional airport capacity is built. To be fair, London has got the capacity it needs up until 2030, so one of the reasons why we haven't built an extra runway recently is because we didn't actually need one but capacity pressure is growing and we will need one by the early 2030s and the lead in time is such that a decision needs to be made now.

I do think that airport capacity is bedevilled by the fact that there is all this focus on expanding Heathrow, which would have catastrophic environmental consequences, but it is also so impractical and so difficult as to be politically undeliverable. The fixation on Heathrow blinds some policy makers to the merits of expanding Gatwick, which is a perfectly reasonable solution to our aviation capacity pressures

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and is a whole lot easier, costs half the price and will take half as long. And it might actually end up with a new runway being built.

With other decisions I suppose it was very slow. As a country, we were quite slow to adopt high-speed rail. With the railways, perhaps decisions were a bit slow because of that mind-set in the 60s and 70s that railway was old tech and it was a managed decline. From the 1990s onwards, after privatisation, the number of people using the railways has expanded massively and it perhaps took policy makers a while to catch up with the fact that one of the key ways to support economic growth is to invest in the rail network. I think each of these questions are separate, there are different factors at play.

In terms of delivery, one of the problems is the legal process does mean that things are very slow, but that is partly because we are a very healthy democracy and any big transport project affects individuals and we give those individuals lots of opportunities to protest and change proposals. There are things that I am sure we could try to speed that up but, you know, in some ways it is an inevitable consequence of the fact that we are a vibrant, healthy democracy with lots of active campaign groups that want their voice heard in these controversial decisions.

NH: Final couple of questions. First of all, was there anything you found frustrating about being a minister?

TV: People will think I am fixated on correspondence! But I did get depressed at DfT by poorly written letters, partly because it is just so time consuming to turn them all around, but partly it was just frustrating to say 100 times that I wanted short sentences and short paragraphs, correct grammar and then not always to get it. Certainly one of the toughest things is the sheer volume of work. Just trying to keep on top of the regional visits, making sure you are available for your colleagues all the time, making sure that you are there to respond for the Government in Parliament very regularly; that certainly is quite stretching. As I said before, probably if I was doing it again now, I would be able to manage the workload more effectively. I think when you start out, it is quite tough grappling with all of that.

NH: I wanted to touch on the last year or so in government, because you had the EU referendum on the horizon and you were campaigning for Brexit, how did the campaign affect your work as a minister?

TV: I was able to balance the two. I had important continuing duties as Secretary of State while the referendum was happening, I was able to continue with those. I was quite careful in terms of the Leave campaign related activity which impacted directly with Northern Ireland. I was asked about it a lot, inevitably because of the position I held, but I was always very careful in the way I expressed myself on Northern Ireland matters and Brexit matters and particularly careful about what debates I got involved with in Northern Ireland. Really throughout the referendum campaign, I was very keen to try to make sure that I always looked at things from a moderate, mainstream perspective. I tried to avoid anything that looked like it was an attack on a colleague or something like that. I felt it was very important that whilst I believed in the side I was campaigning for and I wanted to do all I could to persuade people to vote to become an independent country again, I felt it was perfectly possible to do that in a way in which it was respectful of people who had a different view. Not least because one of those happened to be the Prime Minister who had appointed me and who I have huge respect for. So it was difficult, but I really wanted to do as much as possible to maintain a sensible and civilised tone to the debate, knowing that I had very good friends on both sides.

NH: And finally, you have mentioned a couple of things already, but what would be your key pieces of advice to a new minister on how to do the job well?

TV: As I said before, I think getting a good private secretary is important. Preferably getting a [spad] as well, there are way more spads now than there were when I was first appointed at DfT, so that is easier. It is now feasible to get more time with them even though the spads work for the Secretary of State primarily, hopefully most ministers have more direct engagement with them than I did. I think that you just have to be focused on your key priorities and keep pushing and pushing away at them, even if sometimes the civil servants tell you they are impossible. If you focus strongly enough on them, you can in the end help deliver them.

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