

# Ministers Reflect Amber Rudd



1 December 2020

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2010–19: Conservative MP for Hastings and Rye (Independent from September 2019)

## Government career

2018–19: Secretary of state for work and pensions

2018 and 2019: Minister for women and equalities

2016–18: Home secretary

2015–16: Secretary of state for energy and climate change

2014–15: Parliamentary under secretary of state, energy and climate change

2013–14: Assistant whip

**Amber Rudd was interviewed by Dr Alice Lilly and Tim Durrant on 1 December 2020 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.**

Amber Rudd reflects on her time working with three different prime ministers, the implications of the EU referendum and her decision to resign as home secretary following the Windrush scandal.

Tim Durrant (TD): Can we start with your first ministerial post, when you were appointed to the Department of Energy and Climate Change in 2014. Can you tell us about the conversation you had with the prime minister?

Amber Rudd (AR): Yes. I was in the Whips’ Office at the time and, I’m sure other people have told you this, when a reshuffle is on, ministers, junior ministers – everybody who has any sort of ambition – is on the edge of their seat. And in the Whips’ Office, you’re kind of watching each other. Claire Perry [parliamentary under secretary of state for rail 2014–16] got called just before me. She got trains. I got a call and I was called into Number 10. I think you get a specific slot. And I was given energy, and I knew not very much about energy. I knew that the Green Deal [a coalition policy to increase household energy efficiency] was not a big success and I was a little nervous of that, I can tell you. I think it was a fairly short conversation. It was one of those things where David Cameron was just allocating junior roles to people who he thought could perhaps handle it on the next step. I hadn’t particularly shown an interest in energy. Your first ministerial role really is a test, in a way the Whips’ Office is not, because the Whips’ Office is very collegiate. It’s a completely different environment to any other ministerial post, because you’re not doing the [House of Commons] chamber. And you cannot succeed as a minister if you cannot do the chamber. It’s your first step in the ministerial ladder, that’s really how you will be judged for the next step.

It was a short conversation. I just said “thank you” – and left and went and collected my things from the Whips’ Office and went to the department, where Ed Davey, of course, was the secretary of state. I arrived in the department and Ed was away. A phone call was immediately arranged with him and he was absolutely charming. Of course, you remember the very charming things that people say and try to forget the less charming ones. And he said “I’m so pleased it’s you”. Because I expect he was worried that there might have been a Conservative allocated to him who might not have felt as strongly as I did about the need for an energy transition. So he was very pleased, he was very welcoming. In terms of the coalition, it worked very well. I was very happy to work with him. And we had Matt Hancock as the minister of state, but he was half in BIS [the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] and half in energy.

Let me tell you this, because it was a sort of seminal moment as we went into the 2015 general election. A few months before, I was very nervous because I was in a marginal

seat and there was a reasonable prospect that I would not be coming back. There was a moment when Matt Hancock came into my office and said “could you do the energy section of the Infrastructure Bill?”. The Infrastructure Bill was covering a whole lot of issues and we in energy had a section. And of course, I said, yes. It would be my first and possibly only opportunity to stand at the dispatch box and take legislation through. I turned to my private office and said “great news, Matt’s asked me to do this”. And they were like, “that is outrageous, you should not be doing that”. They're very defensive, as I'm sure you know, of what they think their minister’s responsibilities are. It was the first time I'd come across that. I said “no, no, I’m doing it”. Because it may be my last chance to do anything. I'm not going to be strategic or planning about this, this is it. And so, I got my chance to do it.

When people ask me “how did you get to the senior levels you got to?”, that was an important stepping stone. Because as we did the Infrastructure Bill, our portion was about fracking and shale. Hugely controversial. But unusually, not just controversial with Labour, controversial within the coalition. And when I was at the dispatch box, taking the legislation through on where you could and couldn't frack, the negotiations between [Nick Clegg](#) [deputy prime minister 2010–15] and David Cameron were ongoing. The chamber was packed. Tom Greatrex [shadow energy minister 2011–15] – the man who lost a 24,000 majority – was opposite me and outraged at things going on. It was one of those moments in the chamber. And Matt Hancock came and sat next to me and said “we haven't made up our minds yet about these clauses”. And I'm taking them through now. Sorry?! I could see him thinking “thank God I'm not doing this”. He went out to the Whips’ Office and he came back again. By that point, I had told the House why we were not accepting the amendments with certain clauses. And he handed me a note saying, the prime minister’s done a deal with Nick Clegg, we're accepting them. And so, I had to get up and say “but on the other hand...”. I mean, looking back on it, it was quite exhilarating, but it was baptism by fire. Tom Greatrex called a point of order, everybody was outraged. And I just had to go stony-faced, ‘why, why, no, this is fine’. But it was a moment where I was perceived to have performed well and got it through without running out of the room screaming. I think that had a big impact on my promotion that came next.

**TD: Let’s talk about that. Because you kept your seat at the election and afterwards you were appointed the secretary of state at DECC [Department of Energy and Climate Change] in the Conservative majority government. What was it like, that transition, both from the junior minister role to the secretary of state, but also from a coalition into a majority government?**

**AR:** It’s fantastic when you're promoted within a department, because you're not starting again. Either with the people, or with your priorities, or with getting to know where you're supposed to go. Everything about it. It’s such an obvious comment to make and it is something that goes terribly wrong in all politician’s lives really, is you need to stay in your lane. I was absolutely delighted to be promoted to secretary of

state. And I can see why it happened. Because we all look for meaning in our lives and it was a good thing to do for the government, to get somebody who actually had some feeling for it, who had been involved, and could hit the ground running. David Cameron said to me, keep the bills down and get the deal in Paris. Actually, that was exactly the right message. I mean, it was harder to do than say, but it was absolutely the right priorities, which I distilled down into decarbonise basically, to get the deal in Paris. Taking over from Ed Davey was great – Ed had done a great job. There's this myth that goes around that people don't get sessions with the person they replace. I think sometimes they don't but, in my experience, I always have. I've given them and I've received them. Ed Davey did get in touch and we had a lovely long chat, and he was very helpful. He'd lost his seat, of course, so he didn't have a stake. He was great. And people say to me “well done, for getting the UK to sign up to the Paris Climate. Well done”. He did all the work. It was like a rugby game, you know, he chucked me the ball in the last 10 yards. I didn't drop it, but he did most of the hard work. So, it was great. It worked out very well.

Did I notice any real difference? I suppose the pressure the Lib Dems put on the Conservative government to be much more on the front foot on decarbonising, was taken away. So even though David Cameron wanted to decarbonise – the whole hug-a-husky initiative stuff was very much authentic to David Cameron – once you have no check on the Conservative right wing, i.e. a coalition, it is very difficult to manage them without compromising and leaning into them a bit. So, some of the concessions we had to make along the way – the whole ‘cut the green crap’ moment – didn't reflect well on the Conservative Party, it was tricky. But overall, I think that we did reasonably well. We did run a good operation over the Paris Climate Change [Agreement] negotiations. I was very committed to it.

**TD: On Paris, I wonder if we can talk a bit more about it. The UK is hosting the next big climate conference next year. What lessons can we learn from last time about how the UK can make a success of the Glasgow conference in 2021?**

**AR:** It was a brilliant diplomatic endeavour by the French. There is a lot to learn about how they managed it, how they corralled nearly 200 countries. The world leaders came at the start – that they'd learnt from Copenhagen [which hosted a similar summit in 2009]. One of the reasons people believed Copenhagen failed was because the world leaders came at the end to sign. There was too much pressure. And then it snowed and so people didn't know whether they were going to leave. So, it all fell apart in Copenhagen. And they learnt a lot from Copenhagen for Paris.

I worry that this government is preoccupied – not unreasonably – with Covid, completely by Brexit, and needs to be much more on the front foot, on the world stage. Taking the opportunity that Biden's election gives us, to really deliver on the country's Global Britain, post-Brexit badging of itself. And I've said so in an interview in the *Sunday Times* this Sunday, but I think it should be in the Foreign Office, a Foreign Office

endeavour. However, I think it's going to be quite successful. I mean, it should be successful. China is committed, the US is committed. The announcements are that we are largely in line with Paris' efforts to get us to two degrees or less [of warming], so it should be a successful COP [Conference of the Parties, the official name for the UN climate conference]. But I worry the government is a bit distracted.

**TD: You mentioned that after the change from the coalition to the Conservative government, there was a different emphasis put on some of the issues that DECC was dealing with. One of them was this bearing down on the costs of green policy on households at the same time as trying to tackle fuel poverty. It's a very contentious area politically: you've got the Treasury bearing down, you've got both viewpoints in parliament. How do you manage such a politically difficult topic as a secretary of state?**

**AR:** I think that you have to have some sort of core belief of what you're trying to do, otherwise you can't distinguish what's a good outcome and what's a bad outcome. That's a theme that I felt very strongly in my other jobs as well. You're right about your assessment about how the Conservatives stay green when we're just purely Conservatives – which is harder. But on the other hand, there were some things that I was able to do that we couldn't have done with the Lib Dems that were very conservative – that got a better outcome.

For instance, I came under quite a lot of criticism for cutting the solar grant quite aggressively, but when I went into cabinet, just after I announced that, one cabinet minister came up to me and said "I'm so pleased you've done that, my brother was set to make £250,000". I mean, the Conservative approach to looking after taxpayers' money was able to really thrive in a way that we couldn't under the Lib Dems, who put it [green policies] first. And the Renewable Heat Incentive absolutely destroyed the Northern Ireland government because it was all 'cash for ash'. But in GB, when they explained it to me, I sat there saying "who gets these things?" I was shown all these amazing country houses. And I said these are not people who need taxpayer support. This was taxpayer support rather than support from the bills. So, we would use that.

I think that it depends where you put the priority, but the truth is, solar has continued to thrive, it doubles in capacity every five years. The difficulty on offshore wind, and on other elements, was quite astute. I remember as secretary of state going to sit with the chancellor [George Osborne], and he had his red pen out and was wanting to cut everything. He was looking for £20 or £30 billion. He just put a red line through carbon capture and storage. We had £1 billion taken out of that programme, which basically killed it. There was nothing I could do.

Oliver Letwin [minister of state for government policy 2010–16] helped me, he really was an energy expert. I remember him saying to me "it's so interesting, I've read studies on the studies". That's quite a lot of expertise. He came to a meeting with me, with the chancellor, and we arrived at a compromise on offshore wind, where the auctions

would stay in place, but they were a very competitive starting point, which was £105 per megawatt hour. At that point, I think offshore wind was coming in at £135, but it was obviously coming down. And when we said £105, the offshore wind sector people said “oh, that's far too competitive, it can't be done”. I think now it's down at £40 or something. It's a really good example of an industrial policy that worked.

In terms of how government works, I think having a convincing argument, again, which you believe in – you're not just defending your territory. See, that's one of the things I find is difficult in government, is this concept of defending your territory because you happen to be secretary of state for this, but, on the other hand, is the obligation to cabinet. So going in to see him with somebody else who was an expert, in this case, Oliver Letwin, and finding a compromise that worked. I mean, access to the chancellor is pretty key to anything you want to do.

**TD: You had been parliamentary private secretary (PPS) to George Osborne earlier on in the coalition. Were you particularly close to him and did that help - because he was particularly powerful in the Cameron world, wasn't he?**

**AR:** Yes, I knew him. And it did help. I didn't know him at all at first, I was made his PPS out of the blue, to me. I did a year with him and got to know him. Having that relationship was critical to my confidence to be able to go and see him and try and successfully persuade him to back offshore wind.

**Alice Lilly (AL): Let's talk now about your time as home secretary. In July 2016, Theresa May appointed her first cabinet. Could you tell us a little bit about how that transition to being home secretary worked?**

**AR:** Well, after the referendum [on EU membership], I rather thought my political career was over. Because I was clearly on the losing side and I hadn't held back in fighting to Remain. I genuinely thought that was it. As Theresa May became the candidate to back – as we know, Boris [Johnson] and Michael [Gove] sort of blew each other out of the water – and I got closer to her, it dawned on me that I was going to get a role, probably. But one is slow to adapt to a changing climate sometimes. And I was very happy in energy. So I was actually slightly surprised when I found myself in the briefings, before she began to appoint, as potentially having a major role. I hadn't been particularly close to her. I don't know really – I say that with all modesty – why I entered her sights like that, I didn't particularly know her. As I said, I'd been on the losing side, so it surprised me.

Actually, I remember the moment. I was in a car, on my way to an event, and I literally just got the call from Number 10 and I had to say to my driver, could we just turn around and go back. My daughter texted me a picture – she was watching on Sky TV – ‘Amber Rudd's car turns around’. So, we went in and it was dark – it was nighttime at that point. It was absolutely extraordinary arriving at Number 10, with the lights going, the cameras going, they're all shouting at you. What is the point of shouting at you at

that point – because you're going to find out in a minute. I went in, sat in front of her. By that point, I knew Boris had been appointed [as foreign secretary] and I think David Davis had been appointed [as secretary of state for exiting the EU], so it became pretty clear this is where I was heading. I sat in front of her and she set it out for me and described the three tiers of the Home Office, which are immigration, counterterrorism and policing, and what the priorities were in each of them. But she didn't go into any detail. I mean, why would she? She had a government to set up. Once I had my marching orders, I was out, basically. One of the themes of my various appointments is that I never negotiated. I can't really understand people who did sit in front of the prime minister and negotiate, but on reflection maybe that's because I was always kind of on the way up, always, so I didn't have to discuss anything really. She just set it out for me.

The extraordinary thing about becoming home secretary is that the protection officers are waiting for you outside and then your life completely changes. She was very sweet about it actually, Theresa, she said “you will find it very surprising, dealing with protection officers”. It is an extraordinary way to live your life. Perhaps if I'd come up from the Home Office, I would have thought about it or prepared myself for it a bit. From that moment on, for nearly two years, you have protection officers covering absolutely everything you do and where you go. And it takes some adjustment.

**AL: You've mentioned that the prime minister set out some of the priorities for the Home Office. How did you find it taking over from a very long-serving home secretary who has just become prime minister? How did you try and make your mark on the role?**

**AR:** The thing about the Home Office, unlike any other job, is that it comes at you really fast. The other jobs I had – energy and work and pensions– you think about your priorities and you can get ahead. The thing about the Home Office is that you almost can't... Because my first thing I had to do was the independent inquiry into child sex abuse, if you recall, that Theresa May had set up. It had a very controversial start; it couldn't get a chairman to stick. There was a New Zealand woman, who had just gone home because she'd said some rather unfortunate comments. I had to find a new one. And I was in and out of the House quite a lot, immediately.

I did set some priorities and they came out of events, really. Which was, in 2017, about terrorism. In 2017, we were hit by terrorism, very fast, very hard. One of the pieces of evidence was that most of the terrorists that we saw in the UK were being groomed online and were receiving publications from the terrorist organisations and were accessing material about how to get bombs. It was at that stage where people weren't sure how to get social media to take that stuff down. So I formed a programme with some fantastic people at the Home Office. There's a lot of talk about the Home Office being rubbish. Not true. There are some rubbish people there, like there are in any organisation. But actually, particularly in the area of terrorism and counterterrorism, they were absolutely fantastic. We took this plan to get the US to work with us to set up a new organisation internationally, which would be led by the social media companies



and would take terrorist material offline and would teach other new social media companies how to do it. And it's enduring. It's called GIFCT [Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism] and it carries on – I think Facebook run it now – and they do a really good job. So I set priorities differently at the Home Office, because we were assaulted by so much activity.

**AL: On the point about terrorism, what is it like to actually have to deal with those incidents, as home secretary? You say they come up very suddenly, you have to react very quickly, but what's that process actually like?**

**AR:** First of all, you have very good people around you in that sector. As I said earlier, not about everything, but in this particular area. Everyone says "oh, the UK is the world leader in this or that". The UK *is* the world leader in cybersecurity. GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters] and MI5, they're fantastic. They're very well informed. They know how to handle a home secretary. They come and see you, they give you the information. You feel well supported. I think it's about trying to keep your cool and trying to show empathy for the victims and trying to make sure that you collect all the information around you. I would say that you're making very few decisions, because mostly you're absorbing the experts' advice and agreeing to it or challenging it, hopefully challenging it as well, but, ultimately, you're not making operational decisions. It's rather like with the police, you don't make operational decisions. And as soon as COBR [the Civil Contingencies Committee, convened to handle major disruptions or national emergencies which meets in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room] is held, you go out and do the TV report. You've got to be able to absorb, distil and then communicate what's going on, with certainty.

It's like when we had the cyberattack on the NHS, the WannaCry virus, in April 2017. It was a busy year. There was very little decision making for me. What I had to do was convene COBR and find out what was going on. Because all we knew is that hospitals were receiving ransomware and I had to reassure the National Cyber Security Centre that they were doing the right thing and make sure that they had the confidence to deliver the right message, a reassuring message. And because it was a first it felt slightly different. Because the thing is about terrorist attacks is that we'd had them before and we'd rehearsed them, but a cyberattack we hadn't so much. But they did really well. And we had a protocol which was the expert goes first [in the briefing]. If it was something involving the police, they would go first. If it was something involving a cyberattack, the head of the National Cyber Security Centre would go first, and then the politician goes. So the facts are out there and then you're reassuring people.

**AL:** You've touched on this a bit already, talking about some of the officials that you worked with at the Home Office and how supported you felt. Generally, how would you reflect on the culture and working environment of the Home Office and your relationships with officials there, particularly comparing that to your experience at DECC previously.

**AR:** I suppose, the difference really is a difference in character of two different departments. DECC is a department which is trying to do something noble, in a way. Although, of course, it got closed as soon as I left, rather unfortunately. But it felt like the people there really believed in what they were doing, a sort of noble cause in terms of decarbonising and keeping people's bills down. All that felt quite interesting, contained, people would come up with interesting ideas.

The Home Office – it's homeland security, it's a defensive position. It's a completely different environment really. I mean, I did feel that it had very good people working there. My private office, for example. As I say, the department divides into counterterrorism, policing and immigration. Counterterrorism, first class. Policing, also good. And of course, immigration was where I was unable really to get to grips with what was going on. I look back on that and wonder how I could have done it better. I think that I could have got more involved in what was going on in the immigration side, but then I don't think I could have worked longer hours and I don't know how you can prioritise trying to find out what's going on in parts of the department when you're at COBR trying to deal with terrorist attacks. The only thing I can think is whether there is a possibility for hiving immigration out into somebody else's portfolio. Making a separate department for immigration perhaps. Because it's never going to be a priority for a good reason, i.e. trying to get a really first-class system that does what it says on the tin.

I do recall one of the problems I had was that we needed a new director general for immigration enforcement. And we advertised internally and externally. I think we didn't get anybody the first time, and the runner up, but – this terrible civil service term which is a term I learnt to hate – 'they weren't above the line, minister'. We did it twice and nobody was above the line, minister. It was absolutely infuriating because the second time we did it there was a guy I wanted to appoint who was a former policeman from Wales, who I thought had the right combination of empathy, as well as understanding it was a tough job. But in the end, nobody was above the line, minister. So the guy who got it, was this guy who had been acting DG (director general) on it but didn't really have the capacity. But I accepted the judgement of the civil service and I should not have done that. I should have pushed back. And when it came to the whole issue with Windrush and with targets, and the source of the information... it was like jelly, trying to find out what was going on when I needed it. Nobody really knew. I think that is a hard thing though – and don't know how you address this – is how do you get a really good person to do immigration enforcement. I think you've got to have it as a top job under a secretary of state who has a lot of time for it.

**AL: Looking back on that period in the spring of 2018 when all the news around Windrush broke [when British citizens were mistakenly deported], how do you reflect on that time and what were some of the lessons that you've taken from that?**

**AR:** The latest report from the EHRC [Equality and Human Rights Commission] just came out about what happened. I feel that, clearly, the mistakes that were put into legislation were done as a result of the 2013 and 2016 Immigration Act regulations. I wasn't home secretary when that was done, but I do think that the biggest problem for the government over Windrush is that there didn't seem to be a mechanism for interrupting the home secretary and saying "are you clear what is going to happen if we do this?". Because both that report and Wendy Williams' report really were very damning of the Home Office. People were being told, they just weren't listening. So, I think what I come back to is that immigration does not get enough attention and thought from a department that deals with terrorism and policing as a priority.

And I think that partly reflects the public's mood. I think the public only gets really wound up about immigration when politicians speak to them in a way that suggests there's a real problem. But I think there is an issue of kindness and how you treat people. And immigration is a very difficult area to get right, to obey the law, to do what's right and also to be kind to people. I think that it takes somebody with really careful attention to detail and wanting to deliver a system... the current home secretary [Priti Patel] refers to tough but fair. That's not really what I mean – what else are we going to do to make sure that Windrush doesn't happen again? What else are we going to do to make sure to treat people in a way that they get answers sooner? I think it also requires some investment. I come back to this thing about where does it belong, immigration? Maybe it belongs somewhere else or in its own department. Because the cost of getting things wrong in immigration is not just another £10 on your bill, like it might be in DECC, but it's people's individual lives and I think that we haven't got that right at the moment.

**AL: What is it like to be a minister in the midst of a storm like that? You've already talked about how as home secretary there are a lot of personal adjustments that you have to make in terms of close protection officers, but also there is far greater scrutiny. How was that period?**

**AR:** It's very difficult for your family and that's one of the things that, not unreasonably, puts people off from high office. Because everybody comes under scrutiny when you get really quite high up. It takes a certain nerve, really, when the storm hits and you have the cameras outside your house and people shouting at you. It comes back to what I said before – you have to believe in what you're doing. You have to believe that the position you've taken is the right one and it's worth defending. I'll never forget hearing about Estelle Morris, the Labour MP who resigned really quickly from being education secretary, because she did something – I don't even know what it was – but she got hounded out really quickly. I think particularly as a woman, that's just so

unfortunate. I mean, this is a by-product, I'm not thinking about it at the time, but it's a really bad sign to other women if you get hounded out. So I didn't feel I was hounded out.

But when I called up a number of secretaries of state – I resigned on Sunday evening – to tell them I was resigning, they were all like, “what, what are you doing?”. You know, some of them had been through it, like Jeremy Hunt, of course, he'd been through it when he was culture minister [2010–12]. Philip Hammond [chancellor of the exchequer 2016–19] said to just see it out, see it out. But I felt that sort of the mistakes that the government had made, and that the Home Office had made, required the resignation of the home secretary, irrespective of my own mistakes during the select committee. In a way, the select committee was nothing, really – it wasn't really the point. The point was we had apparently deported people. Up until that point when I resigned, I was still being told by the Home Office, they were going through the files, the relevant files, that they didn't think that anybody had been actually illegally deported. And Saj [Sajid Javid] had started [as home secretary] on the Monday, and a week later he said we now know 164 have been deported. So, they really did not know what was going on. And the fact that the Home Office did not know what was going on required the resignation of the home secretary. And it did reset it and allow the new home secretary to try and fix it.

**TD: As you say, this is a longstanding issue, you just were there when it came to a head. But do you think, from conversations you've had, from the attitude of the civil servants you worked with, that the Home Office is capable of making the changes that is needed? Do you think it will be able to avoid something like this happening again?**

**AR:** Yes, I do, but only if a home secretary makes it a priority. There are only so many hours in the day and nervous energy somebody's got, so I think it will be hard. But I don't see why they shouldn't. It should be perfectly possible. I also think that, perhaps just in terms of how government takes place, I made a mistake in not using my immigration minister more. Mind you, I had three within two years. It's like that theme, good government is leaving people in place. But they didn't know what was going on either.

**TD: A few months after that, you came back into government as secretary of state for work and pensions. What was it like coming back in a new and bigger department? How did that compare to your previous roles?**

**AR:** Very nice coming back in. It was nice to be lifted off the floor. By the way, between leaving the Home Office and coming back in, I had a conversation with Yvette Cooper [Labour chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee since 2016]. And she said “you could have stayed, you know”. I'm like, what? I thought you were calling for me to go. And she said “yeah, you could have done what Ruth Kelly [secretary of state for transport under Gordon Brown] did”, and apparently Ruth Kelly had a moment like this when she made some comment that got her into real trouble. And she said “I'm not

going to comment any further until an independent investigation has taken place”. Yvette said to me “the first thing you should have done was suspend any comments about it as you left the room and said ‘three months, I'm going to need, to sort this out, and I'll come back to you then’”. She may have been right, she may have been right. Although I think it was too serious an issue. It wasn't just a comment that I made, underlying it was really something terribly serious. But anyway.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was great to come back into. It was really lovely for me to feel that I was still involved, and I was still wanted. So that was great. A fantastically interesting department, one of the biggest spending departments in the government. And of course, now I knew which levers to pull and when. I felt like a veteran. It was great. I went and got my own private secretary, quite early on. Which I do think I would never have had the confidence to do before. I brought someone in from the Home Office who had been in my private office, who was fantastic. I do think that's important. I appointed some spads [special advisers], which was good. Thinking about your comments about spads, when Ed Davey was secretary of state for energy, he had a spad who was almost as senior as he was, somebody of the same sort of age, but was really knowledgeable. I think there's a lot to be said for that. And I never found that because I went into DWP, I inherited one young, but very effective, spad from Esther McVey [secretary of state for work and pensions, January to November 2018] and brought in a media spad of my own. And Eleanor Shawcross came in and worked with me, she was fantastic. She's now on the board at DWP, so that's good, for continuity. But I do think the new secretary of state could do with expert spads alongside them rather than just people fighting your corner with other spads.

**TD: That's a big department. Do you need more spads? You're covering such a wide waterfront.**

**AR:** No, I don't think so. I mean, where you need more spads is somewhere like the Home Office where everything comes at you so fast. DWP you've got much more opportunity to plan and decide what your priorities are. The first thing I did was the two-child policy, whereby you can only claim benefits for up to two children. And that was about to go retrospective at the start of 2019. So if you lost your job and you had four children, you would only get support for two, even though you'd had the other two before the policy came in. Clearly problematic. So I had to work hard, immediately, to get that changed. And I could only do it by making it a priority and corralling people. You get things done in politics by getting people together. Getting certain MPs to complain, getting Philip Hammond on side, who said “fine, Amber, but you find the money”. Eventually we did it. I definitely feel it was a very good early sign to show that I could achieve this.

**TD:** You entered DWP in autumn of 2018. The following year Theresa May's premiership came to an end, there was a Conservative leadership contest and then Boris Johnson took over as prime minister. You stayed on in cabinet, unlike some others on your wing of the party that was more critical of his leadership. Can you tell us why you took that decision?

**AR:** I wasn't sure... I'm going to choose my words more carefully now. If I was going to leave cabinet, I wanted it to be on my own terms. Even though I hadn't backed Boris Johnson in the leadership, I knew him – I know him. I thought I would give him a chance and he clearly thought he would give me a chance. I went into it thinking I hope this can work. I wanted to stay at DWP. I had discovered that I thought that I could make it better, I thought I could improve it. I thought I could improve the quality of people's lives who were receiving benefits or on pensions by the work that I did and the levers that I pulled. I wanted to stay. I didn't want to move on again or leave, if at all possible. So I tried to do that, but I found I couldn't. Because of Boris Johnson's working style.

The last thing I did before I left DWP was to arrange training for somebody in every job centre to spot domestic abuse. By that point, that last year as a secretary of state, I'd worked out that one of the things you can do – not in every department, but I could do in DWP – was things that didn't require legislation and didn't really require funding. But I still found things that sort of surprised me, like benefits sanctions. The department would go around saying there are no unlimited sanctions. And it turns out that effectively there are, there were. I only got to the answer on that by really probing and probing and probing. Sometimes getting that information out can be hard. The other thing on sanctions is that when I was interrogating them, I said "well, how many people have got sanctions of a year?" Because they have sanctions, in theory, one week, two weeks, three months, six months, a year. And I think the answer came back, "two people". So I made an announcement that we were ending sanctions that were over six months. And everyone was like, oh, sensible, sensible, sensible. But it got more coverage than it was entitled to because there were only two cases. It can be quite hard sometimes in a department getting the information that would help a minister. Again, it's a shame people don't get longer.

**TD:** There's a lot to unpick on DWP. It deals with such big issues.

**AR:** Yes, but look how well Thérèse [Coffey, current secretary of state for work and pensions] is doing. She's just keeping her head down basically and getting on with it. I will say one thing on DWP, if I may, is that as part of no-deal preparations under Boris, my no-deal preparations were that there was going to be mass unemployment. I was obviously a marked woman for being too anti-Brexit. But I could see mass unemployment around the corner if we left without a deal. So fortunately, the DWP was completely ready for Covid. I don't think I can take all the credit, but we kept all the staff there to deal with the rise in unemployment that we were expecting. In fact, rather to my embarrassment, at the end of several no-deal meetings chaired by Michael Gove

[chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster], EU XO, as they were called, we were congratulated as being one of the best performing departments in preparation for Brexit, which made me even less popular with some people.

**TD: You did resign in autumn of last year. Why was that moment the moment for you? What was the thought process then?**

**AR:** Well, you've said earlier about me staying on, when actually I'd been on a different wing of the party that left. Really that was it. But I would have stayed – and wanted to stay – because I felt that there was important work to be done at DWP, and I regret not being able to continue that work. But it was Boris Johnson's style of government, really. It was the way he treated other people and his determination to deliver Brexit, whatever the cost in terms of the economy and – I thought – the consequences to people's lives.

The prorogation [of parliament, later ruled unlawful by the UK Supreme Court] was really the tipping point for me. The line was that the prorogation was only taking place because this parliament had gone on for so long. And everybody knew that this prorogation was taking place to try and avoid a vote in parliament to stop the prime minister being able to leave without a deal on 31 October. And it made me uncomfortable that it wasn't entirely accurate. A pattern of those sort of things. It's not a coincidence both Jo Johnson [minister of state for universities, and the prime minister's brother] and I jumped out the same week.

**AL: You've touched on lots of really helpful reflections about what it's like to be a minister and what some of the frustrations, as well as some of the perhaps happier points, are. What advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be most effective in office? And is there any particular advice that you would give to female ministers?**

**AR:** I would always suggest to ministers, and secretaries of state, new to a job, to try and have a good chat with the exiting one. Of course, that's going to be more difficult in a different party, but not necessarily. So that they know what the key issues are. I think that if you're being promoted within the department, you're very lucky, because it's just so helpful knowing where to go. No sudden, early decisions, if possible. Because you look back after six months with amazement at how little you knew when you started. You've got to really just try and buy yourself some time while you get to know what's going on. Try and make sure you've got a good private secretary in the office.

To women, particularly, I think that networking – everyone talks about networking as though it's something of the past – is so important. It's so important. It's like your earlier question about having got to know George Osborne. There is a kind of boys' club-type behaviour in parliament because it is still more like a public school or a university club than anywhere else you'll ever go. I fear that it's going backwards a bit at the moment because unless you have the leadership really making an effort to ensure

that women are promoted as equals, all the time – not just because, oh, let's promote the women, we forgot about the women – it's going to be a problem. I see that in Boris Johnson, I'm afraid. Even though I don't dislike him at all. He's come from that establishment group. And also, he has that sort of language, which he's – quite rightly – nervous of using in front of women.

So, to women I would say, always put yourself forward, always volunteer. It's like my mother used to say to me at school. As a backbencher, I was an absolute creep in the House, getting in there, making questions, taking speeches, the whole thing. It's also good practice. Someone like Stella Creasy [Labour MP], I think, is a very good example of someone who got herself established very quickly as a voice on women. I did a campaign early on as a backbencher on teenage pregnancies and how to limit them. It was a good way to work cross-party, it was my first showing on Newsnight. Women journalists particularly noticed, and I started getting mentioned.

**AL:** And is there anything that we've not talked about or that we've not raised that you would like to add?

**AR:** Just to say that it's a fantastic job being a minister. Even better one being a secretary of state. So even when parts of it are hell, it is worth it.



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