

Ministers Reflect Eric Pickles



12 January 2022

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

April 1992 – May 2017: MP for Brentwood and Ongar

Government career

May 2010 – May 2015: Secretary of state for communities and local government

August 2014 – March 2015: Minister for faith

Lord Pickles was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Graham Atkins on 12 January 2022 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.

Lord Pickles considers his five years as secretary of state for communities and local government, including his early experiences of the department and what it was like to govern as a coalition. He also discusses the balance between devolving power to, and imposing spending cuts on, local government.

Tim Durrant (TD): Can we start by talking about when you first entered government in 2010 – after the election – when you were appointed as secretary of state for communities and local government. What was the conversation you had with the prime minister at that point?

Eric Pickles (EP): Well, I’d had an earlier conversation, after I took on the chairmanship of the Conservative Party, as to, if we won the election, what would happen. Now, my working assumption, prior to looking like we were going to take the 2010 [election], was that I’d be the Gerald Kaufman [a Labour MP from 1970–2017, Kaufman did not hold any ministerial posts during the New Labour years, despite taking on various high-profile shadow cabinet positions between 1980 and 1992] or the Roy Hattersley [deputy leader of the Labour Party until 1997, when Labour won the general election] of the Conservative Party, essentially doing a lot of work to get us into power, to watch other people become ministers.

But towards the end, as we were getting closer, David [Cameron, then leader of the Conservative Party] called me and said that he had a big job in mind for me. It didn’t go further than that. So after the election I went to see him and, bearing in mind I’d been his party chairman, so I’d been seeing him virtually daily for the best part of a year and a half, it was actually quite formal. We sat in the cabinet room; he formally asked me if I’d take the position of secretary of state; I accepted. I then went upstairs into the main reception room to virtually kiss hands with Nick Clegg [then deputy prime minister], who was sort of stood there, as a solitary figure, waiting to see the ministers troop up to see him. That, indeed, was quite convivial.

TD: And did you have any conversations with the prime minister about his or your priorities for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) at that time?

EP: Well, we had a manifesto, which we’d produced with enormous worry, particularly for Oliver Letwin [who was heavily involved in the development of Conservative policy at the time], so I had a rough idea of what I wanted to do. I had done the opposition job prior to becoming party chairman. I knew we were going to be very committed to localism. I knew that we were going to look very hard at planning and to try and bring it back into some kind of human form. And I also recognised that public expenditure was

going to be cut and that I was going to have to break the bad news to local government that, while we were going to give them a lot more powers, we were going to give them an awful lot less money.

TD: We'll come onto spending cuts in a bit. But just to continue from the very beginning, having had that conversation in Downing Street, did you then go straight to the department?

EP: Yes, bearing in mind that normally you get a degree of contact in opposition with the department, talking through the manifesto commitments. But I had none of that because I was party chairman, so I wasn't entirely certain where the department was [*laughs*]. And so I had to wait for my new PS [private secretary] to arrive to take me there. And we arrived, and you get this sort of Kremlin-like greeting in which the entire staff come out and start applauding. And there was obviously some uncertainty that it was going to be me. I think they expected another minister – another secretary of state. And we went up and I met my private office, and then we started to get moving.

TD: And what was your impression of both the private office and the wider department over those first days and weeks?

EP: The impression when I first walked through the door was, "My God, we employ an awful lot of people". Because, remember, that department has no function. It isn't even a regulator. It may produce a regulatory reform bill, but it doesn't actually do anything other than distribute funds and set a tone. But in terms of the best advice I received, that was several decades earlier, from Nigel Lawson when he was secretary of state for energy. I happened to be at a conference at which the poor man put up with speaking to a bunch of young Conservatives around a breakfast table in Scarborough. And he was chatting about what it was like to be a secretary of state and the amount of time it took up: it was essentially very early mornings and very late nights. And someone said to him, "Well, how do you manage it?" And he said, "Because I know that one day it will end." And that was always very much at the front of my mind. It's advice that I always have given to people who become ministers: don't occupy the post, do something with it. So I was pretty determined to move things along fairly sharp-ish.

TD: Getting into the day to day then, what did that look like? How did you make things move along?

EP: Well, first of all, I tried to establish a routine, and the then permanent secretary arrived with our manifesto and produced a booklet on how we would implement it, which I quickly looked at. And it was a very corporate approach – almost the very antithesis of what I wanted to do. And he kept asking me if I wanted to do it, and I kept saying, "Well, not really". He said, "Well, what's wrong with it?" So I said, "I don't like the typeface." And they went away and had a meeting, and then realised that actually that was my polite way of saying, "I really don't like the approach whatsoever."

Basically, I ran the department on the basis of a tracker system. So the top 40 items that were important, I would track their progress in terms of delivery. And the first important thing was to get room to produce the Localism Act [2011], which I think was the largest act of parliament that the coalition government produced in its whole term. And that was quite a hassle, in terms of getting agreement from the legislative committee, and then ensuring that we worked out how many sessions we were going to take, how quickly we could get it through. We looked in terms of the secondary legislation because there's no point in passing vast grand designs unless you actually implement them. And I think we created a record in terms of getting the whole act implemented in very quick time.

TD: And what was your relationship with the civil service like generally? You mentioned they presented this plan, and you weren't happy with that approach, so how did you go about discussing that, and how did you make that work?

EP: By and large, I think my personal and private office were extremely helpful, and I found colleagues in the senior civil service very happy. It's a partnership – not a master and servant relationship – essentially, they kind of deliver what you want to do in the department. But it's your job to deliver what you want to do in parliament. And if you get that out of kilter, you get into serious trouble. I told the private office I really had two things that I required from them. One was I expected loyalty, and secondly that, when things went wrong, they should tell me, and they should tell me promptly. And I promised them I wouldn't seek to blame them for things going wrong because things do, and I was more interested in finding a way out of the problem.

"Yes", they said, "of course". But, of course, the first thing that happened was that mine was the first department to actually lose a vote on a piece of legislation, which was a not very important piece of local government reorganisation, I think in the West Country. And we lost it. I mean, we were able to bring it back, it was kind of okay. But we were then in Eland House [then the office building for DCLG] and I think, if you'd have put a drone on the top of Eland House and looked down, you would have seen all the senior civil servants disappearing like a great exodus while that was happening. And I had to sort it out with my own SpAds [special advisers] and my private office and junior officials: something that I noted with great interest.

TD: And what was your relationship with Bob Kerslake like, who was permanent secretary for most of your time at DCLG?

EP: Yes, I recruited Bob. Bob, I knew in rather a strange way, because when he was chief executive of Sheffield City Council, when I was a backbencher, he once threatened to sue me for defamation of his council. And I was pretty well aware that he was virtually on the left of politics, but I really wanted somebody who was very competent, who knew housing extraordinarily well. And I have to say, I got along with Bob enormously well. I still respect him. He always gave me loyalty and he always gave me, actually,

pretty good advice. And I don't think we could have really got the housing programme going, particularly when the Treasury raided the capital programme early on. We wouldn't have been able to recover and get back without Bob's help, and I remain grateful to him to this day.

TD: What about relationships with other ministers? How did you run the ministerial team?

EP: Well, remember it was a coalition, and I took the view that you couldn't have a Tory caucus inside that ministerial team that would meet regularly. And throughout the whole of the five years, I never had a separate meeting with Conservatives, and I thought that was important to build a degree of trust. Obviously, it's slightly different because, when you've got a coalition, the Lib Dem in the department, they have a greater importance than their title actually gives them. So, in a way, you've got to ensure, for the good running, that there is total transparency in terms of what you're doing. So I suppose it's the big difference between the formal and the informal power structure within the department. But I was lucky, I think, in the selection of ministers that we had.

TD: You mentioned you spoke to Nick Clegg on your first day, and that obviously you had Lib Dem ministers in the department. How much then did the coalition arrangement affect the way you ran the department, or the way you approached policy? Was it a daily consideration, or was it only when there were particular issues that cut across the two parties' priorities? How did it play out?

EP: It was constantly on your mind. You needed to ensure that trust existed. You needed to ensure that it wouldn't be possible for anybody to play games inside the department. So I'd had experience of coalition government in local government, *[laughs]* well actually, we *[the Conservatives]* were in coalition with the Labour Party for a brief period. But what would happen there is that often officials would go behind your back and get the coalition partner to push a particular policy and, fortunately, I never had any of that *[in coalition with the Lib Dems]*.

Because, I think, if you do things out in the open, it's very difficult to ambush politics. And, as I say, we used a tracker quite ruthlessly in terms of ensuring things were delivered, and it had quite a big effect on officials. I am not a shouter by nature, but I've got a reputation for being a bit of a tough bully boy. In truth, I shouted at nobody, I sought to blame nobody, and tried to give the officials a lot of respect.

The other thing I did, which I think was kind of important, and John Gummer said this to me around four years in: "It's remarkable ... the number of urgent questions that have been regranting against you is so low". There were very few attempts to bring me to the chamber to explain, and that's largely because I did an awful lot of written ministerial statements. Say, if you came out of Christmas, you would bring the House immediately

up to date in terms of what had happened in the last few weeks; the same thing after the long recess. So there was very little in terms of having to appear to answer urgent questions in the Commons. And no disrespect to my successors or predecessors, but they seemed to spend an awful lot of their time at the dispatch box responding to the opposition.

Graham Atkins (GA): So I'd like to start off by asking about DCLG and its relationship with local government. DCLG has always had relationships with a lot of vocal membership organisations, councils, councillors etc. How did you engage with local government when you were making policy?

EP: I engaged quite considerably, ensuring that the LGA [Local Government Association] had access to me. I also met with the leadership of the Conservative side on a weekly basis, to ensure they knew what we were doing. Obviously, we were going to have a very big change with regard to localism, and a very big change with regard to housing numbers, which essentially put the onus on local people to decide the numbers in a scientific way. And I recall having a meeting, I think somewhere in the Midlands, which a lot of district council leaders and county leaders came to. And I can remember this guy standing up and saying how much he opposed what we were doing. I replied, "All we are doing is implementing our manifesto." And he said, "Well, the system that exists at the moment is, if we have an unpleasant piece of development take place, we can blame you, but you're putting the onus on us, so it's us that's going to have to take the decision." So I said, "Well, with power comes great responsibility, why not?"

But it was in many ways an indication of some of the problems that we had; localism sounds great on paper but when you're actually faced with the harsh realities with a difficult public, it's often easier to say, "Well, it's them down at Whitehall that want to ..." kind of thing. I think I also decided not to be kipped by the continuous process of, "It's going to be a disaster if local government expenditure is cut and everything is going to come to an end." So I did go onto the front foot with regard to waste that existed in local government and some of the silly spending, which I think made it a little bit more difficult for them. But the other side of that is that I did look at local government finance in terms of what individual councils could face really intensively, and on some occasions, where I thought councils probably should put up their council tax – that they cut their council tax too far – I did intervene privately.

GA: That's really interesting, and I think both planning and council tax are good examples of areas where there are tensions between local decisions and central prescription. So, in general, during your time in the department, how did you set about thinking through what should be managed locally and what should be managed centrally?

EP: Well, there's a presumption in localism that you move everything as close to the people as you can, and I think we were about that, but there did exist the existing

tension of the council tax. And I did make a number of reforms. And what I was quite interested in was this sparsity argument. I did a study that looked at the levels of deprivation. I looked at a couple of London boroughs, and I also looked at some villages in Kent. And there was the same level of deprivation, the same level of poverty. But the thing was that when you're dealing with a London borough – and I kind of knew this from my Bradford experience [Pickles was previously a member of Bradford council] – you have a critical mass in which you can bring services to be able to address that poverty. But in rural areas of Kent, it wasn't really possible to do that, so I did try to bring into the formula some kind of recognition of that.

But it was a halfway house because it was pretty clear that the business rates system was beginning to totter, and I think I put it on the last bit of life support with the long-term aim of a Treasury re-examination of local government finance. Which – let's be really blunt about it – the Treasury completely fluffed, and we got some technical papers that were wholly inadequate. And, in many ways, the things that we've seen happening with Covid in terms of the shifting nature of town centres and the need for companies to spread the load around the country, these things happening now have revealed the weakness of local government funding arrangements. So I think the system with which we fund local government does now require a fundamental overhaul. I don't think it's possible to slap yet another sticking plaster on top of the previous sticking plaster, which was on top of the previous sticking plaster.

GA: So, just continuing with the themes of localism and centralism, during your time in office, DCLG intervened in Doncaster, Tower Hamlets and Rotherham councils. Why did you feel that was necessary?

EP: I can go through each in turn, but what I should probably say is that these were mostly Labour authorities, and the local MPs didn't disagree, the local Labour Party didn't disagree, and largely the councillors didn't disagree. That's because, I think, in all of those, we took enormous trouble to ensure that local members didn't get a surprise. I can tell you precisely why I took a decision.

With Tower Hamlets, there had been complaints for ages, and I think it was PricewaterhouseCoopers [PWC] we sent to have a look. And they did a thorough job. And there was a piece of work looking at deprivation in terms of looking at the grants – this was a small grants kind of thing – where you compared the level of deprivation, and you sort of transported it in terms of where the grant was going, and there was no kind of tie up. And you saw where a good business case had been put forward to receive a grant, which had then been overturned by the members [of the council]. And you saw people putting forward no business case but being given grants by members. So I thought at that point there was something deeply wrong. And obviously, there were more things going on, but, to me, that was the tipping point.

And the tipping point for me in Rotherham was the number of taxis within the area, which was enormous. And they were clearly being used in terms of things relating to the central complaint about abuse towards children, complaints about money laundering, complaints about organised crime and the like. And I felt that it was clear that Rotherham had reached a point where it was ungovernable, and I think I put Louise Casey [previously the commissioner for victims and witnesses and director general of the government's Troubled Families programme] in there. But the idea with all three of the councils was to establish good local governance and get the commissioners out as soon as was practically possible. And I think that's a role that only the centre can do. But I have to say, the support we received from the Local Government Association was tremendous, in terms of getting people quality and understanding. So actually, I put commissioners into more councils than I think anyone has ever done before, but without any real controversy.

GA: So what were the early warnings systems, to alert you to which councils might require intervention?

EP: Well, Doncaster I inherited, or we took rather an early decision on. It was pretty much already moving towards that position. They were fire bells in the night! There was clearly something terribly wrong in Tower Hamlets. There had been too many complaints. Members of parliament talked to me privately about their worries in terms of what was happening within the borough. But in Rotherham, we got early warning of the number and extent of the grooming cases that were going to come. We'd seen a number of failures, and it seemed the only logical thing to do. And, with something like that, I think, going back to the sticking plaster, you've really got to pull it off very quickly and start to kind of re-establish good governance. And again, as I say, the Local Government Association were very good. They were keen to lend senior councillors to go in and help the management system. Other councils were very keen to offer help in terms of guidance and mentoring. So I saw the decision of putting in commissioners as just the very first stage, and, in many ways, not the most important stage. The really important stage was actually trying to re-build and re-establish local government within that area, and to give it confidence to continue.

GA: Another thing I wanted to discuss was the Localism Act 2011, which was obviously one of the biggest legislative changes during your time in DCLG. What were the biggest challenges and successes, do you think, in passing that Act?

EP: The biggest challenge was, how much of that legacy will continue? Because temptation from the centre is always to take back powers and you often get ministers who think, "It'll be you who is at the dispatch box and will have to answer questions about these decisions being made, so wouldn't it be better if you were taking that decision yourself?" I think we changed planning for the better. I think the housing numbers did work under that basis, but I think successive ministers have rather pulled back on that and have gone back to the idea of centrally imposed targets. I think that's a

colossal mistake, but we'll see how it works out. I think it was Zhou Enlai [then premier of the People's Republic of China] who was asked about the effect of the French Revolution, and he said it was too soon to tell. And I think the same is true about localism.

I did a speech to a bunch of developers and, as part of that, somebody dug up for me a Pelican [book] – one of those blue Pelicans that Penguin used to produce, as sort of think pieces. And this was about the planning law in the 1940s. And I looked at it, and it was written, I think, in 1941, when there was no certainty that there would actually be a Britain to do any planning in. But what was kind of refreshing about it was, it put planning into a human scale. What I was trying to do, particularly in the planning framework, was to put it into language that people understood, in which local people could decide about development in a sensible way. I was also quite struck by a work about getting things as close as possible, making decisions in local meetings. They shouldn't be dominated by NIMBYs "not in my back yard", but I had faith that, if people were faced with the reality of their children having nowhere to live near them, of sensible developments that we could move forward with some degree of consent. In some places it worked, and in some places it didn't.

GA: Thinking specifically about the planning changes that came forward, DCLG introduced the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012, and during the draft Greg Clark [then minister of state for decentralisation] set up the Practitioners Advisory Group [a panel of experts advising DCLG on possible changes to the national planning policy framework], which is obviously a slightly different way of making policy than the government and the civil service are used to. How well do you think that model worked?

EP: I really stand by the framework. I thought we did remarkably well. I thought it was important, and I supported Greg in that process of trying to get some practical views in terms of putting things together. I wanted that document to be a living document; it's to my eternal regret that subsequent amendments have expanded it from its initial 50 pages. It's now starting to grow larger and larger and larger, and further and further away from keeping the framework as simple as possible. So I think that, in terms of developing policy, once we'd set the overall strategic view in terms of what it should be, it made an awful lot of sense to be able to bring people who really knew what they were talking about together.

GA: And obviously, a lot of other departments in government, particularly BIS [the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] and the Treasury, had an interest in planning reform. How did the inter-governmental join up work between the departments?

EP: You make an interesting point there, and also, it's about the dynamics of a coalition, as often you would have Tory–Liberal versus Tory–Liberal on a lot of these issues. I

mean, I am a great admirer of George Osborne [then chancellor of the exchequer], but I don't think he was entirely converted to localism. And there was a lot of pressure to try and make it easier to develop. And I think we did a number of things, not least of which was that I separated the housing minister from building regulations. The building regulations actually, throughout the whole period, stayed with the Liberal Democrats, and housing was kept separate. Because I always felt that, if you gave it [building regulations] to the housing minister, it would be a bit like putting a fox in charge of a chicken coop. So then it would always be a transactional process, if changes were going to be made.

I think I had quite a bit of conflict with the centre, who thought I was, ironically, too pro local authorities to put together what they wanted. But I felt I'd produced something that should work long-term because people will not build unless they can make money. You need an environment in which they feel safe, they can actually start to release, and I think toward the end of Cameron's government, we started to see some quite reasonable figures in terms of housing.

GA: Obviously, planning reform was also a big political issue last year. Michael Gove chose to pause the set of reforms when he became secretary of state [for levelling up, housing and communities]. What lessons would you pass on about planning reform from your experience?

EP: This is the number one lesson: if you're going to embark on planning reforms, why don't you check all the previous legislation and see if there is something there that you can actually draw down? It's a point I did make to people. If you take, for example, zoning, zoning was there, it just simply hadn't been implemented. And I think they could have achieved an awful lot.

But I have no criticism personally of any of my successors, I want to make that absolutely clear. But sometimes it's not all about grand gestures, sometimes it's about application and getting down and doing things. And I think many of the things that were required in planning were actually already there on the statute book, but just not being implemented. And I think, to me, being a minister is not about being there and announcing policy, it's about implementing policy and making a difference. I think even now, if they wanted to do things, they could do an awful lot without having to embark on a root and branch planning reorganisation.

GA: You mentioned George Osborne's attitude towards localism. At the same time, the Treasury was quite closely involved in negotiating mayoral and combined authorities throughout the coalition. What role did you and your department play in developing devolution policy during that time?

EP: I set up the Local Enterprise Partnerships. I was very supportive of what he wanted to do. I wasn't initially very much in favour of it because I always felt that structure

should follow function and that the changing nature of what was happening meant we should just let it rip and then put together a new structure, rather than to just perform. I do feel sometimes that we wasted a lot of time setting up structures when we could actually have got down to the issue itself. But, by and large, I think they looked pretty good. And I think his [George Osborne's] legacy of the Northern Powerhouse will last.

GA: 2012 saw the first round of mayoral elections. As the secretary of state, what role did you play in the elections, both as a political actor and in an apolitical sense as well?

EP: I was very hands on. I came out as former chairman, so contacts with the central office were quite close. I took a view that, actually, we were likely to do extraordinarily well. Everyone predicted we were going to lose because it was the beginning of the process of government introducing a number of reforms that weren't very popular. But in terms of the general election, I'd been involved in targeting, and we were quite ruthless in our targeting of seats that we could hold and take, and the results were extraordinarily good. And in fact, we started a cycle at which Conservatives became the dominant party and held as the dominant party at local government right up to this day. I mean, in truth, this next set of elections in May is the first real opportunity Labour will have to make substantial gains. So, yes, I was very hands on.

GA: And moving away from devolution to a couple of final questions on local government finance, one of the first decisions the coalition government had to make was to set out spending plans for the rest of the coalition. You mentioned before that you decided you didn't want to be kipped by the local government membership organisations, so how did you decide on local government funding when there was a tight overall envelope?

EP: Well, there is also a big difference between the rhetoric and rolling a pitch in terms of what's happened, and the very harsh realities. The harsh reality is, I looked very carefully at the former, in particular resource allocation. I made some initial changes. What I was keen to ensure was that key areas like social services or care for the elderly had a degree of protection. I also wanted to ensure that areas of deprivation had particular protection, hence when people woke up to what I was doing I had all that trouble with Conservative rural areas, who wanted changes. But I thought that was kind of important. I also looked very carefully at balances and what they were doing, and the growth of great management speak. At the time, I described it as this, and I hope it doesn't sound terribly crude but, to me, it seemed a bit like the last page of *Animal Farm* [George Orwell's novella], when the animals look in and they couldn't tell the pig from the people. And I really felt that in regard to the way a number of local authorities were being run. They were almost being run by a political class at which top officers received enormous, ludicrously large salaries, at which point they lost their mojo. So I did focus on those kinds of things, in order to try and give the coalition government a number of legislative cycles in order to get that stuff through.

GA: You were secretary of state for five years, which meant you obviously oversaw the initial decision on funding, and then how it played out. How did you monitor what effect the spending cuts were having in different parts of the country?

EP: I monitored it really carefully. I looked very carefully at balances, had a really good team at DCLG that knew what was going on in local authorities, looked at outliers, and by and large was convinced that we'd managed to take money out as reasonably as we could. But again, you've got to separate rhetoric from reality. There were some councils that became true believers and pushed it to the limit and, as I said earlier, some of those I personally intervened in, because I did have the power, if we felt that they were putting local authorities' finances at risk, to intervene. I came quite close to doing that with one borough. So I was reasonably pleased. I think there were some knives sharpened for me, and I think if we hadn't won a lot of elections, I might have had a slightly shorter term. But again, there's no point in being there and just being like some daft rag doll, just taking in the abuse and not actually letting local government try and move on to an issue-based funding process, rather than just increase funding streams incrementally. I thought the nature of local government was changing. I remember we did quite a lot on the general power of competence. And I was ambitious for local authorities to move on. And remember, ultimately, the decision with regard to the size of the council bill went down to local people. If they decided to have a referendum, and if they won that referendum, and decided to put the council tax up, then there was nothing I could have done to stop them.

GA: A final question from me, which is less to do with local government and more to do with non-departmental public bodies. There was the "bonfire of the quangos" [during which a number of these bodies were abolished], as it came to be known, at the start of the coalition government. How did you decide, when you were in office, what to keep and what to abolish? What was the criteria?

EP: In terms of function, the most obvious one is the Audit Commission. The Audit Commission, as it was originally together, was just ruddy excellent. You know, they wouldn't even talk to ministers when they were first set up; they wanted to keep their purity. But it seemed to be they'd become an extension of the establishment. In all the big scandals, they'd been next to useless in terms of addressing those. It was the Local Government Association that picked up what was going wrong in Doncaster. And they were useless in Tower Hamlets; they were even thinking about giving Tower Hamlets a special commendation for the way in which they were running their authority. Also, they dabbled in the market, they got themselves messed up with all the problems with Icelandic banks [during the 2008 financial crisis] and the like.

And the most telling thing was that, when I said that I was minded to wind them down, they came back and suggested that we privatise them. Now, I don't regret their departure at all, because I don't think they were fulfilling their prime function in terms of offering guidance and help on audit. I think they'd lost their way. It's a bit sad, but

there we are. And it's quite interesting that, although within the department, sometimes people had worries about, as you said, some of the bodies we were wanting to remove, there was kind of a universal pleasure among senior officials that this quite useless organisation was about to go.

TD: One question I wanted to ask is, during your time in office, did you deal with any crises, however you interpret that word? And, if so, how did you approach those? How did you manage them?

EP: Well, when drummer Lee Rigby was murdered, myself, and I think Sayeeda Warsi [then minister of state for faith and communities, as well as senior minister of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs], were the only cabinet members in London. And the initial response to all that was down to myself and Sayeeda. And Theresa May arrived as home secretary. But everybody else was out of the place, so we were involved with that. I was very much involved with the [2011] riots, in terms of addressing and dealing with them. I clearly had a number of crises with regard to troubled families, difficult things to deal with there. I have to say, I thought the support I received from officials was exemplary. But you need to be able to give a lead. When Owen Paterson [then secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs], I think, had a detached retina, I took over flooding for a while, and that was difficult. I mean, there were a number of points where the matter of less than an inch would have made an enormous difference to the east coast of England. And indeed, the capital came quite close to seeing a number of power stations and substations being taken out of action. I spent a lot of time chairing COBRA [the Civil Contingencies Committee] and bringing us through that. So, yes, I think most cabinet ministers have to deal with crises of some sort or another.

TD: And do you think the machinery in government can deal with crises? Is it well set up for those purposes?

EP: I think so – if you offer guidance and a bit of leadership and try to create an atmosphere where people can tell you if they violently disagree with what's happening, or tell you where things are going wrong, the system that we have works extraordinarily well. I don't want to go into detail, but I can think of a number of occasions where almost the same officials, when faced with a different crisis have not been given leadership, and so have taken their style and their tone from a vacillating secretary of state. I'm not talking about anyone or anything in particular; I'm not talking about any of my predecessors. I want to make that clear.

TD: One thing we're interested in is that it's quite unusual for one person to be a secretary of state in the same department for five years. So did your approach to the job and DCLG change over the five years of the coalition? What more did you know at the end of it that you didn't know at the beginning?

EP: Well, at the beginning, you have a feeling of evangelism and wanting to get things going. Obviously, the longer you were in post, the more pragmatic you became but, nevertheless, I knew what I wanted to do. And that tracker remained with us right up to the very end, so decisions were made. I mean, even as we moved towards the general election, I was making sure that secondary legislation was in place, so that it would become law. So, yeah, you get a degree of confidence, and you get a degree of being able to deal with difficult problems and, by that time, I had a team around me that I really liked.

TD: You left Government in 2015, after the election. Was that your plan?

EP: Oh no, absolutely not. No, I was sacked. But I think I am quite good at politics; I could see the signs that I might not be continuing. And to tell the truth, I am not a sentimental person, but I thought that Cameron treated me extraordinarily well. He then offered me to do something with regards to Holocaust remembrance, and it's something I'd been very committed to, so I moved on to that. I might have felt sore for a day or so, but by the weekend I didn't; I'd moved on. That first weekend of being able to read a book or go out for a meal was just terrific. And I sort of threw myself into the Holocaust memorial and various international organisations. I brought back the IHRA [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance] definition of antisemitism, which made a considerable difference to British politics. So I don't feel like I've stepped out of public life. I enjoy it. And being a secretary of state was fantastic, but – it sounds bad this – I just moved on without a second glance. You won't find me at a reunion or looking backwards.

TD: Your big role in public life at the moment is obviously as chair of ACOBA [the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments]. How does having been a minister inform how you approach that role?

EP: It doesn't, because one of the things that ACOBA does that nobody gives it any credit for – the applicants don't – is we stop people doing stupid things. Because until someone takes up a post, nothing is published, and I think there are a number of quite senior people who would be quite grateful for the things we do, particularly in the present climate, to say, "this doesn't really pass the smell test."

As we speak, we've been involved in looking at the way in which the system works, looking at the nature of the rules, and we've made a number of suggestions, and I am very hopeful that we might be producing something a lot better than is currently there.

TD: So can I ask, what achievement are you most proud of from your time as a minister?

EP: Troubled families, I think. I am really pleased about that. I think we managed to put together a centre of analysis to do with poverty, and it did work, and it was a great privilege to work with Louise Casey. Also, at the time, I had quite an epiphany in terms of my attitude around social issues. I had been, early on, an opponent of gay marriage, and I completely and radically changed my views after seeing constituents and friends go through the process. And I was pleased to be one of the sponsors of the Equal Marriage Act. So I was kind of pleased to do that. People obviously exploit issues never to change; people are worried so much about a U-turn. But I just realised I had been so utterly unreasonable, and deeply regretted it. But it was a pleasure to run the department, and to see a number of things in place. Even on things as simple as flags, I like to think that the reforms I introduced made it impossible for a party like the British National Party to hijack our flag again, by making it more available to others.

TD: A final question, which we ask everyone, what advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be most effective?

EP: Just remember it's a summer lease. You're here today, you're gone tomorrow. Use every day and don't look back and think, "Oh God, I wish I'd done that, I wish I had not been silent." Speak your mind, do your best and try and make a change. Because all the effort that you put in is to make changes to public life and to enhance public life and, if you're just a passenger, you'll miss that opportunity.

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Institute for Government
2 Carlton Gardens, London SW1Y 5AA
United Kingdom

Tel: **+44 (0) 20 7747 0400**
Fax: **+44 (0) 20 7766 0700**