

# Ministers Reflect Lord Frost



6 December 2022

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

Since 2020: Member of the House of Lords

## Government career

2021: Minister of state at the Cabinet Office

**Lord Frost was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Beatrice Barr on 6 December 2022 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

**Lord Frost talks about negotiating the UK’s exit from the EU as a special adviser and then as a Lords Minister, what his previous experience as a civil servant brought to his ministerial career, and the challenges of working across government to deliver Brexit opportunities.**

**Tim Durrant (TD):** You entered government as a minister of state in the Cabinet Office, and you were a member of cabinet. What was the conversation you had with the prime minister when he asked you to take on that role?

**Lord Frost (LF):** It’s probably a bit different from the usual one. I’ve probably said some of this elsewhere, but I came to the PM [then Boris Johnson] in late January or early February 2021 and said, “Look, the job’s done, time for me to move on. I’ll go to the Lords, support you from there.” I said, “You need a minister to be on the joint committee [the EU-UK Partnership Council established under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement]”. And the PM said, “No, no, no you can’t go. We can’t manage without you. In that case, we’ll make you a minister.” So that’s the approximate way it happened, and why it all came out in a bit of a rush. I think what drove it was the joint committee, where I would otherwise have to have been working for somebody else. Given what I’d been doing on the treaties, that just seemed a bit unnecessary. He did also want somebody to push forward the Brexit opportunities thing, but we could already see at the point that the [Northern Ireland] protocol was going to be an issue. So that was part of it.

**TD:** When you entered the Cabinet Office, what was your first day as a minister like - obviously you knew people there already, but how did your status change?

**LF:** It was all a bit messy really. The room was still a bit of a mess because it was a new role. I’d inherited a private secretary and one or two others who had come with me from my past job. But the rest of the office didn’t exist and we spent a long time recruiting people. It was also right in the middle of a row with the EU over the [Northern Ireland] protocol and the extension of the grace periods [that delayed the full implementation of checks and controls on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland]. So I don’t have a very clear recollection of the first day, to be honest – it was just like one more day.

**TD:** Yes, I was going to ask you, did you feel the role changed but the issues you were dealing with didn’t?

**LF:** They didn’t really, no. It was a gradual glidepath, I suppose you would say, rather than a fundamental difference.

**TD:** You’d obviously been doing the chief negotiator role before you became a minister – what was the transition between those two roles like?

**LF:** I think the way we set things up in 2020 worked really well. It’s a bit like what was done for Kate Bingham’s vaccine taskforce in a totally different environment: where you set up an ad hoc group of people with a mix of experts, and, in our case, civil servants we

knew and trusted and SpAds (special advisers), all part of the team. A completely unusual structure for Whitehall was me just running it as a SpAd. In theory we're not supported to direct officials. In practice people realised I was speaking for the PM so there wasn't much point in arguing about it. It worked really well because it enabled me to be really hands-on with the team. They had very clear political direction, which obviously had been a problem in the past in the negotiations, and because they had SpAds in the team, they had people who, day-to-day, civil servants could go to and say, "What's the politics of this? How is it going to land?" Rather than everything having to go up the chain to the top. I think that's one of the reasons why we were much more flexible than the EU was able to be as we moved towards the end of the process.

Then what happened was we moved to a conventional ministerial structure and, although we kept some of the same people, it felt quite different. One of the things that immediately struck me was the power of the 'normal way of doing things.' Even though most of the people working with me had been through the past two years, they still found themselves – despite all their best efforts –operating in a conventional fashion with a private office that screened you, processed papers, served them up when you were ready. Because that's how everybody else expected them to operate. So it really brought home to me just how strong those instincts to do things in a particular way were when we switched over from one to the other.

**TD: And would you have liked to have kept that more informal way of doing things?**

**LF:** I found it much better. We did try and replicate bits of it as we went along because my office wanted to. One of the things that frustrated me was that a submission would come into the private office and then you couldn't see it until the private office had processed it, maybe asked a few questions about it, and checked it. Meanwhile I was sitting there waiting for things to do. We developed an electronic box instead, partly so I could take it home without leaving any papers anywhere but, also, so I could just log in during the day and see what had come in, whether I could process it quickly, and whether I was going to have to think about it. So to that extent it replicated a more normal working environment.

We had a bit of an argument with the Cabinet Office authorities over this because I insisted on having access to the 'PSLordFrost' [private office] inbox, as well as my own semi-secret one. That allowed me to dive in and see what had come in, what was waiting, whether I had a view on stuff quickly. Although my office was quite okay with that, the rest of the system was reluctant because they thought it deprived people of the freedom to discuss things without me looking in, and they never knew whether I'd seen a document or not, and so on. That was just a little example of how hard the system found it to adjust.

What I really reacted against was having the traditional route of having lots of meetings during the day then all the paperwork in the evening. Not only because it's difficult with one's lifestyle, but also, if anything's wrong with the document it means you've lost a day. Something could've been dealt with when it came in, but you have to say, "No, this isn't right. No, we need to have an answer to this question. Send it straight back." Then you've lost a day and it slows everything down.

**Beatrice Barr (BB):** Did you find it easy or at least possible to develop those alternative working patterns, or did you feel like there was a lot of pushback and you had to try to work around it?

**LF:** My own office was fine. It was pretty easy to set it up the way I wanted, with some of my own people, because it was a new office. But the Cabinet Office bureaucracy was more uncomfortable with everything I changed, I would say.

**TD:** You'd been in government in different roles before being a minister: you'd been in the diplomatic service, you'd been a special adviser to Boris Johnson when he was Foreign Secretary and then you were a SpAd as chief negotiator. Did those different experiences and different roles inside government inform your approach to being a minister? And did you have any sympathy for bureaucracy because of your experience at all?

**LF:** I think being a civil servant and being a SpAd are much more like each other than either is like being a minister. There isn't really a glidepath from one to the other, I thought. The degree of exposure and decision-making responsibility you have – your formal role in the system – is quite different. I think what it gave me was a bit of an advantage in knowing how things are done: how papers are prepared, who to go to, who's likely to be doing things, how to apply pressure to get things done quickly, just knowing the ropes. That was true as a SpAd in the Foreign Office and Number 10 as well, because obviously I knew lots of people and they knew me in a different category, so that was completely different to the normal SpAd, and that continued as a minister. It was just familiarity with the system, I think, and with some of the people and how things are done, which was a huge advantage early on.

**TD:** One other big difference, I guess, between civil servants, SpAds and ministers is that ministers are subject to a lot more public scrutiny. You were in the Lords: what was it like answering questions in the House and going in front of select committees as a minister, as opposed to previously?

**LF:** It was strange. Obviously we pushed the boundaries a bit when I was a SpAd in 2020 as indeed you...

**TD:** I was going to say, the Institute called for more scrutiny at the time, I think.

**LF:** Yes. Partly it was a deliberate choice, partly we felt we couldn't not, because otherwise we were at a permanent disadvantage to the EU who could say anything at any point and we couldn't. So we had to find some way of, from time to time, dealing with that. By the time I became a minister, my political *persona* was unfortunately very well established by that point. I think I didn't really realise that, and it took some time for me to realise that, and that was a bit of an issue. So there had already been some exposure for me to some of this stuff in different ways.

I think I found that the Lords itself – the Chamber and the questions, which we set up for half an hour every month – is, well, unsatisfactory from that point of view. The Lords is a revising chamber, really, although it's trying to turn itself into something else. That would be a problem, but one of the reasons it can't turn itself into something else is that it's fundamentally not political. People are not connected to public opinion and they don't have constituencies, they're not elected. So trying to do a political event, like showing up

for your monthly questions like you would in the Commons, doesn't really work in the Lords. Partly because it feels like theatre, rather than real politics. You've got people who already have extremely strong opinions – particularly in my case – about the issues, like Lord Adonis and Lord Purvis. It wasn't really an arena where you could do proper scrutiny: testing whether the minister really knew about stuff, whether they'd really done the politics, if they had talked to the right people, if they had got party backing. In the Commons, you can judge by whether there are people on the benches behind you, whether they're cheering or sitting coldly on their hands. There's none of that in the Lords.

It makes it easier for a minister in one sense, because unless you are hugely incompetent it's difficult to make a bad job of being a Lords minister at the despatch box. But in another way it doesn't work, because you're not connected to the politics of what's going on. I know this has been talked about from time to time, but I think it would be better to find a way for Lords ministers, at least for non-legislative business, to appear in the Commons. I just think it would be better for everybody. I can see why it doesn't happen because MPs themselves have reservations about it. But, in terms of scrutiny, it would be much better. So I felt I adjusted to it reasonably quickly, but it was always a chore in the sense that I didn't feel it added anything, whereas I think that Commons questions will always tell the minister something important, even if they don't like it or want to hear it.

**BB: When you were in the Lords, Penny Mordaunt [then minister of state for trade policy] was deputising for you in the Commons. What was your relationship with her like at the time? And what was the experience like of having her deputise for you?**

**LF:** It never really worked. Partly, I'm not sure that Penny herself wanted to make it work. Obviously I said what I said about Penny during the leadership campaign [that Lord Frost had "grave reservations" about Penny Mordaunt as Tory leader]. To be fair to her, I think she found it frustrating because I was in charge and she, I think, found it difficult to get in and grab issues for herself. With a different personality it might have worked better but she, as I said, was quite often just not around or not trying. I don't think she had a grip on the detail of things.

**BB: Do you think it would be possible for that relationship to work, with a Lords minister and their deputy in the Commons? Was it primarily personality or was it a setup that is impossible?**

**LF:** There was a period in the autumn in 2021 when Michael Ellis took over that role, and it worked much better because he was just around much more. He'd show up to the morning meetings and he'd know much better what was going on and be able to talk to it much better. So it can work. I think it's inevitably unsatisfactory, though, because everybody in the Commons knows that they don't have access to the person who's really in charge.

**BB: You've mentioned the Brexit opportunities brief, which is something you set up in the Cabinet Office and which then followed Jacob Rees-Mogg to BEIS. It's such a complicated brief that inevitably cuts across so many departments – how did you conceive of it working? Did it continue to work in the way that you hoped that it would?**

**LF:** I had some slight doubts from the start that it would work well. As a civil servant, I'd run teams that are not line teams but whose job it is to get in the way of other bits of the system and check they are doing their job right – the policy planning role in the Foreign Office is a classic example of that. In my experience, it was difficult to make such roles work well. So I had some reservations about whether this was really going to work elevated to the ministerial level. I think I was right to have that. You do inevitably run into the problem that you've created a job whose job is to interfere with somebody else. Particularly with the way that Number 10 and the Cabinet Office are set up, they aren't a proper prime minister's department with real lines of delivery and accountability. Much of what you can achieve depends on your perceived political authority and your ability to push things and make trouble. On Brexit proper I was perceived as speaking with the PM's authority and there was never an issue. But on Brexit opportunities it was never quite like that. It was obvious that Boris had different views on some of the Brexit opportunities dossier to me, and that could be exploited to stop things going as fast as we wanted. So I think yes, there were certain "opportunities" aspects that fitted properly with the EU minister role, however one defines it, particularly stuff connected to borders, which really should be part of the same job. Border reform, paperwork, how the ports work – that really should sit with it. But a role that is just about driving the rest of Whitehall to reform a bit faster is unsatisfactory. Because if they don't want to do it, then it's hard to make them.

**BB: You often hear that complaint about the Brexit departments, that the challenge of cutting across government departments was just so big. How do you think that cross-cutting work could have been done better? Is there a way to make it work, or was it always going to be something that was a huge challenge?**

**LF:** I think it's always a huge challenge, and it was particularly a challenge because some of the things we wanted to do weren't really prefigured in the manifesto. The manifesto was written in the Theresa May world, in 2019, in terms of emphasising high standards and certain social policy assumptions. Then we tried to change that around, but we didn't really have much political support we could point to. That was part of the problem. So you can do it but, as with everything really, there's got to be clear direction from the top, a clear identification of what needs to be done, and a real machine behind it. That takes you back to some of the issues which are constantly discussed about whether you need a proper prime minister's department, whether the Cabinet Office plus Number 10 is fit for purpose. And I don't think it is really. You could create that political input – a central unit that pushes the departments – if it were part of a properly set up wider organisation. But in the current arrangements, it all depends on political authority and perceived political strength, and, if you don't have that, it's difficult.

**BB: Throughout the Brexit process, what were your most important relationships? Where were your biggest differences?**

**LF:** As a minister it worked really well. I don't think there was anybody I had difficult relations with at cabinet level. One of the things that struck me, actually, was that I was

quite readily accepted around the cabinet table. I was seen as a probably slightly junior equal but definitely on an equal footing. There was never any prickliness or difficulty from that point of view. The person we worked most with when I was a minister was Brandon [Lewis] at the NIO – that was probably the most important. One or two other Cabinet Office ministers were also important: Lord Agnew, for example. [George Eustice](#) at Defra, too, partly on the reform side, partly because fisheries was a running problem throughout the year. And Rishi [Sunak] as Chancellor.

**BB: What about moving backwards slightly, as chief negotiator, what were your relationships with the EU side like? Did they work?**

**LF:** It worked pretty well because I was perceived as speaking with the PM’s authority all the time. We took a lot of time to make sure the PM understood and was fully sighted on all the sensitive issues in the 2020 negotiation. Contrary to popular belief, he spent a long time thinking about, and was quite deeply involved in, some of the difficult stuff like the level playing field, the equivalence debate, fisheries quotas. So as long as he and I always agreed, others were willing to go along with it. We did spend a lot of time setting out the strategy – we had the strategy papers at the start of 2020. We would always go through the cabinet committee process, write out where we were, what we were trying to do, what the objectives were, so people felt they knew what was going on properly. But nobody really debated the direction seriously, I would say, at any point.

**BB: How about your relationships with those outside government like businesses and the devolved administrations?**

**LF:** We had a cabinet committee-like body on which the devolved [governments] sat: the Joint Ministerial Committee in its various forms. Normally Michael Gove would chair and I would be present when necessary. It never really worked, obviously. It was a way of forcing everyone to talk to each other. But we disagreed so fundamentally on what we were trying to do that it was never a place for a meeting of minds or engagement. But it did mean that we saw and spoke to each other and that was useful.

I spent a lot of time talking to businesses in 2021. We had all the sorts of things that the civil service normally sets up, like engagement groups and meetings with the top six business organisations from time to time. I think that was useful, probably not so much to me, but as a way of exposing issues, getting people to follow up on things, getting certain civil servants to be seen as blessed to get on with issues subsequently. Actually my frustration, as probably a lot of ministers say, was just the amount of time you had to spend doing this sort of thing. It’s the dignified rather than the efficient bits of the role in that you have to do it, but it doesn’t really help.

**TD: So would those conversations affect your policy decisions or was it more, as you say, a requirement, do you think?**

**LF:** Somewhat. At the margin, probably, about prioritisation. More often on the opportunities side than the actual Brexit, post-Brexit process side. But not really, I would say, on the fundamentals of what we were trying to achieve.



**TD:** You talked about how your power in this role came from your close relationship with the PM and your understanding of his priorities. How did you maintain that? On a practical side, what did that look like in your diary? Did you have regular meetings with him? Were you talking to him all the time?

**LF:** As a minister, things changed – going through the door into the Cabinet Office made a huge difference. I had about six different offices where I was a SpAd in Number 10 for various reasons, but you could always wander down and see people, or you’d run into people, you were seen in the house. Once you go through that door, it’s different. My office was literally above the door where Helen McNamara [former Deputy Cabinet Secretary] used to be when she was there. So it wasn’t miles away in the Cabinet Office, but it still made a huge difference in terms of day-to-day interactions. People forget about you in the Number 10 machine when you’re not there. So what had in 2020 been quite an easy relationship – I could always get to see him when I needed to, went to Chequers from time to time when needed – became much more that I had to ask for time. I’d show up at the morning meeting to take the mood then grab him afterwards. But it became rather more like it would be for any other minister. I think that’s possibly one of the reasons why we got slightly disconnected on some stuff during the year.

**BB:** You then resigned in December 2021 – why did you leave when you did?

**LF:** It was over Covid. The circumstances of my departure – because it got leaked prematurely – slightly blurred what it was all about. During the October/November period when it seemed like things might be getting worse again, I had said to the PM that I didn’t agree with vaccine passports in particular, and I thought they were a fundamental step that we shouldn’t take. He knew I had reservations about the way we’d taken decisions on Covid anyway and the balance between economics and health. He would occasionally call me in as another voice on those kinds of issues when it was useful, but I never affected the direction of policy, I would say. So when they brought in Plan B, which was the beginning of December, I think, I argued against it in Cabinet. Next morning we spoke and he got that it was a fundamental point of principle, that I just couldn’t agree with it. We agreed that I would leave in the new year. We’d find a successor, it would be a managed departure, he would probably be setting out a new agenda in some way – it would all feel a bit different. Then it got leaked and it all blew up. That’s why the exact motivation slightly got lost in the noise. It all happened very suddenly because it was over a weekend, and I never went back into the office. So that was the end.

**BB:** Ministers often talk about having a particular personal bar for resignation. Was it really obvious to you, the moment you reached that point of principle, that you were going to have to resign over it? Or did you more slowly come to the realisation?

**LF:** I’d seen it coming, and I tried to say that it was a problem. I’ve just been reading Seb Payne’s book about it [*The Fall of Boris Johnson*], where somebody says I was on resignation watch in the autumn. So they’d obviously clocked it. I had come to feel so strongly about the way the pandemic had been mishandled during 2021 that I just said, “We just can’t do this again.” Obviously, as it turned out, lots of other people thought the same and it never happened. But yes, I think it was vaccine passports which it seemed could lead us to all sorts of other undesirable things, so I felt we just had to draw a line. I think the reason it came as a surprise was – obviously partly because it was me – but partly because, although ministers spent 18 months grumbling about Covid and signalling

dissent, everybody had always accommodated themselves to everything. So it was the first time that someone said, “We can’t do this.”

**BB: The thing that you ended up resigning over was not directly related to the Brexit brief. Did you feel like your job was done when you left? Did you feel like it was an okay time to be saying goodbye to it?**

**LF:** Not really. I wish, in many ways, that we’d be able to carry on with the Northern Ireland stuff, though I think there is equally an argument that says I’d become such a difficult figure for some of the EU by then, that it was better to have somebody else come in and do it. Objectively, it could cut both ways, but personally I’d have liked to have continued. The Brexit opportunities thing was always going to be a years-long task so there’s never a good moment on that.

**BB: Could you see yourself going back?**

**LF:** I could. I think it’s known that I turned down the two jobs Liz [Truss] offered, for reasons that look quite well-justified in light of events, and I haven’t sought one with Rishi [Sunak] and I haven’t been offered one either. But, yes, I could. In a way, it was easier for me to resign than it is for a lot of, in inverted commas, ‘real politicians’, because I haven’t made my life being a politician. I have done other things. It’s easier for me to say, “These are my principles.” There’s no point in me being in government if I’m not doing things that I think are worth doing, because it’s not my career in the same way. So that’s how I qualify the answer. I don’t want to go in and build up an issue of conscience and then we have another problem. Possibly that’s what the government can see as well, and that’s why it doesn’t happen.

**TD: And then looking at your whole time in government, what achievement from your time in office are you proudest of?**

**LF:** It’s bizarre because, honestly, my real achievement was before I became a minister. We came in in 2019 when nobody thought that the logjam could be broken, and we broke it – admittedly quite brutally, but it had to be done. Then all the Ivan Rogers [former UK Permanent Representative to the EU] -type people were going around saying, “It’ll take you 10 years to do a free trade agreement (FTA)” and we did it in 10 months in those extremely difficult Covid circumstances. Everyone forgets that it’s not just an FTA: there’s law enforcement, lorries, airlines, social security, all this sort of stuff in it. It is so broad. So I think to have done that is what I’m really proud of. I wish that the protocol had not run into the problems it did. I wish we could find a way of settling that and settling the post-Brexit arrangements definitively. But that’s my place in history, I suppose, getting that done. Without talking myself up too much, my advantage was that there were not many people around who had worked professionally on the EU and yet were actual believers in Brexit and wanted to get it done. I think I was the right person at the right time, probably, knowing the people and knowing the systems and yet being committed to it. Me, Boris, Dom[inic] Cummings, one or two others – I think if any of us had not been there it wouldn’t have happened.

**TD: On the protocol: what do you see happening now? Can it be resolved? Is there a way forward?**

**LF:** Yes, I think so. We wouldn't have started from where we started in 2019 – that was the first problem. We also had the tremendously challenging backdrop where we had to agree some sort of deal or else we wouldn't be allowed to leave. So it was the best possible balance between all the competing forces, and a bit of an experiment as to whether we could make this rather ambiguous document work in practice. It came apart under the pressure of the pandemic and some of the decisions that were taken around it as much as anything. It's much easier to see how you get to an outcome if one thinks of it as a somewhat experimental approach capable of evolving by agreement, than if you think of it, as the EU do, as, "Well, we did that, just do it and move on."

So I think if the EU can get themselves over that hill of thinking, "You agreed it, so do it", then I see no reason why we couldn't get a proper agreed outcome. They'll have to go a bit further than they seem to at the moment, but these things are always compromises and balances. I believe that from our government's point of view that there are compromises that would work, I just think they're more ambitious compromises than the ones that the EU are considering at the moment, that's the problem. The main frustration is that these arrangements are designed to do various things: protect the single market, support the Good Friday Agreement, and so on. There is no evidence of any threat to the single market, really, in practice, as we've seen over the last couple of years, but the provisions to achieve that are now causing turbulence that is threatening the Good Friday Agreement. It's an oddity that the politics around the Protocol and its consequences are now more problematic than the problems it is supposed to be resolving. And if we can see that, I feel we could find a solution.

**TD: Would you do anything differently if you had your time again in the roles you did?**

**LF:** I think not really in 2019-20, not fundamentally. Obviously there are judgments that we made in various points of the negotiations that one might have thought differently about, but they were definitely second- or third-order things. As a minister, I think I probably should've realised that I'd become a rather difficult figure for a lot of the Europeans, and it took me a bit of time to realise that. I think if I had realised it, I would've accommodated myself to that and gone about things optically in a slightly different way – more outreach, more trying to talk to people. We did a bit of it but we were still coming out of the lockdowns so it was difficult to see people other than through Zoom, and that was part of the problem. But I think that was probably what I would try and do differently, just be a bit more careful about things.

**TD: What advice would you give to a new minister about how they could be most effective in office?**

**LF:** Make sure you've got a private office you completely trust, obviously. Get as many SpAds as you can and make sure they're really good. I had three or four very good SpAds, some of whom are still knocking around in government. We wouldn't have achieved what we did without them because they're always the people who are willing to work much harder. But you need expert SpAds, so I think that's part of it. There's a tendency to employ people in their mid-twenties as your eyes and ears. I think that's a fundamentally wrong approach. You need experts in the areas that are important to you because then

they have credibility with the system. So get your SpAds right. It's absolutely crucial and it's so disappointing that every government seems to have to re-learn the lesson that two SpAds is not enough for a minister to do their job.

It's obvious, really, but pick two or three priorities and stick to them, and tune everything else out, if you can. And it's easy for me to say because I didn't do much media – I did do interviews and so on, but probably less than most cabinet ministers would do, and I wasn't doing the morning round – but try and tune out all the day-to-day media. Don't respond to everything that's said, but transmit much more about your own priorities. I think the most successful bits of this government, at least while I was in it, were the bits where we tried to ignore the day-to-day noise and just said, "This is what we're doing, like it or don't like it, this is what we're doing." There was a phase in 2019 when it was like that. People liked it or didn't like it, but they certainly knew what we were trying to do. I think in the first half of 2020, the pandemic, the setting out the case on Brexit, all that was extremely clear. You've got to do that. Don't be pushed around by the noise around you.

With your department, don't readily accept anything they say to you can't be done. Usually there are ways that things can be done. Push and push and push and ask again. Don't be frightened to go to outsiders to get different views, and bring them in and challenge.

**TD: Is there anything we haven't asked about that you want to mention?**

**LF:** One thing I have noticed over the years is the growing tendency of officials to consult ministers on more and more stuff. I remember when I joined the Foreign Office, in the late '80s, we would spend a lot of time on a big policy submission and the minister would agree it, and then that would be the policy and we'd all operate to it. One of the things I found frustrating 30 years later is the tendency to ask about every stage of something. "Shall we do this tomorrow? Shall we say this to these people?" It slows things down massively. It's very disempowering and, I think, frustrating for ministers because you often want to say, "Well, sort of, but not quite like that." It wastes time. I think we need a more military style 'mission command' concept, where you're much clearer about what you're trying to achieve, everybody understands what the policy is, and people are not constantly checking whether they're doing the right thing. I've always felt we needed something a bit like presidential directives in the US, where you write down what the policy is, classified or unclassified, and people know. That's what I mean when I talk about my system getting clogged up with endless papers, the importance of not losing 24 hours, because it all seems to be tactical.

**BB: Why do you think that tendency has developed?**

**LF:** I think officials have got frightened of getting things wrong. It's an organisation where you get relatively little credit for success and if you mess it up people know, particularly if you mess it up and your minister suffers for it. I actually think a lot of it stems from the Blair/Brown years, which is where I first felt some of our traditional ways of doing things were going wrong, where people started to hoard information. There was visible internal disagreement on a lot of policies. So if you were an official trying to navigate it, you didn't want to get it wrong. You didn't want to inadvertently get in the way of something you couldn't see, so the instinct was to check, to make sure you'd cleared your lines. I think

that's probably where it started. It's not a party-political point, I think that's just when people began to use information as a weapon.

I really remember the Major government years when we were running a very difficult European policy, but everybody knew what it was. We always properly cleared our lines internally, people understood and there was no one trying to go round the back of people, which I think crept in after that. The Blair/Brown government was a coalition in many ways. Then we had an actual coalition government where people were doing the same thing. So I think that's how it got established.

**TD: Is there anything else you would like to mention?**

**LF:** One big difference between an official and being a SpAd or a minister is not having to care about HR or the corporate ideology of the department. It is really a big difference. I can see that officials nowadays have to spend a lot of time on appraisals; management; being the board champion for this, that or the other; standing up for certain things. And it is relief when you don't have to, you realise just how big a burden it is compared to getting the day job done. That didn't really strike me until I was freed of it. I know people jokily say, "Why is civil service doing so much on the woke agenda?" But it really is, whether it's woke or not, a big, big burden on people who should be doing the day job. There's a lack of support to civil servants generally, by way of PAs, assistants, people who can make the system work and avoid using up time for the day job. I think that is a real problem and as soon as you're freed of it you realise what a problem it really is.

## Citations

This archive is an open resource and we encourage you to quote from it. Please ensure that you cite the Institute for Government correctly:

In publications (e.g. academic articles, research or policy papers) you can footnote or endnote the interview you are quoting from as follows:

Transcript, [Name of Interviewee], [Date of Interview], Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: [Web Address of Transcript], Accessed: [Download Date].

For example: Transcript, George Young, 21 July 2015, Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/george-young>. Accessed: 15 December 2015

On social media, please hyperlink to the site:

[www.instituteforgovernment.co.uk/ministers-reflect](http://www.instituteforgovernment.co.uk/ministers-reflect). You can also use [#ministersreflect](#) and mention us [@instituteforgov](#) if you are quoting from the archive on Twitter.

Journalists wishing to quote from the archive are free to do so, but we do ask that you mention the Institute for Government as a source and link to the archive in online articles. Please direct any media enquiries to [press@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:press@instituteforgovernment.org.uk).

**The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.**

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.

Copies of interviews undertaken as part of this project are available at:  
[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect)

Email: [enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)  
Twitter: [@instituteforgov](https://twitter.com/instituteforgov)

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

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