

# Ministers Reflect

## Jim Murphy



7 October 2022

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

1997 – 2015: MP for East Renfrewshire

2010: Shadow secretary of state for Scotland

2010 – 2013: Shadow secretary of state for Defence

2013 – 2014: Shadow secretary of state for international development

## Government career

2002 – 2003: Assistant whip

2003 – 2005: Whip (Lord Commissioner)

2005 – 2006: Parliamentary under secretary of state in the Cabinet Office

2006 – 2007: Minister of state for welfare reform in the Department for Work and Pensions

2007 – 2008: Minister of state for Europe in the Foreign Office

2008 – 2010: Secretary of state for Scotland

## **Jim Murphy was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Alex Nice on 7 October 2022 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.**

**Jim Murphy talks about working in the Whips' Office, the challenges of the Lisbon Treaty and Scottish devolution, and the transition from government into opposition.**

**Tim Durrant (TD):** Let's start with after you first took on a government role as a whip under Tony Blair. How did you hear about that appointment and what were you told about the role? What were you expecting about the role?

**Jim Murphy (JM):** I was in Japan at the World Cup watching the football and the hotel phone rang. I don't know if this translates in London, but in Glaswegian when you say to someone "aye right", it means "stop taking the piss". But, in Downing Street talk, "aye right" means "yes, okay". So when the phone rang in my hotel room and it said, "Could you hold for the prime minister please?", I thought, "Aye right". I just thought it was my friends winding me up because when we got on the plane to Japan it had been the early stages of a reshuffle, and when I arrived at my hotel room that's almost immediately what happened.

The thing that I reflect on about my time as a whip is that – though I had close relationships with lots of politicians, both in my own party and others – being in the Whips' Office was one of only two occasions where I unquestionably felt like I was part of a much larger team. Hilary Armstrong was the chief whip. She was exceptional in that role. She tutored, supported and encouraged you. I think there were probably a dozen or 14 of us and we met every day. We dealt with the most sensitive issues and there was never once in – I think I was doing that job for perhaps two years – never once did anything spoken about ever leave the room, which was remarkable when you consider how gossipy politics can be and how gossipy subsequent Whips' Offices have been. It was remarkable. The only other time I felt part of a team was when I was literally part of a team, which was when I was playing on the parliamentary football team. It was politicians of all parties and you were playing on an actual team. So I really look back fondly on that [the Whips' Office], partly the camaraderie and the teamwork.

But also ... there is no HR policy for ministers, really. But if I were going to construct one I would try to make it the case that, as far as possible, most people should start [in government] in the Whips' Office. It just gives you an understanding of how parliament and government works. It gives you a breadth of insights. It also teaches you to respect the chamber of the House of Commons. And I think – although I've never studied this – that those ministers who have been through the Whips' Office initially often do better in the House of Commons because they enjoy being there, because they've spent so much of their time in the chamber. So those would be my reflections on being in the Whips' Office, at what was a relatively tumultuous time because I was responsible for all the Scottish MPs. And at the time, I was the youngest Scottish MP, so it was a bit peculiar.

**TD:** Yeah, not an easy job.

**JM:** No, I mean I arrived in my 20s and I had to whip former coal miners, steel workers and George Galloway - so that was a challenge. But I enjoyed it.

**TD: You said Hilary Armstrong was a very good chief whip. What makes a good chief whip? What are the characteristics that people need in that role?**

**JM:** Everyone thinks that all you need is a big stick. It's a combination of treading carefully and the knowledge that people realise you have a big stick. In those early years, Labour was going to win almost every vote. That made whipping unconventional because there were lots of people in marginal constituencies who wanted to spend more time in their constituencies: people who were unexpected victors in the recent New Labour elections. Therefore it was about getting the right balance of time in the Commons and time in the constituency. That was one thing. There weren't enough places in government for everyone, so it was also about managing to keep everyone motivated when you had over 400 MPs and keeping everyone pointing in the same direction. It was also during the turbulent time of the Iraq war vote, when we had 84 MPs voting against military action in Iraq. So there were some big issues being debated.

But what made Hilary very successful is that in that room every day she listened. She wasn't fixed in her opinion. She took what we were saying in that room to [Tony Blair](#) when she spoke to him each day. So your ideas were respected and often implemented. One of the frustrations of being a whip is you take a vow of public silence, so you surrender an independent political identity temporarily. But what she managed to do is to say, "I know you can't be on the media, I know you're not at the despatch box, but you have something else: you have that direct route into the heart of government." That's what she did very successfully. It's so important for a chief whip to be unconditionally trusted by a prime minister or a party leader for any of that to work.

**TD: You then went into the Cabinet Office – what was the transition like, from being in the Whips' Office into a ministerial office?**

**JM:** It's difficult. You're a working-class Glaswegian who arrives into the biggest physical office I have ever been in. The Cabinet Office has famously grand offices overlooking Horse Guards Parade. The thing that you've got to get used to as a minister is that it's almost always the case that you know the least about the given subject of anyone in the room and yet you've got to make the decisions. I think for the first couple of weeks at least, any normal person would have imposter syndrome. "These people all know more about this – why am I making the decisions?" But you realise very quickly that what you're there for is to hear the best available advice, apply your political judgement across it, and make a decision. You're there to make a judgement and a decision. I think that the ministers who struggle are those who want to understand every nook and cranny of a policy issue instead of making any and all decisions – every detail of every aspect – because you can paralyse yourself! You can paralyse the department by just not having the confidence to make a decision. Tony Blair told me, when he gave me that job – and I remind him of it quite often actually; I'm still friendly with him – he told me, "Jim, the good news is that the British civil service has the engine of a Rolls Royce, so get behind the wheel and drive it. The bad news is the British civil service also has the brakes of a Rolls Royce and if you don't drive it, it may find a layby to park itself in. So get behind the wheel, use your judgement, and drive it." That was the one thing that stuck with me.

Then the second thing – genuinely the second thing that I took in all the jobs I had as a minister, and this was just something I developed late at night sitting in the office – was when everyone else has gone home, you're sitting there with your red box, you're

listening to the radio or playing some music or whatever, and you're going through all your paperwork. I got to a point that I had to have a decision matrix. I made it so simple. It only had two questions. The first was: what difference does it make having a minister of my party making this decision? That helped narrow down options. And then the second question was: what difference does it make that it's *me*, as the minister of my party, making this decision? That narrowed down the options as well. And bluntly, if those two questions drew a blank as an answer, then I wasn't absolutely convinced the decision was for me to make. I made it nevertheless, but free of value, free of judgement. I didn't think it was necessarily a ministerial decision. But nevertheless, the paperwork was with me so I made the decision. But in all of my jobs – whether it was in the Cabinet Office, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Foreign Office, or in the Scotland Office – every evening when I was doing my paperwork, those were the two questions that I asked myself. I probably asked myself those two questions thousands of times in multiple ministerial roles.

**TD: You moved to DWP and then the Foreign Office working on Europe. Throughout that time, there was a change of prime minister. How did Brown and Blair compare as prime ministers to work for?**

**JM:** Yeah, so I enjoyed my time. I enjoyed all my jobs because the truth is that the worst, the very worst day in government is so much better than the very best day in opposition. And I only realised that when I was in opposition. In DWP, the main thing I did was the Welfare Reform Bill. And as you say, in the Foreign Office, it was Europe and the Lisbon Treaty on introducing Article 50 into UK law.

But on Blair and Brown, I've always been socially much closer to Tony, but I respect both of them immensely. But I was always closer to Tony than Gordon. I would say that Gordon is much better at reshuffles than Tony. Tony didn't enjoy the whole – well neither of them enjoyed sacking ministers – but Gordon just brought an organisation to reshuffles. For example, you didn't make ministers walk up and down Downing Street when they were getting hired or fired. You went in via the Cabinet Office in Whitehall and sat in the anteroom before seeing Gordon. It was striking, actually, when Tony left Downing Street and Gordon arrived. I remember going in for the first cabinet meeting and it felt – because everyone that you had known, all the senior people you had known, had left – and it felt not so much like a change of prime minister but a change of government. That's the overriding sense I had. But in my time – notwithstanding the fact that I was socially closer to Tony and obviously subsequently went on to work with Tony when I left politics – Gordon was unfailingly supportive of me in the two jobs that he gave me. I couldn't be more complimentary towards Gordon in the relationship that we struck up on the big issues of the day, both when I was at the Foreign Office working with David Miliband and when I was running the Scotland Office as secretary of state.

**TD: You mentioned the Lisbon Treaty. Obviously there had been the promise of a referendum on any treaty change, which then didn't happen. What was that decision, or that process, like inside government? And what do you think the implications were for what happened afterwards?**

**JM:** I inherited responsibility for Europe, relations with Russia, and global public diplomacy. And for the first nine months or so I lived in the House of Commons taking the Lisbon Treaty through parliament. I can't remember how many hours and how many

sessions and how many hundreds and thousands of words I spoke. But we were absolutely clear that because the constitution had been downgraded to a treaty – and we can debate that fact until the end of time – because this treaty transferred fewer powers and shared less sovereignty than, for example, the Maastricht Treaty, it didn't reach the required threshold for a referendum in the way that we subsequently have had.

I mean, arguably we shouldn't have had one on proportional representation, but that was a political fix. But undoubtedly on Scexit [Scottish independence] and Brexit, both of those required referendums. Our view was very clear that we weren't entertaining the idea of a referendum because it didn't get to that threshold. However, it was intensely political, which was countercultural for the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office is a brilliant organisation staffed with very smart people. But they are exceptional at understanding the politics of every country other than Britain. Here we had a piece of legislation which was arguably the most contentious piece of primary legislation going through parliament and it was being led by a department that normally pointed outwards to every other country in the world and rarely radiated inwards into the United Kingdom. That just created capacity challenges in the Foreign Office. They rose to it brilliantly: they built a brilliant and well briefed team and we got the Lisbon Treaty through.

I ended up enjoying the process and by the end of it was able to, for example, joust with Bill Cash [Conservative MP and chair of the European Scrutiny Committee], for whom this had been a lifelong fixation. I remember having a debate with Dominic Grieve on the definition and the meaning of the word 'shall', because the treaty had been translated into Dutch, I think, before it was translated into English. I had grown up in South Africa and it was the only time that my Afrikaans had ever proven useful in real life, because obviously Afrikaans is Dutch as spoken in another century. So we had, I think, a fascinating conversation about the Dutch translation of the word 'shall.' I think actually it was the most interesting period in parliament in my entire career, but it was a challenge for the Foreign Office. At the time they were also dealing with a new president in the US, they were dealing with the latest variant of Putin, and we had had the poisoning of the British citizens and much else besides going on. So that's my reflection of my time at the Foreign Office. But Gordon was very generous, very supportive and very collegiate actually. He created time, because again the Lisbon Treaty wasn't Gordon's natural territory either.

**Alex Nice (AN):** You mentioned that on top of dealing with the Lisbon Treaty, you were also responsible for Russia. And of course, this was at the time when Russia invaded Georgia, and there was the poisoning of Litvinenko. Reflecting now, given the current context, how do you look back at that period, and the UK and European response to that security crisis, and what followed?

**JM:** I think that, looking back, one of the behavioural norms of the Foreign Office was that it was important to speak frankly to Putin and also, at the time, Medvedev, in the knowledge that you knew how to get back into the room with the Russians. Because at that time they [Putin and Medvedev] were important in all sorts of different ways, for example in Afghanistan and in a range of political security issues. The war with Georgia was a very early sign of a different type of Putin. And looking to where we are now, it's not clear how Russia is readmitted into the decision-making councils other than those in which they are guaranteed, meaning the Security Council. They have rightly been voted

off a multiplicity of international bodies in the last year. And I think that process of delegitimization will continue.

It's not clear how Russia gets back into the room other than – and this is what worries me most ... Putin knows that Biden, or any Democratic successor to Biden, can never meet him again, ever, and never shake hands with him again, or at least it's very unlikely. But, of course, Trump could change that for reasons that aren't altogether clear. But it's difficult to see a British prime minister or an American president or a French president ever shaking hands with Putin again. So, if he's not going to be invited into the room, how does he force himself into the room? And he does that by starting new fires that he tells the West that only he can put out. Whether that's in Syria, whether it's starting further problems in the Balkans or whether – as we've seen in recent times – it's the Wagner Group being involved in the coup in Burkina Faso. I think we have to, as the West, be able to game where it is and how it is that Putin, or Putinism, forces its way back into the international arena. Because they're rightly not going to be invited back in, and that creates all sorts of jeopardy.

**AN: Then in 2008, you moved from minister for Europe to be secretary of state for Scotland. What was it like to move from being a junior minister to a secretary of state and running your own department for the first time?**

**JM:** The whole process is fascinating, because I went from being a parliamentary private secretary, to being a parly sec [parliamentary under secretary of state], to being a minister of state, to then being a secretary of state. And being secretary of state is significantly different in that, other than the prime minister, the buck stops with you in your department. And I knew that occasionally, very occasionally, in my previous roles, a secretary of state would look over the garden fence and find the work that I was doing very interesting, and would say, "That's so interesting, I think I should lead it instead". Then the secretary of state would take ownership of the three or six months of work that you had put into something as a junior or middle-ranking minister. That's just the parliamentary, the government jungle. And I tried to – and it would be for others to comment on whether I was successful ... I was determined not to do that. So, for example, Ann McKechn [parliamentary under secretary of state for Scotland, 2008-10] worked with me and was a very, very good parly sec. I tried very hard to make sure that she had space to develop ideas and policy and then to deliver them. That was important to me.

Running a team, I tried to incentivise collaborative working. As I spotted the most talented civil servants, I tried to make sure that they were more regularly and more closely attached to the centre of decisions. That wasn't always a formal process, but it was a sense of finding the people who could think independently, who offered challenge, who offered good advice, who identified problems and also attached some solutions to those problems. It was finding a way to gravitate those people closer to me as secretary of state. This was at a time of intense politics because Gordon Brown was prime minister, we had an SNP government in Scotland committed to a referendum, and we were delivering fresh new powers to the Scottish parliament through the Calman Commission [the Commission of Scottish Devolution]. Gordon's closest advisor on Scotland was Gordon. We were navigating that, but I thought we did it very successfully. Then there was also the preparation for the general election in 2010, where Scotland was a crucial component of any chance of Labour winning a majority. That was very important.



In terms of the shift, I had early preparation for that because way back when I was at the Cabinet Office as parliamentary secretary, John Hutton had been the chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster when David Blunkett resigned [as secretary of state] at DWP and John went over to run DWP as secretary of state, and I was left at the Cabinet Office for six months with no secretary of state. Actually I think for more than half of my time at the Cabinet Office, I was the only minister. I had four or five perm secs [permanent secretaries] at the Cabinet Office; it's such an unusual organisation. So I had, I think, a very good apprenticeship preparing for running a department by virtue of – and I don't think the government ever announced this – running the Cabinet Office as the only minister in the building for six months. So that was a very unusual career path, if you like. But it was a great grounding for then formally running a department, having previously informally done so for six or so months.

**AN: You mentioned that, before you became secretary of state, the SNP had taken power in Scotland. Did that set off warning lights in Westminster? Did that prompt a rethink about the Labour government's approach to managing Scotland?**

**JM:** It did. Now that I'm more reflective, my truth would be that Whitehall and government, including a Labour government, institutionally hadn't come to terms with devolution. The election of the SNP amplified and crystallised that problem. There were intergovernmental institutions created but there wasn't enough time, effort or care given to them. And quite often the intergovernmental arrangements were then resolved informally. Because at the time, when you had a UK Labour government, a Welsh Labour government and a Scottish Labour government, party conferences and informal gatherings were sometimes more effective at finding solutions. So I don't think the machinery of government had made a sufficient enough switch. And we possibly hadn't resourced it successfully enough.

That was passable when the same party was in power in all three capitals (put Northern Ireland to one side) but, when one capital was governed by a party committed to leaving the UK, it led to friction and occasionally fracture in the relationship. The constitutional role of the secretary of state for Scotland is the guardian of the devolution settlement. So my role was, while being a member of the UK government, also acknowledging that on occasion the SNP government had a case and to occasionally carefully make that case within my own government.

**AN: Do you think, in retrospect, that the recommendations of the Calman Commission went far enough? Should it have proposed other things which might have addressed some of those issues you've raised?**

**JM:** I think at the time, the Calman Commission was probably the right set of powers. The difficulty with the powers conversation – and again this is something that I've reflected on – is that, whether it was the Smith Commission [set up after the independence referendum], the Calman Commission, or any of the other additional devolution packages that went before, what successive Labour and Conservative governments have tried to do is fix a political problem with a constitutional answer. There's a constitutional debate about nationalism and Labour in particular but, also, the Conservatives have tried to come up with a constitutional response to what is in effect a values, identity and political argument. And there isn't a set of powers short of full independence that answers



nationalist demands. And even if Scotland were to become independent, that still wouldn't halt nationalist demands of London.

So my self-critique, but also a collective critique, would be that in making the case for additional powers we should simultaneously have been making the case against nationalism, which is pretty straightforward. I don't want to rehearse it but, for too long – and this thing came to fruition during the Scottish Independence referendum – the Labour Party allowed the argument to gain root that devolution was a stepping stone towards independence, when the truth was that devolution is the opposite to independence. One is about decentralising and strengthening our multinational state. The other is about breaking up that multinational state. We didn't make that political argument. For arguably a quarter of a century, the Labour Party has put insufficient effort into the political argument. Instead, we focused on a powers discussion in the hope that that would solve a political argument. It hasn't, it didn't and it never will. Scottish and British Labour are strengthened by making a respectful political argument front and centre.

**AN: Do you think the Labour Party needed, at that time, to make a stronger case for the union? And you also mentioned that Gordon Brown was his own lead advisor on Scotland – were there moments of significant disagreement between you and him on how to approach the SNP or how to approach devolution?**

**JM:** Occasionally. But if he and I ever write a book about it, it might be in it. But I don't plan to write a book. And perhaps when I'm even older than I am now, I'll be more incautious. But generally we came to an agreement and he would persuade me. It was always collegiate. That was the thing about Gordon and I on Scotland: we never once fell out. We occasionally disagreed but we never fell out. I would go and see him in Downing Street in his study, or I would go to his house in Fife, and we would talk things through. Sometimes I would change his mind; sometimes he would change mine.

The proof that Labour hadn't been sufficiently consistent in making our case came in the independence referendum in 2014. That was the proof point, writ large. A very substantial number of Labour voters were genuinely surprised that Labour was against independence. And that's not the voters' fault. It never is. That's our fault. Because a whole generation of hitherto Labour voters had not heard our argument that devolution and independence were opposites. They weren't two sides of the same coin, they were a completely different currency. We hadn't made the case for devolution and the union with sufficient energy and clarity – not a Rule Britannia case for the union, because ultimately I'm not a unionist, even though I'm in favour of the union. I'm a social democrat. My politics is that in the workplace you're stronger in a union, on an island you're stronger in a union and on the continent we're stronger in a union. It's that social democratic case for unions that Labour uniquely can make. And we did so with insufficient energy and intellectual commitment. As a consequence, I think, for a lot of people in Scotland, it sounded as though, in devolution, we were splitting the difference with the nationalists. At the point of the referendum, it became absolutely clear that we had allowed the relationship with Labour voters who wanted further change – I'm choosing my words carefully – to be fractured again. And as a consequence, they saw no inconsistency in voting for independence in 2014. Then having done that, the 2015 general election became 'referendum round two' for many of those voters. But we

couldn't get them back in the six or so months between referendum and the 2015 general election. Labour, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems were then competing for that 55% of people who voted to remain in the UK. As for the 45% who voted to leave the UK, the SNP had them almost to themselves. That was very difficult for all three parties.

The three parties are completely different. The Conservatives are traditional unionists. They're the Conservative and Unionist Party. The Lib Dems are federalists. And Labour are social democrats and socialists. And all three parties came to the pro-union case from different points of view. We allowed ourselves to be conflated with the Conservative and Unionists – to appear almost Labour and Unionist. That was a problem for us because we had allowed the SNP to contaminate or toxify what being in favour of maintaining devolution was about. That was our fault. No-one else's. Labour is in favour of devolution within the union, and we always will be but, from the early 1990s onwards, we didn't make our distinctive case consistently enough.

**TD: I want to ask you about after your time in government, after the 2010 election. As you said, Labour didn't get a majority and you moved to shadowing the secretary of state role. What was that like shadowing a role that you'd already done, because often it's the other way round?**

**JM:** Yes, I was shadow secretary of state for Scotland briefly, and then shadow defence and shadow DfID [Department for International Development]. And it was terrible! Being in opposition was terrible. There's a line that's often quoted about the difference between being in government and being in opposition: "In government, I get up every morning and ask myself, "What am I going to do today?" In opposition, I get up every morning and ask myself, "What am I going to say today?" That's the difference. When you go into politics, you join a political party to change the world. The remarkable privilege every day in government is getting a ringside seat in being able to do that. And it's an enormous privilege. So what were my reflections? If I had known in government what I learned in opposition, I would have been more facilitating of the opposition in terms of time in parliament and access to information. I would have been more open to parliament entrenching the powers of opposition even more so. Those would be the main things that I learned from being in opposition. As well as the underpowered nature of being in opposition and the lack of resources that you have as a frontbencher in opposition. And, on reflection – in the same way that running the Cabinet Office for six months was a great preparation for running an actual department formally – being in opposition is great training for being in government. If I'd had my career differently, I would have preferred six months in opposition *before* being in government.

**TD: You're not the first person to say something similar. It's in every opposition's interest to have more resources and more time and so on and so forth. And it's in very few governments' interests to grant that when they're in power.**

**JM:** I've become reflective about this: government is itself a coalition. Even if it's one party in power, it's a coalition of left and right within your party, with liberals and protectionists within your party. Part of that coalition, I think, should also be parliament. I think that I got a good piece of advice from [Jack Straw](#) [home and foreign secretary under Tony Blair], which was to treat the House of Commons with respect, and in return it will give you the benefit of the doubt. That piece of advice was a great help to me when I was taking through controversial legislation, whether it was a change in the welfare state

or attributing the Lisbon Treaty. Parliament cut me a huge amount of slack because I think – well I know – I tried my very best to treat it with respect.

But I think if I was redesigning our politics, I would find a way to give parliament more power to shape legislation at the early stage and amend legislation throughout. Because during a Labour government the fact that a Conservative member of parliament is a Conservative member of parliament doesn't rob them of the authenticity or legitimacy on their mandate. And it shouldn't denude them of the ability to formally influence a policy process. And the same is true of a Labour MP under a Conservative government.

The only problem would be if you're in government and you have that very open offer to the opposition. It's sometimes in their interests not to take it. So while for some people in all parties it's opposition for opposition's sake, that energy is the opposite from the energy that we ought to crave. I wasn't very good at opposition because my starting point having been in government for so long was, "actually I might possibly have been doing something similar myself". Whereas other people in opposition started with, "this is all a disgrace". I often found myself giving the person I was shadowing the benefit of the doubt. And that's not the way that adversarial politics encourages you to behave.

**TD: What achievement would you say you're most proud of from your time as a minister?**

**JM:** The piece of legislation that I'm proudest of would be the Welfare Reform Bill. That massively improved the career opportunities for people who had been written off to a life of Incapacity Benefit.

**TD: And what piece of advice, or pieces of advice, would you give to newly appointment ministers entering government for the first time?**

**JM:** Have an agenda and fill the role. Don't just occupy the conveyor belt of, 'this is the piece of legislation that was coming my way so I'll just implement it'. Have your own agenda and additionally respect the chamber of the House of Commons.

I would also encourage new ministers to read beyond their excellent civil service briefings. I would always try to read the three most interesting books on the subjects I was responsible for.

**TD: If you did have your time again, is there anything you would do differently?**

**JM:** Don't be in a hurry. I arrived in parliament in my 20's and I was a young man in a hurry. There were so many big characters and former prime ministers still alive or even still in parliament. I regret not spending time getting to know them and asking to spend time with them. Jim Callaghan, Barbara Castle, Roy Jenkins were all still alive and Ted Heath was still in the Commons. I should have asked each of them for a cup of tea and listened to their experience and listened to their advice. I will always regret not having done so.

**TD: Is there anything that we haven't asked about that you think we should have?**

**JM:** No, I think you've given me an opportunity to reflect on anything that I wished to. Eat well, sleep well and realise that it's your judgement that you bring to being a minister. It's not because welfare, technology, civil service reform or anything else is your chosen

specialised subject. It's because judgement is the unique quality you bring to that room. And the last thing would be advice on this is – you will have heard this from others – make decisions. Make decisions. The civil service rightly – and I'm not complaining – the civil service will work out that you can't make a decision and they'll understandably go elsewhere for a decision.

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