

Ministers Reflect Maria Miller



29 June 2022

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2005 – present: Conservative MP for Basingstoke

2005: Shadow minister for education

2005 – 2007: Shadow minister for work and pensions

2007 – 2010: Shadow minister for children, young people and families

Government career

2010 – 2012: Parliamentary under secretary of state for disabled people

2012 – 2014: Secretary of state for culture, media and sport

2012 – 2014: Minister for women and equalities

Maria Miller was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Paeony Tingay on 29 June 2022 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.

Maria Miller talks about working in coalition, the challenges and rewards of passing legislation on same-sex marriage, and what life is like on the backbenches after a ministerial career.

Tim Durrant (TD): Can we start by talking about when you first entered government in 2010, after the election? You became a minister at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Can you tell us how you heard about the appointment and what you were told about the job?

Maria Miller (MM): Gosh, that’s a long time ago. You will remember it was a very exceptional time because we had a coalition government being formed. And my enduring memory of that particular set of announcements was sitting with a colleague in the tearoom here [in parliament] and in fact I think we all, as members of parliament, stayed for dinner that evening – when we were still trying to form a coalition government – to try and work out what was happening. It was politics in real time. Everything was moving fast. We had a meeting of the 1922 [committee] and David Cameron came in to go off to Number 10 to become prime minister. I think we then found out that perhaps things were not as sewn up as we’d thought they were. But anyway, the Liberal [Democrat]s then did agree to go into coalition, and the prime minister started to form a government.

Because we were in coalition, very few people got what they expected to get [in terms of ministerial roles], which I think was a challenge – a challenge for the prime minister. His approach was to make sure that he’d got a coalition partner minister in every single department, which I think was probably why the coalition worked, because our partners had skin in the game in every single department. And I ended up in DWP – I’d been a shadow minister predominantly in the education department in opposition, looking after the families and children’s brief – and I ended up as minister for disabled people, which I hadn’t shadowed at all. It was a new brief for me. So, I had a call from the prime minister to say that that’s what he wanted me to do. And, of course, as all good MPs are, we’re there to serve, so I immediately went into the department. It was a team of people I’d never met before either, or I’d never worked with before – [Iain Duncan Smith](#) [then secretary of state], [Chris Grayling](#) [then minister for employment], [Steve Webb](#) [then minister for pensions], and [David Freud](#) [then minister for welfare reform] – so, an incredibly high-powered team in the department. But it was really not what I’d expected to do, so I didn’t hit the ground running with a predetermined set of priorities.

TD: And what was that first day like? When that team walked into the department, what was your impression of the civil servants and how did you spend first day as the new minister?

MM: I think day one we spent doing two things, because the prime minister or the secretary of state had confused the situation by deciding that they didn’t want to completely replicate what had gone before. And of course, the civil service had decided that they would structure everything exactly as it was under Labour and that that was exactly what the new incoming government would want to do. And it wasn’t. And so that caused a few ripples to start with. You’ve got to remember that we came in after having had a very long Labour government, so perhaps that generation of civil servants was

simply not used to change and the idea of a change in government. But certainly, that caused quite a few problems to start with, that this incoming secretary of state wanted to do things differently.

The second thing was trying to make sure that everybody had got a private secretary. And this is only from memory – I might not be correct on this – but I think we had one extra minister in the department, and that’s what had thrown things quite significantly.

And then, the next thing that we did straight away was print off the spreadsheet of the budget lines, of what was being spent. Again, that wasn’t the easiest thing for us to get our hands on, not because I think people wanted to do anything other than be helpful, but it hadn’t been asked for before. But we wanted to look at where the money was being spent. And my overwhelming memory was how fragmented the expenditure was – again probably symptomatic of the fact that we were taking over from a very established government that had been in power for a number of years and that had done things in a certain way and had a very, very high turnover of ministers. And again – I can’t remember the exact figures from memory – but I think they basically had a minister for disabled people being summoned every single year. So, as a result of that, people were coming in, being given a small budget to make an impact, and then moving on again. So, the fragmentation of the budget lines was immense.

Our first job, given to us probably by the Treasury, was to sort out the money. Because DWP is one of the biggest spending departments, and if you want to save money – and we had to save money given the state of the public finances – you’ve got to start at DWP. But that’s my overwhelming memory, thinking, “Oh my goodness, this is a monumental task, but also ... enormous budgets.” And remember, this is not an area that I’d shadowed before. So, it was very, very new.

TD: So, because you hadn’t shadowed the DWP role, how good were the civil service at getting you up to speed on the kind of content of the job?

MM: Oh, in DWP the civil servants are brilliant. Because it’s actually technically quite a difficult department. It’s not very sexy, so it’s not like being in the Foreign Office or Treasury [*laughs*], but it is technically extremely difficult. I think some of the most impressive civil servants I’ve ever met were pensions civil servants, because it is technically such a difficult process.

I think it was difficult, probably because we underestimate how long Labour had been in power and what that had meant for the way the civil service did things. I particularly remember the agenda of Iain Duncan Smith, who was our secretary of state, with Universal Credit, and David Freud, of course – so very big, strategic changes in the way we were going to run our benefits system. Now, for the incredibly well trained, very capable civil servants, this was going to be a big challenge – and it was a big challenge – but it’s in place now and it’s one of the most enduring parts of the coalition government. So, that and equal marriage, I like to think, were two really big changes that we created in the country with that particular government.

You don’t become a Tory woman MP without being a bit belligerent and difficult, and I found it a little challenging with the permanent secretaries. Because they, I think, probably had a view of the role of parliamentary under-secretaries which wasn’t my view.

So, I wasn't afraid of pushing back against what I found to be quite a dominating influence. I felt my role was to be challenging and to get change, not least on the reform of the Disability Living Allowance, of which the Treasury required significant reform. And that wasn't something, I think, necessarily on the agenda of DWP when we took over.

Paeony Tingay (PT): And what your day-to-day was like as a minister? How did you spend your time, in terms of the division between the department and parliament etc.?

MM: Okay. Again, we're thinking back here a number of years, about 2010, so twelve years ago, so this might be a case of rose tinted spectacles as to how I used my time. I do think things were very different under a coalition government. We had to make sure the policies we were going to take forward had agreement, and we couldn't take that for granted. So, an awful lot of the time that we spent day-to-day was making sure that we had a clear and unanimous view of how to move forward. I think that was actually an incredibly useful discipline, but it did require a lot of time to be invested.

As the junior minister, obviously I wasn't involved in all of the cabinet discussions around my policy areas in the same way as I was later on, but the need to go to the Quad [a key decision making body in the coalition made up of David Cameron (then prime minister), George Osborne (then chancellor of the exchequer), [Nick Clegg](#) (then deputy prime minister) and Danny Alexander (then chief secretary to the Treasury)] to get agreement was something which was – I wouldn't say it was day-to-day – but it was very regular, at least for my department, because we were making such big changes around disability benefits, universal credit, and reform of the child maintenance systems. These were all big-ticket items, which you couldn't do without feeling an awful lot of what David Cameron used to call 'rolling the pitch' [preparing the ground for a big match]. And I think that was a great discipline and really helped the cohesiveness of the government. So, a great deal of the day-to-day work that we did was actually trying to make sure we would have agreement from our coalition partners.

But ultimately, I think this is a little different to the way it is now. I spent almost all of my time in the department and very little time in the House [of Commons], because so much of what we were trying to do in those early days was actually just get our hands around what it was we were trying to do and how we were going to achieve it. So, major reform of benefits required an awful lot of man hours in the department, working with civil servants. Whereas now, I see ministers an awful lot more in the House of Commons, which I think is probably a good thing as well, and they don't have the complication of having to try and work with coalition partners.

PT: And you touched on this briefly, but how did you find being the only woman minister in the department?

MM: Well, I had Philippa Stroud. She wasn't a minister, but she was Iain Duncan Smith's special adviser. And there was also another woman special adviser. So we had two women special advisers. And Iain was brilliant to work with, and Chris [Grayling] I've known forever – he used to be my local councillor *[laughs]*. And Steve Webb was absolutely brilliant – knew everything about pensions. It was a very, very cohesive team, and it had to be because we had so much change that we were going to get through and had to get through if we were going to achieve the savings and the complete revolution of the benefits system that the government wanted to put in place. So, it was a very

cohesive team. We worked very closely together. It was probably the first time since I'd become an MP where I didn't feel that being a woman was a disadvantage. Sue Owen was one of my directors in the department. And in fact, she became my permanent secretary in DCMS [the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] when I moved there, because she is a real role model. So, there were some really, really capable people there, and Sue particularly stood out for me as somebody I could identify with and was really, really helpful.

PT: In terms of working across government, as minister for disabled people, was there a lot of cooperation with other departments, maybe in particular with the Department for Health?

MM: So, I think if you remember back to 2010, our focus was on reform, and the vast majority of my time as a minister in that department was spent on benefits reform. You had to have priorities, you cannot do everything, and that was where the priorities lay. I actually put my emphasis most on stakeholder engagement, particularly with disabled people themselves, and we were looking at the time at reforming the Office for Disability Issues, which was then the sort of subdivision within the department which seemed to deal with disability issues. I wasn't very comfortable about that. I felt it was a way of hiving off the issue within the department and not mainstreaming it. And I can't remember now when we decided to move away from that structure, but certainly that was something that I was quite keen to do, because it didn't make much sense to me that we had an office of disability issues when it was such a mainstream issue in the department. So, my time was spent with, as I say, a lot of external engagement rather than necessarily ministerial engagement.

Actually, thinking about it now, it's interesting, isn't it? I hadn't really thought about that before. Whereas when I was equalities minister – obviously I wasn't equalities minister at that point – but when I was equalities minister, a lot more of my engagement was across departmental boundaries. But in DWP, it was very much about stakeholder management ... stakeholder engagement, not management. And I think that's really probably as it should be, because you're dealing with a group of people who need to be part of the conversation and need to be part of the process of change. There are only a certain number of hours in the day and the night and my priority was always to be able to speak to people who were going to be most deeply affected by what we were doing.

TD: Just on that last point on stakeholder engagement, you said the big issue you were focusing on was the reform agenda, streamlining benefits and cost cutting. Were the relationships with stakeholders difficult in that context? And, if they were, how did you go about having those difficult conversations with important external groups?

MM: So, interestingly, I think the external groups felt that reform was long overdue. Many of the benefits didn't really work in a way. Again, I am not going to go down why DLA [the Disability Living Allowance] needed to be reformed because we'd be here all day but there was a massive amount of money which didn't have in-built processes to review, which stakeholders who were affected by this change knew. Therefore it wasn't necessarily working in their best interests either.

And we'd inherited one or two howlers in terms of policy decisions that had been made in the dying days of the Blair government, which for reasons of ministerial accountability

I can't go into, but which certainly hadn't been costed properly. Therefore, unpicking some of that knitting was also quite difficult but, again, the stakeholders knew that those decisions had been made by people who probably knew they weren't going to live with the consequences, particularly for profoundly disabled people.

So, it was difficult, but I think people knew it was time for a change, and that either they could work with us or not. And they chose to work with us. And I will forever be grateful to them for doing that.

TD: You were then appointed secretary of state at DCMS in September 2012. What was the step up from being a junior minister in DWP to becoming a cabinet minister like?

MM: Well, I think the advantage of having been in DWP at a time of such profound change and reconsideration of the way in which we spent so much government money, i.e. through the benefits system, meant that I had actually had quite a lot of exposure to all levels of government by that point. I'd been into Quad meetings with Iain Duncan Smith, seen how those operated, and how negotiations with the Treasury operated as well. So, perhaps if I'd been in a different job, that would have been a more significant change than it felt at the time.

I think the change in the job was less of an issue compared to the subject matter of what I was dealing with. In the infinite wisdom of the prime minister, he gave me two of the most challenging issues of the time to deal with: the Leveson Inquiry [a public inquiry into press practices following the phone hacking scandal], and also equal marriage, which had been in the Home Office and then miraculously moved to the equalities brief, which I was in charge of. So I had DCMS plus the equalities brief, at a time when they'd received a quarter of a million responses to a consultation on the changes that were being proposed by the government in terms of the marriage situation for people in same sex relationships. So, those were two enormous issues for a department that wasn't tooled up to deal with that.

You will remember that, at that point in time, the equalities brief was trailing around different departments depending on who was doing it. It's now sort of still doing that, but the machinery of the department is now in one place – in the Cabinet Office. So, that, I think, was a really sensible thing to do. My department, DCMS, had to rapidly recruit in people who were expert in marriage law etc. I think they're probably doing a lot of this now too – recruiting specialists – given they've also got the online safety bill going through. They've also had to deal with a lot of legalistic issues there. But really, it was a seismic change in what the department was doing. They'd obviously already had the Leveson Inquiry as an ongoing issue, which again they were working jointly with the Home Office on.

TD: So, on the Leveson Inquiry, what was your role? Because I believe the inquiry had reported before you became secretary of state, and therefore you took on the government response? Is that the right chronology?

MM: I think it reported, yes, around the same time, and it was [Jeremy Hunt](#) [the previous secretary of state] who'd been dealing with that. And there were some wrinkles around that. It was trying to find a way forward with something which was not really written in a way... well, being very frank, I don't think it had been really thought through enough as

to how you take it forward. It was a very interesting inquiry report, but it provided very little way forward which didn't involve enormous amounts of conflict. It was very, very difficult and I think probably, in hindsight, not really a very illuminating piece of work.

TD: So, as secretary of state, you've now got your own team of ministers. How did you approach running that team? I think you also had [Jo Swinson](#) from the Lib Dems in the department, so how did that dynamic work?

MM: So, we didn't actually have a Lib Dem minister in our department. Jo Swinson was in the BIS Department [the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills], I think, although she did a little bit of work on equalities. I think that's the overlap, yeah.

So, I had [Hugh Robertson](#), now Sir Hugh Robertson, head of the Olympic operation in the UK, who was probably one of the most capable people I'd ever worked with. He knew his brief backwards. He was Mr. Sports Minister, had done it for many years, and had obviously just run an incredibly successful Olympics. And, when you go into any new organisation, you're looking for where your strengths and weaknesses are, and sports certainly was not a weakness. We did that brilliantly. And then, I also had now Lord Vaizey, then [Ed Vaizey](#), who was the arts minister, who equally had done the job forever and knew it backwards, was brilliant at it, and knew everybody. And he also oversaw the digital brief as well.

So, when you go into an organisation like that, and you've got a really strong ministerial team, you're then perhaps not surprised the prime minister has given you one or two googlies to deal with on top of that. So, the two googlies were Leveson and equal marriage. So, my time was mostly spent managing those issues, leaving the – I'm not even going to call them junior ministers because they were very good at what they did – leaving the ministers to do the heavy lifting in their portfolios.

TD: And so, you were happy to delegate and to trust them to run their portfolios? And you could focus on those particular googlies?

MM: Yeah. It comes as a surprise to me that some people wouldn't do that. Maybe it was different in different departments but, certainly in DCMS, where you're covering such a wide range of organisations, and where again relationship management with your external stakeholders is so important, I was happy to delegate. You've got people who are running major cultural institutions or major sporting organisations, so having capable people with good relations is really important. And I think they did a great job, and they didn't need me interfering, although it was rather nice to occasionally be the recipient of a wonderful evening out at a theatre event. As I say, my time was mostly spent on the heavy lifting of the more difficult things. But I did rope Hugh Robertson into doing the bill committee for the Equal Marriage Act, which was not the natural casting for a sports minister.

PT: You've spoken a bit about what it was like for the department, but how did you personally find balancing being secretary of state at DCMS with being women and equalities minister?

MM: There were never enough hours in the day. And it's really frustrating, because you could do either of those jobs alone and it would still be a huge job to do. I found it

particularly frustrating because there was so much more I would have liked to have done on the women's brief, and perhaps I've been able to do that since I've stopped being a minister. But you only have so much political capital to expend, don't you? And when you're dealing with something like ... I keep going back to the Equal Marriage Bill – I think you can't underestimate how difficult my party found that piece of legislation. And so, it was extremely difficult to do some of the other things which I would have liked to have done at the time, around making our workplaces better places for women. And I've done a lot of work since on those very issues – or indeed about how we can make parliament a better place for women to be. These are all things which would have been amazing to have been able to do more of when I was a minister, but I simply didn't have the time. I didn't have the capacity or the political capital to do it. Remembering back to what I was talking about coalition government, things, I think, were a lot more difficult to land because you were having to do a lot more pre-work, a lot more rolling of the pitch, and so therefore that meant also that your capacity was more limited than I think perhaps it would be under a majority government.

PT: And so, with the equal marriage legislation, you said that was quite difficult for the party, and there was a lot of opposition from Conservative MPs to that bill at the time. How did you manage that?

MM: Honesty and respect. And I've still got a note on my notice board from one of my colleagues, who popped a note under my door after the first statement that I had to do. I was doing the statement on the Equal Marriage Bill. And it was tough. And it was difficult. And people were very upset and not enough work had been done to prepare people to understand what it meant, so there was a lot of misunderstanding. And a colleague put under my door a note which said, "Thank you for dealing with this in such an honest way and listening".

And that stayed with me because, I think, as long as you listen to people, and as long as you're honest with people, that is 50% of the battle when you're in government. Trying to pretend you know all of the answers, and trying to pretend that it's going to be something that it isn't, is where you store up trouble for yourself. So, it was tough, and a number of people who were the biggest and most vocal decriers of that piece of legislation ended up actually completely reversing their position very soon afterwards, which I respect. It didn't make my life very easy at the time, but maybe they just needed that extra bit of time to understand. So, the real learning there was that it was a bit of a hospital pass from the Home Office, who had dreamt up the idea. They did a consultation; a quarter of a million people responded; and they didn't know what to do. My department did, and I was given a very clear steer by the prime minister, "You need to sort this out quickly; it's difficult. You need to get it done by the summer". And we did it. And something which my department thought was going to take at least 18 months ended up taking six months. So, it was good.

PT: And was there consensus in government for the bill at the time?

MM: Was there consensus in government? Gosh, that's a really good question. I am going to say there must have been because otherwise it wouldn't have gone forward. But there will have been a settled view that it was the right way forward, otherwise it literally wouldn't have gone through. Look, I think any social change – and I know it's not that long ago, but it was then a big social change – is always going to be challenging, whether

you're a government minister or you're not. And I think probably some ministers did find it challenging, and there certainly was not unanimity amongst the ministerial ranks. But the prime minister – and I take my hat off to him – was incredibly clear that this was the direction we were going in and we were not wavering from it. That was in the face of some quite stiff opposition, not just from the ministerial ranks or the backbenchers, but also from party members as well. And going back to my quarter of a million responses to the consultation, all of which were read and all of which were logged, I think that actually took more time than the legislation did to get through parliament.

TD: It's funny, as you say, it was contentious at the time, but it feels so settled now, doesn't it? Which is a good thing. It shows quite a lot has changed.

MM: Yes, and it's the only thing that I've done as a member of parliament where people I have never met before have tapped me on the shoulder in the street and said, "Thank you. You changed my life", which is quite an extraordinary feeling. It was a relatively small change, and I would argue should have always been the case. The state should not be allowed to discriminate between people who want to get married. We recognise that people have a right to be protected if they're homosexual, therefore we shouldn't be saying that they shouldn't get married. There's such a thing as a state marriage and that should have always recognised same sex couples. It was a mistake. It was an aberration that it didn't. So, yeah, it was a strange beast. And just in terms of the other parties you haven't raised: obviously one of the biggest negotiations I had to do was with the Church of England, because they have canon law [which governs the church], which is a strange beast. And we were impinging on their jurisdiction. So, that's why my department had to get up to speed very quickly on things that they had never and would never have conceivably dreamt that they would have ever had to have known much about. And they did a brilliant job. The civil servants on that were extraordinary.

TD: You said the initial assessment was that it would take 18 months, but then it only took six in the end. How did you compress that? Obviously there was a political desire to get it done quickly, but what were the steps you actually took to make that happen?

MM: I think it's trying to get rid of those that are trying to put obstacles in the way, and that was mostly through external stakeholders. So, I worked very closely with the Church of England particularly, but also all of the other religious stakeholder groups. And the leadership from the prime minister made it very clear that there was no turning back from this. We were not going to give way, and this was going to happen – and, maybe, because there was a bit of a determined secretary of state in there who just pressed forward with it. Perhaps having worked in business for twenty years, when I am asked to do something by the person I work for, I just get on and do it. That's what I did in the DWP, and it's what I did in DCMS.

And David Cameron was absolutely involved on a daily basis with the sorts of things I was doing and I worked very closely with him over that period of time. And it was just having that direct support from the prime minister, I think, that sent a clear message to the civil servants that we just had to get this done.

And, I think, the political pain that it was causing also meant that it was in everybody's interests to resolve it, to get it through as a piece of legislation. There were a couple of wrinkles, which I now as a backbencher occasionally see coming to light, which we knew

hadn't been completely resolved when the primary legislation went through. But, ultimately, I think it was seeing that real leadership from the top that meant there was no misunderstanding that that piece of legislation was going to get through, so we might as well do it quickly.

TD: Okay, if we can turn then to you leaving government, you resigned from government in April 2014, after focus on your expenses, which had been going on for a few years at that point. Can you just talk us through what that was like and how that period felt for you?

MM: Well, it felt like pants. You go into government – particularly I think if you've come from a background where you've been doing a relatively responsible job – you go into government to try and do something which is a really good thing. And then, you find yourself on the wrong side of a set of rules which just appeared to have been constructed in a way to work against you, particularly as a working mum. And I think that was the most dispiriting part of it, that I couldn't have seen a way in which I could have not fallen foul of these rules, because of the way they were drawn up. But you have to take it on the chin, don't you? I mean, if you want a fair life, don't go into politics. It's just as happenstance would have it.

Now, some people speculate that perhaps there was some link between the issues that I was dealing with and the focus on expenses. I don't know. All I do know is that as a result of the experience that I had, the expenses system was completely axed. And now, under the new system, I would have actually not had the problem that I had to leave government as a result of. So, this wouldn't have happened now, as a mum with three kids and two dependent parents. I would have actually received more support through the MPs costs and allowances. And I think that is in no little part because of the experience that I had, where I was penalised for the fact that I had an extended family and I had several people in my family, all of whom were dependents and two of whom were my parents. So, I am really glad that it's changed the system, though I wish it hadn't been so painful for me personally.

TD: Yeah, of course. Having left government, you've been quite active on select committees, and you chaired the women and equalities committee for a few years. How beneficial do you think it is to have been inside government and then to take on those roles? Did it change the way you scrutinised what government was doing, because you knew what it was like being inside?

MM: Absolutely. Being a minister was the best preparation for being a select committee chair. And the fact that we have a women and equalities select committee is somewhat drawn from the fact that, when I became minister for women and equalities, I was staggered ... staggered ... to have discovered that there wasn't a select committee. When I was in opposition, I was very focused on the education brief. When I was in DWP and doing disability issues, I was focused on that. And when I became minister for equalities, it sort of dawned on me that it was the only area of government that wasn't subject to select committee scrutiny. My PPS [parliamentary private secretary] and I decided that this was actually really unhelpful, and it would be helpful for a minister if you had a select committee scrutinising equality issues. And it was a recommendation that then came out of the APPG [all-party parliamentary group] called Women in Parliament. It was Mary McLeod who was my PPS, and it was her recommendation that we establish a women

and equalities select committee. And then, she lost her seat, unfortunately, so I took up the gauntlet of advocating for the select committee very loudly with the leader of the House, who was then Chris Grayling, and the then speaker, John Bercow. And I don't know, maybe it was because I'd just been a secretary of state – I don't know – or whether it was going to happen anyway, but it was David Cameron who agreed that it should happen. The speaker agreed. The leader of the House agreed. And I think it was a profoundly good thing to have an equalities select committee that looked uniquely at that issue. And I was so proud to be its first chair. I decided to stop after five years because I know you can do it for ten years, but I do think you need to get fresh blood in there. And Caroline [Nokes, subsequent committee chair] was doing a brilliant job. But I think it's only Hampshire women who should be chairs of the women and equalities select committee *[laughs]*.

TD: Which role do you think you've had more influence in, as a select committee chair or a minister? Where do you think you can get more change done? A high profile select committee chair who knows their stuff can be very influential, can't they? And maybe a minister might have to toe the party line a bit more.

MM: I think the reality is you can get more change done as a cabinet minister than you can as a select committee chair, but can you shape the debate? I think you can do that much more easily as a select committee chair than you can as a minister, where you have collective responsibility. So, it was incredibly rewarding to be able to be challenging about issues which I knew my ministerial colleagues might really care about and totally agree with me on, but were hamstrung about being able to be open and transparent.

So, I enjoyed being chair of the Women & Equalities Select Committee, particularly over a period of time where there was quite a lot of other things going on. I also enjoyed it because I was able to offer a lot of new members of parliament the opportunity to shine and to get real knowledge on equality issues within the committee context, and have the privilege of working with people like Mims Davies, Flick Drummond [previously members of the women and equalities select committee] and many others, who are just really great members of parliament, and great colleagues. It's a great team as well ... a great team.

PT: Great. So, I think you might have touched on this, but what would you say was the achievement you're most proud of from your time in office?

MM: Well, I think the one that has caused the most change and challenged the most people is the Equal Marriage Bill. It was a great privilege to be able to put that through parliament and to find a way of helping us as a society to be a better place to live for everybody. And that was the most profound feeling I had, when we passed that piece of legislation.

PT: And what advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be most effective in office?

MM: Focus. You know, I think there is a great deal that you can do as a minister, but you can't do it all. If you actually want to achieve something, you have to focus. You have to decide what it is that you can do that can have the most effect and then you need to rigorously stick with that. Now, you might be lucky and focus on something which your department also thinks is a priority, or you might be unlucky and not do that and have to

work with them to understand why you're right and they aren't. But ultimately, if you try and do too much, you will end up doing nothing. And I think that is the biggest challenge for ministers, is just focusing in on something that you can achieve. And I think being on top of your brief is important, so you have credibility in the House with backbenchers. Otherwise, your life will be hell.

PT: And is there any advice you would give in particular to new women ministers?

MM: I think women ministers still have an incredibly tough time. I think that they disproportionately get adverse media comment. I think they get a disproportionately tough time in the House. And I think the House of Commons needs to ask itself some questions sometimes about what is, I think, still quite a misogynistic environment. I really feel strongly that women in parliament need to stick together, and that's why I chair the APPG on Women in Parliament, which is all about getting more women in parliament, but also supporting each other, and then within my party. And all of this is because of my experiences. I've established a group for Conservative women MPs: ministers and non-ministers. We call it the 2022, which is purely because it was formed in 2022 and not at all of course to in any way parody the 1922 Committee, which is more established than we are. But it's there because of my own experiences and the experiences of many women who have gone before me, that it is much tougher, and we have much less well developed networks of support than our male counterparts. And we've got to start to put that right, rather than just experience the downside.

PT: Something we're looking into, at the moment, is the support provided to ministers. What was your general impression of the support you received from your private office etc. when you were a minister, in both DWP and DCMS?

MM: I think private offices have an in-built conflict of interest because they both have to serve their department on a career level but also serve their minister, often on a very, very personal level, because ministers work very long hours, very antisocial hours, and, depending on what they're doing, they do the most extraordinary things with their private office's support. So, I think your private office is the reason you'll succeed or fail: having good people in there for a long enough period of time. For me, the biggest issue was turnover. It was far too fast. Again, going back to the context of when I was a minister, the civil service had become accustomed to the Blair way of doing things, which was a continually revolving door of ministers. And then of course, David Cameron did it very differently. He kept people in place. Nick Gibb is perhaps the extreme example of that. But people actually stayed in place for many years. Whereas, prior to me the minister for disabled people had been a new person at least every ten months. So, I think the civil service had become used to changing private office quite frequently without there being any impact on ministers. Whereas, under the coalition government, we found the turnaround far too quick, and we wanted people to be in place for longer, because that relationship is so important. But, as I say, I do think private office has this inherent conflict of interest, which they are clever enough people to deal with, but it is difficult.

PT: And finally, is there anything that we haven't asked you about that you'd like to add, or think was an important part of your experience?

MM: No, I think you've covered it all. I think it is very difficult for the outside world to realise how challenging these roles are, and how it's really important we don't have experts in them. Because we're there to try and speak for the people, and govern for the people. We're not trying to govern for the experts. And so, to come in as somebody who is an outsider into a very complex portfolio is an enormous challenge, and one that probably deserves a tiny bit more support than it gets. But it's a huge privilege. Not many people get that opportunity, so I count myself as very fortunate.

I was just thinking, I've probably forgotten people who worked with me in ministerial office and, actually, one person who I did work with who I haven't mentioned, because she wasn't a minister straight away, was Helen Grant, who came to work for me as sports minister when Hugh moved onto something else. And actually, it was the first time I'd had a woman minister working with me. And that was lovely, and Helen and I remain firm friends. And actually you build a real relationship and a rapport with the people you work with. And it's being able to share that experience. It's quite unique.

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