

Ministers Reflect George Eustice



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Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2010 – present: MP for Camborne and Redruth

Government career

2020–22: Secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs

2015–19: Minister of state for agriculture, fisheries and food (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

2013–15: Parliamentary under secretary of state for farming, food and the marine environment (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

George Eustice was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Mark O'Brien on 8 July 2019 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

George Eustice was the minister of state for agriculture, fisheries and food during 2015-19. He took up this role again in the July 2019 reshuffle. He was previously the parliamentary under-secretary of state for farming, food and the marine environment (2013-15). He has been the Conservative MP for Camborne and Redruth since 2010.

George Eustice was interviewed again in March 2023, when he reflected on his time as secretary of state at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Read this interview from page 16.

Tim Durrant (TD): We'll start by talking about when you entered government. You became the parliamentary under secretary for farming, food and the marine environment in 2013. Can you tell us about your first day? What was it like?

George Eustice (GE): Very sudden, I think is what I would say. I was unusual in that the prime minister's chief of staff had phoned me the Friday before the re-shuffle to ask whether I'd be willing to accept a position in government. So, it didn't happen on the day, and that was because they were conscious that I had a very marginal seat and they didn't want to factor in offering me a ministerial job. It's very unusual for them to do that because they normally expect things to leak, but because I'd been a press secretary to David Cameron, I think they trusted me to not leak anything.

I knew what was likely to come, but when it actually did happen, it was just a phone call: "Can you come to Number 10 in 20 minutes?" Literally about three minutes with David Cameron, the then prime minister, just to say: "I think you'll be great at this job, I know you've got experience there, we really want you to do this", and came out and spoke to – it would have probably been Jeremy Heywood – the then Cabinet Secretary, who just said: "You'll shortly get a phone call from your private office." Within five minutes, no more than that, I had the phone call from my private office who said: "Can you come here immediately?"

I had a very short debrief as to what was happening, but I think the most pressing thing is you immediately inherit your predecessor's diary. On the day that I was appointed, they cleared out the diary, but I think from the following day there were speeches and engagements that I had to step straight into. So, it happened very quickly. I think the other thing that I perhaps rather naively wasn't prepared for was that when you become a minister, it's not that it's just another part of your role, like being on a select committee or anything else, but they take over the entire diary.

TD: How did you find balancing between your roles as a constituency MP and as a minister?

GE: We had very good relations between my private office and the parliamentary office, and I did a lot to nurture that because where I've seen it go wrong is where a private office is seen as rather a sort of ivory tower, supercilious, doesn't understand how politics on the ground works. And you can sometimes get tension between a private office and your parliamentary office. So we regularly used to do social events between the two offices, pizza nights, barbeques, so on and so forth, and they actually bonded and started to work really well together as a team.

We very quickly evolved a way where certain days were constituency days and they were given over. Pretty much every week I still went down to my constituency, and you learn to just get better and better at managing your time – as a minister there is no short cut to just becoming more and more effective at time management – the time I was in the constituency was maxed out with events. So that I could still do the constituency as far as possible, I'd avoid dinners and I would spend that time doing constituency work, signing letters, re-drafting letters related to the constituency. I think that was quite important because there is a danger otherwise that, as a minister, you can very easily fill your evening diary with promises of this or that dinner, which are quite exhausting and wearing because everyone just wants a piece of you, but actually don't achieve very much. So, I think safeguarding that time to do the constituency work helped.

TD: That makes sense. So, on that first day, you met the prime minister and he told you he'd like you to take this job. Were you given any kind of guidance or steers as to what he wanted you to focus on? Were you able to decide your own priorities?

GE: Not a huge amount actually. I think it's fair to say – and he said so privately to me a few months after that – for David Cameron he largely saw Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] as a department where they didn't want to do anything too ambitious that would rock the boat and cause problems. He was in the business of trying to drive a very delicate coalition situation with the Liberal Democrats and had a very important agenda to try to re-balance the books and deal with the aftermath of the financial crisis and the debt that our country had. I think he saw Defra as being somewhere where we should do a competent job, but it should be a fairly steady thing, we shouldn't try to do anything ambitious that might come unstuck.

Although he didn't want new problems on the Defra front, he was also very personally committed to the very contentious policy that we had which was the badger cull as part of our work to eradicate bovine TB. He was very supportive of that, and wanted us to make sure we just delivered that in a way that didn't cause too many communications issues. On other fronts, I recall when we had, as Defra has periodically, some row over beavers – it was the reintroduction of wild beavers in Devon that had been done

illegally, and there was some speculation that Defra might cull these beavers because they had been extinct – and I can remember him saying: “Just leave the beavers alone. One piece of wildlife at a time is more than enough” *[laughter]*.

Mark O’Brien (MOB): On your experiences before becoming a minister, you mentioned David Cameron said when he gave you the role that it was partly due to your experience in the area. In particular, how do you think being a member of the EFRA [Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] Select Committee prepared you to become a minister in Defra?

GE: I think it helped a bit, but if I’m honest, not as much as I had envisaged. The thing that hit me, more than I realised, was just how many tiers of detail there are beyond the depth that a select committee will go into. On fisheries policy, I can remember, the very first submission that I had from the civil service, a typical sort of four- or five-page submission, was an update on some highly contentious negotiations over mackerel quotas. There was a dispute with Iceland and the Faroe Islands, and famously if you managed to get the Faroes on board, you would lose Iceland or vice versa.

Trying to understand the intricacies of these negotiations – how they worked, how they were structured, what our role was in them given that it was an EU competence, where a settlement might lie – was just a whole level of detail beyond what a select committee would typically look at. So, I think the fact that I had studied horticulture and had worked in the soft fruit industry for 10 years and the farming industry as well, and grown up on a farm, all of that helped, because it gave me a kind of hinterland of understanding. But just the sheer complexity of some of these policy areas, and the structures around them was certainly further than we’d encountered within the EFRA select committee.

MOB: Another aspect of your previous experience was your involvement in managing press and campaigns for both David Cameron and, before that, Michael Howard [leader of the Conservative Party from 2003–05]. Do you think that experience helped you in any way when you became a minister?

GE: Yes, I think it did in that I spent four years in the role, both for Michael Howard and then David Cameron, walking up and down what’s called the press gallery or the lobby as it’s called – a long corridor where every newspaper journalist is based in the Houses of Parliament – day in, day out trying to defend the latest crisis that had happened, or to brief the latest policy we had advanced. I’d done lobby briefings, as in confronting a pack of maybe 12 or 20 journalists and enduring 15 minutes of intense questioning. I think that ability to be constantly a step ahead of the questions you’re being asked and realise where they might lead, making sure you’re not opening an avenue where there might be a question you don’t have the answer to, gave me confidence to be able to do things like select committees, and confidence to leave behind the Defra script when I needed to. Having done that role for four years, I had an instinctive understanding of where the contours of official government policy lay and how far I could push it, stretch

it, reinterpret it, or say things that were slightly different to the stated line to take. It did help.

MOB: Just going back to your time as parliamentary under secretary of state, how did you see your duties as a minister? You mentioned that Cameron wanted a steady hand at Defra, but how did you learn to do your role?

GE: Quite early on I learned what you need to do to be a minister effectively and, as is the case in most things in politics, I would say it is about asking the right questions. Where I might have agreed to something I'd regretted, I would always regret that I hadn't asked a particular question that might have made me more cautious. This wasn't always welcomed by officials, because the civil service typically like to give you a submission with a multiple choice of three options, two of which are rather bizarre, and with one in the middle being the preferred option that they would like you to adopt. But actually, it's very helpful to ask many more questions about the points, the facts they presented, whether those were correct, and what the basis of assuming those things are: it is really about just intensively asking questions. So, as time went on, more and more I used to say: "Let's have a meeting with the officials to discuss"; and I very much used to like getting not just the deputy directors or senior officials, but also the SEOs [senior executive officers], HEOs [higher executive officers] and the Grade 6s and 7s [civil service positions above SEOs and HEOs but below the most senior civil servants]¹ so that you had the people who were actually sleeves rolled-up doing the policy detail, and you could really drill down into that detail.

I found that I didn't like to just trust the line given and assume that it would be done, I needed to really understand what had been done and why. I think that did serve me quite well in the end, just asking lots of questions, because over time you become more and more proficient with the intricate detail. There's a particular feature I have in that I'm appalling at remembering names, so even after five and a half years, there were officials that I dealt with regularly and I couldn't remember their names, but I could always remember detail and things that they'd told me. Over time you build up that ability, almost institutional memory, with which you can actually question things quite effectively.

TD: How did officials react to that kind of questioning and that request to see the policy leads, rather than the senior civil servants?

GE: I don't know. None of them ever told me that they didn't like it, but I used to pick up from my private office that the request to have a meeting was sometimes met with a kind of rolling of eyes, because they knew they'd have to go and make sure they really understood it and spend the time doing that. All government departments experience

¹ For more information on civil service grades, see Institute for Government, 'Grade structures of the civil service', 1 May 2019, retrieved 11 September 2019, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/grade-structures-civil-service.

this: there's sometimes a feeling that it's a straightforward decision that should just be rubber stamped. My experience was that you can get lulled into a sense of security that it's just a relatively basic thing and then you rubber stamp it and it turns out that it's a bit more complicated than you realised. So, it's better that you understand that before you enact a decision and regret it afterwards.

MOB: During the period when you were still a PUSS [parliamentary under secretary of state] in 2014, there were multiple crises which would have had an impact on the department, such as flooding affecting farmers and storms affecting fishermen. Can you talk us through managing a crisis? How well did you find the department dealt with those sorts of crises?

GE: I personally think it dealt with it quite well, although I am aware that there was criticism of the way the communications was handled in particular, I think from one of the committees or from an internal civil service kind of review of matters. But my view is when you have an issue such as a flooding crisis, there's always things waiting to go wrong and you won't get everything exactly right.

But my experience of Defra during that time was actually quite positive because, to be fair, during that flooding incident, over Christmas when it all broke, the Environment Agency had put in place all sorts of protocols to alert local authorities. I think there was a special forum that local authorities could check into, and the Environment Agency were doing their bit, but what they found sadly is that a lot of local authorities were kind of 'off on holiday' and just weren't there. In the end, the real weakness was that local authorities were off on holiday over Christmas and weren't doing things that they would be expected to do, such as getting sand bags into areas where there was flooding, alerting people, putting out that sort of information. So while the Environment Agency were doing their job, there was a fall down in terms of other areas.

In the end, what had to happen, because it had got out of hand, was David Cameron – not for the first time, as we had to deal with floods and flood issues when I was press secretary – went to do a flood visit and got accosted by somebody who said it was all terrible and a joke and nothing was happening. From that moment on, there was actually quite a lot of COBRA [Cabinet Office Briefing Room committee] time invested. I chaired some of those COBRA committee meetings over the Christmas period, and Owen Paterson and even the prime minister chaired some too, in order to try and get this situation moving. But the local authorities, in my experience, were the weaker part of that link.

TD: And did those COBRA meetings make things happen?

GE: Yes, they did, because COBRA is designed to try and you know, give everybody a kind of proverbial kick up the backside and get things moving. So, when you had DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] ministers who were being harangued by the prime minister to sort this out, you soon found that some of the DCLG

weren't just saying: "Oh, it's just the local authorities' [problem]", they were actually getting involved and really pushing things forward.

MOB: Just moving on now to when you became minister of state at Defra. How did the transition compare, how did you hear about the appointment, and were you expecting it at that stage?

GE: If I'm brutally honest, it didn't feel remotely different to being a parliamentary under secretary of state, apart from that it's a slightly higher salary attached to it, but not a huge amount. There was a history in Defra of having a minister of state, and when I was appointed, they lost that minister of state position, and the reason for that was linked to the politics of the coalition. Norman Baker had been promoted as the Lib Dem in the Home Office and had demanded a minister of state role, because that's what he should have. But there's only a set number of minister of state roles, so in order to make coalition politics work – and this was a sore point within Defra as a department – they lost their minister of state position and it was replaced by a parliamentary under secretary of state. It meant that Defra had just a secretary of state and then three parliamentary under secretaries, and the minister of state role had just gone in along with lots of others into the Home Office.

The truth is that the role that I was doing was really a minister of state role, even though I had the badge of a parliamentary under secretary of state. And I think, even in those early years, I was treated as a sort of de facto deputy to the secretary of state, first to Owen Paterson and then to Liz Truss afterwards. I think it's because I was probably covering more than half of the portfolio brief within Defra at the time, and certainly for Number 10, when we had that flooding crisis and they were a little bit concerned that Owen Paterson wasn't best equipped to deal with it, they would occasionally field me to do nasty programmes like *Panorama*, to be interrogated for half an hour on flood funding for instance, even though it wasn't necessarily something I was doing. So, I didn't really notice the difference to be honest, because from both the department's point of view and probably Number 10, I was to all intents and purposes performing the role of the minister of state from the beginning.

MOB: You mentioned you, Owen Paterson and Liz Truss, but in total, you served under four secretaries of state in your time at Defra. How beneficial do you think continuity is in ministerial roles?

GE: I would actually say very important. My conclusion is that the Cabinet role and the Cabinet positions are as much as anything about creating stability within the political party or indeed the coalition, to make sure that you've got different factions and different perspectives that are reflected around the Cabinet table. But I think to have a minister of state underneath who stays in position for a long time, in an area where they've got expertise, can be incredibly beneficial.

Otherwise what does start to happen is that even though I'd been there a long time, the same submissions would come up, for example, asking me to agree things I'd already said no to. I had two issues I remember in particular: one was a dispute over a change in the regulations on the UV treatment of bottled water, where I didn't agree that we should make a change but the advice was always that we should, and another was around an exception for small fields requiring a buffer strip, where again I didn't support change, but I think in total we received a submission four different times recommending change.

I think having that consistency, so that you know that, hang on, we said no to this not once but twice or three times, is quite beneficial because otherwise you just have a new ministerial team and it's only a matter of time before officials will get their way – I mean, they may do now that I'm gone, who knows? But it's only a matter of time before they'll get their way, given a change in ministers. So, for a secretary of state, to be able to understand the argument that happened before and why it was had, I think that is quite useful.

TD: Working with those four secretaries of state, were there differences in how they managed the department, how they managed their teams?

GE: Yes, huge differences. I have to say I got on very well with all of them, but they were all quite different creatures in terms of their approach. So, Owen Paterson was passionate about countryside issues, and so therefore passionate about Defra issues, and in particular had done a lot of work on issues such as bio-security in trade issues, but also famously the TB and the badger cull where he had a long track record of arguing for this. He was quite intuitive, so he would intuitively reach positions without necessarily analysing all the detail in great depth. That gave quite a direction but it was quite an intuitive direction that he gave.

Liz Truss had other issues that she was very interested in, in particular digital and data and how technology could transform agriculture, and I think it's fair to say she had more interest in issues that perhaps had an overlap with Defra but weren't strictly Defra issues. So, issues such as skills or training or education she was very interested in, issues such as planning she was very interested in, even though there was a less direct Defra involvement to that. She also had, far more than any of the others, a pre-occupation with communications and media management.

Andrea Leadsom was very passionate about issues such as animal welfare and was also very keen to progress a green paper initially on future agriculture policy and fisheries policy. And be fair to her, she was only there for a year and I think got quite frustrated, if I can put it that way, with the resistance of Number 10 at the time under Theresa May to actually let go of the reins a bit and let Defra have the freedom to start developing policies in these areas. In that first year, they very much held everything on a tight rein and it did quite often choke departments like Defra from doing anything; if there wasn't

head space in Number 10 to understand everything you were doing, they wouldn't let you do it. So, I think she found it quite frustrating, although she did have certain passions for it.

And finally, Michael Gove – I think just a consummate operator really. Probably the first time, in a long time, that Defra's had a secretary of state who wasn't a junior part of the Cabinet but was actually a very senior player in the Cabinet. Probably the first time it had a secretary of state, certainly in all the time that I was there, who could just turn over the Treasury, block the Treasury or reverse a decision the Treasury thought they had taken. He was just very good at driving decisions over the line. He didn't suffer fools, was very unforgiving in the department if there was slowness or prevarication, and really knew how to drive the department I would say. But also, he had very good relations and became very respected within the department for the courteous way he dealt with people, even though he was quite impatient to get things done.

MOB: One more question on the Defra work. What do you feel were your biggest policy successes and what was the implementation of policies you oversaw from introduction to end like?

GE: I still say that after all that time probably the biggest things that I did were the two flagship bills on agriculture and fisheries. At the time we'd been developing those bills, I'd been doing those briefs for the best part of four years and had campaigned to leave the European Union myself, based on my experience of working in Defra and seeing the EU law up close, and there's quite a lot of hallmarks in those bills that are very much my own conclusions and thoughts. So, I think being able to craft those bills, get them through secondary reading, get them through committee stage, were the two most important legacies that I have.

After that, there are a few other things, in particular the badger cull policy as part of the TB initiative which I inherited from Owen Paterson; a highly contentious, very difficult, quite painful policy in many ways, but it has been rolled out and we are now seeing where it first started a significant reduction in the incidence of the disease. As painful and difficult though that policy was, I think we're seeing it start to work.

My reflections on Defra as a department, and the things that are really good about it, are that I can't think of any other department that would have the breadth of expertise that you have in Defra and the family of agencies around it – whether it's talking about some bizarre issue around the lifecycle of an oyster or the nervous physiology of a lobster, to agriculture policy and how you promote pollinators and habitats and soils and all the rest of it – the technical diversity is just so incredibly diverse. And whatever the question when we get parliamentary questions coming in, in Defra it's quite an enlightening experience because every week you learn new things you didn't know about, even when you've been there for years; somewhere tucked away in Defra, there's the expert who knows exactly the answer to these things.

So, I think in terms of its technical expertise and the breath of it, it's probably second to none. And the other thing is the types of civil servant that join Defra are, in my view, quite a good-natured bunch of people generally speaking, in that if you're somebody who joins Defra it tends to be because you've got a passion for those issues already, you care about the environment or agriculture or some of these other issues. More so than some other departments, this particular connection with the portfolio that they're dealing with gives them quite a good nature, whereas my experience in some other government departments is you get more highly ambitious, swaggering types who want to climb up the ladder and are less good natured to deal with, to put it that way.

So, that's what I really liked about my time in Defra. The bit that I think they suffered with, but to be fair they were very good at shedding it, was that because 80% of the regulations that Defra deals with are basically handed down by the European Union, there's a tendency for them to get into a rather sort of slavish mindset of implementing the latest dictat from the EU or fretting about the latest court judgement in the ECJ [European Court of Justice], or saying that the auditors have said that they don't like the way that we record this. It means that while you've got some incredibly talented expertise, it tends to get lost under the morass of fretting about EU law and its legal implications.

My frustration in my time there was that we used to spend so much time trying to sort out EU things, and implement EU directives, or change the way we implemented EU directives because there was a legal challenge or a threat of infraction, that actually thinking from first base about what policies we'd like to do tended to get smothered out as not a priority, because the priority was always mitigating legal risks from Brussels. And that's quite a debilitating culture for any government department to end up with and it's why, on balance, having seen that for several years, I concluded that we should leave the EU, which is, as you know, not something everybody who has done that role did, but that was my conclusion having seen it.

TD: We will come back to Brexit, but before that, you were in government for a long period of time, you saw the coalition, the majority government after the 2015 election and then the move to a minority in 2017. Can you tell us a bit about how those different parliamentary arithmetics affected your role?

GE: I think as a minister of state or even a junior minister, you only see it through the prism of what you can achieve, and in my experience, it's still very hard to get anything done in politics even as a minister. There are lots of decisions that you'll make on all sorts of smaller issues that nobody else is interested in, but in terms of trying to get major policy changes, you first of all have to have a sympathetic secretary of state who will stay there long enough, then inevitably in a department like Defra you have to have the argument with the departmental lawyers about whether what you want to do is compliant with EU law. And even after that, you still need Number 10 to agree it and to give it the space and the time, the grid slot [a weekly diary of policy events and

announcements maintained by Number 10] so it can be announced. And, of course, you've got other government departments just waiting to block you, and in common with a lot of other departments, the Treasury was a frequent frustration, in that even when you wanted to do something that was relatively modest and you could demonstrate made sense, often there was just an automatic block, sometimes I felt just to assert their power on a particular issue if it related to a budget, rather than for any kind of rational reason beyond that.

So, I don't particularly feel that changed going from the coalition to a small majority to no majority, because I think they were all much of a muchness, and it was still quite difficult to get an alignment of the stars as I would call it, which is, a secretary of state and a Number 10 operation willing to give you the green light so that you could do things. The closest I got to that really was when Michael Gove arrived, he did manage to unblock quite a few things, we managed to get certain agendas over the line that we'd struggled with for some time.

TD: We've spoken about how much it affected Defra's work, but what impact did Brexit have on your role? What changed after the 2016 referendum in terms of your role as the minister of state for agriculture?

GE: Well, the crucial thing that changed after was that there was huge preparation for a post-EU world. So, developing the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill, working out what a transition would look like, all of the no-deal planning that I had a role in, even though latterly because of the burden of work that we had, David Rutley [parliamentary under secretary of state for food and animal welfare] joined the department and started to do some of it. So, there was enormous amounts of thinking for day one readiness in terms of having an operable law book, including all of the SIs [statutory instruments] under the EU Withdrawal Act, right through to trying to think about what the Agriculture Bill should look like, what its powers should have, and likewise on Fisheries; it was an immense, huge workload. So, the crucial thing post-the referendum result, I would say, was that around half of my time was suddenly dedicated to preparing for a post-Brexit world, whereas prior to that it was much more around managing the existing membership of the EU.

TD: How did relationships with member states change? If you were negotiating with other EU countries, did that affect your day-to-day activities?

GE: If I'm honest, initially it didn't really affect it at all; it was business as usual. We still went out there [to Brussels], we still took part in the December Fisheries Council, had the usual sorts of arguments, and to be fair, the European Commission didn't treat us any differently. While we were a member, we were a member and that sort of thing carried on.

Defra is unique in [that] there was an Agri-Fish Council [a meeting of agriculture and fisheries ministers from each EU member state] monthly – most departments have

something usually quarterly, but we had one every single month – so I built very good relations with all of the ministers there over that period of time. In fact, I think a couple of months before I resigned, I became the longest-serving agricultural minister in Europe. I think the Austrian one resigned and that made me the longest-standing until I resigned [*laughter*]. So, no, it didn't really change.

The only thing I would say is that towards the end, probably the final six months, I had more commitments home here in the UK. Partly because of the pressure back home to make sure we were ready for no deal, but also because whenever I looked at the agenda, it was, for want of a better term, the fag end of the current Commission, so they were really scraping the barrel for agenda items. They were kind of going through the motions of holding European Councils, but it would be you know, an update on the latest school honey scheme being run in Slovenia or something. At the end of the Commission, they had no time to advance anything of particular substance, so they'd just fill the agenda with lots of AOB [any other business] items. It got to the point where it wasn't really worth a minister attending, so if I'm honest, the final six months I didn't really attend as often as I had done previously.

TD: You resigned as a minister in February 2019. Can you talk us through your thought process at that point and why that was the right time for you to resign?

GE: I had almost resigned when the Withdrawal Agreement was published, because I did feel that there were elements of it that were highly restrictive, and in particular a lack of an exit clause from the back stop concerned me. However, in the end, with some considerable concern, I decided that I should back the Withdrawal Agreement because I felt that if we didn't, there was a danger that we wouldn't leave the European Union at all, that things would then unravel quite quickly, and we would have a new sort of problem in politics, which is indeed what we do effectively have now.

The thing that forced me to resign was that I'd always said that I was open to all sorts of compromise. Personally, I'd advocated joining EFTA [European Free Trade Association] and remaining a member of the EEA [European Economic Area], we never left the EEA, we had some legal rights under it, and I had been arguing internally to Michael Gove and to others in Number 10 for a period of 12 months that it might be a better option to simply re-join the EFTA pillar [of the EEA], and go for a Norway-style option at least for an interim period, because it would deliver the referendum result, but it would do so in an orderly way, that would assuage the concerns of those who were nervous about leaving.

I didn't feel that the case for that had been made adequately, so while people like Oliver Letwin were starting to make it, I didn't think it was being made properly from what I would call a Leave perspective, which is where I was coming from. Increasingly I just felt given that I wasn't being listened to inside government on this, there was only a short

period to go and I wanted the freedom, more than anything else, to make the case for an EFTA-type of compromise.

The second reason, and the trigger really, was that I got a very strong sense from advisers around the prime minister in Number 10 that actually she wasn't up for doing no deal at all personally, and it suited her to present this as Parliament forcing her hand, and I didn't really feel that was the way to go about things. In some ways, I would have respected it more if she'd have levelled with me and said: "I'm not willing to leave with no deal because, these things I think will happen, and I'm just not willing to do that." I would have respected that more, but I felt that there was a bit of elaborate choreography going on, where Parliament would be portrayed as this terrible thing that was blocking the government from doing what it wanted to do, when in actual fact, I think people like David Lidington [Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a de-facto deputy prime minister to Theresa May] and probably the prime minister herself, just didn't want to do no deal, and kind of opened the door to Parliament hijacking events.

Very clearly in these things, I think the role for Parliament is to scrutinise legislation and to either provide confidence in government or not to provide it, and the role of government and the executive is to govern and to lead on these sorts of issues. I think once you had blurred that, frankly there's not really much point remaining part of a collective government if the government's no longer in control. So, for me, there was a logic and that was the right time to get out.

As I said, I would have done all sorts of other compromises that the prime minister wouldn't countenance earlier, including talking to the Labour Party much earlier, including an EFTA-style settlement, but that wasn't done and I feel that at that point you did have to leave in order to keep your credibility and continuing talking after. And so, when it was clear that wasn't going to happen, it just made sense to go. I think also, for me on a personal level, I'd done huge amounts of work on the Agriculture and Fisheries Bills, and it was clear to me at that moment, that those bills would be put in the deep freeze, and that is indeed exactly what happened, because bringing either of them back to report stage meant that they were very prone to being hijacked. So, nothing further would happen.

TD: To finish, could you tell us what achievement you are most proud of from your time in office?

GE: I think the thing that I'm most proud of really is having crafted and brought forward two really important flagship bills, that will be necessary as we leave the European Union, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill. I was deeply involved in the 18 months leading up to their publication, and obviously took [the bills] through second reading and committee stage as well.

TD: And what advice would you give to a new minister on how to be most effective?

GE: I think the single most important advice I can give to any minister, it's common in lots of areas of politics, is ask questions. Never accept the multiple-choice submission that comes up with three options, two of which don't make any sense at all, and one of which officials would like you to do. All of the regrets I had were through not asking questions, questions that appear obvious after the event and something goes wrong, when you're at the dispatch box trying to defend something that you regret doing. I think there's no substitute to scrutinising what you're being asked to sign off in a submission. Get the officials up, all of them, from HEO and SEO ranks right up to the deputy directors, and really talk through the detail of things and ask the right questions.

George Eustice was interviewed by Catherine Haddon and Nicola Blacklaws on 6 March 2023 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.

George Eustice reflects on his time as secretary of state at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and preparing for leaving government.

Catherine Haddon (CH): What was it like going back into government and returning to the department after some time away?

GE: Well, much easier than going in first time round because I’d had, by that stage, nearly seven years in the department. I knew a lot of the key civil servants; they hadn’t changed that much in the six months or so that I was out. But, crucially, I knew a lot of the issues inside-out, having dealt with them – in particular the issues around Brexit, which were obviously very problematic – but, also, the wider agenda in terms of what we were trying to achieve on agriculture policy and fisheries negotiations. So it felt quite straightforward going back in. I got the feeling – and civil servants are very good at giving that feeling, whether it’s genuine or not, I suppose – but I got the feeling that they were quite pleased to have me back, in that they had somebody who genuinely understood the brief, that they had worked well with previously, and we could pick up pretty much where we left off.

CH: One of the major things that happened during your second stint in the role was the Australia trade deal. You’ve spoken about your misgivings about that deal, but what was it like working on it at the time?

GE: It was infuriating, to put it mildly, because Defra [the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] had incredible technical expertise in this area. I think we had a problem, really, taking back control of trade policy, in that there was a presumption that nobody in Whitehall understood trade. And therefore we had to bring in outsiders, notably Crawford Falconer [lead civil service trade negotiator during the Brexit process] from New Zealand, who had some experience of both the New Zealand civil service and the WTO [World Trade Organization]. I think they overlooked that actually, in departments like Defra, but others as well, there was actually quite a lot of technical knowledge on trade. Because Defra used to support EU trade missions and actually used to do a lot of the market access work with countries right around the world. The RPA [Rural Payments Agency] was actually the agency that used to manage TRQs [tariff rate quotas] for imports coming in under the old EU schedule. So there was a very deep technical knowledge of some of these issues in Defra, but it was incredibly difficult to get that properly recognised by the Department for International Trade.

Allied to that was a wider problem within the government and within the Conservative Party in general. While there was quite a bit of sensitivity for agricultural interests, there was a stronger feeling about the ideological benefits of free trade. So the difficult thing

for me was trying to argue that we should be seeking a reciprocal trade deal where, yes, we would give away access, but we would be granted something in return – but endlessly coming up against what could best be described as a rather ideological stance, which just held that we should just liberalise *per se*. This was a feeling that the Treasury had as well. Treasury officials were quite strongly of the view that tariffs were protectionist – that we should just scrap them all. The only other departments that sometimes supported us were BEIS [the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy] – who could see that you should in a trade deal give something for something, not just give everything away – and Michael Gove in the Cabinet Office was the most passionate, strongest supporter that I had on these issues, because he felt very much that taking back control meant standing up for yourself on the world stage. And we were sadly outnumbered. So we had to settle for a compromise that stuck in the throat. But, as ever in government, you either flounce off at that point and you're not able to shape other agendas that you're working on – or indeed to improve other trade deals in future – or you reach a settlement with your colleagues to acknowledge the consensus, even though that might sometimes be quite painful.

CH: Then in the February 2020 reshuffle you were promoted to secretary of state for Defra. What did you want to do with the department? Were there any changes that you wanted to make, having experienced it for so long and seen how it operates?

GE: There were policy things that I wanted to drive forward. So, the agriculture policy [the Agriculture Act 2020] is something that I'd been working on from around 2016, from the moment of the [Brexit] referendum result. That was something that I wanted to get over the line. I wanted to make sure that I took personal oversight of some of the technical, and actually very intractable, issues around Brexit, because we were facing a rather intransigent European Union in terms of being willing to work with us constructively on ironing out certain issues. But I felt that I should own that directly since I'd done it previously and it was too important for me not to. So that was the focus on the policy side.

Then generally I felt that, by that point, having been in the department long enough, I had a pretty good sense of what needed to be done and I'd been around several arguments on multiple occasions. I wanted to try and shorten the processes: shorten consultations, spend less time scoping and thinking about what principles we were bringing to certain things. There's a tendency, unless there's a strong ministerial steer, for the civil service to keep going around comfortable loops – to talk about strategies and processes and what our stance should be, and so on. Often that's an excuse for dodging difficult issues that you just need to grasp.

So I instituted a number of things. One was to try to get away from the concept of submissions, because I felt that the department could agonise for months over a submission. And they would usually have what I called multiple choice recommendations: usually there would be three options, two of which would be rather

bonkers and you wouldn't do, and then the middle one would be the recommended one that they wanted you to do. But often this was trying to address complex issues, where really what you needed to do was to get everyone who'd had their head in the detail – whether it was a technical expert on oysters in Natural England, or whether it was the grade sevens [middle-ranking civil servants], the SEO, or even the HEO [both fairly junior civil servants], who'd done all the hard graft to understand an issue – you wanted to get them in the room with the secretary of state and then challenge the thinking. And, actually, the option that you might go for might not be one of the three at all. It might be something quite different. There was quite a bit of aversion, I think, in the civil service to this, because they like to offer you solutions rather than problems. And I think they fear what might happen if a minister is set loose on an issue and, as they would see it, jumps to conclusions without being guided down a particular funnel. But, actually, with some of these complex issues, you can save a lot of time; and in my view you get better quality decision making. So, for me, opening up my door to the junior ranks – which was actually made much easier once we all went on Zoom and it was digital, because whether they were in a Natural England office in Bristol, or APHA [the Animal and Plant Health Agency] in Carlisle, wherever these people were, you could plug them into the discussion – it was quite powerful, so that I could be exposed to and interrogate the actual experts, rather than just be expected to tick a box on a submission.

CH: You were there for the duration of the Covid period. You've talked about the practical ways in which it affected the department – getting online and so forth – but how did it affect the department more generally? You weren't one of the departments that was in the forefront of the public's mind dealing with the pandemic, and yet your brief, like every other part of government business, was intensely affected by Covid.

GE: Yes. We were quite affected, particularly early on, and indeed throughout, because there were just relentless challenges to the food supply chain. First of all, we had a panic buying episode where there was a 50% spike and we had to deal with panic buying of toilet rolls. I never thought I'd be doing that within the first few weeks. There was then a period in June 2020 where we were genuinely concerned that there could be a domino effect of export bans. Because we're quite reliant on imports from other countries, there was a genuine fear that we might actually have some categories where we'd just go short. And we don't have the manufacturing capacity in this country. So I can remember infant formula milk in particular being something that I was quite concerned about. Then we had all sorts of stresses and strains caused by labour absences; the so-called 'pingdemic' occurred and businesses which were struggling to find staff anyway were suddenly having 20% absences caused by Covid. Then when we had the later variants the French started requiring testing of lorries, and that caused pressure. So there were a string of stresses on the food supply chain.

My conclusion at the end of it, though, was that – although it was very demanding and it occupied a lot of my time and a lot of bandwidth – the civil service, in my view, is at its

best when it's thrown into a crisis. I'd argue that it performs far better than private sector organisations under stress because it's got incredible technical knowledge and depth of knowledge. And when it's under pressure and it has to come up with quick solutions, a lot of the process that passes for action in peacetime has to go out of the window, and people have to step up and make decisions. And they do so quite well, in my experience. There'll be an inquiry into Covid and what happened, and no doubt lots of criticism, but in terms of the speed of reaction, the ability to grasp complex issues and deal with them in a quick way, I actually felt it demonstrated to me that the civil service works at its best almost when confronted with such situations.

CH: You left government in September 2022 when Liz Truss was assembling her cabinet. Was that your choice, or did you think you might be asked to stay on?

GE: I didn't think there was any chance I'd be asked to stay on. Liz Truss and I actually got on quite well when she was secretary of state in Defra. I think it's fair to say that she wanted to get through Defra without blotting her copybook, and she always had her eye on other roles while she was there, which was probably implicitly understood within the department, and that's not great. But, besides that, we actually got on reasonably well. The trouble is we'd had such disagreements over the Australia trade agreement that I knew there was no prospect at all that she would want me to stay there. She would want somebody biddable and pliable on trade deals in Defra. And so from the moment she was a frontrunner, I pretty much assumed it would be the end for me, and actually used the final six weeks to just get as many final decisions over the line as I could.

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