

Ministers Reflect Chloe Smith



10 January 2023 and 15 August 2023

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2009 — present: MP for Norwich North

Government career

2010–11: Assistant whip

2011–12: Economic secretary to the Treasury

2012–13: Minister for political and constitutional reform

2017–18: Parliamentary under secretary of state for Northern Ireland

2018–2021: Minister for the constitution and devolution

2021–22: Minister for disabled people, health and work

2022: Secretary of state for work and pensions

2023: Secretary of state for science, innovation and technology

Chloe Smith was interviewed by Jess Sargeant and Maddy Bishop on 10 January 2023 and again on 15 August 2023 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. This transcript combines the two interviews.

Chloe Smith talks about her experience as minister for the constitution under three different prime ministers, her time in Liz Truss’s cabinet, and implementing another minister’s priorities while providing maternity cover as secretary of state for science, innovation and technology.

Jess Sargeant (JS): You started off in government as an assistant whip, but your first appointment in a department was in 2011 as the economic secretary to the Treasury. What was the conversation like when the prime minister asked you to take on the role?

Chloe Smith (CS): A few others I know have commented on how weird those initial phone calls are – and this one was also a slightly strange one. I was in a very long school governors’ meeting in the constituency. My phone was buzzing away in my handbag and I thought, “Oh, just go away, I’m busy chairing a meeting.” But, of course, it turned out to have been the prime minister calling. So I took the call at what then became reasonably late on a Friday evening. You enter into a very frenetic period as soon as you get that call. You are rapidly in touch with your new private office and they ring you up and they say those magic words for the very first time: “Hello, minister.”

I think from the outset you have to not let all that go to your head. That’s really important, because you need to keep a very clear view of what you’re there to do, what you want to get done and what the broader environment is that you are operating in. So you have to look past the initial trappings and the strangeness of it and focus pretty rapidly on the job at hand.

JS: What were your impressions on your first day in the Treasury?

CS: It’s actually a very long time ago... I am not sure I can now bring them up! The point about the Treasury is that it is, as they say, a very, very high-quality department. People call it the ‘Rolls Royce’ department. However, even though it may be a Formula One car, it is still a machine – a piece of machinery that exists for a reason. It’s a highly structured environment and I appreciated that. I enjoy working with a rhythm of decision making, which is very much what you have in the Treasury. They’ve gone under slightly different names over the years but basically you are operating to budgets, to autumn statements, to that fiscal rhythm. So there is a structure to your work and to your decision making from the outset.

I was also struck very early on by the way that we would endeavour to handle stakeholders in the Treasury. The role I had was economic secretary. Role titles change slightly, but at that time this was the role that was responsible for the miscellany of taxation – everything from cigarettes through to air passenger duty. So naturally there were a lot of organisations and businesses – and beyond that, individuals – who wanted to talk about those issues; that’s quite right and proper. So it struck me very early on that this was a very full role: needing to make enough time to listen, to understand, to respond to people’s concerns and to the debate on any one of those issues, while also ensuring

you get right up the technical curve, to be able to master a technical brief very quickly, to cultivate the depth of grip that you need as a minister to be able to make sensible decisions, and to ensure that all of that then slotted into the broader endeavour of what the Treasury is about, six-monthly and annually.

JS: It sounds like a very challenging and wide-ranging role. Of course, you were the youngest minister in the government at the time and had only recently been elected as an MP. How do you think that shaped your experience compared to your ministerial colleagues who may have had time in opposition or in shadow roles?

CS: Yes, that was challenging. I'd come into parliament at a by-election, I'd become the youngest MP in the House at 27, I'd done a year in the Whips' Office rapidly after that, at 28, and then at 29 was doing this role. Now, that is very young, and there's no denying it; you just need to gain experience and gain knowledge quickly. I mean, how else can you put it? I've always been a fan of encouraging young people into politics but, on reflection, I would urge people to make sure they do have the experience and the knowledge that's right for them before they go into major roles of responsibility like that. Over the span of time, I know I've gained a great deal of the skills that are needed, but I can't lie to you and say I don't look back with occasional moments of embarrassment at that first year of being a minister.

Maddy Bishop (MB): Did you feel you received sufficient support from civil servants and special advisers as a junior minister?

CS: Yes, and fairly consistently so over all the departments that I've worked in. But there are differences and nuances in that as your experience grows, but also as you do different roles in different departments. If I take the SpAds [special advisers] example, some of the best relationships I've had with SpAds are where there's a clear goal of what you are trying to get done and you form a team around that. SpAds formally work for the secretary of state, but whether you're a junior minister or whether you're the secretary of state, actually the best SpAd relationships are where they are supporting all the ministers in the team to get a certain task done. That can be really important.

An example of that would be when I was the minister for the constitution and devolution and was taking through the UK Internal Markets Act [passed in 2020, it enshrined the principles of mutual recognition and non-discrimination in law, with the aim of preventing trade barriers for goods and services between the four constituent countries of the UK]. This was significant legislation – it was complicated, it was controversial, and I was working side by side, week in, week out, with SpAds in the Union Unit at Number 10 to ensure that we did everything that was needed. Another example, again from my time at the Cabinet Office, would be working with SpAds in the Policy Unit at Number 10 to ensure that we got legislation right that eventually became the Elections Act [passed in 2022, it introduced a requirement for voter photo identification for in-person voting]. That was a very long-running piece of legislation. There were elements in it that had gone back many years to previous reports and reviews and recommendations, and we were pulling all those together through the mists of time towards what would then become a single, unified act. Again, to have a really effective working relationship with the Number 10 team at that time was essential to be able to produce the finished article.

Departmentally, as I say, I think it always works best when SpAds are there to support the whole ministerial team, not just the secretary of state. I've seen that work reasonably well across all the departments I've been in. Towards the end of my career, when I became secretary of state myself, I then had the luxury of being able to choose my own SpAds and build my own team. This obviously happened very recently and in the context of the Elizabeth Truss government. We were moving fast. The history books will agree that we were moving fairly fast. So I wanted to waste no time in getting a good team together. But by that stage, I knew what I was looking for in SpAds to support me, and I knew in turn that I also wanted them to be able to support the whole team of ministers so that we could succeed as a team on the goals we had.

MB: What did you look for in your special advisers?

CS: Well, considering that you might have two or three in a team, you obviously can cover a couple of different functions. Classically you would be looking for a person who can specialise in media as well as a person who takes on the subject matter expertise. In some cases, you might also look for somebody who can assist with parliamentary engagement. That's a fairly typical array of three that I've seen most recently. I think that model is a good one.

I was particularly keen to find a good media SpAd that I could work with, because I knew that I was taking that step up. Other ministers in these interviews, I know, have spoken about how, however good you are as a minister of state, the difference between being that and being the top dog is significant. I knew that in particular I wanted to be able to use communications opportunities to achieve my goals. I am sure we will come on to that later. But for the purposes of that, a good media SpAd was essential. And then, in terms of subject matter expertise, I was very fortunate to be able to find a good fit with a person who was basically the welfare specialist at a major think tank and who was incredibly helpful and supportive.

MB: We'll definitely cover your time as secretary of state. But first, I was wondering if we could talk a bit about your experience of working in coalition. Your early stint in the Cabinet Office as minister for the constitution – that was an area of policy in which the Liberal Democrats had a particular set of priorities. What was your experience working with them as a Conservative minister?

CS: I think with the advantage of hindsight, I suspect I am probably almost unique in the ministerial ranks in having had a decade of experience in one role – with the constitution role – spanning three prime ministers [David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson], many different flavours of politics, and frankly outlasting officials as well. It came to the point towards the end where I absolutely was the longest-serving expert in the room on many aspects of devolution and the constitution – which is unusual as a minister, to be able to get to that depth of expertise, because obviously the nature of being minister is that you can be moved frequently. But I think there's also some great value to be had from depth of expertise, so I appreciate having had that span of time.

I could add: I am one of the very few people who has worked for all of the prime ministers since 2010. There is a very small number of people who've done that. It's a pub quiz question all of its own. I think there's also a further trivia question which is, "Who was in office in May 2010 and also in office at this stage of the Conservatives' administration?"

Again, a very small list. I've been very proud to have that length of service, but it means that I've worked for a real range of characters as prime minister.

Coming back to the point about the coalition, the nature also of having had that span of time in the role is that, by the end of it, I was undoing some stuff that I had done at the beginning of it! There were literally bits of legislation that I had done on the one end and was then looking at again towards the other end. I think the constitutional role was one of the most interesting roles in the coalition period. Because, of course, as you will remember, this was the department that [Nick Clegg](#) [then deputy prime minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats] chose as his. You would also have a Conservative who was put in as the junior minister to be his partner and to provide that balance between the two parties. Naturally, in terms of the constitution, in terms of electoral law, in terms of all the things that come under that brief, political parties take a great interest in them. So this was quite a hot brief. And again, it was one where I worked closely with SpAds to try to correctly discharge that party side of the responsibility, as well as to form the right relationships with Nick, but also with the officials to ensure that we had the right things being done.

I enjoyed working with Nick Clegg. I found him very easy to work with, in terms of our relationship as secretary of state and junior minister. We had the opportunity to do some quite historic things. I am quite proud of the Succession to the Crown Act [passed in 2013, it altered the laws of succession to the British throne to end the system under which a younger son can displace an elder daughter in the line of succession], for example. Obviously, it was a huge privilege to be able to make legislation like that in the constitution brief.

MB: You resigned from your position in government in 2013 to focus on constituency work. What were the challenges of balancing your responsibilities as an MP and as a minister?

CS: I think this is the area where politics is unusual. Normally I would argue that politics is not exceptional and we shouldn't treat it in an exceptionalist manner; running a large organisation in the public sector ought to have a lot to learn from running one in the private sector and vice versa, and in my experience it does. However, what I can only describe as the constitutional tensions of the job, is where you do have something a little bit different in politics. I think that time was a perfectly good example of those tensions coming together.

I was finding it somewhat challenging to be able to really give my all to the ministerial role and to the constituency – particularly at that point in the electoral cycle where basically the politics hots back up, and in the marginal seats you need to give a lot of time to your constituency work and to your campaigning. I thought at that moment that the most sensible course, personally, was to create a little bit more space and time and focus on doing one thing well.

As my experience has grown, however, I've come into many more techniques of controlling those tensions. They will always apply to a minister, and I think one of the particular hallmarks of ministerial work is that, at any one time, you are managing not only all those tensions, but also a very wide set of relationships and needs and complexity. Again, much of that will be common with large organisations in the private sector or in

other sectors, but in politics there is also this slightly more personal element to it. Because actually it's you that is the product – it's you that is elected.

MB: You mentioned techniques that you learnt to manage those dual responsibilities when you came back into government in 2017. Do you have any tips for other ministers?

CS: If there's one piece of advice to get across, I think it's how, as a minister, you need to understand your subject matter, understand your environment, understand what people need and want, and then put all that together. You are the place at which all those things come together. You have civil servants who can support you on the technical subject matter and on the operations and on the implementation. You have special advisers and plenty more sources to help construct the political side. You also have to manage how you will do all of that in parliament. You have to manage how you will do all of that as a communications effort and listen to those people who will be affected by the decisions that you make.

For example, in DWP [the Department for Work and Pensions], there's a pretty serious stakeholder landscape of millions of people who are affected by your decisions, and very many charities and campaigners who also take a view on any decision at any time. So one of the key things about being a minister is being able to listen and to learn, to synthesise all of those different elements, and keep focused on the thing that you are delivering and the change that you're hoping to make.

JS: You returned to government in 2017, going into the Northern Ireland Office just shortly after the Northern Ireland executive had collapsed. What was that like? What sort of conversations were going on at that point about how the UK government could support Northern Ireland in those circumstances?

CS: To your question, I would add the fact that the ongoing Brexit debate was raging. As we all know, there is a particular Northern Ireland element to that, which meant that this was again a pretty hot spot.

I was really fortunate at this point to work with the wonderful [James Brokenshire](#), and I'd just like to say, in his memory, what a great secretary of state he was and how much he served as an inspiration to me but also to others. As you know, the Institute for Government [hosted a lecture last year in his memory](#), created by [Jeremy Wright](#) and me, and I think that's deeply well deserved. Personally, I sat in his funeral, listening to the eulogy, thinking at times amid our grief, "That is the reputation I would like to have." All of the things he was able to achieve across all the spheres of his life are meaningful and I admire him hugely.

The things that we were trying to achieve at that time were, by their very nature, pretty complex – and made a lot more complicated as well, in the UK parliament, by the confidence and supply decision [between the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party following the 2017 general election] and all the ramifications that had in terms of party management, in terms of parliament, in terms of policy, in terms of eventually what we needed to be able to work towards the Brexit deal. It was a pretty tumultuous time and, looking back over that role and the couple of years after it, it was a very professionally challenging time. You could see that toll was taken on parliament and on politics, with the ups and downs that then followed.

JS: Your next role was as minister for the constitution and devolution, where you were responsible for intergovernmental relations – which were obviously greatly affected by Brexit. What was your experience of being at the centre of that at such a challenging time?

CS: I think this provides a good example of how you need to work across government, bearing in mind that around that time you had a special department that had been set up to try to manage how Brexit was done: DExEU [the Department for Exiting the European Union]. But also from the Cabinet Office you had many responsibilities, as the Cabinet Office always does, to co-ordinate and support the rest of government. The intergovernmental relations aspect was another layer of this, and I think it was absolutely right to manage that from the centre so that you could have consistency, and also so that you could have some grip, because it would be all too easy to fail to achieve objectives. I speak here as a unionist; so the objective is to keep the union together – not just together, but also to flourish. It would be all too easy to miss that objective if you didn't have central support. So in the Cabinet Office, I was working very closely with the territorial offices, with Number 10, and then in due course with every department, to provide that co-ordination within the UK government – and then with our partners in the devolved administrations.

One of the projects that I led was on common frameworks [a mechanism for the UK and devolved governments to mutually agree some regulatory consistency for policy areas where returning EU powers are within devolved competence]. They are quite a significant constitutional tool. If you have devolution, yet you have areas of regulation that in the course of history had been allocated to the European Union and then repatriated, you need to have a sensible and sensitive process for redesigning those things, including for listening to the real world about them. One of the points I would make about intergovernmental relations is that it is not only about the governments; critically, it is about the people that you are there to serve and the businesses who also need to know where they stand on regulation.

JS: Obviously, in your role, devolution was very much at the forefront of your mind, but as you said, devolution has implications across all departments. Were there ever times when you had to remind ministerial colleagues, or intervene in certain policy areas to encourage them to think about the devolution aspects?

CS: Yes, although not in a negative sense. We designed processes to allow for that to happen naturally. It's not that I had to go round telling people off, it's that we were running processes to allow that to happen sensibly. For example, in my time as minister for the constitution and devolution, I sat on the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, which is where you take a look over all of the bills that government proposes to bring forward, and a small committee of ministers are responsible for just kicking every aspect of each bill and making sure that it's going to work. I had the role of providing reminders to colleagues across government about constitutional and devolution aspects in bills.

JS: One of the key things that you worked on during that time was the review of intergovernmental relations. What was it like working with colleagues in the Scottish government, the Welsh government, and – when it was established – the Northern Ireland executive? And how did external affairs and the context at the time, including Brexit, have an impact on your ability to make progress on the review?

CS: I left the role before it came to a conclusion, so I am only able to answer your question in terms of the time that I was there. But it was absolutely challenging, no doubt about that, including some people using those meetings for a bit of posturing. In the end, it was all a very good illustration of how power works. The truth is, in these years that we are talking about, you had a demonstration of power, or lack of power, in terms of parliamentary confidence, in terms of parliamentary majority, in terms of who could get things done, in terms of who could be trusted to do things.

All of these issues – a constitutionalist’s dream of issues – were all happening in real life politics, to the intense frustration of many of us working at the time but also, crucially, of people who were watching – citizens who were watching and who wanted a resolution. The tensions inherent in intergovernmental relations at that time, to me, were another illustration of some of those basic truths about what politics is for. What you want in democratic politics is to have people’s needs and wants understood and acted upon and respected and politicians held accountable for those things. As we all know, by the time 2019 came around, quite a lot of things had had to break to get there.

JS: As you say, the government was trying to deliver a particular policy aim in very difficult constitutional circumstances. As a result, I think a lot of people would argue that, particularly under Boris Johnson, there was a push back against some constitutional conventions, for example on the prorogation case and on the Sewel convention. As minister for the constitution, what did you feel was your role in those discussions? Were you present during them? Did you feel you had a role in advising on or safeguarding aspects of the constitution?

CS: In short, yes, that was my role. Perhaps to answer your question in a practical way, I think here you could see a distinction between the job that cabinet members need to do, and the jobs that junior ministers can do. I was very much in a supporting role to Michael Gove, who at that stage was the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. So naturally Michael took the leadership role in the department and for the prime minister. What I thought was essential that I do was provide comprehensive back-up in parliament. We’ve touched on a couple of examples of legislation where that was critical. There came a point, for example, with the UK Internal Markets Bill, where it was me that negotiated the final breakthrough with members of the House of Lords that allowed that thing to pass. I am proud of that piece of work. A good junior minister, I hope, is able to identify where those things need to be done and ensure that the trench work is done.

Also though, bear in mind I was responsible for things besides devolution, in particular elections legislation. Now, I sometimes feel that in the Cabinet Office elections legislation gets forgotten. The wonderful team of officials that work on it get slightly shunted around departments in Whitehall, and I think probably have done for 20 years. Again, because I took on that role for quite a long period of time, I got to know those officials very well and enjoyed working with them. But I found that sometimes it was difficult to remind others that this was an important section of work that just had to be done. Without stable

elections, you do not have a functioning democracy and you do not have a platform on which businesses and citizens can build their lives. I mean, it is absolutely fundamental. That, by the way, in a nutshell, is why I really loved the constitution role: because it is the crux of everything.

To give an example, the elections brief remained very important during the Covid pandemic. At that time, obviously huge amounts of attention went to managing the pandemic with the likes of the Department of Health in the lead, but also the Cabinet Office providing a significant cross-government co-ordination function. However, the time came round when the question was, “Can we safely and sensibly run local elections in 2020 and 2021?”

You’ll remember that we did not in 2020, and I don’t think there were any particular arguments over that; that was the subject of broad consensus. But, by 2021, there was a slightly different environment and there was quite a bit of debate over whether there should or should not be local elections that year. I took the view very early on that there should be, because, as I say, I think our democracy is simply fundamental and you have to have a really good reason to not run elections. But here was an example of needing to ensure that, at this time, the election policy came to the fore in the department, that the prime minister was well sighted on what we were doing, and that other colleagues in other departments also had a clear view of what the emerging policy was going to be... it’s certainly an example where it is unhelpful to have public speculation from whatever quarter. I’ve had a few of those in my career and it’s always unhelpful to have ill-discipline. You need to be able to have a single policy position. Working with officials and SpAds and colleagues, I hammered out the policy package that would allow us to run safe and sensible elections in 2021. That might just get forgotten in the mists of time, considering everything else that was going on in pandemic policy, but it is an essential function that I was proud to discharge in terms of being constitution minister.

JS: You mentioned earlier that you had quite a unique experience in holding the same ministerial role under three different governments. What were the differences in approach to the constitution under those governments?

CS: To be clear, for the record, we are talking about the coalition government – whether we count the later Cameron years as a different one, I don’t know – but the coalition government, followed by Theresa May’s administration, followed by Boris Johnson’s. I think the constitutional flavour in each of those was quite distinct.

Indeed, the job title reflected that. The first time round it was minister for political and constitutional reform – and it was what it said on the tin. The Lib Dems’ ask in terms of that section of the coalition agreement was for various reform items, so that was what that was about. Although I should add that the agenda at that time was not all the stuff that you might read about in the history books of the coalition – not all of the kind of classic things that Lib Dems cared about, if I put it humorously. Underneath all of that, actually, I was in charge of one of the biggest digital transformations of citizens’ services, in terms of getting everybody able to register to vote online. That affects millions of people, and I am pleased to say it was a success. Away from the political headlines, I was delivering that, which I think is uncontentious and not to do with partisan politics in any way.

Moving on then, in Theresa May's time I would say it was more about stewardship; so it was more about a slightly sort of calmer discharge of responsibilities and also coping with the tensions that were occurring at the time that we have just spoken about. And then thirdly, in the Johnson administration, in many ways that then became the resolution moment of the tensions that had been building.

JS: We'll move on to your time at the Department for Work and Pensions, unless there was anything else you wanted to mention from that period?

CS: There's just one thing I wanted to add, just on a personal note. During that time, not only had there been God knows how many elections and referendums, but also, I'd had two children and a round of breast cancer. This was not a quiet time in my life personally, as well as professionally.

Firstly, this provided my own experience of how you can allow MPs and ministers to be able to take parental leave. I did it once as a backbencher and once as a minister and was well supported both times. Doing it as a minister requires a certain amount of logistics with how your department is going to work and how you are going to resume accountability. You can't just turn off accountability. You have to judge how you are going to share it with your temporary replacement. We'll come back to that.

Secondly, during the second half of the pandemic, so whilst I was minister for the constitution and devolution but also just as I went off to DWP, I was also having cancer treatment. The story I was just telling you about that elections policy – whether we could run the elections in 2021 – was one of the oddest weeks I think I've ever had, because I was beavering away on that policy, and actually, I was really not very well at the time. I didn't realise it and it was building through this particular week. I ended up in A&E at 3am in the morning on the Saturday afterwards. I hadn't realised how I was pushing myself, frankly, too far whilst I was taking pretty major health treatment – so a slight lesson of self-care in the middle of that.

Unfortunately, having cancer teaches you many things, but one of the things that it did also bring me to see was the power to inspire and to influence that you have as a politician. I mean, I think we all know that and we all sort of grope towards that over time – I am sure we do! – but I was very touched by the two-way reaching out that went on. Lots of people, random strangers, got in touch to give me their best wishes and cheer me on. That was quite extraordinary, and I guess that wouldn't happen if you were a private citizen. But then going the other way, I realised that, by being myself, and by being at work during that time, and by just trying to do what I was trying to do, I was seen as something of a role model for many others. There were several civil servants who came to me to say, "That's actually quite inspiring, you know, what you've been doing there". So this was a massive dose of humility but also helped me recognise that, okay, in fact, I've got the power and the opportunity and the platform to help others through this experience. I can be using this platform to encourage others to get themselves checked for lumps, to get the support that is out there, to just provide support to others. That gave me a further lesson in how you can use a public position to communicate and to influence and to help others and to get things done.

MB: Thank you for sharing that. When you made that move to DWP, how did you find being a minister in a spending department, compared to your earlier career at the centre of government?

CS: DWP and the Treasury have their moments of history on this point, don't they? I was delighted to go to DWP, absolutely delighted to take on that role, first of all as minister for disabled people, health and work, before I later became secretary of state. The reason why I was so particularly inspired to have that opportunity... it obviously came hot on the heels of a health episode of my own, as I've just been talking about. So I hoped I might have a particular insight I could bring to it. Of course, in the disability field, the question will be asked, "How can you represent us if you are not yourself disabled?" And one of the things I was able to say in response to that was, "Well, I do have significant experience of a major health condition and I hope that gives me some understanding."

The other reason I was really pleased to take that role was that it followed on from a piece of work I've been able to do in my constituency on helping people into work. In particular, I'd founded a project that was supporting young people with a disability or a health condition into work. This had been a very successful project. We'd been able to help 2,000 young people in Norwich to get opportunities that otherwise they wouldn't have done. And for me, this then is another illustration of how you bring together the different parts of this role to be able to make a change. You can do something as a constituency MP that is meaningful and that you can then amplify as a minister and try to take forward on the national stage. That's a wonderful thing that we can try to do in Britain that perhaps doesn't happen elsewhere.

Now, in answer to your question, DWP is basically the big spending department. I think you have to be very clear on your goals. I think you have to be able to set out what your focus is going to be and what success is going to look like. You need to be able to track progress. You need to be able to create a strong and effective relationship, certainly with the Treasury, but also with Number 10, because it is such a major part of any spending programme. So you do naturally have that quite central space when it comes to big spending conversations. Obviously, DWP is going to be a major part of any spending conversation because the sums are just so large.

In a department like DWP, you also need to have a keener sense of commercial levers than you may do in other departments. The contractual side and the network of providers and suppliers is likely just larger – and in some cases, perhaps more complex – than in other departments. And that, by the way, is an area where I think ministers could benefit from more training. It would be embarrassing to turn up and say, "Right, well, I don't know anything about contracting." So no minister should put themselves in that position... this is an essential part of the toolkit for not getting caught out and for understanding what is happening with taxpayers' money. In a large spending department, you also need to be able to be absolutely clear on what high standards look like, not just in terms of the policy goals that you are hoping to meet – you know, what does success look like for that programme – but the standards of the operations of customer service at all times, too. People need to be able to trust that they will get the right help when they come to use those services. All of that needs to be absolutely rigorous and needs to be accountable to citizens and just simply needs to be held to the highest standards.

MB: When you stepped up as secretary of state in the same department, how did you approach that role? Were you drawing on your experiences with previous secretaries of state you had worked with?

CS: Yes. By this stage in my career, I had had the benefit of working with a lot of different secretaries of state. Some great, some less so. But you know what you would like to do by that stage, in terms of the tone that you would wish to set as a leader. For me, I wanted that tone to be passionate and determined, and compassionate, because of the nature of the department. But I also knew, from experiences that I've just touched upon, that if you bring an amount of energy to the things you are setting out as your goals, then you know you will be able to bring people with you and achieve perhaps some quite surprising things, if you go about them in an inclusive and open-minded way.

There was a lot of seriously good work done by my predecessor at that point, Thérèse Coffey, that was there to be built upon. For example, she had overseen the way that Universal Credit massively expanded to meet people's needs during the pandemic, essentially without falling over. That was really significant. However, that remained a major programme for the department and so I needed to be able to come in after that episode and ensure that the relationships were right, that the operations were right, and that the programme was moving in the right direction.

One of the things that I think you also have to do as a secretary of state in a very large department is work out how you are going to judge risk. Because, in a department as large as that, frankly something could go wrong every single day and you could be in front of parliament for a UQ [an urgent question, which requires a government minister to come to the House of Commons and give an immediate answer without prior notice] every day of the week, because of the sheer size of it. So you have to work out how you're going to know that things are not going wrong. That means you need to ensure that you have strong relationships with your officials and that you are being open about what's going well, what's not going so well, and how you are managing your operations. You need to have a strong team of junior ministers that you can rely on to be able to spread the political understanding between you, and the judgement of risk between you as well.

MB: What was it like to be in cabinet in Liz Truss's government?

CS: Taking my first step up into cabinet at that time was momentous. It was something I had been working towards for some time. I had aspired towards it. In fact, given the nature of the leadership campaign that preceded that administration, conversations were had to say who might be in the cabinet if we won. And so I had some preparation time and some thinking time as to what I wanted to contribute to that team. I was able to go in with clear goals, for example, to support the growth agenda by helping businesses to recruit – because in the context with a very tight labour market, recruitment was one of the biggest blockers to growth. So I was an early leader in taking economic inactivity as central work for my department in the context of a growth agenda.

Not only did I have that chance to enter with some quite clear goals and clear thinking, I'd also had the experience of being a minister in the department for the previous year. So I had decent relationships with officials, with the private offices, with the permanent secretary, and crucially also with many of the stakeholders.

The other thing of note for the archives, I think, is the decisions that go with what was Operation Bridges [the funeral plan for Queen Elizabeth II]. In the case of DWP, we had to make sure that because there was a short notice bank holiday, that benefits still got paid, that people were not suddenly out of pocket because the cash should have cleared on the Monday and didn't. So I was part of the COBR [the Civil Contingencies Committee that is convened to handle matters of national emergency or major disruption] planning to ensure that Operation Bridges, in its broadest sense, was successful – all of this, of course, at a time of great national sombreness and big change, as we went from one era to another.

MB: Were you part of conversations about the mini budget, as secretary of state for work and pensions?

CS: Yes, of course. DWP is such a major spending department that naturally its programme is a major section of what any government does. That said, as is the constitutional norm, budgets are not actually discussed in their totality with the cabinet beforehand. I ensured that my department was focusing on its economic role, particularly in the growth agenda, the labour market, the way I wanted our department to work with other departments to be able to break down barriers for people getting into work. All of that, for me, was governed by a very strong sense that DWP is a core economic department that has a massive contribution to make, that can change people's lives, and that I could use that approach to galvanise officials, and indeed also take a galvanising approach in talking to businesses about how we could support them to resolve their recruitment problems. All of that had to be done while supporting the most vulnerable people in society, because that is the other critical principle in the welfare and pensions department. I regarded that as the contribution that DWP could make.

MB: Moving on to Rishi Sunak's government, in April 2023 you were appointed secretary of state for science, innovation and technology (DSIT) to provide maternity cover for Michelle Donelan. What was your reaction when the prime minister asked you to take the role?

CS: I was surprised and flattered to take the call and given that I had left government the previous autumn, I had to reflect initially on whether it was right personally for me to go back in and take on this role.

I quickly decided that it was the right thing to do, and that was for a couple of reasons. The first is the agenda of this department is really compelling. A monumental subject matter that stretches decades ahead in terms of some of the frontiers of science and technology that the department is responsible for – so it was a very exciting opportunity to contribute to that agenda. The second reason was that I think it's incredibly important that we have maternity leave being normal and successful at the highest levels of government. So I jumped at the chance to be able to contribute to that as well, and to provide not only a service to my friend Michelle, but also do something that has been historic. To be able to demonstrate that you can lead a department of state, lead a policy department, on an interim basis, and thereby make maternity leave, or parental leave, just as it should be in other walks of life.

At the outset, one of the personal considerations I also had, was that since stepping down from my previous government work, I had begun to be able to play a much bigger role in

my children's lives – such as doing more of the school runs, much more than you normally can as a minister. When I was offered this role, I wondered if I could also role model something that is just a bit different. And so I agreed, at the very outset, and in fact told the prime minister and the chief whip, that if I was going to do this role, I was going to carry on doing the school run, and that this was the right way to do it because it would assist in role modelling the idea that parents are welcome at the very top levels of government.

This dovetailed well with the overall goal of supporting Michelle while on maternity leave, but also I came to understand that it had also helped quite a lot of the civil servants who very often came up to me and thanked me for having set that out because it enabled them to take that sort of dual pride in both their personal lives and their professional lives. And that was then reflected in the quality of relationships I had with officials throughout – by the time I came to leave, people were able to say that.

MB: Did you get a sense that Michelle Donelan had provided input to the decision to appoint you?

CS: Of course, all appointments remain the prerogative of the prime minister, so it's not usual that any other minister has a direct say in that. But I know that Michelle had put a lot of thought into what she needed from her maternity replacement, and we'll come on, I'm sure, to the groundwork that she and I did together to make the handover successful and effective. But constitutionally speaking, I don't think it's the case that the minister on leave is able to have a final say on the person covering. Indeed, when I received maternity cover earlier in my career, I did not have a say. And rather unfortunately, back at that time in fact that person's name was released publicly before I'd been told, which is not how it should be done.

MB: We'll go on to talk a little bit about handover, but first let's take a step back. Going into this role you knew you would only be in post for a few months. How did that affect how you approached the job? Did you feel that you should be setting your own priorities and strategy, or that the job was principally to implement Michelle Donelan's priorities?

CS: I think that whole concept is essential to the operation for maternity cover. I took the view from the outset that this is Michelle's role and these are her priorities – and indeed, through her, the prime minister's priorities, because he [Rishi Sunak] personally takes an enormous interest in science and technology, and so very clearly this is a project that is important to him as well. I was clear with my teams in the department from the very outset that I wanted through this role to demonstrate that maternity leave was normal and that it would be a success and that, therefore, what I was delivering was Michelle's programme.

Of course, many of the teams also remained Michelle's. The best example of that was the special advisers. In this case, I simply took over Michelle's existing team, and they were brilliant and that was fine. We worked well together and one of that team in particular deserves a huge amount of credit for playing a real linchpin role in ensuring that Michelle remained informed while I was covering for her. But nonetheless, it was an unusual case where essentially I'd just taken over Michelle's existing setup.

MB: What was handover like at the beginning? You mentioned that there was a setup keeping Michelle informed on what the department was doing throughout your time in the role. How well did that work? What kind of decisions did you feel you should discuss with her?

CS: This this was an unusual appointment in a few ways, because the phone call from the prime minister and the discussions with the chief whip on his behalf came a little earlier than they would typically do in a ministerial appointment. Normally you would get a call and then you're up in five minutes. Whereas in this case, there was a clear week or 10 days of preparation time. Even that is short by the standards of the private sector, where obviously you plan ahead and you know who your cover is, but by the standards of government, this was luxurious!

That was helpful. It enabled me to get my head round the department and start to form ideas of how I would like to deliver this role. But it also enabled sensible conversations to be had in quiet time between me and Michelle, and me and some of the other key figures in the department who I knew I would have to work closely with. That includes, of course, the principal private secretary in the private office, the permanent secretary and the three directors general. So I was able to have early key conversations just to begin to get things in order.

With Michelle, we focused on working down a list in a document that she'd drawn up. She was very well prepared for what she would like to see done in her absence and what needed to be achieved.

On that list there were a range of things. Some were already in progress, so she needed me to be able to oversee them and ensure that they developed and could be delivered later. Some were about to come to fruition, so it would fall to me to announce or to launch a certain thing. Some needed to be begun, and we went through those quite carefully as to how much input she might like into that, or how much I should put my own stamp on something. Overall, I was not looking for a great set of things that would go down in history as mine, because I just didn't think that was right for this role. I thought the right thing to do was to ensure that I was very closely following Michelle's programme. To summarise all of that, we had really clear communications between us at the start, and we had time to go through how we would like the work to be done.

We also had a number of key people supporting us to achieve that. I've already mentioned the special advisers. The permanent secretary was hugely committed to making this work and played her own particular role in working with two leaders. And the private office were outstanding in how they responded to that challenge of operating two machines at once.

Of course, constitutionally speaking, the Act that we were working under [the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021] has one minister who is the minister on leave, and they are not legally responsible for anything at that stage, and then the [interim] secretary of state is fully empowered to play the role in the normal way. But although I had the full legal empowerment, I chose to play it in a way that was inclusive of what Michelle would have to return to do later on.

I took a highly structured approach from the start. I asked all the teams and officials to contribute to what we then called a 10-week plan. In the end, the period turned out to be 12 weeks, but at the time I called it 10, a nice round number. And what I wanted to be able to do was to be clear about how much work would be needed on a certain thing within that time period, and then to hold people to account for delivering it, and ultimately hold myself to account for delivering it. That accountability flowed back to Michelle – naturally, I wanted to be able to say to her at the end, “Here are these things done.” But actually, it also flowed back to the prime minister. At the outset I wrote a note to the prime minister saying, “Here’s how I intend to approach this job. Here are the things you should expect me to be able to deliver.” And then I married that up with a note at the end saying, “Here’s what we achieved.”

MB: You mentioned that this was an area of policy in which the prime minister took a really intense interest. How did that shape your experience of the role?

CS: Rishi Sunak deserves a huge amount of credit for having set up the science, innovation and technology department. This is a clear passion of his, and I think rightly so, because a number of the issues for which this department is responsible are going to be fundamental in the decades to come. It’s wise to dedicate a department to ensuring that the UK is positioned at the forefront of critical technologies.

In the three months prior to me taking over this role, the prime minister and Michelle had clearly worked extraordinarily hard to establish the department, to give it its overarching priorities and achieve the essentials of the machinery of government moves that are needed to commence new departments. They had also been able to publish a truly impressive range of initial policy documents on big ticket items, like the artificial intelligence white paper, like the quantum computing strategy, and many more besides. So I entered into a department that had set the bar high for the kind of policy it was working on and the level of ambition that it was driving for. But also it was a department still in set-up mode.

I thought the prime minister’s interest in these issues was extremely valuable. It enabled us to get things done because we were able to call on his influence around Whitehall and, indeed, in the private sector as well. For example, you could have seen that on display at London Tech Week this year, where Rishi alongside me, opened the conference. I don’t think a previous prime minister would have done that with the same level of interest and grasp of detail. I think, furthermore, that the PM has been able to put the right stamp on things on the international stage, and you see that in terms of our goal of holding the first global summit on safe and responsible AI. These are very important matters for our times, and I think it’s right that a prime minister should want to position the UK like that.

JS: You mentioned there was some very careful thinking and clear strategy in terms of policy, but did you face any challenges on the more practical side of running a newly created department? Did you feel the fact you were doing maternity cover had any effect on how you dealt with those challenges?

CS: I was quite struck, on starting out, that essentially the department had just had its first quarter, where it had clearly been going a hundred miles an hour to get the first set of things done. I thought, “It falls to me to lead it in its second quarter, and the second quarter is going to be all about delivery. It’s going to be about making this a sustainable

organisation that can deliver its goals.” I also knew that any new organisation has to find its feet and develop its confidence. I had already seen that the officials were some of the most motivated and energised that I’d worked with. Hence, I focused on structure – not just to help me and not just to allow accountability against Michelle’s requirements, but also to help the department, to allow teams to be able to see where we were heading and how we were going to get there.

How did we do that? We needed to set out some basics in terms of delivery and I took advantage of everything that a secretary of state’s office would typically do and asked for feeds of information. I asked for certain things to come weekly, certain things to come fortnightly, certain things to come monthly. There were a few things that I asked some teams to do as so-called ‘sprints’ [competing specific tasks to a short deadline] because I knew that those projects hadn’t been begun yet and what we needed to do was to be able to reasonably quickly put some definition around the thing in question, and then be able to stabilise it and deliver it.

In that second quarter of the department’s existence, we also needed to properly establish all of the board-level governance as well, so I chaired the first board of DSIT – which, as a side note, is a very impressive team. One of the high-quality things that had been achieved in the first quarter was to recruit a half-dozen non-exec[utive] directors, who are almost literally stellar because they include Tim Peake, the astronaut, and others who are outstanding in their fields of science and technology.

So I chaired the first board and that meant I was able to define quite a few of the necessary areas of governance and metrics. I took a close interest in what management information the department was going to use and was going to hold itself to account with. I thought it was very important that that should have a connection to the real world as well, and I and junior ministers were strongly in agreement that we wanted to be able to show those we had the privilege to regulate for, that we were focused on the right things and we were using evidence that would make sense to them as well.

In a couple of cases, I also gave teams the direction that they should iterate their work. I thought it was important, in a few cases, that we should get started and then improve things later, because otherwise the perfect could be the enemy of the good. If we could get going, that would allow us to gather momentum as we went. And so long as we kept an eye on the quality and the overall pathway, then we would just as quickly get to the right outcome.

JS: What was the process of handover back to Michelle? Presumably there would have been decisions that you’d made that she would need to be brought up to speed on. Was there a handback process as well as a handover process?

CS: Yes, absolutely. To an extent, it was the mirror image of how we started. I remember trying out a slightly poor science joke with the officials which was, every paper in government needs an equal and opposite paper. So we wrote a letter that summarised everything for Michelle at the end.

Some of the points of achievement on the way had already been highly documented. For example, there were a good number of areas which were the subject of cabinet committee papers. This was to set out the strategy on one of the technologies, or to

cohere the government approach. For instance, I chaired the first meeting of the refreshed National Space Council, which we did in semi-public because we wanted to use that as a communications opportunity. So I can tell you about that one publicly, even if I can't necessarily tell you about the other papers that were written. But my point here is that that formed a record of decision making and actions, and progress, and direction which was then easily possible to hand on to Michelle. And naturally, collective responsibility applies. So what was done in the 12 weeks stands. It's every bit as valid as what was done before and what was done after. I'm proud of those pieces of work. They were a further example of working with a new department to make sure that it could do what was necessary. I spent a lot of time with officials making sure that the actions that we were setting out in those papers – for example, the asks that we were making of other departments around a cabinet committee table – were as crystal clear as possible, so that we were well set up for delivery on those particular subjects.

Finally, also, by the time I came to leave, the unusual thing of this role compared to any other ministerial role, essentially where basically you resign or you get fired, was that this was a planned stepping down. So we had time to draw my chapter to a close. You draw the right pieces of work to a close. You work out what you're going to hand on. You hand over in an orderly state, and you enjoy the time that you've spent working alongside great people, and you get the chance to say goodbye properly. A rare luxury in politics, but in this case that was really enjoyable.

JS: What are some of things were able to achieve during those 12 weeks at DSIT?

CS: In those 12 weeks I was able to do some meaty work. I was very proud that I was able to instigate the global summit on AI safety that we'll have later in the year. And in this time period, I was setting the idea, I was influencing the design of it, I was scoping the outcomes of it and setting the programme. I was recruiting key people in AI, for example, the chair of the Foundation Model Taskforce, and carefully setting the governance and the accountability for that work, which is extremely fast moving compared to the pace of much of what else might be done across government. At the same time, because of the pressures in that area, I had to grow the team of civil servants that were able to deliver, and essentially bring together the approach across the entirety of government that will be required for something so significant as AI.

I also led the first global forum for technology as part of the OECD. I hammered out the strategy on engineering biology, which was one of the items at the outset that I agreed with Michelle that I would do. She had done much of the work on the other four critical technologies, and we agreed that I would lead on engineering biology in that time.

I also launched the semiconductor strategy and built up the life sciences package with the chancellor. I helped the King to launch the [Astra Carta](#) idea [a framework to promote sustainable practices in the space industry], which is about how we reduce debris in space. And I reinvigorated the National Space Council, which I've mentioned already, as well as reviewing the existing national space strategy for how well we were delivering against that and what more action needed to be taken.

I set up the department for delivery and metrics and governance, which I've already mentioned. The department was seeking to be more innovative than the typical government department, and so I gave that stream of work its own structure and

governance and got it going. And I also brought across a few checks that I knew should be made from my previous work as minister for disabled people. For example, looking in to how we are considering disability and accessibility in such an exciting technological environment. And indeed, in doing so I was also able to work with my successor at DWP in terms of thinking about the future of work and AI.

JS: What did you learn during your time in the role?

CS: I was learning huge amounts every day. In fact, as somebody without a scientific or technical background, either educationally or professionally, I had an early choice to confront in my leadership role. How was I going to lead an organisation where I was not the subject matter expert?

Earlier in my career, I'd very much valued subject matter expertise. I'd often very much enjoyed being one who was steeped in the work I was doing. But I couldn't do that here, I didn't have the time. So instead, I thought my role here is to apply a kind of lay leadership. Leadership that does the political function, taking everything the technicians need to get across, using the excellent quality of scientific advice that government has access to, and harnessing that in the decision making, coming out with decisions that are the right thing as a democratically accountable minister. I'm not a scientist, I am the democrat in the room, and so that was the type of leadership I was looking to provide. Nonetheless, I was learning things every day, and I loved that.

I also had huge personal motivation for it as well. A further reason why I was keen to do the role was the life sciences area of responsibility in the department. I was conscious that when I had cancer treatment [from 2020–22] I'd benefitted from the breadth of human progress that we are making in terms of medicine and healthcare. I had a chance here to contribute to the support of other types of discoveries that will change people's lives and that will put people in a better position than I even was a mere few years ago in cancer treatments. I thought that was incredibly exciting as well as a further opportunity to learn.

JS: And how did DSIT compare to other departments you had worked in?

CS: We spoke about the size and scale of DWP, and it really struck me, the difference between essentially the biggest department and one of the most established types of spending process, compared to this brand new department that was zipping around doing, in some cases, some quite new and innovative things. It required a very different set of techniques for how you were going to lead it and manage it, but it also carried perhaps slightly more freedom because its work was unlikely to be so immediately controversial, or so heavy day-to-day as DWP [work] often is. In this role, you weren't going to be the secretary of state up for a UQ [urgent question] every day, whereas in other departments, that can happen. This department was much more about long term solutions, not problems, actually solutions, which is a wonderful privilege to be able to work on.

Because of, in some cases, strangeness of the subject matter, you also have another technique available to you which is how you would bring that to life for colleagues and for other audiences. So in all of the strategy documents, or policy launches, that we might have done, there's a technical audience, but there is also a general public audience, and

this department has a very important role to play in giving people confidence and reassurance about technologies that, in some cases, might be daunting or even frightening. And so I think there's an important technique that you can use of demonstrating the opportunity in technologies and in science, as well as giving people assurance on the risks.

One illustration of this that was from an internal ministerial meeting. I had taken a paper to the committee about engineering biology, and to demonstrate my point about the uses of engineering biology and how it could revolutionise what we do in terms of food and fuel and scores of other problems, I took along some snacks for my colleagues. These snacks were actually brownies produced by a company that specialises in an egg substitute. And so I handed this box around the ministerial table and, as they were biting into delicious brownies, I was explaining to them that the egg substitute was in fact derived from algae and wasn't this a wonderful way to be able to get over some of the problems in a supply chain, and indeed, some of the ethical challenges as well. It certainly grabbed their attention. And it was authentic that we were walking the walk as well as talking the talk.

JS: Are there any reflections you have on how the structures around maternity cover could be improved? Or do you think the system works well at the moment?

CS: I've already covered how we worked together. But that was us *creating* the structures and the system – we were writing the book as we did it. Crucially, all those around us were just as committed, gave our operation 100% support, and therefore I can answer that the prototype worked! I hope others who come after us will further support it and improve it through their own experiences.

We were the first case of maternity cover in a policy department, and it had only been done before that for Suella Braverman while attorney general. Prior to that, anyone having a baby while at cabinet level simply wouldn't have had an official cover.

I'll add some other reflections too. One of the other spheres that the secretary of state must take care of is relationships. I gave myself the goal at the outset of focusing hard on the relationships that would be needed to ensure that Michelle continued to be in a position to deliver afterwards, and I believe that approach was reasonably successful – albeit frantic to deliver. If I had kept count of everybody that I met in 12 weeks in a department with some of these thriving policy areas... The list is enormous. But I thought that was really important, and I would counsel anybody else doing this kind of role in the future to think that through. To think through how they will monitor and make progress with the necessary relationships so that those who we're working for, beyond government – citizens, businesses, scientific institutions and all the rest – so that they know that they are well cared for.

I should also note that there's been a great deal of positive feeling about the creation of the department. More than once somebody at a conference would say to me, "This is our department," meaning that they feel ownership of the fact that there is a science and technology department in government, and that they're really pleased by that. "You're our secretary of state", they would say and that's a great place to start from. But you

need to plan out how you're going to maintain that and be able to do essentially the political side of delivery of course. Small 'p' rather than big 'P' [political].

One of the other techniques I personally was able to bring to bear here as well was pools of previous knowledge and previous contacts that I had from prior work. I can think of two examples. One is in the development of this new department's metrics. I cast my net back as far as 2011, when I was working in the Cabinet Office with [Francis Maude](#), about the leap that we were looking to create in government MI [management information], in general. And I thought what principles from that can be applied here to help this department perform that feat now?

A second example would be using contacts that I had developed at DWP during my work there. One of the projects we were seeking to begin at DSIT was to have an outstanding programme for secondments, because in a technical department that's absolutely the right way to go, so that you've got an exchange of expertise. This was one of these things that hadn't yet had a great deal of work done on it. So I thought I'm going to grip this. This is one small thing that I can take huge personal pride in because I'm really interested in this area, and I know I've got things I can add to it from my previous work. So I focused very hard on this, and supported the officials to pull it together from a starting point, and in doing so brought in contacts that I'd worked with before, for example, like the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development. That was a helpful technique that worked in this case, and that others in the future, if providing interim cover, might also think about using.

JS: Is there anything we haven't asked you about maternity cover you'd like to add? Or any other elements of your experience that you think are important to highlight?

CS: One further aspect that was possible in the maternity leave scenario that I'd never had before was, just occasionally, the chance to pull the trick of having two ministers working on something instead of one. So effectively giving double the power. There was at least one instance, although I don't think I can reveal it at this stage, where both Michelle and I, together, went in really hard on something. I suspect there won't be too many of those knocking around the government records where you basically get two for the price of one. And I think that is something that others, if the situation repeats itself, may be able to make use of.

There was also one occasion, towards the end of the term, where I said to a couple of the officials, almost jokingly, "Okay, right, we've got a problem here to solve. Not sure how we're going to do it. Just deploy me. Use me like a rocket. Fire me in. Because it doesn't matter, I'm going to be gone in a few weeks, and I don't mind exploding, if it clears the way for afterwards."

I suppose those are really worked examples of how political capital works, and it works a bit differently in this interim scenario than it does in the normal run of things. Because of course normally, politics is a grubby old business where people's ulterior motives no doubt include the desire to stay in office and be able to continue to serve as a minister. In my particular case, I had already enjoyed a hugely long and varied career as a minister. I'd reached the level of cabinet. I was entirely happy to draw stumps there, and I had publicly said that that's what I was doing. I'm intending to leave parliament at the next election. So I was an unusual character amongst ministers for that, but, in one sense, well

suited then to being able to deliver a role like this for Michelle, because I didn't mind walking away at the end, whereas perhaps others may have done.

JS: You mentioned that over your ministerial career, you worked for five prime ministers. What were their differences in leadership style and how did that affect your role as a minister?

CS: I was once asked exactly this question at a constituency meeting! I'll answer the same now as I did then, which is that their various shortcomings are well-documented. You don't need me to add to those. But actually, their strengths, I think, also need to be respected.

David Cameron, in his first parliament, had very shrewd judgement and very clear drive towards reform and towards sorting out the public finances.

I think that Theresa May was incredibly strong in that very famous ethos of public service that she brings. That shouldn't be underestimated. She was a battler! That is really something to be admired in a minister and in a prime minister.

As I touched on before, Boris Johnson occupied the role of resolving some of the tensions that had built up, and I think he needs to be congratulated for the ability that he had to see what the issue was, set out a vision of how it can be solved, and then to do so and to take an alliance of people with him.

Coming forward then to Liz Truss, it's already been well picked apart that we were trying to do things too fast. But the flip side of that is that she asked all ministers, all of the secretaries of state, to be ambitious. That is absolutely to be admired. She said to us at every cabinet and in every interaction, "Okay, well, how can you go further? Here's what we are trying to do for the British economy and the British people. Don't stint. Go further, be ambitious." And I admire that.

Of course, Rishi Sunak's strengths were well illustrated by my experience at DSIT, as I've set out, in terms of his commitment to this subject matter, and that commitment came across in his characteristic style, which is calm and knowledgeable. The more closely I've worked with him, the more I've been impressed by that. I think he's got an unusual level of grip on what he is trying to achieve, and I think that's to be welcomed.

It's tough. There is no doubt about it. He's got a set of very difficult challenges that he's now managing, but I've come to strongly admire his character.

JS: What advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be most effective in office?

CS: As I referred to earlier on, you need to provide political, democratic, lay leadership. You are performing this feat of bringing together your understanding of what needs to be done with what people need from you, with the environment as it stands, and jumping into a set of technical subject matters that may well be brand new to you.

So to achieve all of that, you do need to have an awareness of what you don't know. And you need to know where to go to ask for advice or wisdom or information. Big up to the

Institute for Government for what it can do to help ministers with that! I recall that, when I first went to the Treasury, I felt that I had very little time to address that need, so I basically went around armed with a copy of Gerald Kaufman's book [*How to be a Minister*, published in 1980] which is a very good book and is very helpful, but is not the same as taking advantage of where you can find the wisdom and the insight that you will need as you absorb all the information from your officials, and as you try to meld that to your objectives.

I think you then also need to carry on that listening task as you go through your work. This is not just about the beginning of being a minister, you have to do that throughout. You have to be a listener. You have to be able to listen to citizens, or customers, or call it what you wish. But you have to be able to find a way to understand what millions of people require from your organisation, and to be able to listen to new ideas and to be able to listen to wisdom as it continues to come.

One thing I would advise ministers to think about is to do the things you can when you can. Now, you go in with a set of goals, of course you do; and you will also naturally have to deal with issues as they come up. So you've got these two very big trays: the stuff you hope to do and the stuff that you are obliged to deal with. But there is an extra tray, which is where you could just keep ideas – medium-sized or small ideas – but things that you can just do while you have the opportunity and you are in these privileged roles to do.

One of them, for me, when I was minister for disabled people, health and work, was to say yes to the proposition of the British Sign Language Act [passed 2022, it legally recognised BSL as a language for England, Wales and Scotland], rather than to say no to it. Famously, ministers mainly say no to private members' bills. But this was, I thought, a vital idea. I just didn't think there was any case to be made for refusing it. So I said yes. I said, "Right, we're going to do it." And it became a surprising piece of work, in some cases, to officials. I had to crack the whip a bit to make it happen. I had to marshal senior support as well to make it happen. And the end result was iconic for a section of the community. So do the things you can, when you can. And if there is something from your memory banks, as a constituency MP, that you know is wrong and that you later get the opportunity to solve when you are in that hot seat: do it. There's two or three of those that I know I've done and I am glad to have done. So I would advise any new minister to have an awareness of those opportunities as well as the core task, of course, of going in with your goals and objectives and being able to deal with crises should they come up.

JS: What achievement are you most proud of from your time in office?

CS: Possibly the British Sign Language Act – although that's an unusual example, because it's a private members' bill, not an item from a government manifesto. But I don't think we should be precious about those things, that's kind of the point.

One of the enduring passions I have – as you see from some of my previous answers, this spans my time as a constituency MP all the way through – is about helping people into employment. So to have been able to make a difference on that at the level of my own city, and then be able to make a difference nationally... For example, in the case of disabled employment, we had set a goal that we would help a million more disabled people into work over 10 years; that was actually delivered as 1.7 million over five years.

I am really proud of that, because I know how much of a difference that makes in people's lives.

There's a lot more besides that but, I think if you can complete a career as a minister with one or two examples that you can be passionate about, like that, and an underpinning foundation of other goals that you set out to achieve that are in answer to what people needed, and that have been delivered well with all the powers of the organisation that you have the privilege to lead, then I hope that's a job well done.

JS: Is there anything you would do differently?

CS: Yes, there are a couple of specific examples that are in my mind. One of them is a reflection on the Covid period. I think this is mostly unexplored, in all honesty. There is now the inquiry and there will be attention coming back around into how policy questions were handled. Being the minister for the constitution at a time when emergency legislation is being used and actually people's freedoms are at stake in how we did things as a country... that's pretty significant. So I think one thing I would like to have done better from that time is to have got a clearer perspective, faster, on what some of the long-term implications could have been, would have been, will have turned out to have been.

JS: Finally, is there anything that we haven't asked you that you'd like to add, or anything that you think was very important about your experience that we haven't covered?

CS: If you don't mind, there are two final things I just wanted to bring in – firstly, how to make use of experiences you might have had outside of parliament in your work as a minister. For me, I had previously worked at Deloitte as a management consultant, and it's striking that there's been some basic techniques that I've used from that period, all the way through my work and that continue to be important, such as how to map the relationships that you need and how to handle stakeholders. I am sure every minister will have these from their previous careers. My other specialism from my time at Deloitte was organisation design, so in other words how to structure an organisation to achieve its objectives. Those skills are crucial to running one of the largest government departments, or indeed also one of the smallest. For example, at DWP, there was a clear organisational question about how best to structure all the functions that support disabled people, between DWP, the Disability Unit at the Cabinet Office and across all of government. There really are significant shared challenges between public sector organisations and private sector ones and I think there's a lot of wisdom to be exchanged between them.

Secondly, I think international comparison is important. As minister for disabled people, I was very struck and motivated by the exchange of ideas and implementation that happened at the UN Conference of States Parties on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It spurred me on deeply. I therefore took that approach further when I turned to run the department, asking officials to look for the right comparators on growth and on economic inactivity.

I continued to do that as secretary of state for DSIT, for example through the OECD, and in our work on AI. I am proud to have had a chance to contribute to the global need to make that technology safe. Perhaps I will be able to talk to my grandchildren one day about how we sought to balance risk and opportunity. I hope it will illustrate why thoughtful, responsible and inquisitive public service matters

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

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