Ministers Reflect
Matt Warman

25 April 2023

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2015 – present: MP for Boston and Skegness

Government career

2019: Assistant whip

2019–21: Parliamentary under secretary of state for digital infrastructure

2022: Minister of state for digital, culture, media and sport

Matt Warman MP was interviewed by Beatrice Barr and Grant Dalton on 25 April 2023 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Matt Warman discusses being an expert minister, how to navigate 'caretaker' government and receiving an apology for being sacked by Boris Johnson.

Grant Dalton (GD): You entered government as an assistant whip in April 2019. What was the conversation like when you were asked to enter government?

Matt Warman (MW): It was with Julian Smith, the chief whip. I had had a conversation with him during one of the many complicated Brexit votes, when I was still a backbencher, where I had expressed an opinion on how the Whips' Office could do things better, and he said, "Would you like to come in and have a chat?" I can't remember what it was about specifically, but I talked about how they might try and persuade people how important it [voting with the government] was in my seat [Boston and Skegness] that voted more for Brexit than anything else. And at the end of it, he said, "How would you feel about joining the Whips' Office, in theory?" It wasn't an offer at the time. And I said, "Well, I think my own estimation of what I'm good at and what I'm not good at actually wouldn't make me the best person to join the Whips' Office." Which wasn't a way of saying, "[Give me] minister or nothing" – it was genuine. I just don't think being quiet [because whips can't speak in the chamber] and persuasive is my forte. And he said, "The correct answer is, it will be a privilege to serve." *[Laughter]* All of this was very friendly, and a few months later, he phoned me up and essentially said, "Notwithstanding what you said before, would you like to join the Whips' Office?"

Because I was the first in – not as a punishment for my unwillingness to join it [the Whips' Office] – I was the unpaid whip. What he [Julian Smith] said at the time was, "It's a fantastic team, it's the only team in government." You'll have heard this before, from other former whips. "You will have an experience that is obviously unique", given where the Theresa May government was at the time. "And I'd like you to do it, and I think you would enjoy it." And obviously I said yes, because I am broadly someone who would say yes to any government job. If they want to make the mistake of thinking I'm good at something I'm not good at, then we can all find out what happens. *[Laughter]*

And actually, in the end, he was completely right and I was completely wrong. I enjoyed it hugely. It is a fantastic team. It turned out that I didn't miss speaking in the chamber [of the House of Commons] terribly much. You do have to find ways of speaking if you don't get to do it in the chamber. I really enjoyed trying, to persuade people, but mostly just having grown-up conversations with them. So I had some Spartans [strongly pro-Brexit MPs] in my flock, and in some ways they were the easiest to deal with because they were like, "We've made up our minds. This is what we're doing. Does this meet our criteria? Yes or no. Therefore we will vote for it." So they were not the people we were trying to have "would you like to talk to a minister" sorts of conversations.

So, there was a lot of stuff that was really fun, but I was also ultimately only there for a very short period, and I do wonder if some people really suit being a long-term whip. I'm

not sure that that would be me. So in some ways, I have a rose-tinted view of the Whips' Office.

GD: What were the ideas that you expressed to Julian, about changing how the Whips' Office worked? Were you able to make any of the changes you wanted to?

MW: So one of my previous whips had been quite… There was never any intimidation by any means, but it was always very clear that you played by the rules and that's how you moved up. And if you just didn't show up for whatever they wanted you to show up for, not even particularly a vote, then there were potentially consequences of being someone who hasn't ticked every box.

I just can't do the heavy-handed thing in quite that way. The Brexit votes were I think unusual votes in some ways, in that people were genuinely engaged with the subject we were talking about. Like "This version of Brexit should satisfy your criteria…" So, I think in a weird way, although it was obviously chaos, and the whole thing was clearly collapsing as I joined – hopefully not as a result – you were able to have conversations with your flock that were much more, "Do you think this would do it for you? Does that?" As opposed to the more mundane thing, which is, "I know that this is not a subject that you are particularly interested in. Are you going to be here? What's the problem that you've got to deal with?" What I didn't really see was any of the HR side of it. By complete coincidence, I didn't have people who were ill or wanted to go to nativity plays, or whatever. And I think it was made easier by the fact that because it was so existential, people got that if parliament is sitting on a Saturday, then there's a reason why you should show up. So that was very straightforward.

Your question's an interesting one. I think most people go in to the Whips' Office and their vision is to do what they're told by the chief [whip] and the deputy [chief whip] and get promoted. What I did want to do was make it a human conversation between me and the person that I was whipping, and I think pretending that that is an immensely hard task is not really fair.

GD: Could you just talk through your first day arriving in the Whips' Office? What was the experience of first being a minister like?

MW: I'd been PPS [parliamentary private secretary] to Karen Bradley in the Northern Ireland Office. So I'd already had a fair bit of involvement with the Whips' Office – in some ways, more than I do now. But I didn't know them that well, and I think you tend to have conversations with departmental whips or your whip, but not with the office. So the newest person gets the smallest desk by the door. There was a – "Right, what do I do now?" feeling. There is none of the HR-y introduction that you would get in any normal business, and largely because you don't actually need it. It's "This is your flock, this is what we're voting on. Can you go and find out what their views are and what we need to do if there is potentially an issue to be resolved?" So it was much more logistical: "when there is a vote, you stand here." But they do ease you in, you're not going to be the teller on the first day. That felt quite humane. It was Julian and Chris Pincher [who were chief whip and deputy chief whip] and they were absolute sticklers for timekeeping and that kind of stuff, because you do need to make everything function.

Other ex-whips will have covered things like 'yesterday in parliament', which is that at the end of the morning meeting at the beginning of every day, one of the whips does a satirical rundown of the previous day. Some people really go to town on it, and others do not, and it comes and goes with different whips' offices. It's a really important part, because knowing what happened yesterday is the context for today. But the fact that there was humour injected into is a really important part of keeping the team together. And it's not a secret, but that is the sort of thing I wasn't really expecting when I showed up.

GD: You left the Whips' Office to become a minister in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Boris Johnson's first government, in July 2019. What was the conversation like when you were appointed?

MW: Short. So he [the prime minister] said he would like me to do digital at DCMS. He knew that I had some expertise around broadband in particular, and in the broader sector. We didn't sort out the details of the portfolios, and he didn't really go through them on the phone, because that was for Nicky [Morgan, then culture secretary] to sort out on day one. But it was very much, "I've just taken office. I've got a lot to do. I'm going through these appointments. I want you to do this. Would you like to do it?" That's it.

I don't think anyone was pretending that broadband was the top issue facing the country at that moment, but what he did clearly want to do was say, "I have got priorities that go way beyond Brexit. I am very much planning for a full programme" – we weren't talking about elections at that point – "and broadband is going to be one of the top priorities of this government." He had some immensely ambitious targets, that to some extent I was involved in producing before they were public, and he was like, "This is a priority, I want you to do it." I knew that he meant it when he said it was a priority.

Beatrice Barr (BB): When that reshuffle was going on, what were you doing? Were you going about your normal day, hoping for a phone call?

MW: Pretty much. I mean, in reshuffles, everything grinds to a complete halt. When I was just a PPS for instance, even when I was in other people's offices, some people that are doing very senior jobs, and the civil service, have ground to a halt. Because we don't know what's going on. So it is a slightly surreal experience, having then been through some subsequently where the phone doesn't ring, or it does and you get fired.

The whole process is surreal and I'm not sure there's a lot that could necessarily make it better, but it doesn't make it any less painful.

GD: There was a major target in the Conservative manifesto in 2019 on the broadband rollout. How involved were you in that specific promise?

MW: So there were several things going on. One was that, I think on the day that Boris topped the first ballot, amongst MPs, he then went to Grantham to do an event with Caroline Johnson [MP for Sleaford and North Hykeham], that I was also going to. I sort of shepherded him round some of the tables and he spoke about this push. He had farmers talking to him about how important broadband was.

Then, a few days later, he wrote a column in the *Telegraph*. He didn't specifically say an event in Grantham, but it was that event, unless I'm mistaken, where he was talking about how important it was. I'd seen the text before it was published and it was incredibly ambitious in the way that newspaper columns rather than manifestos are. That is completely fair enough, and the point of getting across how important this is both to the people he met, and to him, and understanding why it's economically important, and why there is a sort of future world where saving lives depends on it – all that's hugely important and right to say it's hugely important.

The manifesto was slightly different because it's a very odd manifesto commitment, in the sense that it explicitly says, "We want to do this but it's really hard." It's caveated. So it's sort of saying, "We want to deliver 100%, everything, but in this particular case, we said that it would be difficult." So we then had this slightly challenging period.

I did a select committee appearance, for instance, where we knew internally that the target was very likely to be 85% [coverage] by 2025, with a view to 100% by x [date], a staircase up. But we hadn't confirmed it, we hadn't signed off a whole load of stuff. It was very unlikely that it would change, but it certainly wasn't in the [comms] grid to announce it to a select committee, and it wasn't at a state where I could say it. So I had this rather awkward experience. Everyone was annoyed. I was annoyed that I couldn't say more. The committee was annoyed that I wasn't giving them the answer, but what I could say, a lot, in various different forms of words, was, "We have this very ambitious target. We're going to go as far and as fast as we possibly can, but I can't put a number today on what that will be."

I do think it's good that we were honest. We said, "We want to get to here. We'll do our best. We're telling you it's hard." Any sensible person will understand that if it is hard, then you might not get to the target, and also I think it's reasonable to say we will work out where we'll get to, we'll tell you, but we're not quite there yet. I was glad that I knew a bit about it in advance, because otherwise the risk would have been that I would have ended up having said, "We've said 100%, we're going to get to 100%," when actually anyone who knew anything about the sector knew that that was physically impossible, and so you would have looked a bit daft.

GD: What advice would you give to ministers in future who are working towards targets as a big part of their job?

MW: I tried to be honest and open with people in advance. Both about the scale of the ambition and about the likely timetable and trying to break it down, and to say to the industry, but also to the public, "Tell us your laundry list of things that you want that will make it possible to get to the maximum number." Obviously also tell us what the maximum number is, and government can then go away and try to tick off as many of the reasonable ones as possible, and then be open and explicit about why we're not doing that, or why we're not able to do that yet. So that when you then come to the crunch point that says 100% target has been slashed to 85%, which is always how it's reported, you can actually go back and say, well, look, actually, if you look at this and this and this, we've been talking about this for quite some time. No one thinks that it is a controversial thing of itself, it's just the fact that you're going from an ambition to a slightly more concrete number. And I think that genuinely did take a lot of the heat out of the situation.

It's never going to take all of it out of there, but you do have to acknowledge that there are some days when you've got to have hard conversations that rely on you being honest about the kind of things you were saying before, and how they then changed.

The other thing that I would say is that was only possible because I have an incredibly positive, incredibly supportive relationship with Oliver Dowden [the former culture secretary], who himself was all over the detail and got it, but was, for whatever reason, content to leave me to do a lot of the detailed work. And he didn't, I hope, sit there saying, "Well, if only we had a different minister, we'd have a higher number." So having the confidence of your boss and knowing that he has, when inevitably Number 10 say, "Why are we not doing, can we not do any [better]," whatever it might be, saying "Well, actually no, I genuinely think this is where it should land." And that is what allows you to get the maximum amount of money out of Treasury, which is what we did.

GD: On the point about Oliver Dowden, you had three secretaries of state while you were at DCMS…

MW: Are you thinking Nicky [Morgan], Oliver [Dowden] and then Nadine [Dorries]?

GD: Yes. What was your experience of the differences between them? Did they have different styles, and did that affect the way you did your job?

MW: If I'm honest, they're obviously different characters, but my experience of doing the job under three different bosses was relatively similar, in the sense that I was basically doing a version of the same job under all three. None of them tried to micromanage me. Genuinely, all of them were there if I had problems, or if there were things where you know that if Oliver picks up the phone, it's a different level than if I pick up the phone to Number 10, or whoever. So actually, my experience of doing my job was not that different. When I came in to work for Nadine [in 2022], we slightly tweaked the portfolios, to make my job fractionally more like the job I was doing previously. She was very open to that. But again I don't think it would have been a huge row if she'd have said, "Actually, no, I'd rather leave things as they are." So, no, I think I had a fairly consistent experience, and that's partly because I was working for broadly the same teams.

GD: And your experience of the department and the civil servants? DCMS was growing quite a lot, both in headcount and perhaps its importance across government.

MW: Yeah, what's interesting is that obviously it was not the DCMS we have now [after the digital portfolio was moved to the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology]. It was the full-fat version, if I can put it like that, and it was growing.

Even when I was there as Karen [Bradley]'s PPS previously, the big argument that we were constantly trying to win was that this is not the "department for fun", this is a hugely economically important department and it punches above its weight in terms of numbers of people. And also, actually, and I'm not complaining at all, the broadband brief, the national security stuff around it, when I was doing the online safety stuff, all of those things, those are not department for fun things. One is a whacking great infrastructure project, the other stuff is genuinely human safety or national security. These are things that you could equally, in a different world, have seen in BEIS [the Department for

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy], or the Home Office, and no one calls them the department for fun.

The diversity of it was challenging. When I was then doing the creative industries brief as well, which also had a bit of sport in it because of the Women's Euros and also because of the Commonwealth Games going on at the time, then, yes, there were some great fun things, but… it is a slightly unfair reflection.

The main thing, of course, that defined most of the time that I was there was Covid. It was suddenly a huge shift, and I had the unfortunate… So the old DCMS offices had four – maybe it was three – offices next to each other, and at one point the department had got an extra minister. So you had three quite grand offices, big, all roughly the same size for the two ministers of state and for the secretary of state, and then down at the end they had this office that had been cut in half to accommodate an extra minister. And then they realised they needed some more ladies' loos, so an extra bit of my office had been taken out, so– you could hear the hand dryers from the ladies' loos the other side of the wall. I suppose you could have heard worse… So Covid then happens and they did an assessment of how many people are you allowed safely in my room, to which the answer was zero. *[Laughter]* Not even me (presumably because nobody would have been able to come in to talk to me). So there was the ideal number, and then there's how many if you're going to take precautions. And in theory you could fit four people in, which, once you've got a private office, is just not really going to work. So that was an interesting challenge. Subsequently, they've now moved all of the ministers to a much more sustainable setup on a different floor.

The main thing was suddenly going home and trying to do the same job. I really did want to be in the office as much as possible and some of the COBR [Civil Contingencies Committee] meetings, some of the national security stuff, obviously, had to be done in the Cabinet Office, or (at least) in person. Government did amazing, extraordinary things in incredible circumstances that no one would ever wish to do. Was it perfect? Of course it wasn't. Was it done in good faith? Yes, of course it was.

What was really broken by Covid, and it's obviously fixed now, was parliamentary scrutiny of ministers. The idea that you would answer your question on Zoom and someone would make their speech on Zoom… there was not the interaction that parliament deserves. And I think that we see that in the physical return of parliament. Because I think that the universal consensus is that while there might be different ways of doing certain different aspects of it, the scrutiny function comes down to people in a room. And you don't get the same thing without them. On one level, if you were to set up an MP's office from scratch as a small business, as opposed to an MP's office, some people would say, let's do it all remotely, let's not even have an office, let's save on the rent, kind of thing. I'm sort of towards that end of the spectrum. But I am equally 100% sure that scrutiny needs to happen in person to be properly functional.

GD: How did you hear about losing your job as digital infrastructure minister, in the September 2021 reshuffle?

MW: Everything had ground to a halt again, as we discussed. I was on the terrace [in parliament] with lots of other people, worrying if they were going to get promoted or

not. And you get the text message saying the PM will call you in some window. I have no complaints about the conversation I had with Boris at all. But he says essentially, "You know what this business is like. Sometimes I have to make some space. I hope you understand. You're young, you've got a future ahead of you, this is not the end." I came away from it obviously not cheerful in any sense, but it was a polite conversation that actually he did quite elegantly, and I can't complain about that. On a personal level, I was astonished and really upset but at the same time, when you are hired or when you are fired, politics is not a meritocracy.

What did happen subsequently, was that the chief whip and the prime minister were very open with me that they regretted what had happened and both of them apologised to me. Not "we're sorry you feel hurt", but "that process did not produce the outcome that we wanted. We didn't want to get rid of you. We're sorry, these are just the things that happen." It's not literally Post-it notes falling off whiteboards, but the process is not as rigorous as it should be. Boris has subsequently spoken in front of decent-sized audiences, saying how glad he was to then subsequently have me back doing the job, and I think that partly reflects his reflections on where we were in the first place. But reshuffles are not rational processes. And on the one hand, while I'm flattered to genuinely be able to believe in that instance it was something that people told me was a mistake, there are lots of other mistakes. It's not like a normal job where you could go to a tribunal.

BB: Speaking of going back to your job – you came back during the caretaker period in summer 2022, while the Conservative Party was electing a new leader. What was that conversation like?

MW: Actually, that conversation was very similar to the previous conversation. I had a very brief conversation in advance, along the lines of "Would you accept coming back?" And obviously I said yes. And then the PM phoned up to say, "I would like to offer you this. Thank you for accepting." And that was very straightforward. There was then a slight conversation around portfolios when I got back to the department. The change that we made to the portfolio was to bring the national security stuff back into it, because I had been doing it before, and it made sense not to have someone else have to relearn who the players were.

So there was a bit more in the department than I think some of the caretaker ministers in other departments experienced, but other than that, actually it was a fairly normal summer recess where there was not a huge amount to do in parliament. There was a fair amount to do around the broadband programme because obviously it was important that signing contracts and doing the sort of practical stuff didn't grind to a halt. But ministerial involvement was pretty limited because in my previous time there we had basically designed the programme and rolled it out, and the next stage was to go around the country doing the implementation.

BB: Did you feel like there was anything that you couldn't do because it was a caretaker government?

MW: No, there wasn't actually, and having spoken to other people who were doing caretaker jobs, I think some people did feel frustration, that they weren't able to… I think

being a minister of state helped rather than being the parliamentary [under] sec[retary of state]. Being a returnee helped. Literally, having to deal with the same senior civil servants, there was an instant degree of trust and all of that, which isn't to say they wouldn't have trusted other ministers, but you just don't have that relationship.

To be honest, there was only one thing that I felt I wasn't able to do. I was the minister for the Data [Protection and Digital Information] Bill, and in theory we were going to introduce the Data Bill on the day of the announcement of the [Conservative Party] leadership results. I said a couple of times, I just don't think parliament is going to be doing a second reading of the Data Bill whether Liz Truss has taken over, or when Rishi has taken over, just because any new prime minister will want to say, "This is my government, my programme." It was a big post-EU bill. And I said, "Look, do we need to bother with this?" Because there's a lot of work for the team to get to that point.

I think we sort of found a middle ground where I could have done a second reading, and we were all prepared collectively. We were also not all astonished when it was then canned on the day. The thing that was a bit frustrating, if anything, was if you were having a more normal transitional period, I think both [leadership candidates'] teams would have agreed that we were not doing the second reading of the Data Bill on the day the result was announced. And then everyone could have been a bit more rational about it. We have, however, literally only just done the Data Bill earlier this week, so it did get rethought a little bit, and other things have happened.

BB: You were also in government for Theresa May's semi-caretaker period, with her initial departure announced a few weeks after you arrived. How did those two periods compare?

MW: In the Whips' Office, we didn't think of it as a caretaker period, I guess. Partly because there was still lots of day-to-day whips work.

When I joined, there still wasn't certainty around the timing [of her departure]. So they were very different. I can't speak for it, but I would imagine being a whip in a caretaker government is a very different experience.

BB: I want to talk a bit about being an expert minister. You have a background as a tech journalist. What was it like to then move to the policy side, and become a minister in an area that you knew quite a lot about?

MW: I mean, there is this huge argument to be careful what you wish for, isn't there. I suppose I was lucky. Part of my frustrations about journalism was that I was writing, for instance, a lot about broadband, increasingly about the policy side. That did mean that I knew it was hard. The journalese is to talk about how frustrating it is and how the government should just be better, there was that bit. But it was some reasonably long articles in the *Telegraph*. There was a degree of nuance involved in it.

My main thought is that I went in on day one knowing that there were a small number of policies that were implementable, and I didn't understand why the government wasn't doing it in the way that I thought it should. Not that they were a million miles apart, but it just felt like there was a sensible way forward, and so I was able – not literally on the

first day – but very much in the first meeting with the various bits of the broadband team, to say, "This is what I think we should be doing. This is how I think the policy should work, and can you work that up?" And by the time I left, they had. It basically took the whole time [of my ministerial career] to go from me saying, "Can we try this?", to it being out there on the ground, in the wild.

Ultimately, we went from 7% broadband, ultrafast broadband, to 69% in that period. On the one hand, yes, I think it's right that ministers take a degree of credit for what they're involved in, of course. But, the main thing it tells you is that you are a small cog in a massive machine and, in this particular case, most of that machine is in the private sector. You can do all sorts of things that help grease the wheels and all that, but it was genuinely the fastest rollout of its kind in the world, and still is. That is a huge testament to lots of bits of the state and the private sector and all that, and I don't think I would have been able to deliver that, or play a part in delivering that, if I hadn't had that expertise in the first place to go in on day one and say, "11This is what I'd like to do."

So I think there is a huge amount of value that ministers who have experience bring to it. Simultaneously, there are loads of parts of the brief that I wasn't an expert in, or that I wasn't anywhere near as expert in, but I did have a little bit of familiarity with. I think the real value is not in spending 10 years writing about the detail of it, it's in not being the person that goes in and needs the absolute basics explained to them. Being able to get over what might be the first month of settling in and already having that, I think is probably the much greater benefit. So, for instance, if I went in to an MoJ [Ministry of Justice] job, I've got an open prison in my constituency, I could do a bit of that, but I know there's huge swathes of it that are completely alien to me, and it would take me a long time to work it out. And the same is true of lots of other government departments. So I just think every time there is a reshuffle, there is that cost. Round pegs in round holes have a certain value. They also, occasionally – to mix the metaphors horribly – mean you're wearing blinkers, because you have your own prejudices, and I think the civil service was good with me at saying, "Well, you haven't thought about this." Or "That's a great idea, the reason we can't do it is X." Because nine times out of 10 the bleeding obvious that hasn't been done, hasn't been done for a reason.

BB: Would you have liked to do something different? Did you feel like you were pigeon-holed in digital at all?

MW: Yes, I would. Yes, I did. No, I don't regret it, in the sense that, I think that the pitch that I would make now, and that I made then was… when I went to see Boris when he was running for the leadership for instance, he said, "What would you like to do, what is your dream job?" And obviously, mostly what he was doing was canvassing for support, but people talk about "what do you want." We both go back to the *Telegraph* to a certain extent, we don't know each other that well, but it wasn't the first time we'd met. And I said, "You know that I have a degree of expertise in a certain subject area. What I would like you to bear in mind is that that importance of technology is really true for DCMS because it's the technology department, but isn't it also true in health, and the Home Office, and the MoJ and even in Northern Ireland, it's a lack of digital public services that is holding them back? And of course, the Cabinet Office does public services, and digital is hugely important. So actually go across the whole of government and tell me where technology is not a massive opportunity."

His reflection, I think, was, "Why didn't you just ask for the job I gave you?" I absolutely still think the point is the right one – if you think someone is good at tech, you can put them anywhere, and that is not true for "she's a pensions expert" or whatever. I think it's a genuinely transferable skill. If someone came to me and offered me any job, I would guarantee that there would be a big technological component to it, even it were pensions, in the sense that technology is valuable to the pensions' dashboard, or whatever, but pensions knowledge is not valuable going the other way.

BB: We have three final questions that we ask everyone. The first one is: what achievement are you most proud of in your time in office? And would you do anything differently?

MW: It's split between 7% to 69% for the broadband rollout – a tangible, huge thing. When it came to Covid, if we hadn't been already starting on that programme, there are significant numbers of people that would have had an even worse experience. And that matters.

The other side of it is the national security stuff. I found it fascinating. It is genuinely consequential, and it makes a big economic difference, and it makes a big difference to real people and real people's lives as well, in a way that is never always that obvious. So I enjoyed both of those.

I think what I would do differently is make sure that more people knew about the politics of what I was doing, if that makes sense. The small 'p' politics. I think I sort of fell down thinking if I just get on with doing the job, people don't hear about you screwing up because you've just got on with it, then surely that will see me right in the reshuffle. What I should have done, for instance… We'd just started the first big contract for the broadband rollout and over the summer I did a day trip to Cumbria to meet some communities that were being told, slightly unfairly, by local providers, that the launch of the broadband programme was going to come two weeks before these companies would miraculously be rolling out brilliant broadband [and so they would miss out on a good connection]. "If only the government changes policy slightly, they would be getting great service." That was not the whole story for the broadband programme, but ultimately you do have to say that there are going to be some people where, in pursuit of 10,000 connections by the end of the year, maybe these 200 will now be in 12 months' time rather than in two months' time. Unfortunately that's the nature of the national interest, and you've got to try to find a way of mitigating it for them – of course you would.

Anyway, so I did this day trip up to Cumbria to try and pour oil on the troubled waters of these communities. I quite enjoyed getting – not shouted at, but robust conversations with people. I felt that I had a really good position to defend, but I was also trying to be honest with them that there might be some truth in what they were being told that they were not going to be better off immediately. What I should absolutely have done is made sure the Whips' Office knew that I'd done a day trip to Cumbria to be shouted at, to try and make sure that it didn't become a big issue with some. Even if it's only a Westminster Hall debate, or whatever, about the Cumbrian broadband, then I should have made sure that people knew about it. So I think my regret is if, it's a lazy shorthand, but if you're worried about falling off the board in a reshuffle, you're less likely to fall off the board if

one of the people in the room looking after the board knows that you've been doing good work recently.

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

MW: I was talking in front of newly appointed ministers the other day, and I think actually most of it is advice that I was given. The first is that it remains your diary. There are lots and lots of stakeholders that you do have to meet, but you don't have to meet within the first 10 minutes, and having a degree of time to think, is hugely important. Also that – I can't remember how I put it precisely – but essentially, imagine that you are going to be moved on at the next reshuffle, whatever happens, because it will give you the impetus to go as fast as you reasonably can. It will make moving on feel like you haven't got unfinished business, and it will make firing feel much more bearable. Because I didn't. When I left DCMS the first time, I didn't feel, "Actually, if only I'd stuck around, I could have finished the meat of it." What I did feel was, "God, I really hope once we've done Cumbria, it works out in Norfolk and Essex, and blah, blah, blah." But it was the implementation phase rather than anything else. And had I not had that little bit of a headstart by knowing a bit about it and being able to crack on as quickly as possible, then I think I would have felt much more regret on top of the huge regret I've already got.

BB: Is there anything else that we haven't asked that you'd like to cover?

MW: No, I think my only thought on the whole process is that you can't let your happiness in parliament depend on whether you have a government job. I think there's a real danger, especially having done it and now not doing it, and there's always a reshuffle at some point in the future… You have to learn how to use this place, not like a brand newly elected backbencher, and not like someone who's trying to be a minister that isn't actually a minister. I think there is a lack of training for MPs, there's a lack of training for ministers, and there's a lack of training for the broader opportunities that the platform of parliament gives you. The IfG does good things on all of those things, and so do other organisations, but I do think that that is something that hopefully the more ministers reflect on this, the more that message will percolate around.

GD: You're now co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Future of Work, and you lead a review of the future of work for the prime minister. Having been a minister, how do you think the ministerial role is going to change over the next 50 years?

MW: Fundamentally, for all the talk about expertise, being a minister is simply about judgement. If you are chosen by the prime minister as part of the elected governing party, the theory goes that you can look at that stuff that distils it down into this, that, or the other, and it is your values that will allow you to make the decision that is in tune with that government. And I think it's a long time before AI [artificial intelligence] will be able to make that judgement and have those values. What it will do is mean that ministers will be hopefully besieged by much greater, higher quality evidence and data from which to make those decisions.

I think we will have two challenges. One is getting that data in a good and sensible form, and the second is distilling it into a sufficiently nuanced, but clear, form that genuinely

helps make ministers make decisions, rather than puts them in a position where they can't see the wood for the trees. And I think that will be a huge challenge for the civil service, because everyone needs data scientists and analysts and all that in every part of the world, but there will be lots of very well-funded think tanks, lobbying campaigns, this, that and the other that will be able to find data that ostensibly proves their point. The government and the civil service will have to try to distil that into something that is a fairer assessment, so that ministers can make the decisions. So I don't worry about the judgement bit, but I do worry to some extent about the evidence with which they are presented.

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Published 6 September 2023