Ministers Reflect Alister Jack

15 August 2024

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2017–24: MP for Dumfries and Galloway

Government career

2019: Assistant whip

2019: Government whip (lord commissioner of HM Treasury)

2019–24: Secretary of state for Scotland

Alister Jack was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Sachin Savur on 15 August 2024 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Alister Jack discusses being a minister with business experience, trying to raise the UK government's profile in Scotland, and disagreements with the Scottish government.

Tim Durrant (TD): Let's start in 2019, when you became secretary of state for Scotland. You'd been a whip before, but this was your first ministerial role in a department. What was the conversation you had when you were appointed and how did you approach the role when you started?

Alister Jack (AJ): So it's the 24th of July and Boris [Johnson] had become prime minister, and he was obviously forming his government. And at about nine o'clock that evening I was sitting in the garden having a drink in the summer sunshine with my wife, and the phone rang, it was "Could you come to No.10 please?". So I quickly had to put a clean shirt and a tie on and head round there.

It was one of a number of reshuffles I went through. I think I went through 10 reshuffles in the same post in the end and as you know, I was in the role for five years, three prime ministers, two monarchs and three first ministers, so it was quite an eventful time. And we had a very nice conversation where we talked about the challenges in Scotland and how I thought we should tackle them and how he thought we should tackle them.

And then you sort of move from room to room in No.10 and go through the process of being sort of accredited, if you like, as a minister. Then you go to your department, which I got to – it's quite a slow process through No.10 – I got there about half 10 that evening and met the director of the department and the principal private secretary. They briefed me on the role as they saw it, and then I went home about, I don't know, probably about half midnight and there were a number of people who had popped round to the house – having seen on the news that I'd been appointed – and wanted to come and celebrate and they were keeping my wife company. I joined them, but not for too long because cabinet was at eight o'clock the next morning and I was quite keen to get some sleep.

Obviously I was buzzing and very excited and it was a huge honour and privilege and came completely out of the blue because I'd only joined parliament in June 2017. And as you said in your question, I'd done a stint in the Whips' Office from February that year, so it was a steep learning process.

TD: And you came in at the top of the department, as secretary of state. What was it like going straight in at the top, straight to cabinet?

AJ: Well, I suppose I was lucky in as much as I had led and managed businesses before. I didn't go into politics until I was 53, rising 54 a month later. So you know, I had some experience in leading and managing throughout my career, but had I been in a department in Whitehall? No, I hadn't. Did I have a lot to learn about that? Yes, I did.

I suppose if you interviewed the civil servants who worked with me, they would say that I probably operated differently to most other ministers, and I never really got out of that habit. I tended, when I was facing problems, to go direct to the source of the problem

and then report back to the civil service, or I'd include them in the phone call when I went direct to the source. And very often that meant speaking direct secretary of state to secretary of state, or secretary of state to prime minister.

I just wanted to get things sorted out to shorten the time frames, because one of the frustrations I found going into government – compared to running businesses entrepreneurially as I had in the past – was how long it took to get anything done. You know, it was like wading through treacle sometimes going to all the different people you have to sign off and get agreement from, etc., etc. And it struck me that that could all be done after you had agreed the principle, rather than getting to the principle and then carrying on from there.

The way I tackled it was – I won't go into specific issues – but if, let's say, I wanted to do something around structural funding [to support regional development, previously provided by the European Union], which we had powers to do with the UK Internal Market Act, I wanted to get agreement from the Treasury and No.10 as to what my proposal was. And then I would go round the houses and get all the sign off – rather than trying to get all the sign off and everyone to agree, and then going to the Treasury or the prime minister for them to say no. It struck me that was an awful lot of work to achieve nothing and using a lot of civil service time to achieve nothing. So I preferred to float my ideas at the highest level, get some form of approval for them – or a rejection as often happened – and then if it was approved to use up civil service time.

I suppose coming into politics from business as I did at that age, I took a slightly different approach to things that was probably, um, a little bit non-conformist, but as long as everything was recorded and reported correctly there was nothing wrong in doing it that way, and it struck me as a better way to do things.

TD: I was going to say exactly that – do you think that it led to better outcomes, or at least a better process?

AJ: Well, it allowed me to better use my time and my civil servants to better use their time. I mean, there's not a vast array of civil servants in the Scotland Office, so it was quite important that they used their time wisely rather than lots of fanciful projects that the secretary of state might have that were never going to come to anything.

I preferred to know that we had a chance at least of getting it done. If we could get it done correctly, rather than wasting everyone's time with some hare-brained scheme that was never going to come to anything.

TD: That makes a lot of sense. In those early days, how did you develop a sense for what your priorities were?

AJ: I was very clear that I felt the UK government didn't have the boots on the ground and the presence in Scotland that it should have. I felt that devolution had eroded not so much our powers but had eroded our presence in Scotland and I wanted everyone to know that they had two governments in Scotland.

I took the view that with structural funding, city and region growth deals, the funds that came after that through the UKIM [UK Internal Market] Act where we had, for the first

time basically since we joined the EU, the power to spend directly into Scotland – rather than give the money to the EU, who then spent some of that structural funding in Scotland. We were now doing it directly, the Levelling Up Fund, the Community Renewal Fund, the United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund, and I wanted people to know that there was a UK government presence.

I wanted to practice what I called 'real devolution'. I wanted to work with local authorities and other responsible business partners who could deliver projects so the UK government was directly involved. The money was going directly to the source of the project, rather than through the Scottish government and slowing up everything, and also I wanted the UK government to get the credit for that.

It was about 'showing' not 'telling', with money being invested in Scotland. I felt with the city and region growth deal project which started while we were in the EU we didn't get the bang for our buck we should have got. With this we were able to get more credit for the money and get more direct involvement with local authorities. All of them, including the SNP [Scottish National Party] local authorities, welcomed it, I got no pushback on that.

That was the first thing I wanted to do. The second thing I wanted was the UK government to stand up for the things that we believed the people of Scotland wanted to see happen. You may come to that later, but for instance I stood up against the deposit return scheme which I knew to be completely flawed, I stood up to them on the section 35 [of the Scotland Act 1998, which allows the UK government to challenge Scottish legislation where it would have an adverse effect on non-devolved matters], I did on the Gender Recognition Reform Act, those sort of things.

I wasn't going to just be cowed by the Scottish government and fall into this line that some people had and would impress upon me, they would say, "Well, if you have conflict with the Scottish government it will lead to an independence referendum." Well, I can tell you that I didn't believe that for a minute and the numbers showed that – I mean when I came in the desire for independence as a percentage was running in the mid-50s. When I left, if you asked the question 'leave or remain?' it was in the mid-30s and in the interim there had been what people refer to as 'muscular unionism'. Some agreed with me, some disagreed with me, but ultimately I believe it produced the right results and it pushed the independence question right down the track.

Sachin Savur (SS): You mentioned the Internal Market Act earlier – this was obviously one of the major clashes with the Scottish government during your time in the role, with the Scottish parliament withholding legislative consent but the bill passing anyway. How did you approach handling this disagreement?

AJ: Well, I didn't mind that they weren't giving legislative consent because they had made it very clear they weren't giving legislative consent for any Brexit-related legislation. They'd made that very clear, and we had to have a UK Internal Market Act; the UK internal market had to be protected on the same principles as the EU single market: non-discrimination and mutual recognition. Those are the principles that underpin it and we needed to do that because 60% of Scotland's trade is with the rest of the UK.

You know, the SNP used to talk about the EU being Scotland's biggest market. It is a big market, but actually in terms of actual trade, the biggest market is the rest of the UK, 60%

of trade – 20% to the rest of the world, 20% to the EU, but Scotland does 60% to the rest of the UK. And therefore I had to make sure that market was protected and that within the devolved competencies the Scottish government couldn't diverge and cause problems within the United Kingdom internal market. So I was prepared just to tough it out and that's exactly what I did.

SS: I think we'll go fairly chronologically here – the next big event was the Covid-19 pandemic. What was your role liaising with the Scottish government during this time? What kind of things did you talk to them about?

AJ: I think I covered a lot of this when I was in front of the Covid inquiry, but we met very regularly, we met certainly weekly, but quite often more than weekly. We had different committees running for meeting and some meetings were with the health secretary, some were with the first minister, the deputy first minister.

Because we also were meeting sometimes metro mayors, but always the first ministers of Wales and Northern Ireland as well, Michael Gove, who was the minister for intergovernmental relations, chaired those meetings – most of them, not all of them. That was his role, to sort of co-ordinate the three first ministers, and then the secretaries of state attended and chipped in as they saw fit.

And then there were other meetings that might be with Matt Hancock [UK health secretary 2018–21] and the Scottish government's health secretary. Or meetings relating to the travel industry, that involved the transport secretary, once we were looking at how travel back into the UK operated and the traffic light system we had on that.

Yeah, I mean, there were just a lot of meetings, and for all the ministerial meetings that took place there were an awful lot of civil service meetings going on in the background as well. It was just a very, very busy time and I've spoken to that at some length in the Covid inquiry – maybe you want me to enlarge upon that, but there's not much I can say that you wouldn't read in my Covid response, to be honest.

SS: Just on the inquiry – you told them how you thought that the Scottish government's behaviour during the pandemic was influenced partly by desire to differentiate themselves from the UK government.

AJ: Entirely, entirely.

SS: At what point did you come to that view?

AJ: Very early on. I think I was initially suspicious when Nicola Sturgeon [first minister of Scotland 2014–23] jumped the gun after the Covid meeting and made the announcement to cancel large events on 12 March 2020 ahead of the prime minister announcing to the nation at five o'clock that day, which, as you know, made life difficult going forward for Covid meetings in terms of trust – and again, that's all well documented. But at that point I thought to myself, 'we're not all pulling together here, we're not being completely cohesive.'

And then we started to see these little decisions being made for the sake of it, with little differences but not major differences, but just to be different, causing ultimately quite a bit of confusion across the UK as to what the rules were for how many people could be

in a house and how many people could be in your garden and if you wore a mask in a train or not, or if you did this, if you did that. I just felt the whole thing was all about trying to push what they called their 'four nations agenda'. Mark Drakeford [first minister of Wales 2018–24] did a lot of it as well, this four nations agenda, the idea that we weren't one United Kingdom.

And I felt that that was very unhelpful because we are one United Kingdom. The vaccine rollout was done on a UK-wide basis and very successfully. Our financial support through furlough and all those other things were on a UK-wide basis. And I just felt that there was divergence for the sake of it, when it was very clear that the virus didn't respect boundaries. I remember again the Scottish government tried to make out that there was a sort of physical border between Scotland and England. There isn't. There's a geographical border. There is freedom of travel, as you know, right across the United Kingdom and these things I felt were being politicised.

SS: And then moving on to June 2022, when Nicola Sturgeon announced plans to hold a second independence referendum. How did the cabinet decide on its response to this announcement?

AJ: In June 2022 she declared she was holding a referendum on the 19th of October 2023, setting the date for the following year. And, I mean, she said in that announcement that she was going to go to the Supreme Court to clarify that she had the power to do that. Now, matters relating to defence, to foreign affairs and to the constitution are entirely reserved in the Scotland Act, so I instantly said that we would stand up against her belief. And we got the best Treasury counsel [the government's lawyers] to act for us, we won hands down the case in the Supreme Court, we won it absolutely hands down and I was never in any doubt that that would be the case. It's very clear that the constitution is reserved for the United Kingdom government and the Supreme Court found exactly that it agreed with that.

And it wasn't the only court case I had with them. I had two section 33 [of the Scotland Act, allowing the advocate general for Scotland to refer Scottish parliament bills to the UK Supreme Court] court cases and obviously section 35, but in every instance we won. As I say, we won it hands down, without a chink of light showing any concern from the court that we were wrong in how we were conducting ourselves.

So I wasn't in any way rattled by her announcement that she was having a referendum. I never believed for a minute it would happen and we were happy for the Supreme Court to take the referral on. It was unusual for it to happen from the Scottish government – normally it would come from the UK government, the referral, but we didn't object to that and I took that decision not to object to it and to allow the Supreme Court to proceed without any objection from us because we were confident of the outcome.

SS: Just picking up on the section 35 power that you mentioned, which was used for the first time in January 2023 [to challenge the Scottish government's gender recognition bill on the grounds it would have an adverse effect on non-devolved matters]. How did you decide to use this power? Was there much discussion with other ministers, including the prime minister?

AJ: Yes, so we had been watching this bill coming forward for some time and the advocate general for Scotland had alerted to me to the concerns that he had. He's within the Scotland Office, he's my legal adviser within the Scotland Office. There were many, many amendments put down at that time to the bill and the clock was ticking down and we knew that between November and December – the bill went through on the 22nd of December – that they had a number of amendments that would have affected my decision, can I put it that way. There were amendments in there that would have made a difference to the decision, but those amendments were thrown out. And so I got advice on the basis that the bill was amended, and also advice on the basis that it wasn't, and then I knew on the 22nd of December it hadn't been amended.

So I then communicated with the prime minister and told him where we were with it. In a heartbeat he agreed with me that section 35 was the right decision. I then said, "Well, I will go and double-check everything with the lawyers" because as you know, the legal position was that it had adverse effect on the Equality Act 2010, which was a reserved bill, because it made changes to the 2004 Gender [Recognition] Act and that had adverse effects on the Equality Act. And so I felt it was important that I double-checked the legal advice.

Obviously, between Christmas and New Year the lawyers were on holiday, so I had to wait until everyone got back early January and I think it was on the 17th of January that I did the section 35 order, which was pretty much 24 hours before it would have gone for royal assent. It was very close to the royal assent moment. I wasn't running the clock down, I was just waiting for the correct legal advice to come back in the new year and you don't get that overnight. I mean, for a decision like that, you want to make sure it's belt and braces and it was.

TD: As you say, it was a very belt-and-braces approach. As well as the amendments happening in Holyrood, was there an attempt from the UK government to try and head this off before it got to that stage, before it got to the section 35 decision?

AJ: You mean negotiating with the Scottish government? So that isn't how the Scotland Act works. If I take you back to the section 33 for instance, on the UNCRC bill, the United Nations [Convention on the] Rights of the Child, I sent a letter to John Swinney [deputy first minister of Scotland 2014–23] saying that I think clause 6 and clauses 19 to 21 were section 33 items – so they were putting impositions on UK government ministers that a devolved administration couldn't, or taking powers away from UK government ministers. And they just ignored that letter. In fact, he held it up and he was quite rude about it in the [Scottish] parliament, and that's fine.

But actually, I learned a lesson in that, because a) they didn't want me to be helpful and b) it's not actually for me to tell them how to write their legislation. You know, it's for the Scottish government to write competent legislation that is within the rules of the Scotland Act and then, once it's passed, it is for us to decide within one month before it

goes for royal assent whether it gets referred to the courts as a section 33 or it gets stopped altogether, which is a section 35. And there isn't the opportunity to negotiate after the bill is passed and there isn't the opportunity to negotiate in advance. You can, if they ask you, give them feedback like I did with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and they can, as they did, completely ignore the feedback. But on this one, they weren't asking for any feedback. They had made their mind up, they were having the bill the way the bill was. No material amendments were made, and they certainly weren't asking us what we thought about it.

You get my point. Once the bill has been passed in the parliament, you can't start negotiating about it afterwards.

TD: Of course. So you talked as well about amendments in the Scottish parliament – were those coming from Conservative MSPs? And, where you have the situation we still have where you've got one government in Westminster and a different party in power in Edinburgh, what role, if any, can the UK governing party MSPs play in Edinburgh to bridge disagreements do you think?

AJ: Well, first of all, a lot of the amendments were put down by Russell Findlay MSP, a Conservative MSP, and his amendments were good amendments. But I didn't take any role in influencing the amendments they put down, I should make that point. We don't use our MSPs to put amendments down on behalf of the UK government, because they're opposition MSPs. We don't do that, we just don't get involved, full stop. It's for them to do their legislation, it is entirely devolved, so there's no interference from our perspective and I didn't have any input into Russell Findlay's amendments whatsoever. And, you know, three of them [Conservative MSPs] voted for this legislation, to give you an idea.

So they're doing what they want to do within a devolved structure. I can see where it would be different if there was a Labour administration in Holyrood and a Labour administration in London, there may be a little bit more, um, dovetailing of policy and I completely understand that. But when you've got an administration in Edinburgh who wants to go in a very different direction to Westminster and an administration in Edinburgh that is a Scottish National Party that wants to destroy the United Kingdom, that wants to break up the United Kingdom, wants to be as different as possible in lots of things as I've said before. But actually, you know, they don't want to make it work.

So the idea – and this is one of the things when you asked me earlier about what I thought about when I first came into the job – I mean, a lot of people were telling me how I had to bend to the will of the Scottish government and be nice to them and everything would end up happy in the end. I learned very quickly that the Scottish government had no desire to make things work with the UK government. You know, their desire was to break away from the UK government.

TD: People in the past have described the role of ministers in the Scotland Office, the Wales Office and the Northern Ireland Office as being representatives of those nations in cabinet, but also being the UK government's representative in the relevant part of the UK. Do you agree with that characterisation and how do you how do you balance those two parts?

AJ: I think that's right. You're there to represent Scotland at the cabinet table and that works in two different ways.

One way is you're obviously pressing for funding and you might be pressing to be part of some collective where DCMS [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] are trying to bring a World Cup or some other sporting venture to the UK, you want Scotland to be tied in with that. You're pressing all the opportunities, I mean, COP26 [the United Nations climate change conference], one of the early things I got involved with – actually one of the first decisions I got involved with Boris that first weekend when I became secretary of state – was COP26 going to Glasgow. And that was something I was very keen happened and he was very supportive of that as well.

So on one side you're pushing for things, the other part you're doing is you're making sure across Whitehall bad things don't happen, bad decisions don't happen – the law of unintended consequences I'm referring to – in the UK legislation that has a negative effect in Scotland. And I did that by creating a Scotland Office board that met regularly, quarterly, with the heads of all the Whitehall departments that were relevant, the civil servants. I chaired a meeting with them and we would go through the issues that might be coming up on their radar and things that they were encountering and the legislation coming forward and how that could be best used to best advantage for Scotland.

That's the sort of 'stopping bad things happen'/'making good things happen' part. Then there's representing Westminster in Scotland, and we do that from Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh, and I wanted most of my ministers and other UK government ministers that were relevant to Scotland to be on the ground – more visits, more engagement with the media in Scotland. There were a number of them who were very good at it and the others needed encouragement and I wanted the Scotland Office media team to support them so they knew the issues when they were in Scotland. So that was all about raising again the UK profile in Scotland and getting over this point that Scotland has two governments.

TD: You've already mentioned that there were three first ministers while you were secretary of state, and you also mentioned some of the difficulties of the working relationship. How do you think the secretary of state for Scotland can work well with the first minister?

AJ: The reality is it's very difficult because the Scottish National Party in government don't want a Scotland Office. They don't want the UK government spending money directly with local authorities in the Scotland, as was created under my watch. The list of things is endless they don't want, I mean, they don't want to be part of the United Kingdom.

So it's very hard to have a good relationship with the first minister unless you're rolling over and giving the first minister everything he or she wants. But if you're standing up to the first minister and not giving powers away – and I didn't give powers away – by

standing up and saying no to the request for extra powers or the demands for a referendum or whatever it may be, the demand for the structural funding to go to them rather than to go to the local authorities. When you're standing up and doing that then it's hard to pretend that you're going to see eye-to-eye. I always kept relations cordial and polite, which I thought was very important. But, you know, you're not going to build any great friendships and you aren't going to see eye-to-eye on a number of issues when you are a unionist and they are a separatist.

TD: Let's talk about your ministers then. You were secretary of state for five years and there were eight different parliamentary under secretaries of state in the Scotland Office in that time. How did you see the role of those junior ministers and the relationship between you and those people?

AJ: Well, so I did a portfolio split and between the Commons junior minister and the Lords minister. I would split basically depending on what their strengths and interests were and also their geographical location. So if the minister was from the north east, as two of them were, then the north of Scotland interests, oil and gas, would be with them.

But on the city and region growth deals, I gave them city and region growth deals that were in other parts of Scotland so they didn't have a conflict of interest. And I made sure that was always the case, that there was no conflict of interest. For instance, the Borderlands [Inclusive] Growth Deal, which affected my constituency, I had nothing to do with it – another minister handled it. And equally if they knew about farming – as a farmer, obviously I kept out of the farming portfolio – I would give one of them the farming portfolio, hopefully one who understood farming! And I had on one or two occasions one that knew a bit about farming.

And it was likewise with other portfolios, you know, if they were particularly knowledgeable in an area then I tried to give it to them so they started a little bit further up the curve in understanding the issues. It worked well, I got on well with all of them. I think I have to say they all did an excellent job, I wouldn't criticise any of them, they worked hard, they did the visits, they did the stakeholder engagement and they were good diligent ministers.

TD: Can I ask a very practical question: how often would you be in Scotland? Would you be up quite frequently?

AJ: Yeah, that's a good question. The plan was always to have to be in Scotland by Thursday evening and back in London Monday morning.

TD: And that was both to do ministerial duties and then to go to your constituency?

AJ: Yes. I mean this was different during recess. I went to London if there was a specific cabinet committee or sub-committee I had to attend, but in recess we based ourselves entirely from Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh.

TD: And what about the department itself? What were your impressions of the Scotland Office and how did you lead it?

AJ: From day one I was really impressed with the civil servants that I met and I dealt with, I really was. And I used to tell them very clearly our main issues that we had to be chasing down and we shouldn't chase down everything, we couldn't be champions for everything.

As a leadership team, the ministers and the senior civil servants met every Monday afternoon for an hour and we looked at the issues ongoing and we looked at the issues coming up. As I said, I had the Scotland board dealing with the senior civil servants and that brought in high-level issues and I could then delegate some of those – or in the case of the deposit return scheme, for instance, take it on myself.

But all the time I said to them, "Look, we need to show the people of Scotland that there are two governments. No point just telling them, let's show them, let's engage with the local authorities, get back on the pitch there. Let's get more and more ministers up and let's keep pressing for more funding." Which was all part of the levelling up agenda and then of course that developed into other forms of funding as well. And we started with the base of the city and region growth deals, which as I said started in about 2016 and the delivery partner for that was the Scottish government. We were obviously coughing up 50% of the funding and I didn't feel we were getting value for money, but by the time I left office the total of our financial commitment, the UK government financial commitment to spending in Scotland over and above the block grant had broken £3 billion.

So from a relatively modest start, that was a significant amount of money and that was very much where spending that wisely and spending it with good effect to show the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom, that was absolutely what I was instilling in my team all the time.

TD: You were the longest serving secretary of state for Scotland since the Scotland Act. We already talked a little bit about the challenges, but what do you think are the challenges of the current settlement and how do you think it could be improved?

AJ: I think there are a number of issues where it could be improved. I'm still not convinced that the structure with the law officer, the lord advocate [the Scottish government's chief legal adviser], being in charge of the Crown Office and the sort of director of public prosecutions effectively being tied into the cabinet and a political appointment. I'm not sure we got that right, and a lot of legal opinion has been passed on that subject. You know, the director of public prosecutions is appointed by a board in England and it's very separate, so I think there's a little bit of, um, tidying up that could be done there.

I think within the Scotland Act, a mistake made in 1998 when it was written was that everything that was reserved was put into what they call schedule 5 of the act. Since then, a number of things have come along that aren't in schedule 5 of the act, and the problem with schedule 5 of the act was that anything that's not in that list of reserved items is therefore devolved.

So new technologies, there's some disagreement about new technologies and other things and whether or not they are reserved. And I think whether it's AI [artificial

intelligence] which we should do across the UK, whether it's hydrogen – which is a very important gas, and I think our primary gas in 10 years' time, it's a manufactured gas – that's a confused part of the Scotland Act, whereas it was natural oil and natural gas that was reserved. I think these things need tidying up to avoid conflict – pet chipping might be another one, there's lots of things. But I think schedule 5 should probably be reviewed every seven years by the UK government to ensure that there aren't new technologies and new things that have come along that should be reserved across the UK.

I think another mistake in the Scotland Act that I would change is that we reserved nuclear power and we reserved the grid, but we didn't reserve the planning for the grid or for nuclear – that was devolved. As things stand with the Scottish government, we can't do a mini nuclear reactor and obviously we've got issues about upgrading the grid, which is so important to us to get the offshore wind power onshore and around the country. So I think that was probably another, with hindsight, it was another error.

But why were these mistakes made? Well, Labour were in government in Westminster and they were going to be in government in Scotland. They were by a country mile the strongest party in Scotland and they probably didn't envisage the problems that we have now with a government that is not in lockstep with the Westminster government.

SS: You've spoken about some of your achievements in office, but what are you most proud of from your time in government?

AJ: [laughs] Oh my goodness, no one has ever asked me that question! Um, so two things have had big impacts.

The thing that will have had the biggest impact of course will be the section 35, which as I said, the prime minister supported me in a heartbeat on it, but it still required an element of toughness to get that over the finishing line. I'm not going to write the story of those behind the scenes who disagreed with the decision, but let's just say it wasn't unanimous, it required an element of toughness and robustness to get together. And I think it made a big difference and it certainly, um, created a schism within the Scottish National Party from which they haven't yet recovered. So I'm proud that I held the line and that I did what I believed to be right and legally right.

I think the other thing that I'm most proud of is the UK Internal Market Act and protecting 60% of Scotland's trade, which is with the rest of the UK, but importantly putting in the spending powers into that bill, which enabled us to then spend directly into Scotland, re-engage with local authorities, become relevant again. And I think that, of all the things, will have for the long term the biggest impact.

SS: Great. And just finally, what would your advice be to a new minister on how they can be most effective in their role?

AJ: Well, generally, I would say to any minister in government: don't allow yourself to get bogged down in too much detail. Very often you get bogged down because no one has any intention of doing the things you want to do, and you should work that out quite quickly and establish whether or not you're going to be able to do it, and if not, go off and do something else more useful. So that's just learning the tricks of the trade, if you like.

And to my successor, I would say: be robust and stand up for the UK government in Scotland. That gets very well received by Scots. They want to see the UK government standing up for itself and thereby standing up for them, and that's the best bit of advice I can give my successor.

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