Ministers Reflect John Denham

18 November 2024

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

1992–2015: MP for Southampton, Itchen

2003–07: Chair of the Home Affairs Committee

Government career

1997–98: Parliamentary under-secretary of state, Department of Social Security

1998: Minister of state, Department of Social Security

1998–2001: Minister for health, Department of Health

2001–03: Minister for police and crime reduction, Home Office

2007–09: Secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills

2009–10: Secretary of state for communities and local government

John Denham was interviewed by Sachin Savur and Finn Baker on 18 November 2024 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

John Denham discusses what it means to be an 'engine room' minister, resigning over the Iraq war, and returning to government as the only ever secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills.

Sachin Savur (SS): You entered government in 1997 as a parliamentary under-secretary of state in the Department of Social Security. Can you tell us about the conversation you had when you were first appointed?

John Denham (JD): I don't think I had a conversation that I can recall, because I'd been in the Social Security team beforehand. And I remember John McTernan – who was the special adviser to Harriet Harman, who was the shadow secretary of state – just saying to us that the Social Security team would be confirmed en bloc, which is what happened.

If I did have a conversation with the prime minister, I don't recall it. I think I might have done and it was very, very brief. So basically, there wasn't, on that occasion, any hanging around or nervous waiting to see what would happen.

SS: What was it like coming into government? You mentioned that you'd shadowed the role. Was any of your prior experience useful as a minister?

JD: I mean, when I became a backbencher in 1992, I actually got very heavily involved in issues to do with pensions. Originally I was interested in the investment strategies of pension funds – social investment, all of that sort of thing – but when I got in and started reading the trade press it became clear that there was this massive scandal of pension mis-selling. And I was probably the first backbencher in parliament to raise it in adjournment debates and other debates and enter the conversation. The issue was that people were basically persuaded, wrongly, to leave occupational pension schemes and take out personal pensions. And I think the compensation bill came to £9 billion or something like that in the end.

So because of that I developed quite a lot of expertise in pensions and so when I came into government, I had a fairly clear idea of what I wanted to do. We did a number of different things. We set up a new strategy group looking at the state of pension provision. It was pretty much agreed by everybody that we were going to need a pensions white paper, so a lot of my time was spent on that. And then I did various other things around social investment and other areas. So I think it's fair to say I had a fairly good idea of what I wanted to pursue when I came in.

SS: Were there any surprises or challenges despite you having that view?

JD: Well, I think a number of things happened. One was I learnt very early on that the Treasury was a law unto itself and would do things that were damaging to other government departments without any consultation. In particular, Gordon Brown [chancellor of the exchequer 1997–2007] had a number of priorities, one of which was to – in the very first budget – abolish something called Advance Corporation Tax, which was part of the taxation model for occupational pension schemes. This was seen

universally as a signal that the government was not interested in the future of occupational defined benefit schemes and so accelerated – I mean, it would have happened anyway because of changes in industrial structure of the nation – but undoubtedly led to the more rapid closure of private sector pension schemes. This was done without any consultation with our department at all. I think my officials had picked up something about it because they got me to sign a letter to the Treasury saying "don't do anything with ACT", but that was it. There wasn't a write round to respond to.

And the second thing was that we came in wanting to pursue a strategy of building up an entitlement… I mean there's always a tension in social security between an entitlement-based model of social security and a means-tested, prioritised system. And we thought we were coming in to build up an entitlement model and the Treasury was planning the pension credit and all the rest of it, which was very much a means-tested model, and there was also the broader Treasury strategy around tax credits, very much moving away from entitlements. So the ACT thing was where you learned that there was another big part of government which had no interest in what the pensions department had to say about pensions or social security.

The second thing I remember didn't affect me directly, but just a few weeks after we got in, the department started implementing something called the Benefit Integrity Project. It was basically stripping disability benefits away from people – whatever the equivalent of personal payments was then. And this was a really classic case of the department not understanding that after 18 years, government policy was not necessarily what the previous government had been doing. And so civil servants had not thought in any way that they needed to check with new ministers whether this should be implemented. So that was something that happened fairly early on.

On the other hand, there were some very good things. We set up this pension provision group, looking at pension strategy. They produced a very high quality report, much like Adair Turner [chair of the Pensions Commission, 2002–06] was to do 10 years later. The timing wasn't right to move towards an automatic contribution system, but you know that sort of work. And that was really, really good.

Finn Baker (FB): We want to talk more broadly about your six years as a junior minister. You've previously described yourself as a good 'engine room minister'. What did that look like in terms of the day-to-day?

JD: Well, if I gave you one example to illustrate it. At Health, my job was to make sure we delivered all the waiting list promises that had been made prior to 1997 or were made in the early years after the election. And maybe we weren't the first, but I think we were among the first in Whitehall to start fortnightly stocktakes. And so every fortnight I'd have everybody in my office. And by 'everybody' I mean the actual statistics expert from Leeds, not some middle-ranking civil servant trying to understand what the stats person had told them. We got the people who mattered – hospital managers, health service people – and every fortnight we would review the data and we would see where we were making progress.

It was through that process we discovered that 50% of our waiting list problem was in 25 hospitals, out of the 940-odd hospitals we had at the time. This had not been flushed out of the system previously. And then you suddenly realised virtually all of your problem was

within about 75 hospitals so you had a totally different approach. You had to drive. I got quite involved in supporting collaborative learning projects on cancer pathways. And so a lot of it, I think was trying to understand the dynamics of how the system actually operated.

I took through the legislation on primary care trusts and was – until it got unfortunately… We set up these primary care trusts as voluntary, but they were really successful and I made the mistake of taking Tony [Blair] to see a couple of them and he came back and said "this is great. We'll make everywhere become a primary care trust", which was a complete disaster because they only worked because they were voluntary. But anyway.

So engine room stuff was basically about understanding how the system operates and driving it forward. And that's how I saw my role in each of those sort of junior ministerial positions. I thought it was my job to be somebody who really understood the dynamics of how the thing worked and then to find ways of driving it forward.

FB: You mentioned there that you moved twice as a junior minister. You moved to the Department of Health in 1999 and to the Home Office in 2001. How did you find those moves and how did you go about developing that understanding of each department that you spoke about?

JD: The move to Health: I suppose I had no idea what to expect in government and it's probably the standard 'refreshing' – I mean, you'll know that the social security department had been a bit of a mess. There'd been lots of conflicts between Harriet Harman, the secretary of state, and Frank Field, who'd been called the minister for welfare reform, and then conflicts between Frank Field and Downing Street and between Frank Field and the Treasury. And it was all…

So I think there was a desire after Alistair Darling came in to sort of stabilise things, probably to reset it a bit. I'd also done the pensions white paper so whilst I would have liked to stay around and see it through, it was quite a good time to move. We had quite a big effect on the cost structures of private pension provisions and we'd done some things about social investment policy that had been good. So I wasn't distressed to move on at that time. I would have liked another three months probably to finish off a few bits and pieces, but it was ok.

Health: I think it probably would have been seen across government as a promotion, even though it's a sort of sideways thing in terms of status, just because I think it was beginning to dawn on people how profound the problems facing the NHS were, and also, therefore, the need to do reform. I think it was still at the phase where Downing Street and the Treasury thought you could fix the NHS just by reform and without any investment, because this was in the first term of the Labour government when we were working within Tory spending limits.

But there was a sense that we were really going to need to drive change. And then in due course Alan Milburn [health secretary, 1999–2003] developed the NHS plan which, until I heard Wes Streeting [health secretary, 2024–] say "this is the biggest ever review of the NHS", was, in fact, the biggest ever review of the NHS (and looks remarkably similar, with almost all the same people involved, so it will be very interesting to see what happens!).

Obviously I didn't have the same background I had on pensions. If I say so myself, I think I'm actually quite good at picking up a brief. I think I'm relatively good at reading myself and listening my way into a brief pretty quickly, at least I like to think so. I don't remember particularly struggling to grasp what needed to be done – I'm sure probably other people thought I did – but I seemed to be able to get into it ok.

And the priorities were fairly clearly set. We had to deliver these various targets. We had to change the wages structure in the NHS, and today everybody in the NHS will talk about something called *Agenda for Change* – which I introduced – and put their head in their hands because it's too complicated, but it's not half as complicated as what it replaced. There were like 27 different pay bands in the NHS and we managed to get them down to nine, I think. We had to bring about reforms, like waiting list reform – that sort of detailed work within the waiting lists about reforming care pathways. And then we had the legislation for primary care trusts.

So there was an agenda there that was half already there because they were election promises and half seen as obviously necessary to implement the sort of changes that we wanted.

FB: And what about the move to the Home Office in 2001 after the election?

JD: I mean, my general view is that it was quite interesting to take up a new challenge to be honest. It was an interesting brief around policing and crime reduction; a new set of relationships to get to grips with: everything from the Police Federation to the Association of Chief Police Officers and different organisations. And an intellectually challenging area too. So I enjoyed the move and liked working with David Blunkett [home secretary, 2001–04] and the rest of the team. I can't remember being disappointed by the move – I just think it was interesting.

FB: And not to skip over your early career, but in 2003 you resigned over the Iraq war. How did you come to this decision and what conversations were you having with the whips, with David Blunkett and with the prime minister?

JD: I didn't have any conversations with the whips, didn't have any conversation with David Blunkett until the morning itself, and then had a phone conversation with the prime minister.

It came from growing doubts. There was at the time a group of ministers of state who used to meet, I think, about once a fortnight – probably on a Monday night – to share a bottle of wine and talk. I mean, it was like a group therapy session as much as anything else because in this engine room sort of model, we'd just get together and talk about the challenges of the job. But that was a place where, as Iraq came closer, people would talk about their views. So that was the main group of people that I found as a safe space, that I could discuss my views with. I was in a minority, quite clearly, in my views, but I don't think anybody ever went outside that group and said "one or two people are having difficulty with this". So that would have been the main place.

I didn't come to a firm conclusion until just before Robin [Cook, leader of the House of Commons, 2001–03] announced his resignation, but probably that same day. Robin, I think, looking at his diaries, had come to that conclusion a bit earlier.

And so on the day itself, I just rang up David and said "I'm going". And then I got a phone call from Tony [Blair]. One of two people in Tony's office were very clever – I won't name them – at identifying individuals to ring me up who they thought might change my mind – not MPs, people from outside parliament. But the final decision came quite late in the event really.

FB: I'm very interested in the group of ministers of state you mentioned. How do you fall into a group like that? Is it those you entered parliament with?

SS: And what kind of support did you give to one another outside of that period of time?

JD: Yeah, most of what we talked about wasn't about Iraq – that was just where I had the opportunity to talk. I would say, "what if it's a disaster?" and somebody else would say "what if people are putting flowers in the barrels of the guns?". You could tell the people who had been old enough to be around for the Portuguese Revolution [the 1974 revolution, which saw the overthrow of the authoritarian government, and during which the carnation became a symbol of resistance]. But it was those sorts of discussions.

I can't remember it in detail, but the group probably came from talking to one or two people over dinner or something and then saying, "well, you know, it'd be quite nice to get together". So it's was a very informal sort of thing. And as much as anything, it was a gossip, a chance to talk about frustrations of the job. I don't want to overplay it, but it was quite a nice 'safe space', in today's language, for getting together and talking about those sorts of things.

FB: Pretty soon after you left government, you became chair of the Home Affairs Committee and at that time chairs weren't elected through secret ballot. Did you speak to the prime minister when you went for that election? And what did you hope to get out of chairing a committee after being a minister?

JD: No, I didn't speak to anybody. What happened was that – I don't think he'd mind me saying so – Chris Mullin, who was the outgoing chair, rang me up and said "I think you should be chair of the Home Affairs Committee" and I think I probably said, "you're joking. Nobody's ever going to give me a job again." And he said, "well, it's decided by the parliamentary committee of the Parliamentary Labour Party [PLP]. It's not a prime ministerial decision." And he said, "I think there'd be a majority for you." So I said, "well, ok. Let my name go forward", honestly thinking it wouldn't happen.

And then I did get it and it didn't half cause a fuss, I can say, in the PLP. Understandably, because there were colleagues – I completely understand this – who said, "well, we held our noses and went through the lobbies and voted for Iraq. How come somebody who was disloyal to the government and the party gets a select committee?" But anyway, that wasn't my problem as it were. But it did, I think, probably trigger the events that led to the changes in how people were going to be chosen in the future. It was certainly an accidental bit of history.

I'd obviously appeared before select committees quite a few times as a minister and I'd even given evidence to select committees as an advocacy person for development organisations in the 1980s when I was campaigning on third world debt. So I was familiar with the system and was very excited by it and for me, it required a very different

mindset. You had to reinvent. You know, you spent all of this time as a party MP, backbencher, minister. You had to re-invent yourself as a House of Commons person – that's the way I'd put it. In other words, you know, I felt very strongly that I now had a job to do on behalf of the House of Commons, if this doesn't sound too pompous, as an institution, as a very important part of the constitution. So you had to reinvent yourself in that sort of scrutiny and policy role. And I thoroughly enjoyed it to be honest.

FB: How do you go about scrutinising decisions that you yourself would have been involved in just months prior?

JD: That's interesting. You don't really scrutinise an individual decision in that sort of way.

I mean, two things I recall. I do remember once when David Blunkett was coming to give evidence, getting the clerks with the Library… because he was just about to introduce a new criminal justice bill and we discovered that there were at least 280 measures in his first two criminal justice bills that had never been commenced. And so we did give this question to [Conservative MP] Ann Widdecombe to open the session with, which David didn't appreciate at all. So that was probably legislation that I'd taken through Parliament or been involved in, but you weren't there to protect yourself.

The other areas I think that touched in some ways on things I had done: we certainly had one inquiry about community cohesion and the impact of international terrorism, which indirectly, at least, related to work that I had done in the backwash of the northern riots in 2001 and actually, is still an interest of mine – I'm speaking at a conference on it soon, that sort of community cohesion area.

I don't think I ever confronted a decision where I felt we were holding the government accountable for a very specific John Denham decision. I think what you did bring to bear having been a Home Office minister was your understanding of how Home Office issues worked.

FB: We're going to take another jump forward now. You rejoined government in 2007 as the first ever secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills. What was it like returning to government as a cabinet minister and in a new post?

JD: First and only, I think you'll find in the pub quiz [*laughs*].

That was interesting. That was the only time when I sort of waited nervously by the phone because I had no idea whether I would be brought back into government or not.

There's a slight subtext here, which is that Tony had invited me back into government before Gordon became prime minister to be minister of state in Social Security. And I decided not to take it up, for a number of different reasons, partly because it looked like a pretty unpleasant job to do with disability benefits and reforms that were required, partly because I had a young son and wasn't sure I wanted to go back into that and I just wasn't quite sure.

When Gordon became prime minister, I thought there was a possibility that I'd come back into government, but I didn't know and I didn't know at what level. So I was waiting for the call. And I remember John Pienaar, who worked for the BBC at the time [as Radio 5 Live's chief political correspondent], trying it on by ringing me up and saying, "Can I

congratulate you on becoming home secretary?" He clearly had no idea but he thought that if I had been, I might have said, "Oh, thank you, John." But anyway, I said, "No, I don't know". And then of course Jacqui [Smith] became home secretary and by this stage, we got to the point where we had run out of known government departments and so I had reached the point where I concluded that I was not going to be in the cabinet because all the cabinet posts had been filled. And then I got a phone call and it was to do the new department. So that was quite an interesting experience.

And, of course, it was fascinating because it was bits of three different departments: you had FE [further education], you had the universities, and you had science policy, and teams of people who hadn't worked together previously, and stakeholders that hadn't worked together, and all sorts of people saying "We don't like this very much" for all sorts of reasons.

So the first thing about it was the challenge of, over time, forging a story about the department and persuading people 'this is better'. So part of the push back you got, for example, from universities was they said, "Hang on, innovation, universities and skills: you're making universities part of the economic strategy and economic delivery function of government. We are universities." And there was a process of saying to people, "Actually, as universities, you are probably better off being seen as central to the government's economic strategy than saying we're *not* central to the government's economic strategy." So it's those types of discussions that had to take place.

And then as, as always, there were things on the agenda that the government had published, like the Leitch report, which was the report on skills and vocational qualifications. So there was a drive to implement that, though it wasn't a great policy analysis to be honest and the delivery was pretty flawed, but we didn't know that when we started. It had been written in the Treasury, not in the department, so the Treasury wanted to see it happen.

And another one of these interesting insights into the way that the Treasury operates, which is the local colour I think you want: I was rung up – probably the day after I was appointed, so that would have been a Friday, I guess – by Nick Pearce, who was the head of the Number 10 Policy Unit, who said, "John, you'll need to make an announcement on Monday of a big increase in the maintenance grant. It's a good news story and it's all been done. The department will get the money" and all the rest of it. So I announced this thing. If I'm honest, though it's socially desirable, it wasn't necessarily where we would have spent money if we'd had the choice, but it had been decided. It was part of Gordon's package of measures he wanted to announce as prime minister, so we went off and did this.

It was only after the event that you find out (I'm not saying this has got anything to do with inheritance tax and farmers at all [a source of controversy in the October 2024 budget]) that the Treasury had done the calculations without using the economic modelling that existed within my department. So the financial implications of this announcement was several hundred million pounds more than the Treasury had given us money for, and I then ended up having to make cuts in the department to pay for the overspend on this. I just thought, 'I know there's secrecy, but you could actually have asked the people who know before you made this announcement.' But anyway, that happened.

But generally, partly because it was forging a new department, it was quite exciting, I think.

FB: I think that idea of 'forging a story' is really interesting. When you're in a new department, what's your role as secretary of state versus, say, your permanent secretary, who is responsible for the institution itself?

JD: Fortunately – I mean, I hope he'd say the same – I think I got on really well with Ian Watmore, who was the permanent secretary. And my recollection is that we developed the story together, iteratively, you know, and kicking various different options around. And probably at various stages, various documents would have been written, or paragraphs or whatever.

So I don't think, interestingly enough, there was ever a moment where we were trying to take it in different places, as there could have been under different circumstances. And perhaps because the department was new, it was easier to do it. It wasn't like a minister coming into an established department and asking them to change direction. That came up more in the next department.

But in this particular case, it was a very productive relationship, I think. And we brought about some really long lasting changes. The REF [Research Excellence Framework, used to evaluate the impact of British universities], or the Research Assessment Exercise as it was known then, had just been going through its first iteration and we greatly increased the weighting given to impact within the REF. And I'm now working at a university so I don't admit this to most – you tell people and they say "what!" because it's become a bit of a bureaucratic nightmare. But at the time there was a really strong push back from the Academy against the idea that asking them about the impact of their work was a legitimate question. There was a really strong view that 'you can't ask us that, we're academics'. Nobody in a university says that now. They'll have an argument about how you measure impact, how you understand it, what the weighting should be, how much relationship it should have. So it might be one of the things I'm proudest of: in the long term we kicked off a cultural change in the attitude towards higher education research at that time, which has had a long lasting and I think beneficial effect.

FB: The department was merged into the business department in 2009 when you left as secretary of state. Why do you think that model didn't last?

JD: I don't know. I think it was partly to do with the fact that Peter Mandelson was coming back from Brussels, where he'd been a commissioner, to run the business department at Gordon's request. The government had made a big strategic mistake in 1997 in deciding not to have an industrial strategy and so just having the Robert Reich [US secretary of labor, 1993–97] model as it was at the time: 'you succeed in globalisation by flexibility and skills'. And the impact of the financial crisis really revealed the weaknesses in the comparative economic model, compared with the places in Europe that had kept industrial policy.

And I don't know enough about the relationship between Gordon and Peter but basically Peter came back to head up that area of work and one of the problems was that BERR [the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform] itself was quite a thin department because all the innovation and science and universities were in DIUS [the

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills]. But I think it made sense, at least in terms of a big cabinet figure like Peter Mandelson, to make sure that he had a department that was big enough for the role he had to play. That's my interpretation. Nobody's ever said that to me. Nobody ever said before 2009, "your department's failing" or "you're not managing to deliver" or whatever. But once the government shifted from not having an industrial strategy to putting the idea of the strategy centre stage then it made some sort of sense.

FB: You had, in your first iteration in government, worked with five secretaries of state. Did you learn anything from them and did you have a particular role model that you were trying to follow at DIUS?

JD: That's interesting. I don't know the answer to that question. I don't think I modelled myself on anybody else, no. I suppose I took bits and pieces. I mean, there were very different characters.

Fairly self-evidently, I was never a particularly high profile, big hitting figure in politics, whereas people like Harriet Harman and David Blunkett, Alan Milburn or Frank Dobson [health secretary, 1997–99] were. So I think I probably had a style that went with that. I wasn't the person, and never set out to be the person who was always out headlining the department or the department's message. I'm not saying this is right or wrong, but that's an observable fact about my style. My style was relatively low key.

I worked, I like to think, collegiately with colleagues. Paul Drayson [Lord Drayson, minister for science and innovation, 2008–10] was brought back into government by Gordon in a way that created some tensions about his role vis-a-vis the rest of the department because he was also attending cabinet. But frankly, after a couple of months, we just sat down and sorted that out and worked together really, really effectively. And Paul and I set up the Office of Life Sciences, which was the strategic move we took to take control of the pharmaceutical industry away from the Department of Health so that it had its own independent industrial authority. That was my style: you start off with a tension which wasn't of your own making; you just sort it out and end up doing some really good work on an innovative area of policy.

SS: In 2009 you became secretary of state for communities and local government. At the time, you told the select committee that this was a role that you had chosen out of a number of options. What discussions did you have with Gordon Brown and what did you want to achieve by choosing this role?

JD: I'm trying to remember what the other option was. I remember that being the case.

I had been a local councillor in Hampshire and I'd always had what these days people call a 'localist' view of democracy. I believe in the local democratic state, not just in Whitehall. And it just seemed a good opportunity to push that agenda forward and that really excited me. Local government had not been given much of a central role by New Labour – a bit of a walk on role from time to time – and so I thought it was the chance to shape a different type of agenda for local government.

SS: And how did you decide on your priorities? This was 2009 and the election was on the horizon. Did that shape what you wanted to achieve?

JD: Well, fairly obviously, I wanted to push the devolutionary agenda as far as I could. It was in that year that the orders were laid for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which is the combined authority where Andy Burnham is now mayor – so that was something that happened under Labour. We initiated Total Place, which was the pooling of what we now call place-based public service budgets, which I'm still pushing. That was very successful, working with Michael Bichard [director of the Institute for Government, 2008–10], who wasn't in our department but who had been the architect of some of those ideas. We tried to push the idea of local government being at the centre of scrutinising all local public service delivery, not just council delivery. A number of other things of that sort.

But we also had two very highly political areas in that year, which were not coloured by the general election per se. One was that in the 2009 elections, the BNP [British National Party] won two European Parliament seats and we ran a project called Connecting Communities [a programme of investment for 100 deprived areas], which was clearly… We couldn't do party politics on the rates as it were but we were trying to work out how to undercut the various senses of dissatisfaction that were leading the far right to gain votes in those sorts of elections. I mean clearly to some extent the appeal was to people who were outright racists and far right people, but clearly they didn't get elected without the votes of a lot more people who were dissatisfied. And that was a really interesting, very innovative project, which was very successful.

And then the second area was in relation to community cohesion, to the Prevent duty [which requires public authorities to help prevent individuals from being radicalised] and all the rest of it. By this stage, it was becoming clear that Prevent was becoming quite a problematic model at the softer end of counterterrorism: very much resented in Muslim communities, very much resented in other communities who would actually say, 'well, how come our kids don't get sent off to a football tournament? Do we need to blow stuff up as well?'. It had become very unbalanced. The government had got itself into a ridiculous position of not talking to the Muslim Council of Britain and so we ended up getting back into dialogue with the MCB, but we also needed to handle some really sensitive issues with the Board of Deputies of British Jews. And so it was quite an interesting year because there was a lot of highly political stuff going on within the area.

In terms of the election itself, I don't think there was a great deal – or much at all, actually. I suppose the only area where we did stuff which responded to demands, which included some Labour MPs, was that we did quite a lot of work on a coastal towns strategy. But if you look back at the record, we never got called out for stuffing it into Labour seats in the way that happened more recently with the Towns Fund [a programme of investment which some alleged was directed at Conservative-held marginal seats] under the last government. So we were impeccable in the way we did it, but there were quite a lot of colleagues who represented coastal communities, seaside towns, who wanted to have some sort of recognition of the problems they were up against.

SS: You mentioned Total Place – were there any challenges that you faced when delivering the project and how did you overcome them?

JD: Well, I was quite lucky. The pilots were enormously successful, and they worked in rural areas and urban areas and cities, and they were taken up as enthusiastically by Conservative-led local authorities. So the main issue was when we came to write a white

paper – I think it was a white paper – that Liam Byrne [chief secretary to the Treasury, 2009–10] and I published just before the 2010 election alongside the budget papers, and that's where we really had to do quite a lot of work.

We needed to get other government departments to sign up to an extension of the Total Place approach. And Liam was very keen on this so we worked together on that. Most government departments, including even DWP, who are always a notorious non-player… I think the only department that really didn't want to play ball was Education but other ministers at least were prepared not to veto the write round of the document that would have led to a fairly significant expansion of the monies that were covered by a Total Place type approach. It wasn't really what I would have liked because it still, in principle, came down to an identifiable pot as opposed to greater flexibility across the piece. But it was a significant step forward compared with local area agreements [three year agreements involving improvement targets and a delivery plan] and multi-area agreements [intended to foster co-operation between local authorities], as we'd had in the past.

SS: You spoke about working with Liam Byrne when he was chief secretary to the Treasury. What did you do to keep the Treasury on side? You mentioned having problems with them earlier in your ministerial career.

JD: Well, Liam was very good because he actually supported this. And Birmingham council [Byrne's local authority] had also been involved in this – that made a big difference.

The other thing is that as I got on, as I became more experienced, I did spend more time developing relationships with chief secretaries – the best one would have been with Liam. I realised when I was at DIUS that officials would say, "well, you can't do that, minister, because the Treasury won't like it." And that was where I realised that I had to say to people, "look, if you say the Treasury won't like it, just tell the Treasury that I'll have a meeting with the chief secretary to discuss it." And see, these objections from the Treasury were always about Treasury officials. They were never from Treasury ministers, right? It was the same with Downing Street. At DIUS I actually set up a procedure: you do not tell me the Treasury won't like something unless the Treasury confirm that the chief secretary would like to meet me to discuss it. And you don't tell me that Downing Street won't like something unless you tell me that Tony Blair, or Gordon Brown as it would have been then, would like to meet me to discuss it, because you had to cut out all of these people who are trying to influence policy who had no mandate to do so.

SS: You've spoken about working with universities, research and science communities at DIUS, and obviously at DCLG relationships with local government are important. How did you approach working with groups outside of central government?

JD: Well, you had to spend time meeting people. And if I got something wrong at DIUS, it's that I didn't actually spend as much time early on with university people as I realised I should have done. But, you know, I hope I turned that round over time. I think showing an interest – because I was one of relatively few cabinet ministers with a science degree; well, I think the only one with a science degree – I was able to slightly indulge myself at DIUS. So I would get the Nobel Prize winners and others coming in for a sandwich lunch to tell me about their field of research and I'd go to stuff at the Royal Society and so on. I think that there are ways in which you can communicate your interest in a subject which are quite important. I did that a lot on science.

We had a particular problem that year that one of the research councils – the one responsible for big infrastructure like the diamond light source [the Science and Technology Facilities Council] – had had several years of underspend which they'd put into postgraduate funding and then the underspends came to an end and they cut all these posts, which led everybody in astronomy to think that the government was trying to shut down funding for astronomy research and PhDs. And of course, it was completely down to a cock-up by the research council. But that's the sort of thing – we had to put a lot of work into engaging people: engaging with people online; we had to get loads of people into a dinner at Royal Society and say, "look, this is the situation: you're damaging the image of science by what you're doing." So yes, you had to put a lot of time into those sorts of things.

Similarly, with local government. [Engaging with] local government is easy because there's a whole infrastructure of conferences, LGA [Local Government Association] events, major cities groups, all the rest of it. So really you're going to meet local government without much effort because it will be in an annual diary of things that ministers go to.

SS: And you issued two ministerial directions while you were at DCLG. One related to the revamping of Blackpool Tower and the other one was to do with creating unitary authorities. What conversations did you have with officials and the permanent secretary in particular in the lead up to those directions?

JD: I have no memory about Blackpool Tower whatsoever – absolutely none. I mean that may even have been done by one of the junior ministers in my name, quite possibly, like planning. You know, I apparently took all sorts of planning decisions that I don't ever remember seeing because that was various planning people who were doing that.

The unitary stuff is quite an interesting story about public policymaking because it was the only time that I think I was successfully judicially reviewed. Two things happened. One is, I took a decision on the recommendation of Rosie Winterton [minister for local government, 2009–10] that, I think, Norwich should become a unitary council and that Ipswich shouldn't and, I think, that Exeter should be. So I took this decision having had no issues raised with me by officials at all, so far as I can recall. It seemed to be a decision that was open for me to take.

On the Sunday the permanent secretary rang me up and said, "I think I should tell you that I've requested a direction from you to formally instruct the department to do this". He hadn't told me beforehand that he had any reservations. But he did tell me that he had already told a Conservative member of the Public Accounts Committee that he had taken this decision. So I was in this extraordinary fait accompli where the permanent secretary had gone behind my back to take a decision on something which, if he'd ever raised any issues with me, we could have discussed. Anyway, that was amazing.

So what then happened there was that decision got judicially reviewed, although bizarrely, the judicial review concluded that it was wrong because I hadn't gone for the cheapest option. The cheapest option was the abolition of all the district councils in Norfolk. But that wasn't what was followed through by the following government and that was never judicially reviewed so we ended up with not the cheapest option either.

I mean it was a really good example of the bad interaction between court action and public policy making and the role of democracy. And different people take different views about this. I thought the court interventions over about 16 different court cases, covering millions of pounds of public money, didn't lead to a good public policy outcome. And it was in an area where I thought it was a legitimate area of ministerial discretion.

But Blackpool Tower? I haven't got a clue. [*laughs*]

SS: You've mentioned Gordon Brown's interest in widening university participation. He was also very interested in regional policy. What was your relationship like with him as prime minister and what did it mean in practice that he was interested in these areas?

JD: I mean, if I'm perfectly honest, I didn't have a great deal of interaction with Gordon as prime minister. I wasn't one of the people that he would regularly invite in for meetings or whatever. I would usually engage with him around particular events. He was keen on science strategy – investing huge amounts of money in science strategy – and my relationship there would be in preparation for those meetings and during those meetings. We obviously got Gordon to agree and implement the Office of Life Sciences that I talked about earlier. Frankly, marginalising health officials and health ministers in the process. But I wasn't hugely involved on a day-to-day one-to-one basis with him as prime minister.

And I don't remember him being particularly engaged in regional policy either. The regional policy was pretty much in place when I was at DIUS, and it was still the RDA [Regional Development Agency] structure. It was like part of the architecture, really, when I was at DCLG.

SS: Brown had his ministers for the regions, who were based jointly in DCLG and other Whitehall departments. Did that impact on your department much?

JD: No, no. I mean, where they were good and they had convening skills – and Liam Byrne was one who did a lot on his own initiative in the West Midlands – they were a help. I mean, it wasn't a problem; they were a helpful part of the picture. In other places, they were really more communicators of government policy within the region, so it didn't really impinge directly on what we were doing in policy terms.

SS: After the 2010 election, you became shadow business secretary and then parliamentary private secretary [PPS] to Ed Miliband, the leader of the opposition. What was that like? Was it useful to have been a recent minister and someone who also had experience of being in opposition before?

JD: Yeah, I think so.

I decided fairly early on in that session that I wasn't going to stand again in 2015. So having done the shadow business job for a bit and done some reasonable work on policy – we set up a very successful network for Labour supporters in small businesses – I stepped down from the frontbench because frankly, I was taking up a post that I thought needed to be filled by somebody who would do the job in government.

So I moved to be Ed's PPS, largely to ensure I still made a political contribution. And I did that until, again for similar reasons, I wasn't going to be part of the team that was preparing for government. As you know, people now forget, for quite a long time it looked

as though Labour would be the largest party, if not the governing party, after 2015. So I hope I could bring quite a bit of that experience to bear, really.

SS: And what are you most proud of from your time in government?

JD: I always say to people, as far as I can see in government, 90% of the decisions you take would be taken by any sane, rational human being and the next 10% would have been taken by a Labour minister and of that, there's about 2% that might have happened because it was you. So there are lots of things that I was collectively part of that I'm proud of.

If you try and pick out the things that I can say made a difference, I think that in pensions, we dramatically reduce the cost of personal pensions. So in terms of how many people's lives have been benefited, that's probably as much as anything: money in people's pockets that are retiring now that weren't eaten up in fees. So that's a good one there. We did some very small but quite radical stuff about ethical investment policies in pension schemes.

In Health, I think probably it was what I was saying to you before about actually driving achievements and making sure we delivered all of our promises. Also, it got spoiled in the end, but that work around primary care trusts I think was innovative and useful.

And the Home Office, probably the most obvious thing was police community support officers, which was a policy developed by myself and Sir Ian Blair, who was the deputy commissioner of the Met [and later commissioner, 2005–08]. So in terms of something that created something that's visible and well known, that would be a good example.

At DIUS, amongst other things, something called the New University Challenge, where we went out and invited for bids to establish universities in places that didn't have them, which were largely in the end, as you would expect, offshoots of existing universities. But there were large parts of England that didn't have university provisions – Falmouth or Corby or Hastings had very little. So we extended university opportunities to lots of places.

And DCLG: probably a mixture of the work around community cohesion. If you put it all together: community cohesion; trying to undercut the dissatisfaction that led to the BNP. So there's quite a few things going through where I couldn't say they never would have happened, but they happened *when* they did because I was there. And those are the things that give you the satisfaction.

SS: What would your advice be to a new minister on how to be most effective in the role?

JD: I think you obviously have to get yourself into the brief quickly. You absolutely need to control your diary and your priorities because the machine will try and run you if you don't or if you let it. Some people say you should only try and do one thing. I don't think that's right, but you should be very clear what the things are that you're going to focus on and try to achieve. And I do think that, honestly, an awareness of the power of the Treasury within the machine is hugely important and you need to have strategies of creating as much elbow room for yourself as you can.

SS: And you mentioned the 2% of decisions where individual ministers can make an impact. Do you have any advice on how ministers can identify those areas where they can make that impact?

JD: No, that's quite difficult, because to some extent, I'm giving you a retrospective justification of what I did. So I'm not sure you can. But I think that if you prioritise the things you think are really important then you will end up doing some of that.

SS: Finally, is there anything that we haven't asked but you think is particularly important to mention about being a minister?

JD: Well, I think that the one thing we haven't touched on at all is the relationship between being a minister and being a member of parliament. And I do think that an important role of ministers is to be reasonably accessible and available to members of parliament. And I'm not an MP now but given the progressive reduction in sitting hours and the number of evenings spent in the House of Commons, I don't know how ministers do that today, if they do. Because basically, much of making yourself available was being around in the tea room or the dining room or whatever, where people could chat to you or bend your ear. So it wasn't just in the voting lobbies. Now, I'm sure it's a different place with a different culture but I did think that was a very important part of the job.

SS: What do you think the value was of those parliamentary relationships when you were a minister?

JD: Well, as in almost any relationship, if somebody's had the chance to have a chat with you about something, even if they're not bending your ear, you have a different relationship with them than if you don't know them.

FB: Was there an example where you changed your approach to a policy after a conversation with an MP?

JD: It wasn't my ministerial responsibility but one of the things we did when I was at Health, led by another minister, was we abolished community health councils [intended to give a voice for patients in the NHS], which were very popular and well-connected local bodies, in favour of investing in a different type of support for patients who had encountered problems within the system. It was strategically the right thing to do but it was deeply unpopular with Labour MPs and very often, we were asking them to buy a pig in a poke. They had no idea what the new system was going to be like. I'd be very surprised if they didn't know the people running their community health councils, and they would often be very attractive local leaders.

I think that's the sort of issue where the policy didn't change, but possibly the presentation of it did – the time that was taken to explain what it was about, to actually take people through the arguments about why, though community health councils did good work, they weren't the answer to the problem that we needed to solve if we really wanted to change the patient experience of the NHS and so on. So I think that's more an example of where engagement with MPs was absolutely essential. You couldn't possibly afford to be in a position where you just didn't engage with your colleagues.

There was one other issue, very much driven by a well-informed backbencher, which I touched on earlier, which was a very simple change in the regulations so that pension schemes had to say if they had any ethical policies which governed their investments – not a requirement to have policies, just to say if they did. And this was very much worked through with an MP called Anthony Coleman, who is an expert in social investment. We identified this as an example of a simple change towards transparency which would drive a big change in behaviour, as indeed it did. And this was something that the department absolutely didn't want to do – apart from one heroic civil servant, who was very good! And that conversation drove a significant policy change.

And later on we did some work around an equivalent of an American system of innovation funding. Again, that was an individual backbench MP who introduced me to a particular expert from her constituency. That meant that I could get different advice to that which I was getting from my civil servants. And so, you know, being open to listen to somebody and trust their judgement was quite important.

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