

What can new ministers in Scotland and Wales learn from their predecessors?

Ministers reflect on devolution



About the series

Over 10 years, the Institute for Government has interviewed nearly 200 ministers from the UK and devolved governments as part of the Ministers Reflect project.

Being a minister is a job like no other and the interviews provide unique perspectives about what it is like to govern and what those who have done the job wish they knew before entering office. This series builds on the insights and experiences recorded in the archive to provide broader reflections on the key themes that impact government.

This paper draws on these interviews as well as the Institute's body of existing research to examine the challenges facing new ministers in Scotland and Wales as they settle into government following the elections in May 2026. The reflections of former office holders can offer lessons for new devolved government ministers about the opportunities and challenges of their operating context and how they can navigate these most effectively in the role.

 [@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](https://twitter.com/instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

 www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 4 |
| Collaborating with other parties | 7 |
| Getting the most out of the civil service | 10 |
| Developing policy that aligns with the needs of devolved nations | 14 |
| Working with Whitehall | 20 |
| Conclusion | 25 |
| Appendix: work cited | 26 |
| References | 30 |
| About the authors | 32 |

Introduction

The May 2026 elections to the Scottish parliament and Welsh Senedd were the seventh since devolution was established in 1999. Both were consequential. In Wales, Labour lost power for the first time, with Rhun ap Iorwerth's Plaid Cymru becoming the largest party and leading a minority government. In Scotland, John Swinney's Scottish National Party retained its place as leader, though still without an outright majority. This means that for the first time both nations are led by nationalist parties. Over a quarter of a century on, devolution is now entering its next chapter.

Those results, and the government formation arrangements that followed, have seen a host of new ministers enter office in Edinburgh and Cardiff. In Wales there is an entirely new cohort of ministers and in Scotland there is a mix of new faces and returning figures. Those new ministers will face a steep learning curve as they get to grips with how government works,¹ and as they get to know their new departments and officials.

The scale of change is largest in Wales, where the civil service will for the first time be working with a government that is not led by Labour, meaning new ministers and their officials will need to work together to navigate this transition.² New ministers will also have to navigate intergovernmental relations – between their own governments and with parts of the UK government in Westminster.

These relations have not always been smooth, and indeed became particularly strained in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and during the pandemic. And while the governing party has not changed in Scotland, the SNP has renewed its ambitions for a second independence referendum. This raises the potential for tensions between it and Westminster. For its part, Plaid has set out its plans to undertake 'preparatory work' towards an independent Wales.

Back in July 2024, the newly elected Labour government in Westminster promised a reset of the relationship with the devolved governments. Keir Starmer met with each of the heads of the devolved governments in his first week as prime minister and later established the Council of Nations and Regions – a new intergovernmental body including the four devolved governments and the metro mayors in England – which met for the first time in October 2024. It remains to be seen what effect any renewed focus on independence might have on these relations.

It is in these contexts that ministers in Cardiff and Edinburgh will take up office. One of the ways that new ministers can make sure they are prepared for their new roles is to draw on the advice and experiences of those who have come before them. Over the past 10 years, the Institute for Government has conducted interviews with former ministers in Scotland and Wales for the [Ministers Reflect](#) archive. These ministers span the entire period from devolution up until Rishi Sunak's premiership.

The archive also includes interviews with former ministers in Northern Ireland, the only nation not to hold elections in May 2026, where the power sharing arrangements mean there are some differences in the internal workings of government, but many of the lessons are relevant for new ministers in Scotland and Wales today. We have also interviewed former UK ministers from the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland offices whose insights offer important guidance for ministers navigating the relationship between devolved and UK governments.

Building on a previous IfG report that looked at the experiences of ministers in the Scottish and Welsh governments over the first two decades of devolution,³ this paper brings in more recently conducted Ministers Reflect interviews to distil insights from former ministers into four themes:

- **Collaborating with other parties:** Former ministers agreed that cross-party collaboration has been essential for effective government in Scotland and Wales in the past. They offer lessons for new ministers on how to make a success of various government formations, including minority governance and coalition.
- **Getting the most out of the civil service:** Former ministers offered advice on how to work with the civil service to get things done in government and build effective relationships with officials as a new minister.
- **Developing policy that aligns with the needs of devolved nations:** Former ministers offer insight for new ministers in Scotland and Wales about managing the trade-off between developing policies that suit local circumstances, while recognising the need to co-ordinate with the UK government.
- **Working with Whitehall:** The reflections of former office holders can provide useful context for new ministers in Scotland and Wales about the state of intergovernmental relations as they enter office, and lessons on how to work constructively with their UK government counterparts.



Collaborating with other parties

Following the May 2026 elections, Plaid Cymru and the SNP are heading new governments in Scotland and Wales, though neither with an outright majority. Minority government is not new for devolved nations; the use of proportional electoral systems facilitates and supports it in many ways.⁴ These systems are more likely to result in an outcome whereby one party fails to secure a majority to govern alone – with minority governments, multi-party coalitions and less formal co-operation agreements a regular feature of the past 25 years.* Indeed, only once in the history of devolution – the SNP in 2011 – has a single party won an outright majority.

But minority government does bring challenges, making it harder to win votes and pass budgets. From the outset, minority governments will need to work well with other parties, build trust and good relationships. The reflections of former ministers offer lessons for new ministers today about how to do this well.

The new governments will have to work collaboratively with other parties

Those we interviewed agreed that to make a success of minority government and to have the best chance of delivering manifesto commitments, the governing party needs to work collaboratively with other parties in parliament. This requires ministers to negotiate, make tactical concessions and be realistic about what they can achieve. [Fergus Ewing](#), former SNP Scottish minister for rural economy and tourism, described how the SNP managed to govern effectively in minority between 2007 and 2011 by working with other parties.

“... with the majority of one – with 47 seats and Labour at 46, a small minority of the total of 129 – we could still get the job done. We lost a few votes, but mostly we didn’t because we negotiated.”**

His colleague from that government, former SNP health minister [Alex Neil](#), described the period as “effectively a moving coalition”, which drew on the support of the Green Party on some issues and on the Conservatives at other times, particularly on budget proposals. Reflecting on how this worked he said:

“You’re literally learning from day to day, because you don’t know when you’re going to get ambushed by the other parties joining together against you. So it’s important to communicate with them and try and take them with you.”

* The Scottish parliament is elected under a version of the ‘additional member system’ (AMS), The Northern Ireland assembly uses the ‘single transferable vote’ (STV), and from 2026 the Senedd Cymru uses a closed list proportional system. For more information see www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/electoral-systems-across-uk

** The SNP had a one-seat advantage over Labour from 2007, but did not have a parliamentary majority.

Former SNP minister for health and sport [Shona Robison](#) described in more detail how that same SNP minority government “[tried] to make common cause on the issues of the day” with other parties:

“Clearly there would be some parties that would have a natural alignment [with us]. We went through all of our programme for government, their manifestos, to look at where there were areas of common cause and interest.”

In Wales, following the 2011 Senedd election that saw Welsh Labour win exactly half of the (then) 60 seats, former Labour first minister [Carwyn Jones](#) described the sense of “pressure” on him to govern alone rather than in coalition. He reflected that the only way to govern without a majority “is to work with other parties” and described negotiating and compromising with other parties to gain support behind the government’s budgets.

These reflections demonstrate that while minority government can be a viable governing option, it is a real day-to-day challenge to navigate. As former Welsh Labour minister [Jane Hutt](#) put it, minority government means “firefighting all the time in terms of votes and developing alliances with other parties where you need it, and that could be on a day-to-day basis”. But former Labour first minister [Mark Drakeford](#) encouraged ministers to regard the requirement for cross-party collaboration as a “strength” of the system rather than an obstacle to ministers’ ambitions.

The Senedd and Scottish parliament have far fewer members than the 650 MPs that sit in Westminster. Previous IfG research has found that, in Wales in particular, the relatively smaller size of the Senedd (until 2026 there were only 60 members) helped to facilitate stronger personal relationships between members.⁵ These good working relationships have been cited as a factor in the success of coalition governments, but are important for minority governing too. The increased number of MSs, to 96, at the 2026 election could change the culture in the Senedd and members might find they need to think differently and more strategically about how to build effective relationships with colleagues.

Smart and agile minority governments can still get things done

Securing enough votes to pass legislation through parliament will be a challenge for the new governments without a majority but as the Institute has recently argued, ministers also have wide executive powers they can use to achieve a great deal without needing to change the law.⁶ Ministers can direct the civil service, allocate resources, and take action to improve public services. As former Plaid deputy first minister [Ieuan Wyn Jones](#) told us: “Most decisions aren’t made as a result of votes in the plenary: 80% of government is administrative anyway, so you can do a lot [without a majority].”

However, governments do need a majority (of those who vote – not necessarily of all members) to pass budgets and to survive confidence votes. Former SNP minister [Fergus Ewing](#) reflected that these are the greatest survival tests for a minority government:

“The interesting thing was that we lost votes but it didn’t really matter. There are only two votes that matter – a budget vote and a confidence vote – and everything else is almost irrelevant. The public didn’t know we lost votes, and they didn’t really care”

It can be particularly difficult for minority governments to pass legislation when opposition parties are able to unite against it. For instance, [Ieuan Wyn Jones](#) reflected on the combined power of the opposition parties (Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives) in the 2003 Senedd during Welsh Labour’s period of minority government:

“We were three different parties, but we started to think, well actually, we’ve got a bit more power here. They can’t get the budget through without talking to us. We decided initially that we would challenge them and say we’d vote down their budget unless they talked to us. Labour hadn’t seen anything like that before, so we decided, yes, we can have some of our priorities included in the budget. And in 2005 we voted the budget down. That meant that they had to talk.”

This means that minority governments need to think strategically and realistically about what it wants to prioritise and what it is open to compromise on. Recalling the 2007–11 SNP minority government’s experience, former minister [Alex Neil](#) advises:

“If you’re a minority government, then there’s a lot of things you would like to do but you know you will never be able to get through parliament. There was no point in trying, because that would just burn up your political capital, both inside and outside of parliament. We had to therefore carefully select which legislation we were going to prioritise during that four-year period.”

But as the Institute has recently noted, both Rhun ap Iorwerth and John Swinney are forming their new governments with the important advantage to them that the opposition parties are so fragmented that there is little chance they will be able to work together in a co-ordinated way.⁷

Getting the most out of the civil service

Newly appointed ministers in Scotland and Wales will be keen to show from day one that they are delivering for the public. In Wales, where Plaid Cymru has entered government for the first time, there will be added pressure to show it can govern effectively. To achieve their goals, ministers will of course rely on civil servants. Private offices – the small team of civil servants closest to a minister – in particular play a key role helping new ministers get set up and co-ordinating with the wider department.

The former ministers we interviewed offered advice on how new office holders can make the most of civil service support and ensure that the machinery of government is working effectively to deliver their priorities.

The civil service can support new ministers to get up to speed quickly

“It was a bit bewildering. I came into office with no prior experience of government. I had many years of experience in opposition, so I had viewed government from the outside, but it doesn’t give you a very accurate sense of what it’s really like.” – [Nicola Sturgeon](#), *SNP first minister of Scotland (2014–23)*

The new ministers in Scotland and Wales may never have managed large organisations before, let alone worked anywhere that works quite like a government does; they will be thrown in the deep end as they start their new roles. Newly elected Plaid ministers will have limited knowledge of what it takes to deliver and implement policies from within government – and only a handful of people from within their own party have past government experience. Support from officials will be all the more crucial for inexperienced ministers entering office for the first time.

“You were introduced to a whole mammoth treadmill of people who came through, and the civil service put a portfolio of information in front of you... So it was a blur of somebody grabbing hold of you and saying: “All right, this is what you do next” – [Lord German](#), *Liberal Democrat deputy first minister of Wales (2000–03)*

Entering government can be a bewildering and overwhelming experience for new ministers. [Ken Skates](#) recalled “learning at a million miles an hour” when he was appointed as the Welsh Labour deputy minister for skills and technology. But he felt that the experience was made easier by the “incredibly supportive and helpful” team of officials around him.

Private offices are crucial for helping new ministers navigate the vast amount of information and new people in government. Former ministers told the Institute that the support they received from their private office was invaluable in their early days in the role.

“What was helpful, over the course of that weekend, was that one of the civil servants (who was to become my first private secretary) reached out and got in touch. It was really good in terms of giving me the pointers of where I needed to go on the Monday morning.” – [Hannah Blythyn](#), *Labour deputy minister for social partnership in Wales (2021–24)*

Former SNP minister for health and sport [Shona Robison](#) reflected on her party’s experience entering government for the first time in 2007 when the SNP was completely new to government. Robison recalled her introductory meeting with her private secretary, which became a key relationship over the course of her ministerial career:

“My private secretary brought over a coffee knowing exactly what I took in it and we sat down and had a chat. I was very lucky in that the first private secretary I got was extremely helpful. We got on very well and it helped smooth my first few days and weeks into the job.”

In Wales, ministers and the civil service will need to adapt to new ways of working together

The 2026 election has returned a government not led by Labour for the first time in Cardiff. While the new ministers will have to get to grips with a new role, the civil service in Wales will also need to adapt to new ways of working with ministers from a different party. While this particular change is new, the civil service has shown that it can adapt successfully in the past as, for instance, the devolved settlements have evolved and the governments in Scotland and Wales gained more powers.

In Wales, a referendum vote in 2011 brought primary law making powers to the Senedd. For the civil service this meant that it had to build its capability and develop expertise in drafting bilingual primary legislation.

“We went from ‘99 to 2011 from being an organisation that had no powers and no expertise in drafting primary legislation to an organisation that’s done just that, bilingually, and we know that our laws have been tested and they’ve been sound. So that’s been a heck of an achievement in that time.” – [Carwyn Jones](#), *Labour first minister of Wales (2009–18)*

New Plaid ministers in Wales can look to the experience of former SNP ministers in Scotland for examples of officials adapting to a change in the party of government. [Nicola Sturgeon](#) recalled changing her “prejudice about the civil service” on her first day as a minister when the SNP entered government for the first time in 2007:

“I suppose for a party like mine that wants to effectively – to use pejorative language – break up the British state they serve, there was a sense that they would be particularly obstructive towards us. But that was not borne out at all.”

Similarly, [Shona Robison](#) said that it took some time initially for Scottish civil servants to adjust to a set of entirely new SNP ministers in 2007 but that after the first few months they “began to be quite tuned-in to the thinking, the philosophy, the politics and also the ministers themselves in terms of how they liked to work”.

“There was a mixture of excitement but also kind of caution among the civil service... with a little bit of anticipation along the lines of ‘what are this lot going to be like?’... But also I think for some of the senior civil servants there was a bit of excitement of ‘well, actually this might be a bit of opportunity to do things differently’.”

[Ieuan Wyn Jones](#) became one of the first three Plaid ministers in the Welsh government through the ‘One Wales’ coalition agreement with Labour in 2007. Similar to the experiences of new SNP ministers, Jones recalled that the civil service took time to adapt because they “had been used to having one party running things”.

“The PR staff were finding it very difficult to recognise that they were working with Plaid ministers and they needed to be able to have space to say things themselves, because they’d always been used to Labour ministers. Over time it got better but in the early days, it was certainly a challenge.”

Civil servants in Wales will need to adapt quickly to work with Plaid’s entirely new team of ministers, after having served Labour ministers most likely for their entire careers in Cardiff. The experience of Plaid ministers in the One Wales coalition (and SNP ministers in 2007) should offer reassurance to new Plaid ministers hoping to build effective working relationships with the civil service in Wales.

As political leaders in the department, ministers have the power to get the best out of the civil service

Ministers have a responsibility to set the conditions for good working relationships with the civil service, particularly in a time of transition. Former ministers from devolved governments have plenty of advice to share with new ministers on how to build these relationships and get the best out of the civil service.

“The worst thing for a civil servant is having a minister who has no idea what they want to achieve, because they tend to either make bad decisions or no decisions. Civil servants like clear guidance from the minister.” – [Alex Neil](#), former SNP minister for social justice, communities and pensioners’ rights (2014–16)

Former ministers emphasised the importance of setting out clear priorities and pursuing them consistently.

“...you have to determine quite early on what you want to achieve. Remember that your time as a minister is likely to be quite short in relation to your public life as a politician, and therefore decide what your priorities are going to be and stick to them” – [Ieuan Wyn Jones](#), Plaid Cymru deputy first minister of Wales (2007–11)

IfG research looking at ministers in the UK government has similarly highlighted the importance for ministers to set a few key priorities early on and ensure officials know what they are so they can pursue them, and advocate for them even when the minister is not there.⁸ Ministers should also ask officials for regular updates on how work is progressing – being consistent is crucial.

Former ministers told us that building good relationships with civil servants early on helps to create a trusting and productive working environment in the department. Officials are likely to be much more effective in their role if they are treated with respect and decency by their minister.

“I always had great store in treating officials courteously and in a personal way. I think you get far more out of them than [by being] demanding... They are people!” – Lord Wallace, Liberal Democrat deputy first minister of Scotland (1999–2005) and advocate general for Scotland (2010–15)

Ultimately, the civil service is there to help government deliver on its policies and to support ministers to do their jobs. And ministers can ensure that they make the most of that support by giving officials a clear direction, engaging with their advice and treating them with respect.

Developing policy that aligns with the needs of devolved nations

“The purpose of devolution was to bring about a new settlement between the constituent parts of the UK so that decision making was brought closer to the people who felt a strong sense of identity.” – **Tony Blair**, *prime minister of the United Kingdom (1997–2007)*

Once settled in their roles, new ministers in Scotland and Wales will turn to the task of governing, including developing and implementing new policy. The introduction of devolution in 1999 brought decision making powers closer to the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so that policies could better represent the distinct values and politics of each nation. Since then, the devolved governments have been able to take their own approach in areas such as health and social care, education, welfare, housing and the environment, which has resulted in examples of policy divergence across the UK.

Former ministers from the devolved governments viewed this as a positive opportunity to better align policy with the specific needs of their citizens. But they also said that when this leads to policy divergence from Westminster, it can result in frustrating dealings with UK ministers. New ministers in Scotland and Wales can learn from the experiences of their predecessors about striking a balance between tailoring policies for their own nations and managing political tension at the UK level.

Devolved ministers can take decisions that best meet the needs of their populations

Under the current devolution settlement some policy areas remain reserved to the UK government – such as defence and foreign affairs – but the devolved nations have responsibility for spending on some large policy areas. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have full responsibility for spending on education, health and social care, and housing, communities and local government; Scotland and Northern Ireland are also responsible for their own justice systems and have more powers over transport than Wales.* Within the policy areas that are devolved, ministers are able to develop and implement their own policies without having to align with the UK government.

Since devolution, the governments have each made different choices about how much money to spend on, and how to manage, public services and which services to prioritise. Some of these different policy choices are enabled by differences in the per-capita funding received via the Barnett Formula, but an IfG report also found that the governments have taken different approaches to policy making.⁹ In Scotland and Wales, the governments have generally emphasised universal access to services

* The block grants calculated by the Barnett Formula are a useful comparison of the different levels of funding available in different policy areas across the devolved nations, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/explainer/barnett-formula

– such as abolishing prescription charges – and collaboration with the public sector, while the UK government has typically pursued more targeted intervention and top-down techniques for securing improvement in public services in England.

"I had meetings with Tony Blair's advisers around health where they asked: 'Why are you not doing this and why are you not doing that?' and I'd say: 'Because it doesn't suit us in Scotland, we operate differently.'" – Andy Kerr, Labour minister for health in Scotland (2004–07)

Even when the same political party has been in power at the devolved and UK level, and where it might be reasonable to expect shared ideologies, policy divergence has emerged. In the early years of devolution in Wales, the Welsh Labour party under Rhodri Morgan's leadership tried to distinguish itself from the UK Labour Party using the phrase 'Clear Red Water'. Reflecting on that period, former Welsh Labour minister [Jane Hutt](#) recalled how the Welsh government rejected some of UK Labour's public service reforms:

"...we said no to foundation hospitals and trusts, we said no to academies, that moved into no to free schools and everything else. We started talking about Welsh Labour, 'Made in Wales' solutions."

The school systems in the four nations of the UK have been different since well before devolution in 1999, but there has been further divergence since. In Wales, GCSEs have a different mix of coursework and exams and a different grading system. Wales has also chosen not to bring in free schools or academies. Reflecting on some of these education policy choices, [Carwyn Jones](#) told the Institute that "that's been done not because we want to be different from England, but because we think it's right for Wales".

In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence introduced in the 2010s put greater emphasis on applying knowledge in education while the Conservative–Liberal Democrat UK coalition reformed the English school curriculum to emphasise subject-specific knowledge. [Michael Russell](#), former SNP minister for education, recalled how in 2012, the Scottish government decided to maintain free higher education despite the UK government's decision to raise fees in England. Russell described his conversation with Alex Salmond before announcing that Scotland would not introduce tuition fees:

"I said: 'Yes, I am absolutely sure about this, we have to do it. If we don't do it, the pressure will mount on us to say that we are going to introduce tuition fees and for all sorts of reasons, I believe that is the wrong thing for Scottish education.'"

Devolved ministers can not only innovate policy but also how it is developed

Devolution has opened up new avenues for policy innovation as the governments have been able to experiment and learn from different spending and policy choices that they have made. For example, Wales was the first part of the UK to introduce a levy on single-use plastic bags. After successfully reducing plastic bag consumption in Wales, charges were later introduced in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.¹⁰

The Scottish government was the first in the UK to introduce a smoking ban. In his interview [Andy Kerr](#), former Labour minister for health in Scotland, reflected on the challenge of navigating the devolution settlement as the policy area cut across health – which is devolved – and employment policy, which is not.

“We didn’t change the competence of the parliament, we just rephrased what we were calling the process. We couldn’t call it a health and safety at work issue, because ‘health and safety at work is reserved, young man!’, so we just changed the parameters of the debate around it.”

Ministers have also been able to experiment with different ways of working in government and developing policy. [Mark Drakeford](#) spoke to the Institute about introducing a “discussion cabinet [that] looked at issues which were not on anybody’s desk today, but you could see would be in 12 months’ or even 24 months’ time”. [Lee Waters](#), former Labour deputy minister for climate change in Wales, described how he took on board some of the lessons from crisis working during the pandemic, particularly ways to get everyone round a table working together, and applied that to his later work on climate change. And [Jeane Freeman](#), former SNP minister for health and sport in Scotland, recalled the work she did to set up ‘experience panels’, bringing together social security service users to consult on policy development:

“There was a concern that what people would all want was considerably more financial payments and that they were going to tell us that that’s what they wanted and we couldn’t afford to do it. But actually that’s not what happened... actually, what they wanted was a system that heard their situation, was personal to them, treated them with respect and was fair.” – [Jeane Freeman](#), *SNP minister for health and sport in Scotland (2018–21)*

The governments and parliaments in Wales and Scotland have made more use of deliberative public engagement processes to inform their policies than their UK counterparts. Alongside large-scale projects such as the Citizens’ Assembly for Scotland, the Scottish government has run smaller processes to feed into decisions on issues such as climate change and drug harms.¹¹ And in Wales, the government recently commissioned an evidence review to outline ways to embed citizen involvement in policy making.¹²

Devolved ministers will need to manage tension with the UK government when policy diverges

The devolved governments have criticised the UK government for preventing divergence in certain policy areas that fall under the scope of the UK Internal Market Act 2020 (UKIM). The framework provided by the EU single market fell away after Brexit, and so the UKIM Act was introduced to govern the trading relationship between the four constituent parts of the UK. Under the act, the devolved governments are able to regulate goods and service providers in their nation, but these regulations are not *necessarily* enforceable on goods or service providers from other parts of the UK. Therefore, when exercised, the act can limit policy divergence across the UK.¹³

“The big challenges in this area were really around the [United Kingdom] Internal Market Act [2020] and devolution, because – as we saw with the deposit return scheme – even where the Scottish parliament and Scottish government have fully devolved powers in areas, where we have passed legislation and have invested money, the UK government can disregard devolution and interfere with it.”
– [Lorna Slater](#), *Scottish Greens minister for green skills, circular economy and biodiversity (2021–24)*

Following Brexit, the UK government used the UKIM Act to establish a new UK Shared Prosperity Fund to replace previous EU ‘structural funds’.¹⁴ This funding was allocated directly to local authorities by the UK government, rather than channelled through the devolved governments. Former Conservative secretaries of state for Wales and Scotland told the Institute that from their perspective, the Shared Prosperity Fund was an opportunity to showcase the UK government’s role in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

“I wanted to practise what I called ‘real devolution’. 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.” – [Alister Jack](#), *Conservative secretary of state for Scotland (2019–24)*

Reflecting on the tensions that Brexit created within the Union, [Nicola Sturgeon](#) talked about how the actions of the UK government felt from her perspective:

“I think the independence referendum, my party’s continued success over many years and fears of another independence referendum and what that might mean, have led to a sense of Westminster trying to put devolution back in its box. Brexit has definitely provided some of the tools to do that in the name of something else.”

This UK Labour government has indicated a desire to use the UKIM Act more flexibly and has acknowledged that management of the internal market is best achieved through discussions and collaboration between all four nations.¹⁵ For example, the deposit return scheme for Wales has been allowed and will be the only deposit return scheme in all four nations to include glass bottles.¹⁶ But the UKIM Act and the UK government’s powers to limit policy divergence through it remains in place and new ministers in Scotland and Wales will need to develop policy with an eye to this potential obstacle.

The pandemic showed how poorly co-ordinated divergence can exacerbate tensions between governments

During the pandemic, devolved legislation covering emergency powers to deal with the spread of infection meant that each of the governments were able to make different choices about which restrictions to introduce and when. The Coronavirus Act 2020 also conferred new powers on devolved ministers in areas such as health, education and justice.¹⁷ Additionally, ministers were able to make their own decisions over devolved public services such as education and health systems.

In the UK government, ministers reflected that they sometimes felt frustrated by the different choices made at devolved level, believing them to be driven by politics as much as by the science:

"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." – Alister Jack

[Simon Hart](#), former Conservative secretary of state for Wales, also criticised devolved governments of making ideologically driven choices around the pandemic handling. For example, he recalled how he felt that Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford put the UK government in "an impossible position" by announcing the closure of schools in Scotland and Wales despite the UK government's position that schools should remain open. Describing intergovernmental meetings during the pandemic, Hart told the Institute:

"It was tortuous. It was rife with political opportunism and confusing messages and contradictory policies."

On the other hand, devolved ministers told the Institute about their frustration with what they saw as reluctance on the UK government's part to accept and allow policy divergence during the pandemic. Ministers recounted moments when they felt that the UK government deliberately held back information on pandemic announcements and scientific evidence from devolved leaders to minimise opportunity for policy divergence.

"I felt that they were trying to restrict the information being given to us as a government to make decisions, because they wanted control over that decision making and they wanted us to follow their decision making process instead."
– [Michael Matheson](#), *Scottish SNP minister for NHS recovery, health and social care (2023–24)*

These issues that played out between UK and devolved ministers added to confusion for the wider public. At the time, the Institute noted that it looked as though "the four governments have been developing policy largely independently [generating] confusion for citizens who must live their lives by increasingly complex rules and businesses that are struggling amid the economic disruption that the Covid-19 pandemic is causing".¹⁸

While the opportunity for divergence brings with it increased risk of disagreement or misalignment between governments, that isn't necessarily a problem in and of itself. As [Eluned Morgan](#), former Labour first minister of Wales (2024–26) said at an IfG event:

"Devolution allows difference. It shouldn't come as a surprise. In fact, it's important to have difference because sometimes our values are different."

If ministers see this as a strength of devolution, that the four nations can present different values and principles, then there are ways of ensuring that the current devolution framework can accommodate this divergence. The IfG has argued that the four governments can co-ordinate and work together without having to insist on policy uniformity across the UK.¹⁹ By sharing information, considering the implications of their decisions for one another and, where they consider necessary, agreeing common elements of their approach, policy divergence can be accommodated within the system.

Working with Whitehall

The new Labour government entered office in 2024 promising a “reset” of UK-devolved relations, but political context has changed since then and the government will now be working with nationalist first ministers in each devolved nation. Plaid Cymru’s Rhun ap Iorwerth has committed to being more outspoken than his predecessor on disagreements with the UK government over further devolution to Wales, while John Swinney plans to bring forward a vote on a second independence referendum in Scotland. The IfG has argued that this could place strain on the Union, bringing both first ministers into conflict with the UK government, which has shown little enthusiasm for further devolution to date – rejecting the Welsh government’s calls for the devolution of policing and the Scottish government’s case for migration powers, for instance.

Against this backdrop, new ministers stepping into government in Scotland and Wales will need to start building relationships with their UK government counterparts. Reflections from former ministers can offer lessons for ministers today on how to navigate this well.

Formal intergovernmental forums are important, but leaders will also need political goodwill to maintain good relations

Formal intergovernmental structures have been established to facilitate the collaboration required to manage the interdependence of powers between the different layers of government. There was a shared sense among former ministers that intergovernmental forums have an important symbolic value and can provide a space for constructive discussion between governments.

“Sometimes you would be knocking on the door of other departments in London and nothing would happen, and then you could raise it at the Joint Ministerial Committee,* and normally those doors would then open.” – Ieuan Wyn Jones

However, other ministers argued that these forums have limited tangible value and exist at best as an opportunity to air grievances – or at worst, function as talking shops – while rarely addressing or solving the queries and complaints that devolved ministers bring to the table.

“The JMC Plenary is basically a place where we go to complain. It could be so much more, but that’s what it is... Nothing was done in those meetings apart from the raising of grievances that were then politely acknowledged.” – Carwyn Jones

They also cautioned that these forums need to be supplemented with respectful and meaningful personal relationships between political leaders. The Joint Ministerial Committee no longer exists and was replaced in 2022 by a new framework. Then in 2024 the incoming Labour government established the Council of Nations and Regions as part of a reset of intergovernmental relationships. The IfG has argued that while the

* The name of the previous intergovernmental forum, which was superseded by the new intergovernmental framework in 2022.

new intergovernmental framework introduced in 2022 was welcome and overdue, all four governments need to engage meaningfully with it, and come to the table ready to share and manage differences openly for it to be effective.²⁰

This can be challenging – but not impossible to manage – when the governments involved are not from the same political parties. [Mark Drakeford](#) observed that up until 2019 the Welsh Labour government was able to maintain a good working relationship with Conservative UK governments “who had a basic respect for devolution”. But Drakeford argued that Boris Johnson’s attitude towards devolution as prime minister brought that pattern to an end, showing that ultimately, the quality of intergovernmental relationships depends more on the variability of personalities and attitudes of individual government leaders.

The 2026 election results mean that different parties are in power in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff. The greatest change has happened in Wales, where for the past two years Welsh Labour and UK Labour have made the case for a ‘partnership in power’ by having the same party running both governments. But new ministers today face the reality that different parties are in power in all three governments and this will have implications for the nature of intergovernmental relations. New ministers can learn from the lessons of their predecessors, which show that it is possible to build constructive relationships between ministerial counterparts from different parties.

Scottish and Welsh ministers have sometimes found the UK government’s approach to, and understanding of, devolution frustrating

Devolved government ministers expressed their frustration with successive UK governments for what they see as a failure to adjust UK government ways of working to ensure devolved governments are considered, consulted and engaged with.

“UK government, ministers and the UK Westminster-based civil service... do not understand devolution... they really don’t understand that they’re dealing with another government that’s not subservient to them.” – [Jeane Freeman](#)

Devolved ministers felt that an underlying power imbalance exists where the devolved governments are not treated as equal partners by the UK government. [Lee Waters](#), former Labour minister in Wales, described the “cultural arrogance” he experienced in Westminster, where devolved governments were “being dealt with as a stakeholder not as fellow governments”.

Fiscal policy decisions have been a particular source of frustration and disagreement. The Barnett Formula allocates ‘block grants’ for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in line with decisions taken at Westminster about spending on public services in England. Devolved ministers have reflected on their frustration with how little input they have into the Treasury, especially when it takes decisions that they disagreed with.

"The Treasury has its own way of dealing with you, and they would just say: 'That's your Barnett consequential, and if you ask for detail about that or challenge it, we're the Treasury and we don't need to give you a reason.'" – [Mark Durkan](#), *SDLP deputy first minister of Northern Ireland (2001–02)*

Moreover, former ministers told the Institute that intergovernmental relations have been undermined when the UK government has not followed the [Sewel convention](#), and instead chosen to legislate in devolved policy areas without consent from the devolved governments themselves. IfG research found that during the 2019–24 parliament, legislative consent was withheld by at least one of the devolved governments, in part or in full, from 19 acts.²¹ Several of these bills related to Brexit, including the UK Internal Market Act, from which all three devolved legislatures withheld consent in January 2020.

"I don't disagree that the UK government has a mandate in England, to deliver its programme. I've got no issue with that. But they don't recognise our mandate to govern in Wales, and I think that's a fundamental problem..." – [Alun Davies](#), *Labour minister for local government and public services in Wales (2017–18)*

According to devolved government ministers, a large part of the problem can be attributed to the shallow understanding of devolution among civil servants in Whitehall. Ministers felt that officials in UK government departments gave little thought to how policies might affect each nation differently. Former Labour minister for education in Wales, [Leighton Andrews](#), reflected that he felt the UK Department for Work and Pensions failed to consider the unique circumstances in Wales while rolling out Universal Credit and described the department as operating "on the basis of a default England system".

The IfG has called for further investment in the devolution capability of Whitehall officials²² and has recommended that UK government ministers should lay a "devolution statement" alongside each bill they introduce, making it clear how the bill will affect devolved matters and how the devolved governments have been engaged in the policy process.²³ [Lord Dunlop](#), who conducted a review into the 'UK government's union capability' in 2019, also told the Institute that devolution capability within Whitehall is relevant to the quality of intergovernmental relations.

Ministers held different views about the role and purpose of the Offices for the Nations

The Ministers Reflect archive also includes interviews with former ministers who have held positions in the former 'territorial offices' in the UK government. These ministers have each aimed to strike a different balance between their role as advocates for the interests of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland within the UK government, and their role to make the UK government's case in their respective nation. Some said that they felt their offices' value lay in the fact that the secretaries of state can represent those nations' perspectives when decisions are being made in the UK government, including in cabinet committees.

"The constitutional role of the secretary of state for Scotland is the guardian of the devolution settlement. So my role was, while being a member of the UK government, also acknowledging that on occasion the SNP government had a case and to occasionally carefully make that case within my own government."
– **Jim Murphy**, *Labour secretary of state for Scotland (2008–10)*

The IfG has previously argued that the offices can and should be at the forefront of delivering good intergovernmental relations, rather than pit themselves as rivals to the devolved governments.²⁴ Former (and current) Labour secretary of state for Scotland **Douglas Alexander** told the Institute how he was keen to work collaboratively with the SNP government "rather than to appear to be in some kind of tug-of-war for legitimacy, authority, or visibility with the first minister".

Other ministers leaned more towards the offices playing an active role to promote the UK government's interests in each nation – almost like an "ambassador" as **Simon Hart** put it. These views speak to the more 'muscular' approach to managing the Union that Boris Johnson's government took. Ministers felt it was important for the offices to showcase and highlight the UK government's economic support in the nations to receive political credit for it. Hart's colleague **Alister Jack** felt the UK government should be more visible north of the border:

"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."

New ministers in the Scottish and Welsh governments will find that they engage with a mixture of government departments, including but not limited to the Offices for the Nations. **Lord Duncan**, who has served as a junior minister in all three offices, told the Institute that in his experience, the offices "fell between two stools" because they had no power over devolved matters, while reserved matters tended to be addressed by the relevant Whitehall departments. Duncan argued that the devolution angle needs to become a more integrated part of each Whitehall department, rather than a consideration that is annexed to the Offices for the Nations.

New ministers may find that they have less to do with them than their predecessors. Given that devolution has evolved, and ministers and officials across all four governments have built up their own relationships, some interviewees reflected that the offices were no longer as relevant today.

"Our relationships with the UK government and its departments are bilateral, they're not through the Wales Office... It's more a question of letting the Wales Office know what's going on and asking them for support in certain areas." – **Carwyn Jones**



Conclusion

As the dust settles following the seventh elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, and as new ministers enter into government for the first time, the reflections of these former ministers from the Ministers Reflect archive can offer guiding lessons for those looking to make the most of their position. These lessons, drawn from interviews by former ministers over the last decade, cover the fundamentals of working in a devolved government – working cross-party, getting the most out of the civil service, handling policy divergence and working with the UK government – and are as relevant to today’s ministers as they will be to future ministers.

For new ministers, keeping these lessons from their predecessors front of mind will help them to hit the ground running and make the most of their first days and months in office.

Appendix: work cited

The [Institute's Ministers Reflect archive](#) features nearly 200 interviews with former ministers from the UK and devolved governments. The following interviews are cited in this paper in order of appearance:

| Name | Party | Government | Years as minister | Some ministerial roles |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|--|
| Fergus Ewing | SNP | Scotland | 2007–21 | Cabinet secretary for the rural economy (2018–21) |
| Alex Neil | SNP | Scotland | 2009–16 | Minister for social justice, communities and pensioners' rights (2014–16), minister for health and wellbeing (2012–14) |
| Shona Robison | SNP | Scotland | 2011–18 | Minister for health and sport (2014–18) |
| Carwyn Jones | Labour | Wales | 1999–2018 | First minister of Wales (2009–18) |
| Jane Hutt | Labour | Wales | 2005–26 | Minister for finance (2011–16), chief whip (2018–26) |
| Mark Drakeford | Labour | Wales | 2011–26 | First minister of Wales (2018–24), cabinet secretary for finance (2024–26) |
| Ieuan Wyn Jones | Plaid Cymru | Wales | 2007–11 | Deputy first minister of Wales (2007–11) |
| Nicola Sturgeon | SNP | Scotland | 2007–23 | First minister of Scotland (2014–23) |
| Lord German | Liberal Democrats | Wales | 2000–03 | Deputy first minister of Wales (2000–03) |
| Ken Skates | Labour | Wales | 2013–21 | Minister for the economy, transport and North Wales (2016–21) |
| Hannah Blythyn | Labour | Wales | 2017–24 | Deputy minister for social partnership (2021–24), Minister for social partnership (2024) |
| Lord Wallace | Liberal Democrats | Scotland | 1999–2005 | Deputy first minister of Scotland (1999–2005) |

| | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------|---|
| Tony Blair | Labour | UK | 1997–2007 | Prime minister of the UK (1997–2007) |
| Andy Kerr | Labour | Scotland | 2001–07 | Cabinet secretary for health and community care (2004–07) |
| Michael Russell | SNP | Scotland | 2007–21 | Cabinet secretary for government business and constitutional relations (2018–20), cabinet secretary for the constitution, Europe and external affairs (2020–21) |
| Lee Waters | Labour | Wales | 2018–24 | Deputy minister for economy and transport (2018–21), deputy minister for climate change (2021–24) |
| Jeane Freeman | SNP | Scotland | 2016–21 | Minister for social security (2016–18), cabinet secretary for health and sport (2018–21) |
| Lorna Slater | Green | Scotland | 2021–24 | Minister for green skills, circular economy and biodiversity (2021–24) |
| Alister Jack | Conservative | UK | 2019–24 | Secretary of state for Scotland (2019–24) |
| Simon Hart | Conservative | UK | 2019–24 | Secretary of state for Wales (2019–22), government chief whip (2022–24) |
| Michael Matheson | SNP | Scotland | 2011–24 | Cabinet secretary for net zero, energy and transport (2021–23), cabinet secretary for NHS recovery, health and social care (2023–24) |
| Mark Durkan | SDLP | Northern Ireland | 1999–2002 | Minister for finance and personnel (1999–2001), deputy first minister of Northern Ireland (2001–02) |
| Alun Davies | Labour | Wales | 2011–18 | Minister for local government and public services (2018–18) |

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|-------|-----------------------|--|
| Leighton Andrews | Labour | Wales | 2007–14 | Minister for education and skills (2011–13), minister for public services (2014–16) |
| Lord Dunlop | Conservative | UK | 2015–17 | Parliamentary under secretary of state in the Scotland Office (2015–17), parliamentary under secretary of state in the Northern Ireland Office (2016–17) |
| Jim Murphy | Labour | UK | 2002–10 | Secretary of state for Scotland (2008–10) |
| Douglas Alexander | Labour | UK | 2001–10; 2024–present | Secretary of state for Scotland (2006–07, 2025–present) |
| Lord Duncan | Conservative | UK | 2017–19 | Parliamentary under secretary of state in the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales Office between 2017 and 2020 |

The Institute has an extensive [back catalogue](#) which examines the effectiveness of devolution across the UK and the relationships between national and devolved government. The research reports that informed this paper are:

[Ministers reflect on devolution](#)

[Devolved public services](#)

[Co-ordination and divergence: devolution and coronavirus](#)

[Governing without ministers](#)

[Legislating by consent: how to revive the Sewel convention](#)

[Electoral reform and the constitution](#)

[The UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#)

[Funding devolution](#)

[The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020](#)

[Separate space: the final year of the Scottish coalition, 1999–2007](#)

[Being an effective minister](#)

The IfG provides regular commentary on government, and comments cited in this report include:

[Westminster should watch closely as Wales and Scotland show how minority government can work](#)

[New ministers in Wales and Scotland after May's elections must learn from Labour's 2024 mistakes](#)

[The civil service in Wales must be prepared for a major change after May's elections](#)

[The next Scottish and Welsh governments are likely to put constitutional change back on the agenda](#)

[The next government needs a new strategy for the union](#)

[New UK intergovernmental structures can work, but only with political will](#)

The IfG writes explainers covering key subjects, setting out facts and figures and answering the most important questions about government. The explainers that informed this paper are:

[Intergovernmental relations](#)

[Coronavirus and devolution](#)

The [IfG Ministers Database](#) holds up-to-date information about all government ministers since 1979 – who served as a minister, in what roles, between which dates.

References

- 1 Durrant T, 'New ministers in Wales and Scotland after May's elections must learn from Labour's 2024 mistakes', Institute for Government, 13 April 2026, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/new-ministers-wales-and-scotland
- 2 Keenan H, 'The civil service in Wales must be prepared for a major change after May's elections', Institute for Government, 13 April 2026, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/comment/wales-civil-service-elections
- 3 Paun A, Kidney Bishop T, Valsamidis L and De Costa A, *Ministers reflect on devolution: Lessons from 20 years of Scottish and Welsh government*, Institute for Government, 21 March 2019, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/ministers-reflect-devolution
- 4 Paun A, 'Westminster should watch closely as Wales and Scotland show how minority government can work', Institute for Government, 14 May 2026, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/wales-scotland-minority-government-westminster
- 5 Sargeant J, Pannell J, McKee R and others, *Electoral reform and the constitution*, Institute for Government, 12 July 2023, p. 51, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution
- 6 Paun A, 'Westminster should watch closely as Wales and Scotland show how minority government can work', Institute for Government, 14 May 2026, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/wales-scotland-minority-government-westminster
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Being an effective minister*, Institute for Government, 18 April 2023, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/effective-minister
- 9 Atkins G and Dalton G, *Devolved public services*, Institute for Government, 20 April 2021, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/report/devolved-public-services
- 10 Sutherland N, *Plastic bags – the single use carrier bag charge*, House of Commons Library, 16 December 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7241>
- 11 SPICe, 'The Scottish Parliament's deliberative democracy timeline', 22 May 2025 (retrieved 7 May 2026), <https://spice-spotlight.scot/2025/05/22/the-scottish-parliaments-deliberative-democracy-timeline>
- 12 Welsh government, *Evidence review: Mainstreaming participatory and deliberative democracy in Wales*, 27 March 2026, www.gov.wales/evidence-review-mainstreaming-participatory-and-deliberative-democracy-in-wales
- 13 Sargeant J and Stojanovic A, *The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020*, Institute for Government, 10 February 2021, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/united-kingdom-internal-market-act-2020
- 14 Nice A, Paun A and Hall D, *The UK Shared Prosperity Fund*, Institute for Government, July 2021, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/shared-prosperity-fund
- 15 Department for Business and Trade, 'UK Internal Market Act 2020: review and consultation', Gov.uk, 18 November 2025, retrieved 7 May 2026, www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-internal-market-act-2020-review-and-consultation/uk-internal-market-act-2020-review-and-consultation-relating-to-parts-1-2-3-and-4
- 16 Welsh government, 'Deposit Return Scheme for Wales approved to tackle litter and drive reuse', 25 March 2026, www.gov.wales/deposit-return-scheme-wales-approved-tackle-litter-and-drive-reuse
- 17 Paun A, Sargeant J, Shuttleworth K and Nice A, 'Coronavirus and devolution', Institute for Government, 26 March 2020, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/coronavirus-and-devolution
- 18 Sargeant J, *Co-ordination and divergence: devolution and coronavirus*, Institute for Government, 28 October 2020, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/co-ordination-and-divergence-devolution-and-coronavirus
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Sargeant J, 'New UK intergovernmental structures can work, but only with political will', Institute for Government, 28 January 2022, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/comment/new-uk-intergovernmental-structures-can-work-only-political-will
- 21 Allen B, Paun A and Byrne G, *The Sewel convention in practice*, Institute for Government, 7 November 2024, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/sewel-convention-case-studies

-
- 22 Paun A and Fright M, 'The next government needs a new strategy for the union', Institute for Government, 4 July 2024, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/next-government-needs-new-strategy-union
- 23 Paun A and Shuttleworth K, *Legislating by consent: how to revive the Sewel convention*, Institute for Government, 16 September 2020, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/legislating-consent-how-revive-sewel-convention
- 24 Paun A and Fright M, 'The next government needs a new strategy for the union', Institute for Government, 4 July 2024, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/next-government-needs-new-strategy-union

About the authors

Megan Bryer

Megan is a research assistant on the Institute's ministers team. She graduated with a BA in history in 2025 and has previously worked as an intern in the civil service. She is also a first language Welsh speaker.

Rebecca McKee

Rebecca is a senior researcher at the Institute in the ministers team, with a focus on parliament and public inquiries. She also works on the public finances team, with a focus on regional economic growth. Rebecca has a PhD in politics. Prior to joining the IfG, she worked at the Constitution Unit, UCL as a British Academy postdoctoral research fellow where she led a research project on MPs' staffing arrangements.

The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking, to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.

 instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

 [@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](https://twitter.com/instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

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

© Institute for Government 2026

All body text in Institute for Government publications is produced by the authors. The Institute on occasion uses generative AI for other elements of our work, such as charts or infographics. Our AI policy is outlined on our site.

The Institute for Government is a registered charity in England and Wales (No.1123926) with cross-party governance. Our main funder is the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts.