

Learning the ropes as a minister

“On 2 May 1997, I walked into Downing Street as PM for the first time. I had never held office, not even as the most junior of junior ministers. It was my first and only job in government” – Tony Blair, A journey

“I do not recall ever being given any indication of what was expected of me on being appointed to any political job” – Michael Heseltine, Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography

Effective government requires effective ministers. But new ministers are often ill-prepared for their roles and face a steep learning curve when taking office.

Nick Boles MP was appointed as planning minister in September 2012 and we are delighted to welcome him to the Institute for Government to explore the challenges of ministerial life. At an Institute for Government event on 4 June he will share his experiences so far, including:

- working with the Civil Service
- getting a bill through parliament
- managing public expectations
- handling the demands of the media.

Our report [The Challenges of Being a Minister](#) says there is obviously a close link between the effectiveness of individual ministers and the effectiveness of government as a whole. In our report, we concentrated on how ministerial effectiveness could be improved.

We define an effective minister as someone who can:

- define clear policy objectives
- mobilise support within departments, with cabinet colleagues, in Parliament, with the media and the public to achieve policy goals
- contribute substantively to delivery of the government’s collective agenda.

Our recommendations included:

- Opposition parties need to take more seriously the task of preparing their shadow teams for office by familiarising them with how government and departments work.
- When appointing secretaries of state, the Prime Minister should discuss and agree with them the composition of their ministerial team, taking account of relevant experience, expertise and compatibility, as well as political factors of internal party and regional balance.
- Prime ministers should aim to ensure that secretaries of state serve at least three years in one post, and junior ministers at least two years, to avoid the rapidity of changes that have undermined effectiveness in the past, in the view of civil servants and ministers we spoke to.
- The selection process for ministers is often left to chance and the individuals chosen often lack the skills required. In the past this has led to frequent reshuffles – something the Institute has warned against in our paper [Shuffling the Pack: A brief guide to government reshuffles](#).

- Political parties should take much more seriously the value of development for those holding office and those aspiring to it. They should use an appraisal system, including 360 degree feedback, for their ministers.
- Ministers should regularly review how they are managing their time to ensure they stay focused on their strategic agendas.
- Ministers from across departments should meet on a regular basis to share their experiences as ministers and discuss current issues.

The ministerial private office also has an important role to play. In [Supporting Ministers to Lead, Rethinking the ministerial private office](#) we recommended:

- A small number of outsiders should be appointed as ministerial advisers to broaden the range of expertise, experience and project management capacity of their teams.
- A 'Director of Ministerial Support' (or chief of staff) should also be appointed to lead the expanded ministerial office comprising expert advisers, private secretaries, and administrative staff. The chief of staff should be line managed by the Permanent Secretary and should be capable of managing the transition to a new minister.

"What makes a good minister is an understanding and mastery of the process... Good junior ministers are on top of their briefs, understand the issues, know the technical detail, are sympathetic listeners but are confident enough to say 'no' when necessary." Sir Richard Lambert, former Director General, CBI

For more information about this event, contact the events team at the Institute for Government and follow the event via Twitter @ifgevents #goodministers from 1pm Tuesday 4th June. A video will be available shortly after the event on our website.

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

References

[The Challenge of Being a Minister, Defining and developing ministerial effectiveness](#), 24 May 2011 by Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn, Liz Carolan

[Policy making in the real world, Evidence and analysis](#), 18 April 2011 by Jill Rutter, Simon Parker, Michael Hallsworth

[Supporting Ministers to Lead, Rethinking the ministerial private office](#), 26 March 2013 by Akash Paun

[Creating an Effective Ministerial Team, Ministers and their special advisers](#), 11 October 2012 by Zoe Gruhn and Felicity Slater

[Shuffling the Pack: A brief guide to government reshuffles](#), August 2012 by Akash Paun