

How to be an effective minister

What ministers do and how to do it well

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ANALYSIS PAPER

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About Ministers Reflect

Ministers Reflect is a unique archive of interviews with former government ministers. It is designed to record – in their own words – what it takes to be an effective minister, the challenges ministers face, and what more can be done to support them in driving forward their policy objectives.

The interviews quoted represent former ministers' own views and memories. They do not represent the views or position of the Institute for Government.

Methodology

This paper draws primarily on our 72 currently published [Ministers Reflect](#) interviews. These were semi-structured, oral history interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and lightly edited before publication. The interviews explored ministers' own experiences and reflections; we have not verified these or interviewed civil servants or other stakeholders specifically as part of this project. With each interview lasting around an hour, they are a rich data source and we don't include all of our findings here – further analysis of topics covered in the interviews, including reshuffles, special advisers, the media and relationships with the Treasury, can be found on the [Institute for Government's blog](#). In this paper we also draw on our private work with ministers and officials, particularly private offices, and on our own impressions having carried out the interviews.

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Ministers Reflect

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I literally didn't have a clue. I didn't even know what a submission was. Literally nothing.

Lynne Featherstone

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“

...sometimes I would write 'yes' on a bit of paper and things would happen, which was a bit of a revelation.

Steve Webb

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“

The thing that I believe that no-one can know until they are faced with it is whether they can make decisions. And not just one decision, with the luxury of a day to think about it, but a box full of decisions and another box full.

Jack Straw

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“

You are 'it'. And in a meeting when there's a tough issue or anything else, all heads will swivel to you. You've got to be the one to deliver the bad news or to ask the tough question or to point out that actually the advice that's been given is just not good enough.

Nicky Morgan

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“

Do you sound calm and measured, even if inside you may think ‘Goodness, I’m flying by the seat of my pants here’? How you come across is terribly important. No doubt you can think of umpteen examples of ministers who have done a really bad *Today* programme and the Grim Reaper is at the door within hours.

Alistair Darling

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“

After two years, you are sitting in control now, behind your desk, where you are really going to do this, this and this. And then the phone rings and the Prime Minister is having a reshuffle and you move on to the next department and you are back at the beginning, ... panicking again.

Ken Clarke

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And how do you know if you ever succeeded? I think is a good question. The answer is you don’t and it’s a long haul.

Lord (Stephen) Green

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Introduction

The job of a government minister is a strange one. There is no job description, no application, no interview and no tuition: you are picked from among your peers, by the Prime Minister, to be a chief decision maker and a joint leader of a large and complex organisation that you may know absolutely nothing about. Your new role starts the moment you leave Number 10, perhaps with some instruction from the Prime Minister about what he or she would like you to do, perhaps not. It is a great privilege and most likely the highlight of your political career. In your new office, departmental staff you don't know, none of whom you can – formally – hire or fire, will greet you and wait to hear your plan. You will be part of a ministerial team that you haven't been able to choose and that may include political rivals.

Your new job is 24/7 as you juggle a constant stream of government business along with your role as a parliamentarian, all under the gaze of the media and the public. You know that your job here is an incredible opportunity but it's also temporary, however well you perform. One day the Prime Minister decides that it is time for a reshuffle and you leave the department just as suddenly as you entered it – hopefully having averted disasters and achieved your policy goals.

Ministers are hugely important to government, yet it is surprising how little is understood about what they actually do; even within the civil service the majority of officials have little contact with ministers. Meanwhile the public feel isolated from a political class that is seen as out of touch and elite; government ministers are trusted less than bankers or estate agents¹ and people believe that ministers spend more time scoring political points and seeking re-election than they do delivering their policy pledges.² In 2017, as ministers grapple with the huge challenges of Brexit and the domestic policy agenda, we need to think more about how ministers can be as effective as possible in their jobs.

Since 2015, the Institute for Government has conducted more than 70 in-depth interviews with people who have been government ministers. These interviews focused on their experience of office, their thoughts about the role and their advice for other ministers. Now outside of government, we found these ministers, all confident and accustomed to talking on record, to be candid (if occasionally self-aggrandising) about their successes, mistakes, ambitions and frustrations in office. Interviewees included Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat ministers. They included some of the most senior Cabinet members, such as former chancellors and foreign secretaries; ministers of state

and parliamentary under secretaries, across all departments, both MPs and peers. The interviews are published on our [Ministers Reflect](#) website.

Alongside our experience of government and private work with ministers, which includes high-level advice through induction and training events and work with opposition parties preparing for government,³ the interviews have given us unparalleled insights into what the experiences of people running the country are really like, what their role involves and how they can best overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

With government currently charged with delivering Brexit alongside a challenging set of domestic policy goals and commitments, effective ministerial leadership is vital. This short paper explores:

- what it's like being a minister – the day-to-day reality of ministerial roles and relationships (p. 5)
- how to do the ministerial role well, based on peer advice (p. 19)
- what can be done to help ministers be more effective in government (p. 25).

Part One: What's it like being a minister?

We hear ministers giving interviews on the radio and see footage of them walking up Downing Street with their briefing papers, but what do they actually do? In this section we explore the role of ministers and the reality of their jobs, starting with initial appointment and training, through to day-to-day routines and getting things done, managing key relationships – including with the civil service – and leaving office.

Starting out

“You are asked, you are appointed, somebody suggests they are going to send a car down to pick you up... slightly to my surprise, I walked into a room to find the entire staff assembled, waiting to hear from me what my policies were going to be in respect to the running of the office. And I think I probably sketched out what I thought were the priorities for the law officers and for myself as Attorney in about two minutes, having thought about it for about 35 seconds before I turned up.”

[Dominic Grieve, Attorney General 2010–14](#)

The arrival of a new minister following either an election or a reshuffle is a big deal for a government department, as [Ken Clarke](#), former Chancellor and Justice Secretary, outlined: “It may be that the same party was providing the government, but you could have an astonishing change of policy when the new minister turned up, let alone style.” The appointment process that gets them there is rather different from the corporate world; usually a whole raft of appointments are made over the course of one or two days and announced by Number 10, while nervous politicians check their phones for calls and Westminster-watchers check Twitter to see who’s up and who’s down. The scale varies depending on whether it’s a minor reshuffle or a whole new government after a General Election, but there is usually some sort of change every couple of years. When appointing ministers, prime ministers usually aim to reward loyalty, keep different wings of their party happy, and demonstrate an attempt at diversity.⁴ Personal connections and political standing tend to trump knowledge or skills. When it comes to reshuffles, ministers can drop hints with the Prime Minister but have little influence as to where they might get moved to: “You have to be pretty senior in government before you can even express a view about what you think you might want to do”, as [Jacqui Smith](#), Home Secretary 2007–09, explained. Junior ministers, particularly junior Lords ministers, can pass

beneath the Prime Minister's radar entirely – prime ministers who come into government without previous experience of it, including Tony Blair, might have very little idea what junior ministers even do.

As the Prime Minister allocates ministerial posts, particularly in the busy aftermath of a General Election, things can get chaotic. We heard stories of ministers being unable to get into their new departments, hearing about their appointment on the news before they were told, or being launched straight into answering questions in the House on a brief they had only just learned of. Unlike the US administration, the UK has no period of handover after elections – the transition is immediate. New ministers are thrown straight in and it's "sink or swim" ([Ben Bradshaw](#)).ⁱ

Preparation and support

"I had no training beforehand, no training after, no support after and I had a big, fat lever-arched file prepared by the department for new ministers, which I never got to read. I had no brief from the Prime Minister when he gave me the call to appoint me to the job."

[John Healey](#), Minister for Housing 2009–10

Given the uncertain and often chaotic appointment process, is it possible to prepare for life as a minister either before or after starting the role? Shadowing a policy brief, or having knowledge of the issues from another experience such as select committee membership or work outside of politics, undoubtedly gives new ministers a head start. However, as [Alan Duncan](#), International Development Minister 2010–14, explained, the skills required to be a good shadow minister are different from those needed in office: "you are not really running anything, you are not running a department, all you are doing is posturing and issuing press releases and trying to win an election". The scope of a brief and the issues on which ministers have to make decisions is also much greater in government than in opposition; new ministers are often overwhelmed by just how much they are expected to get involved with.

Even if they are on top of the policy issues, new ministers quickly have to learn how to do their job and particularly to get their head around how Whitehall works. Liberal Democrat [Jeremy Browne](#) became a Foreign Office minister in 2010 and recalled saying to his new private office: "I don't wish to be rude, lovely you're all here, but I haven't really got the faintest idea of what all of you do." Meanwhile, [Jo Swinson](#)ⁱⁱ found that

ⁱ Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Department of Health, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2001–09; Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport 2009–10.

ⁱⁱ Minister for Employment Relations and Consumer Affairs and Women and Equalities Minister 2012–15.

“there’s a whole separate language that you just don’t understand about the civil service”. Prior experience of working in big organisations or in government can help: former Home Secretary [Alan Johnson](#), for example, thought that his trade union experience was a “very good grounding” to be a minister, particularly on how to negotiate and how to run a private office; [Hugh Robertson](#)ⁱ talked about the management techniques he picked up during his army experience; and the Labour Peer [Philip Hunt](#)ⁱⁱ reflected that ministers with organisational experience “are used to making decisions; we’re used to dealing with people”.

Potential ministers and their opposition leaders are wary of doing too much pre-election training to prepare for government, however, partly because of what former Culture Secretary [Tessa Jowell](#) described as “raw superstition” and partly because they don’t want to look like they are ‘measuring the curtains’. Moreover, admitting to not knowing things runs against the grain of political culture – [Patricia Hewitt](#)ⁱⁱⁱ described it as “depressing” that “most of the Shadow Cabinet really didn’t feel they needed any training or development” ahead of the 1997 General Election.

The day-to-day grind: departmental duties

“It was absolutely exhausting, it was just non-stop... particularly at the Department for Transport, I am sure it didn’t do my health a great deal of good.”

[Theresa Villiers](#), Northern Ireland Secretary 2012–16

Being a minister is undoubtedly “damn hard work” ([Jacqui Smith](#)), “relentless” ([Edward Garnier](#)),^{iv} “very wearing” ([John Whittingdale](#))^v and “furiously busy” ([Greg Barker](#)).^{vi} All of our interviewees reflected on the long hours and sheer volume of work. “It’s by far the most difficult job I’ve ever had to do intellectually or physically. I’d normally go 15 hours a day”, said [Vince Cable](#), Business Secretary 2010–15. Trying to maintain a semblance of control over the diary is a struggle for ministers. Health and family life often suffer: “I’m afraid sports days and school plays become victims to being a minister”, said [Desmond Swayne](#), who was

ⁱ Minister for Sport and the Olympics 2010–13; Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs 2013–14.

ⁱⁱ Various roles 1998–2007; Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2008–09; Deputy Leader of the House of Lords and Minister for Energy and Climate Change 2008–10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce 1998–99; Economic Secretary to the Treasury 1999–2001; Trade and Industry Secretary 2001–05; Health Secretary 2005–07.

^{iv} Solicitor General 2010–12.

^v Culture Secretary 2015–16.

^{vi} Minister of State for Energy and Climate Change 2010–14.

International Development Minister 2014–16. The busy schedule and the pressure to ‘firefight’ and constantly react to events, exacerbated by the 24-hour news cycle, leave ministers at worst stressed and exhausted,ⁱ and at best with very little space to think or to be strategic. Of course, leaders in other professions also have very long working hours, but aspects of the ministerial role make their time even more pressured:

- **Ministers have no-one to delegate to.** “I seemed to review a lot of subs [submissions] that I wish I could have delegated to somebody else to review”, said [Mark Hoban](#), a Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions minister in the Coalition Government, reflecting that while secretaries of state could pass on events and pieces of work to junior ministers, junior ministers have very little control over their workload.
- **There is a surprising volume of minutiae to sign off.** “I think ministers make decisions more frequently and at a lower level of importance than you would expect of business people operating at the top of large corporations,” said banker-turned-minister and Labour Peer [Paul Myners](#). Meanwhile, Philip Hunt lamented: “The hours you spent having to do these bloody letters and the box work... We haven’t found clear ways of delegating to officials.” Much of what ministers do is unseen by the general public – responding to correspondence, checking write-rounds and ploughing through paperwork, although how thoroughly they do it varies.
- **Work does not stop when the office shuts.** Ministers are on call all the time, including in parliamentary recess, and we heard several stories of them interrupting holidays to deal with a breaking crisis.⁵ Ministerial offices are still paper-based and revolve around the ‘red box’ – the briefcase co-ordinated by their private secretaries and used for submissions that contain advice and requests for decisions. Most ministers do box work at home in the evenings, or early before the office opens; some we spoke to did their boxes in the car, in the gym and even in the bath. A departmental team might slave over a submission for weeks for a minister to skim it, along with 10 other submissions, late at night with a glass of wine, and scribble an instruction over the top of it for the private office to relay back. Evenings are also spent going over to the House for parliamentary business and attending dinners or speaking engagements. Fridays and weekends are usually given over to constituency work, along with a weekend box.

ⁱ Nick Clegg has reflected on the toll the early years of the Coalition Government took on him; not only did he feel unhealthy and tired but also his ability to work effectively and his public image suffered as a result. He suggests that the volume of work and the scrutiny on senior public figures are not conducive to good government. Clegg, N., *Politics: Between the extremes*, Vintage, New York, 2016.

- **Everybody wants a piece of ministers.** Non-governmental organisations, fellow parliamentarians, business leaders, the local party, the 10 o'clock news – everybody wants the minister, and particularly the Secretary of State, to pay attention to their issue, speak at their event, make the decisions. As [Iain Duncan Smith](#)ⁱ reflected: "It became clear to me that the whole department seems to want to be in the Secretary of State's office." And ministers are acutely aware that what they say when they engage with people matters: "...people pore over what you say and action it", said Mark Hoban. Media appearances in particular get noticed, including by Number 10. As former Chancellor [Alistair Darling](#) said, "a programme like the *Today* programme, probably more than any other programme, really matters because it sets the tone for the day... If you screw up on a programme like that, you are absolutely stuffed".
- **Ministerial responsibility goes beyond the department.** Bound by collective responsibility, ministers need to be able to promote and defend government policy across the board and must maintain a 'united front when decisions have been reached'.ⁱⁱ They participate in collective decision making, including through write-rounds (a collaborative decision-making tool), at Cabinet and Cabinet sub-committees or less formal inter-departmental meetings.
- **Ministers are accountable for everything in their remit.** It can be frustrating to ministers that they receive no credit when things go well or when disaster is averted, but are the first to be blamed when something ostensibly outside of their control goes wrong. Inevitably as the minister of a department you are its public face; being accountable for government activity and particularly the duty to report truthfully to Parliament is an integral part of the role. So ministers, aware of the low public trust in politicians, spend time trying to put out fires and getting reassurance. [David Hanson](#), a Minister of State in a number of departments from 2005 to 2010, for example said: "I can be on the front page of the paper tomorrow and therefore I need to have some elements of understanding. I want some management reporting."
- **Ministers travel a lot.** Many ministerial roles, particularly with briefs connected to diplomacy, trade, international development or defence, require a great deal of travel both around the country and internationally.

ⁱ Work and Pensions Secretary 2010–16.

ⁱⁱ As set out in the Ministerial Code, which explains the formal responsibilities of ministers and the ethical standards to which they must adhere, including avoiding conflicts of interest and being truthful and accountable (see Cabinet Office, [Ministerial Code](#), Cabinet Office, London, 2016).

There are some ways around these time pressures – confident ministers push back against what they consider to be unnecessary work, insist on doing boxes only in office hours, reject overlong paperwork or put into place rigorous diary management systems to protect and prioritise their time.

The day-to-day grind: parliamentary duties

“I mean it is a crazy system. People complain about Members of Parliament having outside jobs, but I mean the ultimate outside job is being a minister.”

[Nicky Morgan](#), Education Secretary 2014–16

In addition to the day-to-day pressures in the department, ministers are also politicians and spend time in their constituencies and in the House.

A minister might be leading a high-level international arms trade negotiation one day and campaigning about potholes in West Wittering the next. Commons ministers do not lose their job as a constituency MP – a job that the department can be “fairly grudging” ([Steve Webb](#))ⁱ about them doing. While there might be an “implicit contract” ([David Willetts](#))ⁱⁱ with the constituency that they will be less available, ministers in marginal seats who neglect their local duties entirely will find re-election harder. Constituency work can also help to keep ministers grounded and to see the real-life effects of policy. Along with casework there are fundraising events to attend, schools and local organisations to visit and speeches to be given.

Furthermore, being a parliamentarian, particularly if your party doesn’t have a large majority, means being on call for votes. “Some poor person who’d had to wait six months to finally get to see the minister and five minutes into the meeting the bell would go and I’d run out the door”, said Greg Barker of this “...slightly odd way to run a country.” Ministers represent their department in select committees, urgent questions, debates and other types of parliamentary scrutiny, and must be able to steer legislation through Parliament successfully, explaining and defending their proposals clearly and winning votes. In the challenging environment of the House, poor parliamentary performers rapidly lose the confidence of their colleagues. Lords ministers who have not had any time on the backbenches or other experience of the House can find parliamentary performance particularly daunting: “You have truly global experts on matters... it was a shock and a surprise to me... every time I stood up in the House of Lords”, said ex-BT boss and later Trade Minister

ⁱ Minister for Pensions 2010–15.

ⁱⁱ Minister for Universities and Science 2010–14.

and Conservative Peer [Ian Livingston](#). Beyond the business of Parliament, it is important for ministers to maintain their political networks, so they must spend time keeping on top of the party gossip and chatting with backbenchers in the tea rooms.

What the day-to-day duties of ministers really illustrate are that ministers have not one role but several roles that cut across their professional, political and personal lives. As we outlined in our 2011 report *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, there are at least five roles for ministers: as policy makers and executive leaders, as departmental advocates, as public advocates, as parliamentarians and as participants in collective government.⁶ They are pulled in different directions all at the same time. This led [Oliver Letwin](#), Minister for Government Policy 2010–16, to conclude that it is an “impossible” job:

“Ministers have to be very good performers in Parliament, they have to be good on the box and on the radio, they have to deal with constituents, they have to find ways of dealing with lobby groups and interest groups, they have to run a department, they have to participate in collegiate discussion and carry the day and you know, it’s impossible for anyone to be an expert in all of these in every respect.”

Getting things done

“I think that there’s a very interesting distinction between ministers whose policies have longevity and those who are remembered as Cabinet ministers who did lots of jobs, but you can’t remember what they did in any job... Tony Blair regularly said ‘I’d like to promote you’ and once we’d won the Olympic bid, I was absolutely clear that I wanted to see the Olympics through.”

[Tessa Jowell](#), Culture Secretary 2001–07

It was clear from our interviews that ministers came into government with a genuine desire and drive to get things done; to deliver on the promises and demonstrate the values on which their party had been elected. They were ambitious, and frustrated when their efforts to shape policy were slowed down.

As outlined above, a lot of the ministerial role, particularly for junior ministers, is about churning through the paperwork to keep the wheels of government turning – benefits paid, trains running, international relations ticking over – and also reacting to events. But there is also reform. As former Welsh Secretary [Stephen Crabb](#) said: “It isn’t enough to say ‘I’ve got an interest in defence’, well, have it in your mind what it

is that you would want to do; how would you do things differently from how it is currently being done?”

Opposition has its limitations but does give potential ministers the opportunity to develop serious, big policy ideas that they can then enact in government. Iain Duncan Smith and [David Freud](#),ⁱ for example, had developed a detailed and ambitious Conservative welfare reform programme, including Universal Credit and the Work Programme, outside of government and came into office with big plans. Alternatively, ministers might use their first few months in office to develop proposals, with input from the department, Number 10 and external stakeholders. For example, Nicky Morgan, when she became Education Secretary, relished the opportunity to think strategically about school reform for an education White Paper – a chance to work out a whole vision “rather than just doing piecemeal policy making”.

Actually delivering reforms, while also juggling the various pressures of office, involves a slightly different skill set to the idea generation and consensus-building needed for policy development. Junior ministers can take on more of a role here to oversee implementation – take Steve Webb on pension reform or David Willetts on university funding. Tenacity, good public and political support, high-quality officials, backing from the Prime Minister and Chancellor and a decent length of time in post to see things through also help ministers to deliver reforms. Ministers must also retain good oversight of implementation without micro-managing it, which on big programmes would be impossible – rather they must ask the right questions of officials, keep track of what is going on and be able to report back to other ministers and to Parliament.

The complexity of modern government, however, means that it is difficult for ministers to be completely on top of their reforms, particularly in large delivery departments such as the Department of Health, the Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions. Oliver Letwin argued that this complexity, the constant churn of ministers and the information technology revolution have widened the gulf between ministers and delivery: “The people who are doing the thing have no idea of what it is that the original minister was trying to do.” A further challenge for some is how to overcome Whitehall siloes, with policies such as life sciences or youth justice cutting across a number of different departments and budgets.

ⁱ Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform 2010–16.

Working with the civil service

“Having been a general manager with profit and loss responsibility, I was not being allowed to manage my team as a team – that felt weird. It means quite a lot of the techniques you should be using either can’t be used or are much less powerful and effective than they would be in other organisations.”

John Penrose, Minister for Constitutional Reform 2015–16

It is an oddity of the ministerial role that, once in office, ministers can feel isolated. Although they now technically have a department at their disposal, ministers know that “officials are on home turf and you’re a visitor” ([Damian Green](#))ⁱ and – particularly when taking over from a rival political party – “you tend to be quite suspicious of the advice civil servants are giving you” (Theresa Villiers); it takes time to establish trust. Although officials are clearly key to the success or failure of a minister’s goals, ministers are “not really involved in appointing them or managing them” (Nicky Morgan), a set-up that is very different from most other professional environments. Secretaries of state are able to directly recruit two special advisers – “personal appointments – and therefore you’ve got a closeness to them and a faith in them, a confidence in them that is crucial in this cold, harsh world that you’re dealing with” (Alan Johnson). Secretaries of state can also try to influence Number 10 as to who might be on their ministerial team, but that’s it.

Private office staff are “by far the most important” officials that ministers deal with (Vince Cable) and certainly the most important personnel decision to get right. It was striking how little ministers spoke about other senior officials, including permanent secretaries. Junior ministers in particular were conscious that they were not high on the priority list of the most senior officials: “It is very clear from the get-go that the entire department revolves around the secretary of state and you’ve got to fight to have a say in policy”, said [Ed Vaizey](#) (Culture Minister 2010–16). Meanwhile, Philip Hunt reflected on the ambiguity of the official–minister relationship, adding that “it’s a strange, extraordinary world where you’ve got ministers and then you’ve got the perm sec’s operation, and sometimes you feel the twain shall never meet”.

Ministers we interviewed praised the overall quality of their civil service staff (“intelligent hardworking people who cared about the work that they were doing” – [Stephen Green](#))ⁱⁱ and most concurred with Alan Johnson’s view that they “will work with you to deliver what you want”. Ministers generally perceived the Treasury and Foreign and Commonwealth Office

ⁱ Minister for Immigration 2010–12; Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice 2012–14.

ⁱⁱ Lord Green, Minister for Trade and Investment 2010–13.

to have the brightest and best staff. Where they did have frustrations with the civil service, they tended to centre on five main issues:

- poor-quality drafting and a propensity to write “a huge amount of terrible guff, at huge, colossal, humungous length” (Oliver Letwin), leaving some ministers “forever doing quite significant re-writes of correspondence” (Theresa Villiers)
- failure of officials to appreciate the importance of Parliament or constituencies⁷ – they are “completely oblivious to the fact that you have 90,000 constituents who are responsible for you being in Parliament in the first place” and “exceedingly poorly versed on how the House of Commons works” ([Tim Loughton](#))ⁱ
- mistakes, gaffes and less commonly examples of incompetence or negligence that ministers cannot hold officials to account for – [Alan Johnson](#), for example, talked about the difficulty he had in arguing that NHS managers responsible for the Mid-Staffordshire hospital failure should be sacked
- overly cautious or “just quite conservative” ([Simon Hughes](#))ⁱⁱ policy advice and a lack of political or communications nous when developing policy
- a feeling that civil servants are too hierarchical, so that ministers cannot access junior but expert staff, or deferential (“everybody is being almost far too nice to you”, said Iain Duncan Smith), resulting in poor debate and dialogue.

These last two criticisms reveal a constant tension between ministers and officials: it is difficult for officials to give honest advice and point out problems, where they exist, without seeming like they are blocking ministers’ policy ideas. Knowing that they may only have a limited time in office, ministers are often in a rush to get things done and can be frustrated if they feel that officials are slowing things down: “There were times when getting something done was like wading through treacle”, said [Andrew Mitchell](#), International Development Secretary from 2010–12.

Ministers also expressed irritation at some more systemic problems with Whitehall: insufficient focus on implementation as opposed to policy development, high turnover of staff and the sense that government is not good at working collectively towards common goals.

ⁱ Minister for Children and Families 2010–12.

ⁱⁱ Minister for Justice and Civil Liberties 2013–15.

Building and managing relationships

"I think what I learned was that, in the end, the levers we had were hearts and minds."

Ed Balls, Children, Schools and Families Secretary 2007–10

A good deal of ministerial time is spent on relationship management. It was noticeable during our interviews how much ministers view the world through personal relationships. Certainly compared with civil servants and others that the Institute for Government works with, the way they think about government tends to be framed by who they get on with rather than by structures or processes. Ministers' reflections on working in coalition from 2010–15, for example, were often about how well they gelled with and could make deals with individual ministers from the other party rather than how the system as a whole worked. Informal phone calls or drinks with ministerial colleagues are seen by ministers as a much quicker and more effective way to get things done than formal inter-ministerial meetings with agendas, officials and note takers. Relationship building comes pretty naturally to ministers – having won round local electors and developed networks in Parliament, most have good interpersonal skills.

Ministers highlighted to us some particularly important relationships, outside of their departmental civil servants, constituents and colleagues in Parliament. These included:

Relationships across government

- **Number 10.** Number 10, particularly its special advisers, drew some criticism from ministers we interviewed – particularly when Number 10 staff blocked announcements or interfered at the last minute. Ministers with the clout and confidence to do so can ignore Number 10 – take veteran Ken Clarke who "didn't bother with the grid and asking permission and all this rubbish" and happily had "Number 10 apparatchiks... all thrown out" when they turned up at his department. But this is risky; for ambitious ministers staying on the right side of the boss is important. A pre-existing relationship helps – Energy Minister Greg Barker, for instance, was a good friend of David Cameron and worked with him in opposition, so could "cash in some of that political capital" in order to get things moving in government. While it obviously varies according to the style of the Prime Minister, it was striking how little the Prime Minister appeared to manage ministers: "If you made a mistake, you could be summoned for a bollocking and you could also be praised but that's about it", said Labour Peer Philip Hunt, while Nicky Morgan found it "extraordinary that you don't have much face time. The PM is effectively your boss – and OK, he or she is very busy as the head of government – but actually, maybe more

regular meetings would help in terms of the central control. If they knew what you were doing, then it would not be a surprise when somebody goes and announces it.”

- **HM Treasury.** “In Whitehall it’s really all about the money”, said [George Freeman](#), Life Sciences Minister 2014–16. While ministers were often critical of the secrecy surrounding some Treasury processes, of perceived interference and of institutional arrogance, they acknowledged the importance of securing budget and backing from the Treasury. Former Social Care Minister [Paul Burstow](#) reflected on the difficulty of “trying to secure a political consensus” on the social care reforms advocated by the Dilnot Commission “when the Treasury didn’t really agree with it”. Most interaction with the Treasury, especially on major spending rounds, is done through secretaries of state rather than junior ministers. Being on good personal terms with the Chancellor or Chief Secretary, or with their advisers, helped ministers to get a good deal, as well as using negotiating tactics such as aligning interests with the Treasury, offering concessions or brinkmanship.

Relationships within ministerial teams

- **Fellow ministers.** Few ministers we spoke to thought about their role in terms of being part of a team; again in contrast to the corporate world, ministers are not usually appointed with a view to achieving a balance of skills in a team. Junior ministers tend to work on their own portfolios and can have very little interaction with their fellow ministers. There can even be rivalry and negative briefing between ministers and special advisers from the same team, as was reported during divisions between Blairite and Brownite factions of Labour ministers.
- **Team members.** Secretaries of state we interviewed were conscious of the need to delegate and to try to manage their ministers effectively. [Margaret Beckett](#) for example, who was Secretary of State at Defra and at the Foreign Office, felt that “everything you do is achieved through teamwork” and tried to build trusting relationships with whichever junior ministers she was given. Most secretaries of state held regular team meetings of some sort, and like managers in other organisations, occasionally had to stamp their authority or resolve tension in the team. Stephen Crabb reflected on his promotion from the Wales Office and starting as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, inheriting a large ministerial team after his predecessor Iain Duncan Smith suddenly resigned: “I had to basically say to each of the junior ministers: ‘You won’t do that again; you don’t take to Twitter or to the airways to criticise each other.’ Actually, things like that were a good opportunity to have a one-to-one with each of them...”

Relationships outside of government

- **External stakeholders.** Relations with external stakeholders, whether business lobbyists, patients' groups or teachers' unions, are important for two main reasons. The first is that ministers can learn from them and get better policy outcomes as a result. One of the risks of ministerial life is that ministers, surrounded by willing officials who want the best for their department, become inwardly focused. Visits and meetings with external stakeholders help them to avoid this: "I used to bully the department into organising trips", said Vince Cable, "...visiting a university, an FE college, a factory or whatever. And you really learnt what was going on in the field by doing that in a way you didn't by sitting in Whitehall." The second reason is that poor relations with external stakeholders mean negative press and a lack of support for what the Government is trying to do; having stakeholders on side from an early stage means that they will be there to "see you through the crises" later on (Patricia Hewitt). Some ministers treated stakeholders with a degree of scepticism, however, cautioning against "transparently self-serving" representations (John Penrose).

Leaving office

"[W]hen you become a minister, you know you are there because of the Prime Minister and the rules of the game are that you can be sacked. You know that and sometimes you are sacked without having done anything wrong; you know that."

George Young, Leader of the House 2010–12 and Chief Whip 2012–14

Ministerial careers can end suddenly: you can lose your seat at election time, you can be forced to resign because of a scandal or row or you can get sacked by the Prime Minister at a reshuffle. Promotions or demotions at reshuffles often come out of the blue; ministers we spoke to usually knew a reshuffle was coming but had no indication of whether or where they would go. The change once you have left your department is instant – it's up to your successor how much or how little of your policy reforms to carry forward. A planned and graceful resignation from government is possible, if rare. David Freud explained that he had made it clear on appointment when he would leave and decided to go with positive publicity and time for a full handover with his successors.

Ministers understand that sudden moves are a part of the role, though evidently can still be surprised about being moved on just as they are hitting their stride: "I felt I was in a groove and I felt I was up to the job... But I also knew I wasn't close to Nick [Clegg] and I would be expendable", explained Liberal Democrat and former Scottish Secretary

[Michael Moore](#). Returning to life on the backbenches, or indeed life outside of Parliament, can be a bruising experience – though the ministers we interviewed had usually been out of office for at least a couple of months and were reflective and, for the most part, not bitter about losing their positions.

Ministers know that their shelf-life in a department is limited and this matters because it means they are in a hurry to get things done. Jacqui Smith reflected on the consequences of the frequency of reshuffles in the last Labour Government, noting that ministers get “frustrated with civil servants who sometimes are doing the right thing by trying to create a speed of policy development, consultation, legislative development, which is probably slightly slower than ideally the minister wants... that creates a bit of conflict”.

Overwhelmingly, ministers who had left office had enjoyed it hugely; they felt proud and privileged to have done the job, if frustrated that they couldn't see some of their reforms through. Tessa Jowell summed up: “There are lots of frustrations in government, but there is nothing as frustrating as being out of government!”

Part Two: Being effective

Given that the role of a minister is so varied and demanding, there is no single understanding of what an effective minister is. The public want honest ministers who can live up to their promises, the Chief Whip wants ministers who can handle Parliament and get their Bills through smoothly, the Prime Minister wants loyal ministers who won't cause embarrassment on *Newsnight*, the policy official wants decisive ministers who understand analysis and the campaigner wants ministers who genuinely listen to a range of views and can secure resources for their issue. Different mixes of skills are needed for different ministerial roles – a junior Lords minister overseeing the implementation of justice reforms requires a slightly different set of competencies from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for example.

Nonetheless, the ministers we interviewed had a fairly consistent view of what it takes to be a good minister and – with the benefit of hindsight and experience – practical advice for new ministers. Listed below are six key pieces of advice on how to be an effective minister.

1. Have a clear sense of purpose

Nearly all ministers we spoke to argued that, whatever position you are in, clear goals are essential. "Why are you there?", asked Alistair Darling. "It's not just to sign the letters or to do adjournment debates when five people and a dog are sitting in the House of Commons. You're there as a politician, you're not there as an administrator." Greg Barker echoed this: "You are there to drive a political agenda, not just to respond efficiently to submissions in your box." It is possible for ministers to sit back and let the department run itself – the day-to-day business of government can function pretty well without active ministerial intervention. But ministers who were seen as successful were those who communicated and maintained focus on achieving a clear objective.

A clear goal might be a piece of legislation or delivery of a major project: ministers cited things like the Olympics, same-sex marriage and the minimum wage as obvious policy successes. For some ministers the big goal is subtler: reframing public debate, smoothing relationships or putting an issue on the agenda. For example, Jeremy Browne spoke about trying to shift foreign policy so that Britain thought more about rising powers outside of its traditional US and European allies; [Chris Huhne](#) saw his job as Energy and Climate Change Secretary as a "missionary" one, trying to increase awareness of climate change and reshape

business practices; Andrew Mitchell as International Development Secretary wanted to prove the value of foreign aid; and Ed Balls, when Children, Schools and Families Secretary, was passionate about securing cross-sector and cross-party consensus that a more holistic approach to families was needed. Other ministers have their goals set for them by external events, for example: dealing with the banking crisis, reducing the deficit or delivering Brexit.

Whatever the goal is, clarity helps to focus ministers and their departments on what is really important and to feel motivated by a shared mission.

2. Prioritise

To avoid getting “drowned with trivia” ([Mark Francois](#)),ⁱ ministers must think about what is important and what isn’t and, as Chris Huhne advised, “prioritise down to really a very limited number of priorities”, ideally early on. Ministers felt that this helped them to manage their time and to get the best out of the department.

How, then, should they go about determining priorities? In some cases, urgency and financial pressures force ministers to prioritise. [Hugh Robertson](#) recalled prioritising projects at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport after the 2010 General Election, when the new Conservative Government came in on a promise of austerity. “I think there were about 40 projects from memory, that were due to be funded over the next three or four years. We had to go through them all with a red pen, one by one, and we knew we could keep about five.”

Talking to officials or other colleagues about what to focus on helped ministers, including [Liam Byrne](#) – a minister in the late 2000s, including as Chief Secretary to the Treasury – who described his process in detail:

“The model I tended to adopt is to set a target of doing a keynote speech one month into the job, to use that speech to lay down the strategic agenda for my time in office and so we would be able to go into the civil service and the private office and say ‘Right, it’s T minus 20 days, there’s a speech in 20 days’ time, we need a venue, message and we need a research programme between now and day 20 that gets us round the analysis, the history of policy, some of the strategic problems.’ And generally speaking you find that you need to speak to about 20 to 30 people in order to establish what’s going on and what you might think about something and what your priorities need to be.”

ⁱ Minister for Defence 2012–15; Minister for Communities and Resilience 2015–16.

Patricia Hewitt meanwhile used a two-by-two matrix to help her prioritise: “One axis is Urgent/Not Urgent, the other is Important/Not Important.”

To stick to their priorities, ministers recommended active diary management, whether through personally approving all meetings, instituting ranking systems to decide what did and didn’t go in, or having a weekly diary meeting with the private office. A good private office can be a filter, actively helping ministers to decide what is and isn’t important and rejecting work that doesn’t fit the brief. In nearly all of our interviews, ministers emphasised the importance of diary managers and the need to get good people in the private office, and not to be wedded to how things were done in the past: “Civil servants, whether they think they’re doing it or not, have an affinity to how things were done before...”, said [Liam Fox](#) (Defence Secretary 2010–11), while Damian Green advised: “If you find you’re spending a lot of your time doing things that you think are a waste of time then don’t do them. And don’t let officials tell you: ‘Oh you have to do this Minister’. No you don’t! You’re the minister.”

3. Make good, timely decisions

Prime ministers appoint people to their front bench rarely for their detailed knowledge of policy or fit with the team; they appoint people more often because they know them and trust their judgement. Effective ministers need the political antennae and the resilience to be able to make tough decisions, quickly: “It’s no good waiting for a week’s time”, said Alan Johnson, “because you’ll have another whole set of problems come up that you have to make a decision on. And the civil service want you to be decisive. They want to give you the arguments for and against, but once you’ve decided, they will follow.”

Ministers must be able to look at a set of papers or listen to conflicting advice and make a judgement call of what is both right by the analysis and politically sound. What is more, as [Jack Straw](#), a senior Cabinet minister throughout the whole of the last Labour Government, explained, decision making in government – particularly in response to crisis – is often done hastily and based “inevitably, on inadequate information. Inevitably about things that are going to happen in the future, so they are uncertain. [You have] to make the best decisions and then to move on, and to accept that some of the decisions will not be correct in retrospect.”

Ministers who had legal or business backgrounds and were used to distilling information found this an advantage when making decisions, and most ministers we interviewed were naturally confident, sometimes supremely so, in their own instincts. Most ministers suggested getting officials in a room to debate issues and taking soundings from special

advisers or outsiders, though some preferred using written documents and detailed analysis to inform their decisions. What is important is that ministers communicate, via their private offices, their own preferred style of working so that the department can present information and advice in a way that works for the minister.

4. Encourage teamwork and challenge

It might seem a contrast to 'decisiveness', but effective ministers are willing to be challenged, to listen and to work constructively with their officials, fellow ministers and external stakeholders. "The civil service is not a conspiracy to stop ministers doing things", said David Willetts, then Science and Universities Minister and now a Lord. "It is worth trying to understand why they don't think it will work to see whether it's a valid reason and if there is a genuine concern that has to be tackled." Steve Webb argued that "an effective minister has dialogue, is not a dictator, is able to hear challenging voices, move in response to them... you just make better decisions I think if you expose yourself to a broader range of voices". [Caroline Spelman](#) (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary 2010–12), while conceding that it "isn't necessarily the currency in which politics operates", felt that a good secretary of state was one who could generate "a good culture within the department" and take seriously their leadership position, including as a manager of a ministerial team and special advisers.

In order to build relationships and encourage challenge in the department, ministers tried a number of tactics. How they set the tone mattered. Andrew Mitchell, for example, put a big meeting table in his office to encourage group discussion, while Ken Clarke sought to make the atmosphere of his departments like a "debating society" and Tim Loughton had "open-door slots". Some ministers encouraged officials to call them by their first name rather than by their titles or tried to get to know staff through informal socialising or walking the floor: "You just walk around and 'What are you working on this afternoon?', 'Is that your son? How old is he?' or 'Is that your daughter?', 'Is that a photo of your wedding?' – all of those little personal touches make a huge amount of difference", said Hugh Robertson. Visits to the front line – hospitals, schools, job centres and so on – also helped ministers to engage with public servants who they might not otherwise encounter in SW1.

5. Win public support

Effective ministers can carry people with them. Public opposition to government policy through petitions, strikes and daily hammerings online might be a sign of a healthy democracy but they are not a good look for an ambitious minister who wants to show the Prime Minister they have everything under control. As Ed Balls commented, “you’ve got to go out to the outside world and make them part of your mission”.

Ministers recommended active stakeholder management. Patricia Hewitt, for example, spent her first weekend as Health Secretary calling chiefs of the British Medical Association, the NHS Confederation and so on and asked her private office to provide “a relationship analysis, which tells me ‘These are the people I need to see every month, and these are the people I need to see every three months or six months, and those are the people I just see as and when.’” They also recommended looking beyond the ‘usual suspects’ – as George Freeman argued, “a lot of the most exciting small players and innovators just don’t have that sophisticated conduit and conversation with government”.

Doing media is necessary to make a case to the public and get them on side with your reforms. Some ministers regretted not spending enough time on it: “If people don’t see you then they don’t know what you’re doing. And so unless you’re out there banging the drum remorselessly, tirelessly, tediously, I think people will tend to move on. And that’s a nature of a 24-hour media”, said [Mark Prisk](#), who was Housing Minister from 2012–13. Some ministers are naturals in front of a camera and enjoy getting on the front foot, others have to work a little harder (“I wasn’t always the sharpest media operator” – Michael Moore), by practice or training.

6. Earn the respect of Parliament

Ministers who perform badly in Parliament can lose the confidence of the whips, their backbench colleagues and eventually the Prime Minister, so should “never take the House of Commons for granted” ([Bob Neill](#)).ⁱ Mark Hoban suggested that “if you can command the respect of your opponents then I think that is a good sign actually because it means even if you are dealing with a very sensitive brief, it shows that if you handle it well and sensitively and carefully and are solid and robust in your defence... you get a lot of brownie points for that”.

Projecting confidence and calm helps ministers to earn respect in Parliament. Ministers also advised building popularity in the House

ⁱ Minister for Local Government and Planning 2010–12.

of Commons through spending time with colleagues – and listening to their concerns – in the lobbies and tea rooms. [David Howell](#) (a minister in the 1980s and a Foreign Office Lords minister 2010–12) raised the example of Willie Whitelaw, arguing that his charm, humour and agility in the House meant that it mattered less that his grasp of policy detail was not strong – popularity with colleagues goes a long way and “if you can keep Parliament on your side and keep the party on your side, that is a great relief, enabling you to get on with the main jobs of the minister”.

Ministers recommended preparation and taking the time to get a good grasp of detail before going into questions or debates, using the private office to get “the support to make sure you can be on top of your brief”, as the Liberal Democrat Peer [Jim Wallace](#) advised. Knowledge of the issues is particularly important in select committees: “You are there for two hours usually and you are examined in detail on every single policy within your brief and that is very tough”, said former Select Committee Chair John Whittingdale. Alan Johnson described the Committee corridor as “much more scary” than the floor of the House; “you have to really know your stuff, you had to really work before you go in there”.

A slightly different debating style works in the House of Lords – the House of Parliament that government tends to focus on less, whose members tend to be politer, more experienced, more technocratic than their Commons counterparts. Ian Livingston recommended finding a tone that is expert but respectful: “Do your work and you treat them with respect and a certain amount of humour, don’t try and seek confrontation... the Lords will reject party tribalism if you’re wrong and will give you a lot of leeway if you are right and prepared to listen and answer and engage.” [Edward Faulks](#), a recent Justice Minister, also advised Lords ministers to “try hard not to be too political unless it is absolutely necessary”. For Philip Hunt, “the key thing is to focus on making sure you’re OK in the Lords because if you’re not, you’re finished. And I can see now the ones that will answer a question, then march out, they don’t get that you need to soak up the atmosphere.”

Part Three: Ways forward

As we have outlined, ministerial roles are unusual and demanding. While it is difficult for any minister to be good at every single aspect of their role, there are ways in which they can maximise the opportunities of office and a wealth of advice from former ministers to help them do so. In this section, we consider the wider context and whether a greater focus on learning and support for ministers would help them to be more effective in their roles.

Should there be more support for ministers?

Historically, politicians have been resistant to anything that looks too much like codification of their jobs, and prime ministers and opposition leaders sceptical about anything that might resemble corporate HR – training, appraisal, support, management. Politicians value their individuality and independence, are confident (maybe overconfident) in their own abilities and are understandably nervous of ‘professionalisation’.

But this does not mean that there should be no attempt at preparation or learning. It seems extraordinary that some ministers are thrown into these difficult but vitally important jobs without so much as an hour’s session on what the job involves or how Whitehall works, a handover discussion with a predecessor, or giving thought to what skills they will need to perform the job. The skills that Commons ministers have developed through careers campaigning, getting elected and performing in the House do give them an excellent grounding in the parliamentary and political side of the ministerial role. However, they need very different skills and knowledge in order to lead a department effectively. Conversely, the management skills that outsiders, usually Lords ministers, build up through years in business serve them well in some respects, but they struggle with Parliament and politics.

Some ministers we interviewed thought that there should be more support and training available. “We don’t do nearly enough HR, career development, managing people who are going through a difficult period”, said George Young, while [Alistair Burt](#)ⁱ argued that: “The more preparation you can give to people, both before they might take office and when they’re in office, the better. Whether or not someone is a good or poor minister will emerge in time but at least you can give people the best

ⁱ Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs 2010–13; Minister for Community and Social Care 2015–16.

chance to do the job.” He urged would-be ministers to “take seriously the opportunities to listen to other people, study case studies and things like that”.

At the Institute for Government we have attempted to fill some of this gap through our private work for ministers, including seminars, inductions and confidential appraisals. This is most effective when sessions are tailored to the particular role of ministers and respect the political as well as the technocratic side of the job; ministers are not quite like managers in other organisations and so generic leadership training isn’t suitable for them. When ministers do participate in some form of support or preparation, they find it useful – [Lynne Featherstone](#), now in the House of Lords and a Home Office minister during the Coalition Government, described going to an Institute for Government induction as “probably the most valuable thing that happened to me”. It is also why we decided to publish the Ministers Reflect interviews in full: so that ministers, and those around them, would have a ready source of advice from predecessors.

What can leaders do?

It is not just up to individual ministers to seek advice and take charge of their own development, but also for prime ministers and party leaders to think seriously about leadership and the performance of their teams – whether preparation for government in opposition, induction support for new ministers on taking office or ongoing advice for ministers who want to make the most of their time in government. Prime ministers set the rules, including who goes where, how much special adviser support ministers get and, unless driven by external circumstance, how frequently they reshuffle the team. They also set the style and tone of a government. Damian Green, now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, suggested that it might not be so naïve to hope for a more professional approach to the ministerial role – but serious political will is required:

“We all know that ministers are hired and fired for a number of reasons, and we sort of all accept that as ‘that’s the way things are’. Well they needn’t be. The real revolution for politicians if you like would be to say: ‘We’re now going to treat you like a sort of manager in a company, and we’re to have development programmes and you’re going to have training and you’re going to be assessed regularly and in an objective way and your future progress will depend on that.’ And you get to that stage and everyone says: ‘Oh, it’s impossible because in the end, prime ministers will want more women or more northerners or they’ll just dislike people and want to get rid of them.’ Well, a strong-minded prime minister will say: ‘No, actually what I want is to run an effective government, and I’m going to do it that way.’”

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About the author

Nicola joined the Institute for Government in 2013. She leads the Institute's 'Leadership for Government' programme, including the Ministers Reflect project.

The Institute for Government's role in supporting ministers

Providing free advice and support for ministers, special advisers, private offices and opposition parties preparing for government has been a core part of the Institute for Government's mission since our founding. Our current programme includes:

- group induction sessions for new ministers, covering the role of ministers and how to get things done in government, including advice from senior civil servants and former ministers
- confidential performance reviews for senior ministers
- hosting and facilitating awaydays or workshops for top teams
- seminars on cross-cutting issues for ministers, such as how to work with devolved nations
- one-to-one advice sessions, including on policy making and implementation
- events and training for private offices
- interviews with former ministers as part of our continuing [Ministers Reflect](#) series.

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