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Taking the Helm

Thoughts for Secretaries of State taking over a Department

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## Thoughts for Secretaries of State taking over a Department

The Institute for Government programme for Secretaries of State offers options to enable you to manage most effectively the major challenges you will face. This will include breakfast and dinner seminars where you can explore core cross-cutting issues, personalised development activities focusing on the needs of individual ministers, and a summer recess programme to focus and reflect on what you believe to be the most important issues going forward.

### Laying the foundations

As a new minister you are thrown in at the deep end. You will be operating in large, unfamiliar departments run by people who may have spent the past few years serving a different Party and who have to come to terms with your changed priorities. All departments will have significant financial challenges despite having very large budgets and many of the staff will feel uncertain about their future civil service careers. You will need to demonstrate leadership and courage with honesty from day one about cutting costs and how that will be delivered. You will be bombarded by briefings and expected to make decisions quickly but while unsure what the ramifications might be and will be doing this while coping with competing constituency, Party and parliamentary demands on your time. You could quickly become overwhelmed. High ministerial office is demanding. Expect to feel exhausted!

### The Private Office

In this highly pressurised environment, the Private Office should be your lifeline and your link with the department. It is there to make the

department work for you and your priorities and to make you work for the department. An effective Private Office will translate your requirements into terms the department will respond to readily. They will task the appropriate officials on your behalf. They will also translate and prioritise the department's requests to you, helping you to understand what you are being asked to decide. All Private Offices must understand the competing demands on their minister's diary and that includes your constituency responsibilities. An effective Private Office has to be able to operate adroitly within the system, even if it can come across as too bureaucratic or too tied up in the internal process.

### Communicating your work preferences

The first priority for your Private Office will be to understand how you want to work. You will have a distinctive style of working. Your Private Office will need to adjust to your style. They will need to know how you like to be briefed, the way you like your papers presented and the style and size of briefing meetings and so forth. However, as well as adapting your Private Office to suit you, you will also need to recognise that their

approach might be better than yours in certain circumstances. You should use any planned staff moves in your Private Office to choose people who fit your style while being realistic about what your staff can do.

### **The difference between what you say and what you mean**

For your Private Office, you are The Boss. So be careful to distinguish when you are just thinking aloud from when you are expressing a preference. Over time, your Private Office will come to know that difference. Initially, however, it is helpful to make the distinction for them.

You will need to decide how hands-on you want to be, e.g. whether you want to see the details on everything or nothing or in just a few areas and where you will trust the Civil Service to take the lead. Also don't forget that the Civil Service is a paper-based system. This means that it's possible nothing happens if the right information isn't in the right papers.

Always remember that an unthinking comment by you to your Private Office can have quite serious consequences. It could mean that senior civil servants start working on something you don't really want. A minor negative reaction to someone's work could ruin their week while a major reaction could possibly damage their career prospects. This is a reality and you should handle negative feedback carefully.

### **Diary management**

Make sure you reserve time in the diary for being in Parliament – for PMQs and at other times to see MPs. You should never forget you are also an MP. It is important to populate your diary immediately with things you MUST do in the first six months. These include parliamentary/constituency events, if known, party events, including conference, and family events, including holidays. As soon as the dates are known, ministerial diary entries should include departmental questions and preparation time. You should ensure that the whole ministerial team does this. Make sure you allocate time every week to discuss the diary – but do not become obsessed about it. Be aware of duty weekend arrangements and what this means.

### **Internal relationships are very important**

Beyond the Private Office, there are seven key relationships for a Secretary of State, in particular: with the Permanent Secretary, with the Departmental Board, with Number 10, with Parliament, with your ministerial team, with your Special Advisers and with your communications team. All are different but all are crucial for success.

In the case of the Permanent Secretary, the wider Civil Service and Departmental Boards, don't start from the presumption that it's 'Yes Minister'.

These people really are there to help you. The more exposure senior officials have to you, the more likely they are to understand you and represent your views effectively across Whitehall. You will need to build trust so that if and when something goes wrong, you will have total support from your officials.

You should work with your Private Office to identify the officials who can best help you deliver your priorities and can leverage the wider department into action. There will be pockets of expertise at more junior levels in the department, which you should identify and use.

You or your Party may have distinctive views of how you want the department to change. The senior management of departments is now formed into Management Boards. These boards exercise both strategic and operational functions and are made up of the most senior civil servants with non-executive directors. As Secretary of State you will need to develop a working relationship with the whole Board, including non-execs, not just the Permanent Secretary.

You may prefer to work with the people that are doing the work, can answer your questions quickly and have the expertise. Progress can be a lot quicker if you talk to the person who is doing the work directly, however junior, rather than assuming the message always filters down efficiently. The downside to this approach could be that senior management may not fully

understand your requirements and so, when the policy team needs more support for a project, it's too late to join everything up at the most senior levels.

There is also the question of whom you hold to account for the work being done. Even if you are working most closely with more junior staff, you should always make sure the relevant Director General takes full ownership of the whole piece.

### **The ministerial team**

You should think carefully about how you want your ministerial team to work. You lead it by shaping and owning the team. They are there to help you. You need to remember that you don't have to do it all yourself. Teams always work best when there is clarity on each individual's roles and responsibilities. As Secretary of State you are in charge of everything but are also responsible for delegation to junior ministers. You should have an honest discussion about the suitability of the division of responsibilities among your ministerial team.

Your junior ministers will spend a lot of time in the department. They will have the same balance of competing priorities and many of the same stresses as you, but without getting the payoffs of the power, profile and publicity which come to you as Secretary of State. You will need to be wary of ministers championing competing causes from different parts of the department. Ministerial

teams tend to work best when they sit down collectively to resolve official-level arguments. It is YOUR decision that counts.

You will face major financial challenges. The Management Board and your ministerial team will need to have a clear understanding of the nature and effect of constrained financial circumstances on the operation of your department. Unless you convene and chair meetings with all of them, that shared understanding will not emerge. Almost all of the decisions that you make as Secretary of State will be affected by the financial constraints under which you operate. Responsibility for living within your means must be a shared responsibility. You should be alert to the possibility that some officials will try to play ministers off against each other to promote their own proposal or protect their budget, although the minister concerned will not be aware of this.

It is valuable to have ministerial meetings with no officials/private secretaries present, so that your team can discuss politics and their moans and experiences of working in the department freely. Despite being a ministerial team, they may see very little of each other day-to-day and if they participate only in official, chaired meetings there can be a lack of genuine communication. Get off to a good start: within days of appointment take the whole ministerial team to dinner.

## Special Advisers

You should think about how you want your special advisers to work with the Private Office, ministerial team and with the wider department and get this settled and understood early on. Be clear with your advisers about what you want them to do and what their priorities should be. If you ask your advisers to look at everything before you do, this is likely to overload them and cause delays in getting you timely information. You need to decide whether you want them to offer independent advice, or to engage with the department to improve the quality of what's produced. Advisers can also be a useful interface with officials and help to present your arguments and structure speeches. You need to be clear how much you want them to act independently and what is ultra vires because you will need to back them in any disputes with officials.

You will need to bridge the divide between politics and administration. The department will not tell you what they think of your advisers unless you ask them how effective they are being. The very best advisers build strong relationships with civil servants while maintaining their independence on your behalf. They are treated like extensions of you and their conduct will reflect personally on you. Even if you want to 'contract out' the rougher edges of getting things done, this could still rebound on you if it goes wrong.

## Press and communications team

You will quickly get to know the Communications Director and Head of News, as well as the internal and strategic communications teams. Of course, communication goes wider than this and you will need to engage with others as well.

You should be in charge of departmental communications. However, much of the media environment in which you will operate will be beyond influence by even the best departmental communications team. You should not become too concerned about this. The print and electronic media compete with the unregulated media environment of the web. You should understand the communications environment and just how little you can control it.

You must make sure your communications team know your key messages. It is they who will be answering calls from journalists every day and who will spot opportunities for you to get your message across. However, they can also be defensive and act as story stoppers. If you want a more proactive approach, they need to understand that and your vision. You could get extra traction by using your speechwriter, who will understand your vision and its nuances, to help policy teams to understand your agenda.

## Managing relations beyond the department

Your Private Office will be most effective once it understands how you want to manage relationships with your ministerial colleagues, especially those in other departments with whom you do regular business, Parliament (individual MPs, Select Committees), journalists (whom do you rate/trust?) and other key external contacts whom you consider important.

The department will also have views on who matters. You should discuss these with the Private Office and the Press Office. You should ensure that PQs and correspondence are handled well. Not all correspondence will have the same priority, particularly in a crisis. You should allocate the burden of ministerial correspondence and ministerial questions fairly across the team.

## Relations with other departments

Do not assume your department will be good at linking up with and working with other departments. They probably will not do this unless instructed to. If you want to work across Whitehall, and you almost certainly will, you will need to do it at ministerial level and work with your Private Office and Special Advisers to get the policy teams on board. Encouraging collaboration in this way can, however, sometimes mean giving up some unilateral control to other ministers.

# Taking the Helm – Ten tips

There are some things you will want to do straight away, but remember it's the start of a long haul. The UK is unique in asking people to take over the reins of government immediately. Euphoria + adrenalin + goodwill need to be converted into a solid base for future action. Here are 10 ideas for improving your chances of being effective:

1. **Invest in relationships.** Whether with key NGOs, business people, Chairs of Departmental Select Committees or your EU/international counterparts – relationships are key.
2. **Be visible, especially within your department.** Many employees will feel nervous about spending cuts and will want to hear directly from you why you have made particular decisions.
3. **Think ahead.** What do you want to get out of the Spending Review? Where do you want to be politically and departmentally by Conference, by Christmas, in a year's time? Make sure everyone in the department understands YOUR priorities.
4. **Be wary of adopting a “departmental position”.** Ministers are politicians and members of the government too, not just delegates for a department.
5. You need to understand what the **performance and other measurements** are which can assure you that the department is delivering your agenda.

You need to be able to track performance at a strategic level and to know what is going on with your budget.

6. Establish how you want to **work with the media** – the biggest differences between opposition and government are with the media. The media sees its role as holding government to account. Avoid knee-jerk reactions – officials will judge whether you hold your nerve under pressure.
7. Take the time to **get the approach to PQs and correspondence right.** Make sure people know how you want to handle this – and make sure you or your Private Office can explain what you want (rather than just that it wasn't right).
8. Think about how you want to **manage your ministerial team.** Work out a division of responsibilities that fits with their skills and interests – and will enable you to delegate.
9. Make good use of **your Special Advisers and other expert advisers.** It is important that you also get advice from outside the government machine as this will put you in the best possible position to make decisions.
10. **Decide what you want to achieve in your first three months, first year and first term** – and make sure your top team – ministers, officials and non-executives – are part of that decision-making process and will do their part to ensure success.

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*“The Institute was created to support the development of senior politicians and top civil servants, as well as conduct research and offer advice on effective government. Our programme for new Ministers is designed both to support those who have not held senior office before and to stretch those who have to operate even more effectively in their roles and departments.”*

Lord Sainsbury of Turville

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