



# Becoming Secretary of State

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**“Nothing quite prepares you for being a minister” – Tessa Jowell<sup>1</sup>**

**“As Secretary of State, you decide what the Government’s policy is... that was quite an eye opener to me.” – Patrick McLoughlin<sup>2</sup>**

Becoming a secretary of state can be a daunting experience, even for those who have been a minister before. Within days, a new secretary of state can be in front of a select committee, answering questions in Parliament, defending government policy to the media or leading the response to a national emergency.

Many secretaries of state will only have a short tenure in office, 18 months to two years if they are lucky. This means that they do not have the luxury of time to learn the ropes; the break-neck speed of the job and the expectation that they hit the ground running leaves little time to adjust and consider how to do the job well.

For those who come into the role with little ministerial experience, the shock is even greater. Caroline Spelman, who became Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2010, reflected on her arrival in the role:

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“We as ministers, particularly me with no ministerial experience, didn’t actually know what was required of us... no-one had explained that to us”.<sup>3</sup> Some individuals move from being secretary of state in one department to another, but each role brings with it very different challenges. Learning a new portfolio is no easy task. As Ken Clarke, a former Chancellor and secretary of state in four departments, put it, “after two years, you are sitting in control now... And then... you move on to the next department and you are back at the beginning, there you are, panicking again.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the huge challenges of the role, there is very little guidance for new secretaries of state on how to do the job. While there have been book-length treatments of being a minister, such as Gerald Kaufman’s *How to be a Minister* and Peter Riddell’s *15 Minutes of Power: The uncertain life of British ministers*, there is little practical advice to secretaries of state on how to prepare for the office they are about to hold, the mechanics of what happens when they are appointed, the early decisions a secretary of state is required to make, or what they should be thinking about as they take on the job.

This paper aims to help fill that gap. Drawing on previous Institute for Government research and our collection of interviews with former ministers in the *Ministers Reflect* archive, it sets out:

1. **The transition** – what happens when, how best to prepare, the first week in office and the key things new secretaries of state should ask of themselves and the people around them.
2. **The organisation** – how to understand the department, the questions they should be asking, and who does what in the department.
3. **The personal adjustment** – how to make decisions and prioritise tasks, managing their diary and ‘ministerial’ or ‘red box’ (the red despatch case in which ministers carry official documents), making time for Parliament, focusing on implementation and maintaining a work/life balance.
4. **Conclusion: the preparation** – our summary of recommendations for a new secretary of state.

The job of secretary of state involves several roles, and these vary according to the individual, the political climate and the department they lead.<sup>5</sup> He or she is the political head of a department and the “constitutional essence of a minister’s role” is to make decisions.<sup>6</sup> The Secretary of State also represents the Government publicly and is accountable to Parliament for everything that happens in their department. Like all ministers, a secretary of state is bound by collective responsibility and as part of the Cabinet he or she contributes to policy decision making across the whole of the Government. Balancing these roles is a difficult task. By understanding the organisation he or she inherits, the nature of its role and its key relationships and stakeholders, the new Secretary of State will be better placed to perform their role effectively.

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## Becoming Secretary of State – the transition

Prime ministers have an idea they are going to assume the role before it happens. Secretaries of state often do not have that luxury. Justine Greening recalls being appointed by David Cameron via phone: “He was on a train. It promptly cut out, of course, because mobile signals aren’t great on a train. The next thing I know, I’m not Economic Secretary to the Treasury anymore... I’m suddenly Secretary of State for Transport.”<sup>7</sup>

Nicky Morgan was moved from a junior ministerial position at the Treasury to Secretary of State at the Department for Education. The move came as a surprise to both her and the civil servants at her new department, and she recalls (also) finding out via a phone call from No.10: “‘Can you come to Downing Street in about ten minutes?’ and I said ‘Yes’ and they said ‘Exactly ten minutes’ and that’s it! You don’t know anything until you sit down in front of the Prime Minister.”<sup>8</sup>

How a new secretary of state experiences the transition depends significantly on his or her previous position. An experienced secretary of state who moves departments will need to adjust to the new department but will be familiar with the mechanics of government; an experienced shadow secretary of state will have their policy priorities ready and the civil service is likely to be prepared for their arrival, having studied the parties’ manifestos (though the adjustment to government will itself be a shock for those who have previously only been in opposition).

However, as with Justine Greening and Nicky Morgan, an appointment may happen very quickly and even unexpectedly; quite often, only the most senior politicians who are closest to the Prime Minister will be aware of the position they are likely to be offered in advance.

The routine of appointment is well known and rapid: a phone call asking the appointee to come to No. 10; a quick meeting with the Prime Minister, or the switchboard saying you are being put through to them; in some cases, the Prime Minister will outline their priorities for the new secretary of state, but in other cases not; finally, after this whirlwind, Cabinet ministers then go back out the No.10 door to face the cameras and find the car that will drive them to their new department.

### Getting to know the department

On arriving at the department, the new Secretary of State will be greeted by their Permanent Secretary and private office staff. He or she may be asked if they want introductory meetings or a townhall meeting with departmental staff, which can be an early opportunity for everyone to get a sense of what the new Secretary of State expects. As Dominic Grieve recalled from his first day as Attorney General, soon after being appointed he arrived at his department where his new staff were assembled; he “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”.<sup>9</sup>

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New secretaries of state are almost immediately immersed in briefings by the department. Whenever there is an election or if civil servants know a new secretary of state is likely, they will develop first-day briefing documents. These cover the key issues and decisions that face the department, its approximate organisation and budget, and the policy landscape in the short and long term. They may also include details of the key policies in the department, plans for meetings with key stakeholders (such as leaders of the key public bodies or community groups), or a proposed timetable for the parliamentary sequencing of key legislation. If it is a new government following an election, they will also include manifesto commitments and how the civil service thinks these can be delivered.

Ministers of any level rarely have time to read the full briefing documents in any depth. John Healey, who held a number of junior ministerial roles in the last Labour Government, described the briefing as a “big, fat lever arched file... which I never got to read.”<sup>10</sup> Alan Johnson, a former secretary of state in no fewer than five departments, got these briefings in every new department he joined but thought “if anyone’s got past page 50, well done! Because you start reading it and suddenly the job’s on top of you”.<sup>11</sup>

As well as written briefings, a new secretary of state will discuss the condition of the department and his or her plans for office with the Permanent Secretary – the most senior civil servant in each department. James Purnell, who was Secretary of State in two departments between 2007 and 2009, recommended having “a really honest discussion [with the Permanent Secretary] about what you both want from the relationship”, as not having a good relationship “makes life much harder.”<sup>12</sup>

Different secretary of state roles vary considerably. Justine Greening described the three departments she headed as “different beasts”:

“Transport: there’s a massive operational piece there. Irrespective of whether you’ve subcontracted some franchise out, when it goes wrong it ends up on your desk. And it’s an investment department... DfID [the Department for International Development] is a massive spending department... But there’s a huge dose of foreign affairs in there that you can’t really quantify... Then...once you get into a department like Education where most of the grants are block grants given to schools, then it’s a very different beast to try and get a clear line of control through.”<sup>13</sup>

Even those ministers who have been a secretary of state before will take time to adjust to their new department and the different approach required. A number of ministers recommended seeking advice from their predecessors. Nicky Morgan asked Michael Gove, her predecessor as Education Secretary, his opinion on policies that he had been working on, which she found “very helpful”;<sup>14</sup> Jack Straw, who served as both Foreign and Home Secretary, “contacted Douglas Hurd, a predecessor of mine who was a friend, and still is, asked him to come in, to tell me how to do the job”, and asked him for a reading list.<sup>15</sup>

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## Getting to know the departmental team

The most important figures involved in inducting any new minister into the department are those that make up their private office. This is the civil service team dedicated to supporting the Secretary of State: managing his or her time, arranging meetings, selecting which papers they see and when, and advising them on the day-to-day responsibilities of the role. The private office provides continuity through changes of minister, and is appointed by the civil service, though ministers can ask for changes to the team if they feel they are needed.

Many former ministers stressed just how important the private office is to ministerial effectiveness. Jacqui Smith, who held various ministerial roles between 1999 and 2009, advised that in order to be effective, ministers must “decide how, and communicate to your private office how, you want to live your life.”<sup>16</sup> John Hutton and Leigh Lewis, in their book *How to be a Minister*, put it even more bluntly: “To be a successful minister you need to have a good private office. It is as basic as that.”<sup>17</sup> A new secretary of state communicating clearly how he or she would like to work and what their key priorities are will go a long way to maximising the effectiveness of the private office.

Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for four years, and of Health for two, saw that the private office “runs your life” and so “you need to be very clear about what you do want in your life and what you don’t want”.<sup>18</sup> In particular, ministerial boxes, which contain a range of papers, from urgent decisions to briefings on future meetings and responses to parliamentary questions, can be arranged to meet the Secretary of State’s working style. Stephen Hammond, who served as a junior minister in the Department for Transport between 2012 and 2014, arranged a top sheet listing all that was in the box, the date a decision was needed, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

The private office team, working with the departmental Permanent Secretary and the Cabinet Office, are also responsible for advising ministers on the application of the Ministerial Code, which sets out what is, and is not, appropriate for a minister.<sup>20</sup> This document, circulated in the name of the Prime Minister, is one of the few official guides that exist on what the role involves, how ministers work and what the rules are. For new ministers not used to government, it is essential reading, not least because breaking any of the rules can easily lead to an early departure.

Jo Swinson, when first appointed as a junior minister, said that reading “the Ministerial Code was one of the first things I did.”<sup>21</sup> Lynne Featherstone, a junior minister in both the Home Office and the Department for International Development did not, and soon found herself in trouble:

“I didn’t realise blogging, for a minister, is probably not the best exercise because you are bound to break the Ministerial Code about every five minutes because you are not allowed to say anything about any other portfolio and I did that in the first five minutes and this thing I had written about Iain Duncan Smith went worldwide so Theresa [May, then Home Secretary] called me into her office, like a naughty schoolgirl.”<sup>22</sup>

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The Ministerial Code also covers the role of special advisers (SpAds). Most secretaries of state will also be able to choose their own SpAds, though as they are formally appointed by the Prime Minister, any candidates will need No.10's approval. Some ministers will bring in SpAds who had served them in another department, or who were part of their team in Opposition. The choice of SpAds is a personal and political one and the Secretary of State needs to find a balance in their appointees between political nous, media savviness and an ability to get to grips with the subject.<sup>23</sup> SpAds also provide the civil service with an insight into the minister's thinking, and so should be on the same 'wavelength' as the Secretary of State.

With the exception of the Prime Minister and Chancellor, secretaries of state are generally entitled to appoint two SpAds. Many ministers now choose to have one focusing on policy and another more on media or press. Alan Johnson told us that SpAds can "make or break your time as a minister".<sup>24</sup> He also warned against being too closeted with SpAds and not allowing officials into the discussions:

"I heard of someone I replaced that their special advisers liked to go round the department saying 'Look, I'm the eyes and ears of my minister' and expected to be treated with some kind of reverence. I had particularly good special advisers, because they were good at making relationships very quickly."<sup>25</sup>

### Getting to know the ministerial team

A final key decision that is required of new secretaries of state is the appointment of his or her junior ministers (officially, Ministers of State or Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State) and how they intend to work with them. Either the appointment of particular ministers, or the allocation of policy portfolios, or both, is made by the Prime Minister. Few secretaries of state are asked their view. When taking over a department in a reshuffle, the ministerial team may even be inherited from the previous Secretary of State. Either way, understanding what the rest of the team is doing is an important task, although not always prioritised.

Deciding how to work with junior ministers is an important early decision for any new secretary of state. In the first instance this might be about how to manage the team: whether to have weekly or daily meetings, for example. But it also extends to wider signals a secretary of state sends about how much delegation he or she wants to allow: which areas of policy or legislation will be led by other ministers; how much of a role they will have in department-wide decision making; or how the ministers should work with the press. Liam Byrne, who held a range of ministerial roles in the last Labour Government, commented:

"You forget, actually, that when you come in with a new secretary of state, it actually takes them a bit of time to work out who is doing what job and it takes four or five days to pin down the allocation of responsibilities – and obviously as a junior minister that is the most important thing in the world! For the Secretary of State, that's about tenth on your list of things to be worried about."

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Junior ministers are the “workhorse” of the department.<sup>26</sup> But as Jonathan Djanogly, a former junior minister at the Ministry of Justice, put it, they can easily become “siloed” in their own area. According to Kitty Ussher, a junior minister between 2007 and 2009, it was the Secretary of State’s job to help junior ministers see the bigger picture: “As a junior minister you’ve only got partial sight, you’ve only got partial influence and actually sometimes, you just really know what your role is in the team”.

Secretaries of state manage their teams in very different ways, depending partly on their own personality and working style and partly on their relationship with their party colleagues. Some ministers spoke about the value of secretaries of state who left junior ministers alone to get on with their own roles.<sup>27</sup> For others it was about building a team. Margaret Beckett, who held a number of Cabinet roles in Tony Blair’s Government, was focused on helping her ministers develop, so that it would pay dividends in the future. Her view was “that everybody should have some kind of responsibilities on which they reported to me and so that they got the chance to build up experience, to have to exercise their own judgement”.<sup>28</sup>

Mark Garnier, a junior minister in the Department for International Trade from 2016 to 2018 praised Liam Fox for how accessible he was: “You could always send him a text and he’d catch up with you or would have a conversation.”<sup>29</sup> For Nicky Morgan her weekly team meetings involved asking “one of the ministers each week to talk about something they were doing and that’s really useful and important, for people to hear what else is going on in the department”. Ultimately, the Secretary of State is still accountable for the whole of the department, so managing what the rest of the ministerial team is doing is crucial to make sure that nothing is being missed.

### Deciding on priorities

A new secretary of state who has come into the Government having shadowed the same position in Opposition, or who has been promoted from a more junior position in the same department, should have key priorities ready; some of these may be based on existing manifesto policies or agreed government policy. For a newly promoted secretary of state, some of their new priorities may be simply continuing the work of their predecessor – or perhaps rescuing the department from a blunder that removed them.

Others have policy priorities set by the Prime Minister. For Jacqui Smith, “the only time in my ministerial career I really got guidance from the Prime Minister about what they wanted me to do was when I became Home Secretary, when Gordon Brown and his team had produced a letter that said ‘these are my priorities for the Home Office’”.<sup>30</sup>

Setting priorities from the outset (or as soon as possible once they are established) helps set the direction for the civil service. According to Lord Heseltine, “I remember giving my permanent secretary a list on an envelope of 10 things and saying, ‘this is the agenda.’”<sup>31</sup> For David Laws, a junior minister in the Coalition Government, this was about making sure that his time was focused on those priorities: “I think you can’t underestimate that you need not only to identify priorities, but then follow through on them and structure your day and your week and your month around that.”<sup>32</sup>

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But many still need to work out what they want to focus on in their time in the job. This can take time. For Ken Clarke, this time was important:

“Try to ignore the advice of colleagues, including the Prime Minister, about something you must do straight away, until you have had a meeting or two about it and decided you have really got your head around and you want to do it.... Deal with what is absolutely essential, but you have got to move on from just reacting nervously, event by event, document by document, dossier by dossier, submission by submission. After six months, you need to have some idea of what it is you want to do whilst you are in this portfolio.”<sup>33</sup>

### The first week

The first week of a new secretary of state’s tenure will vary with the portfolio, the circumstances and the timing of their appointment. They may need to attend meetings or events that their predecessor accepted invitations to and that cannot be moved, and various organisations will be keen to get an early audience with the incoming Secretary of State.

Any new secretary of state will quickly find themselves being swamped by requests for meetings, decisions and visits – as well as responding to real-world events. Stephen Crabb talked about being made Secretary of State for Work and Pensions as “almost an emergency appointment” when his predecessor, Iain Duncan Smith, quit over disagreements with the Chancellor.<sup>34</sup> Crabb was appointed on a Saturday and the following Monday had to make a statement in Parliament about the policy that had caused Iain Duncan Smith’s resignation (the planned cuts to Personal Independence Payments). He “spent that weekend basically in negotiations between No.10 and the Treasury about what we were going to say about the Personal Independence Payments cuts and any other welfare changes.”<sup>35</sup>

A new secretary of state may get a little bit of leeway as they are getting up to speed, but as Jacqui Smith pointed out, this is a “pretty short period of grace”. During her first few days as Home Secretary, Smith was confronted with a major terrorist attack (on Glasgow Airport in 2007). For her, the incident provided a rapid induction into the department:

‘Very quickly I met the most senior counter-terror people both in the police and in the security agencies. I got a feel for what happens when there actually is a live terror attack. I got a feel for what does COBR [Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms; emergency council] do and why is that significant, what role does a minister play at a time like this, what value can you add actually?’<sup>36</sup>

The first week will also feature a meeting of the Cabinet, the Government’s formal decision making body, which meets once a week. Nicky Morgan had advice for a new secretary of state attending the Cabinet for the first time: “Don’t say very much to start off with. See what the lie of the land is and then think about when you can most make an impactful contribution.”<sup>37</sup>

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For those in departments with public service delivery or international responsibilities, the first week may include frontline or international visits. On her appointment as Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett was “plunged straight into the Iran negotiations”,<sup>38</sup> while Michael Fallon “was on a plane every second week in [the Ministry of] Defence. That was partly because of Iraq and Afghanistan, so going to Baghdad and Kabul, going to Washington and so on.”<sup>39</sup>

Some new secretaries of state opt for a public speech early on in their tenure to set out their priorities. Liam Byrne, though not a secretary of state, aimed for a keynote speech 20 days into the role, in which he would set out his strategic priorities. During that time, the department was tasked with getting “a venue, message and... a research programme” that got it up to speed with “the analysis, the history of policy, some of the strategic problems” in preparation for the address.<sup>40</sup>

### **The relationship with No.10 and the Treasury**

Outside their own department, the most important relationships for any secretary of state will be with the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Number 10 and the Treasury will take an interest in all decisions made by government departments, particularly those that may attract media attention. The No.10 ‘grid’, which is used to plan government announcements, means that Downing Street will always seek to maintain tight control of ministers’ relationships with the media.

Margaret Beckett noted the “shock on [her team’s] faces when it was explained to them that when you were a minister... probably Number 10 had to sign off potentially on the content of any speech, or any press release”, which was a big change from how they had operated in the Opposition. As Justice Secretary, Ken Clarke “found all kinds of Number 10 apparatchiks were turning up in the department, having meetings with my officials and discussing policy.”

The Treasury takes a similarly close interest, with a particular focus on departmental spending and any policies that could be deemed to affect the economy. Liberal Democrat Nick Harvey, who served as a junior minister at the Ministry of Defence, explained how he was “astonished by the extent to which Number 10 and the Treasury and the Cabinet Office stuck their nose into departmental affairs.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Caroline Spelman “found the Treasury very hard to deal with; it has all the power because it has all the money”.<sup>42</sup> David Willetts, a junior minister at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) during the Coalition, noted an inbuilt tension, compounded by governing with another party: “BIS had by and large a poor relationship with the Treasury. It is one of the great dysfunctional relationships in government. Who is the economics ministry? Is the Treasury the economics ministry or is BIS the economics ministry?”<sup>43</sup>

Managing the relationships with both Number 10 and the Treasury is key to being a successful secretary of state. Some, however, are comfortable with the relationship becoming confrontational. Ken Clarke had the No.10 “apparatchiks” mentioned above “all thrown out and said if anybody wants to come over from No.10, to have a meeting

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with my officials, I shall happily chair a meeting". He also "didn't bother with the grid and asking permission [for announcements] and all this rubbish."

That said, a new or less seasoned secretary of state might not feel able to be so bold. Other former ministers stressed the importance of building productive personal relationships with ministers and SpAds in both No.10 and the Treasury. Pensions Minister Steve Webb "would ring Danny [Alexander, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury]"<sup>44</sup> if he needed an issue unblocking at the Treasury. Similarly, David Willetts would try to look at things from the Treasury's point of view, taking "items that were in the BIS ask list, but re-presented and re-prioritised in accordance with what I knew [the Treasury's] priorities were." Patricia Hewitt had similar advice: "really understand what your Prime Minister wants and expects, and then stay very close to [the] Prime Minister or Number 10 and [the] Chancellor and his or her special advisors, because you're going to need that to make things happen."<sup>45</sup>

## Becoming Secretary of State – the organisation

For any new secretary of state, turning policy objectives or manifesto commitments into reality means understanding the organisation that will support them.

### The key people

The people who support a secretary of state include civil servants, who provide continuity in the department, and political staff, whom the new Secretary of State may not have much of a say over depending on their own standing with the Prime Minister. Some of the most important people to be aware of include:

- **Permanent Secretary:** the department's civil service head. He or she is a key figure within the department, as Ken Clarke remembers: "The atmosphere in the department rather depended on who you got as permanent secretary."<sup>46</sup>
- **Directors General:** senior civil servants responsible for key policy portfolios or departmental management functions.
- **Private office staff:** a team of civil servants supporting the secretary of state. They work closely with the secretary of state, acting as "gatekeepers"<sup>47</sup> to the minister, and organising their ministerial box and diary.
- **Special Advisers (SpAds):** special advisers are appointed by the Secretary of State with the prior approval from No.10. Their specific roles depend on what the Secretary of State deems most important. They may be mainly press-focused, tasked with working across departments or to manage relationships within the political party, for example.
- **Junior ministers:** these support the Secretary of State, generally covering a specific area of policy or their portfolio. The number of junior ministers varies by department, but every department will have a junior minister to represent it in the House of Lords.

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## Support structures

There is a lot of consistency in the type of things that secretaries of state report finding useful in terms of support structures, and the civil service is well equipped to provide support to ministers. It is unlikely that a new secretary of state will need to change structures beyond their private office and they rarely have the flexibility to change the support structures around them (like new prime ministers do). Nonetheless they can use existing structures to support them in their decision making.

The civil service day one briefing will provide an in-depth overview of each department. At a minimum, new secretaries of state should be aware of the following structures:

- **The civil service:** the set-up of the civil service varies depending on the department but will consist of multiple grades or levels of seniority and 28 professions. The latter broadly fall into the categories of operational delivery, cross-departmental specialisms, and departmental specialisms. The largest grouping is operational delivery – the frontline staff in delivery departments – while the civil servants that secretaries of state are most likely to interact with are those working in policy analysis and communications. Departmental specialisms are unique to individual departments, for example tax specialists working at HMRC and the Treasury.
- **Departmental boards:** each department has a board that consists of the Secretary of State as chair, the junior ministers, the Permanent Secretary and other senior civil servants, as well as non-executive members brought from outside of government to advise the board. This structure is there to support the decision making of the Secretary of State and manage departmental business.
- **Cabinet committees:** these bring together ministers from different departments to make decisions that affect the work of multiple parts of the Government.
- **Arms-length bodies (ALBs):** public bodies that have varying degrees of independence from the Government. In some departments ALBs spend the majority of the departmental budget and provide oversight for a particular policy area, service or function. If something goes wrong in an ALB, however, the Secretary of State will still find themselves accountable to Parliament for the failure.
- **Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA):**<sup>48</sup> departments deliver a range of projects relating to infrastructure, defence capabilities, government IT systems and transforming public services. Supporting this activity from the centre of government is the IPA, a joint unit of the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. Described as a 'centre of expertise', it oversees government projects throughout their life cycle and develops the skills and capabilities of project leaders.

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## Becoming Secretary of State – the personal adjustment

### Decision making, responsibility and accountability

The Prime Minister and their secretaries of state are the primary decision makers in the Government. Even for secretaries of state who are stepping up from a minister of state role, which may have involved responsibility over a particular policy area, deciding on the direction of the department can be daunting. With the Secretary of State's decision making role comes accountability for the actions of the department – even when, in the case of the Department for Health and Social Care, for instance, large parts of the department are outside their direct control. As Alistair Burt, a former junior health minister, explained:

“Anything that goes wrong anywhere in the Health Service is your fault. Whereas anything that is done well in the Health Service is down to our marvellous NHS staff who do wonderful things despite the Government. And it's a bit wearing. I think it was wearing on civil servants and the department as well as ministers.”<sup>49</sup>

### Decisions

The role of secretary of state brings great power. As Patrick McLoughlin put it, “you decide what government policy is”.<sup>50</sup> When making decisions, secretaries of state have to balance a range of factors including the evidence, feasibility, propriety and cost of the decision – but also their party's position (perhaps based on the last manifesto), the Government's position (decided in Cabinet or Cabinet committee) and their own view.

The decisions made by secretaries of state are not just large policy decisions, but also many smaller decisions that come thick and fast. Consequently, new secretaries of state are in the somewhat unusual position of having to make numerous decisions very quickly, most of which can have significant repercussions, and for which they are accountable. According to Jacqui Smith, “one of the shocks of ministerial life is the speed with which decisions need to be taken. One of the shocks is the amount of paper and, not always decisions, but reading and general information and submissions that you need to process and the speed with which you need to do it.”<sup>51</sup>

Alan Johnson's advice to a new secretary of state is: “Don't be indecisive! Don't think that you can stick those things back in the red box and eventually they will go away. It's no good waiting for a week's time, 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”.<sup>52</sup>

One way to manage the quantity of decisions required can be to delegate certain areas to junior ministers. Vince Cable aimed to “make sure I understood everything but there were certain things I concentrated on”.<sup>53</sup> Michael Fallon, reflecting on his role as a junior education minister in the 1990s, said that his two Secretaries of State, John MacGregor and Ken Clarke, had a “very different style. John wanted to know everything and see

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everything, he checked your homework... Ken was much more trusting. They were both good bosses, but Ken delegated much more".<sup>54</sup>

### **Papers**

New secretaries of state need to consider how they work and how best to communicate that to the staff preparing papers and meetings for decisions. One of the important parts of this is managing their in-tray and red box. Ken Clarke felt he worked best in the evening, so would have his red box then.<sup>55</sup> Others prefer to work away from their boxes, in the form of meetings or phone calls.

A danger, especially early on, is that the civil service self-censors, providing advice that it thinks the minister wants to hear.<sup>56</sup> Ministers should make clear how they want information presented, and whether they want to discuss key decisions in meetings with officials as well as receiving written advice.

Secretaries of state must account for this decision making in Parliament, to their colleagues and to the public. If they want to pursue a decision that officials feel may be irregular, improper, poor value for money or infeasible, they may be required to 'direct' the department to continue regardless. In such instances (which are fairly rare), the Permanent Secretary will write to a secretary of state outlining officials' reservations and requesting such a 'direction' to proceed.<sup>57</sup>

### **Cabinet and Cabinet committees**

The Cabinet is in theory the most senior forum for government decision making. But depending on the attitude of different prime ministers, this may not actually be the case. Ken Clarke said that in David Cameron's Cabinet "the discussion on individual subjects is quite cursory. And sometimes it does seem... that it is merely held so that the Cabinet can be told what is going on".<sup>58</sup> Justine Greening reflected that with Theresa May as Prime Minister, "in Cabinet we had much fuller discussions" than under David Cameron.

While Cabinet meetings are the big set-piece discussions, many decisions requiring input from different ministers are actually made in Cabinet committees.<sup>59</sup> As David Willetts explained, these can be "incredibly important" or end up "not functioning", often because of personal disagreements between ministers.<sup>60</sup> Ensuring that the department is represented on the right committees is important. Willetts "managed to wangle, quite early on, a place on the Home Affairs Committee, which proved to be an incredibly important committee", as that was where decisions relevant to his ministerial portfolio were made.

### **Implementation**

As well as deciding on the overall direction of their department and their policy priorities, secretaries of state need to think about how those decisions and priorities will be implemented.

Ideally, new secretaries of state will have considered implementation before moving into the position – especially if coming from the Opposition after an election. Justine

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Greening highlighted the relationship between policy development and implementation: “Policy on its own is not enough. If it doesn’t have a strategy, doesn’t have an implementation plan, if you don’t know how you’re going to transition from where you’ve been to where you’re going to... then don’t be surprised when it doesn’t go well”.<sup>61</sup> The secretary of state needs to ensure that implementation is part of the discussion of new policy proposals and to seek assurance from officials that policy ideas are feasible in practice.

Patricia Hewitt, reflecting on her time in government and particularly in the Department of Health, believed that many ministers expected to be making the decisions, and implementation was the civil service’s problem – but, she argued, it is “no good being a minister” without understanding how your decisions will be put into practice.<sup>62</sup> Staying on top of the progress of policy, and obstacles that may come up in the process of implementation, is as important as providing the overarching policy direction.

Secretaries of state can create mechanisms within their department to provide them with information on the progress of policy implementation. Iain Duncan Smith “asked for what I called a ‘red team’ of outsiders to come in and to review the running of the [Universal Credit] programme... They made it very clear to me that this programme was not progressing in the way it was meant to.”<sup>63</sup>

Delegating to junior ministers, who may be able to stay closer to the detail of a particular implementation challenge, can be an effective way to ensure that political pressure is brought to bear without taking too much time in the secretary of state’s diary.<sup>64</sup> It is important to remember that some policies will ultimately be implemented by a public body, local authority or private company, for areas that are outsourced. Even where implementation is not the responsibility of departmental officials, the prestige and authority of a secretary of state can be a very effective way to keep others focused on delivering commitments they have made.

### **Managing Parliament**

Handling Parliament is crucial to being an effective minister. Jack Straw noted how important it is to “pay attention to the House of Commons, not do what a lot of my colleagues did which was to disappear”.<sup>65</sup> Maintaining the support of Parliament is crucial for numerous reasons. Getting legislation through Parliament requires the support of backbench colleagues. Jack Straw, again, warned against “disappear[ing] into the red box, in their ministerial suite of rooms”, as ministers would not be able to maintain their relationships with fellow MPs.<sup>66</sup> Putting in time to have lunch or spend an evening in Parliament, rather than just attending for departmental questions or select committee hearings, will pay off.

However, numerous former ministers have said that the civil service don’t always realise this, so making sure that civil servants are aware of Parliament’s importance is crucial. For Jacqui Smith, too often her civil servants would wave her out of the building with a jovial “‘Have a nice evening, Minister’ as you left at half six without much recognition

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that what you were doing was going over to Parliament, where individual MPs would be bending your ears about your policy or about constituency issues.”<sup>67</sup>

The degree to which Parliament takes up time in a secretary of state’s diary will depend on whether he or she is in a government with a majority or not. As well as meaning more time needs to be spent with parliamentary colleagues, minority government brings with it constant close votes, meaning that ministers cannot be far from the voting lobbies. It may also mean that wherever possible, policy aims need to be achieved without legislation.

As well as managing his or her own relationship with Parliament, the Secretary of State will need to decide who in their ministerial team will be in charge of any legislation passing through both Houses. The Secretary of State will also need to think about dividing responsibilities for parliamentary questions and select committee appearances (which can also feature senior officials).

### Managing the media

Perhaps one of the most significant differences in moving from opposition to government, and between the position of secretary of state and that of all others bar the Prime Minister itself, is the degree of media attention they receive. The job will be conducted “under the gaze of the media and the public”.<sup>68</sup>

Alistair Darling, Chancellor of the Exchequer 2007–10, stressed the importance of media management, saying that “if you let things get out of control, you’re ruined” and that a big question for any minister is “how you project yourself, the fact you’ve got to exude confidence.”<sup>69</sup> But the media can be an ally: Jo Swinson spoke about how the “positive reactions” from the media to her shared parental leave policy helped her “make a case for it within government because... it [increased] the cost, if you like, of opposing it”.<sup>70</sup>

Secretaries of state have multiple tools at their disposal for media management, including a team of official press officers and any SpAds whose role it is to focus on media relations. These two groups need to establish a good working relationship and division of labour; if this is achieved it can both create space for their secretary of state to set out a long-term agenda and deal with day-to-day issues.<sup>71</sup>

The press officers will take media enquiries and must be able to spot opportunities to get messages across, as well as act as “gatekeepers”.<sup>72</sup> Both they and the relevant SpAd will need to understand the main messages and nuance of the policy in question, and cultivate relationships with the press and No.10’s communications team. They will also know the media environment and be able to advise the minister on how best to handle it. A secretary of state is likely to already have their own network of media contacts by the time they reach Cabinet, but may want to get to know specialist correspondents in their departmental policy area once they are up to speed with their new portfolio.

### Managing the diary

The role of secretary of state involves juggling multiple roles: senior decision maker in their department; representative of that department, the Government and their party;

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member of the Cabinet; and constituency MP. All of this puts pressure on their diary. Much of the juggling is done for them by their private office, but to be effective, any secretary of state needs to be conscious of how their time is being spent.

As well as their ministerial work in Whitehall and Parliament, the secretary of state will take on regular travel commitments, whether to visit public service providers or private sector organisations in the UK that fall under their policy areas, or internationally to attend conferences or speak with other governments. Often, travel will allow useful discussions with people outside Westminster; Iain Duncan Smith “did a lot of visiting of job centres and benefit centres” which proved useful for him to understand how the Department for Work and Pensions policies worked on the ground and how they could be improved.<sup>73</sup> Secretaries of state at internationally oriented departments can expect to be abroad regularly; Jack Straw spoke of his “endless trips to Afghanistan and Iraq” as Foreign Secretary during the early 2000s.<sup>74</sup>

Stephen Crabb advised ministers: “Don’t be afraid to say no to things in the diary... be clear about what the meetings are there for and what is expected at the end of them.”<sup>75</sup> He discussed his priorities for the diary with his diary secretary and “after a bit of trial and error we got a structure that worked well.” Bringing together the constituency office and departmental private office can also help each understand the pressures faced by the other; Alan Johnson, with his Principal Private Secretary, took his entire private office to Hull to understand how the constituency office operated and vice versa”.<sup>76</sup>

### **The personal adjustment**

Ministers of all ranks have discussed the pressure of the job, the “colossal” hours<sup>77</sup> and “relentless pressure”, with many ministers averaging a 15-hour working day.<sup>78</sup> Personal life, such as family and sleep, become squeezed as ministers balance the role with constituency and media work.

This varies with the portfolio and depending on how particular secretaries of state manage the job. Andrew Mitchell, who was a junior minister in the Department of Social Security between 1995 and 1997, would have “six boxes most weekends” which he used to “slightly resent” because it encroached on his home life.<sup>79</sup> When he became Secretary of State for International Development 15 years later, he would “sit down with a box at 10 o’clock on a weekend evening and [then] suddenly look up and it’d be two o’clock in the morning”.

Former ministers have suggested several mechanisms for coping with these day-to-day pressures. Jack Straw said one of the most important pieces of advice he had for new ministers was “go to the gym”, because “if I’d not taken exercise throughout the period I wouldn’t have coped as well as I did in government,”<sup>80</sup> both as it enabled him to keep fit and spend time with others. In a similar vein, Michael Moore, Secretary of State for Scotland in the Coalition Government, “had a well-established little group of friends” which was “really helpful.”<sup>81</sup> John Healey, set clear boundaries: “on Friday and Saturday I was full time an MP and dad, and Sunday I was a dad.”<sup>82</sup>

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## Conclusion – how to prepare

All secretaries of state will want to hit the ground running. The tenure of a secretary of state is rarely very long, and there is no guarantee of how long he or she will be in position. Preparation can maximise effectiveness and help ensure what the Secretary of State wants to get done in office is achieved. Preparation can be very different for a secretary of state who has spent years shadowing in the Opposition, who has come from a junior position in the same department, or who has previous experience as a secretary of state in another department. For all, however, time spent preparing for the position will not be time wasted.

### 1. Devote time to preparation

The ability to prepare depends on the time, resources and opportunity an individual has to think about what type of secretary of state they want to be and how they want to work. This could be the result of years of preparation, or done in a matter of hours. If there is no time to prepare before taking office, they must take time to consider the key decisions when starting out – and try not to feel the pressure to make immediate announcements or reforms without knowing the department’s landscape.

### 2. Have clear priorities

Throughout all of the Institute for Government’s work, ministers and officials stress the need to have clear policy priorities and a plan for how they will be implemented. The civil service will respond if given direction. This does not mean reinventing the wheel, and the extent of policy change depends enormously on the political climate and department; it may simply mean continuing the work of the predecessor. In any case, giving a clear steer to the civil service and paying attention to implementation will go a long way to ensuring the best outcomes.

### 3. Think about ideal work practices

The private office is there to work for the Secretary of State. Private office staff prepare the Secretary of State’s boxes and diary, and act as “gatekeepers” of his or her time and attention. Communicating how this is to be done is crucial for an incoming secretary of state. Factoring in time for Parliament, constituency visits, home life and how the ministerial box should be prepared are all important things to consider.

### 4. Build a team

Secretaries of state may not have the power to reform the structures around them like the Prime Minister does, but they do have a say on their political advisers, the people they meet and in some cases their junior ministers, as well as the policies they can have responsibility over. Being clear about who does what will shape how the department works, how policies get implemented, and how the secretary of state spends their time.

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