Managing as a minister

How personal style and gender norms affect leadership in government

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Summary

Using the unique archive of the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect interviews,[1] this paper examines how ministers approach their management role and reflect on their relationship with the civil service. We looked at more than 100 interviews with former ministers in the archive to identify patterns in how ministers think about and adapt to the challenges of managing their offices and departments.

Ministers have different assumptions about the civil service and the management role that ministers ought to play. Many ministers reflect on adopting a transactional style, regarding the civil service as a potential challenge to be handled, a policy making resource to be optimised or a political risk to be contained. Others reflect on the value of a more transformational style. These ministers prioritise having a shared objective and vision for the department, building mutual trust, respect and understanding, or innovating with forms of engagement, dialogue and collaboration. There is some suggestion that women ministers are more likely than men to fall into this latter category of a perceived 'feminine' leadership style, while several women ministers identify a masculine norm of the 'good' minister, which they had to adapt to or reject.

Understanding how ministers approach their managerial role can help civil servants to better understand, accommodate and anticipate the challenges a new minister is likely to face, promising a flatter 'learning curve' for incoming ministers and a smoother transition for those they interact with and rely on.

At the same time, there is no 'one size fits all' approach to management, as ministers draw on their various backgrounds before politics to negotiate these relationships. A diversity of approaches to leadership in this context is an asset. It means ministers with different approaches and skills can work effectively across the range of departments and in a variety of political contexts. These findings reinforce long-standing calls for greater diversity at the top of the British government, since a greater range of personal experiences and professional backgrounds informs ministerial leadership styles.

Introduction

The relationship between ministers and civil servants in Westminster systems is famously one of co-dependence.[2] On the one hand, ministers exercise a great deal of discretion and their personal impact is potentially substantial. Departments need their minister to fight for resources, shape the direction of policy and 'set the tone'.[3] But on the other, their role is precarious and any impact short-lived.[4] With high rates of 'churn' in ministerial tenure, new ministers often lack adequate preparation for or substantive expertise in their portfolios, and they seldom have time in office to plan, oversee and implement major changes. They can therefore be highly dependent on the continuity that the civil service provides.

While much has been written about this complex relationship and its importance for the functioning of the British government, surprisingly little has been written from the perspective of the ministers who perform this uncertain or chameleonic role in managing a department. Using the Ministers Reflect archive offers an opportunity to systematically interrogate ministers' perspectives – how they experience the managerial demands of their role, what they see as the best way to manage their departments and how they learn to navigate their relationships with the civil service. Gaining new insight into this relationship can help us continue to learn how it works (or fails to work) in practice, and how it might work better in future.

Ministers Reflect comprises more than 100 'exit interviews' with former ministers in Westminster, from across the Thatcher, Blair, Brown, Cameron, May and Johnson governments. These semi-structured interviews focus on the question of what makes an effective minister. A key recurring focus of the interviews is on managing departments and engaging in relationships with the civil service. We draw on these insights to reflect on the experiences and perceptions of ministers.

Our analysis entailed three steps: a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the general trends in how ministers reflect on their relationship with the civil service and their managerial roles; an analysis of general patterns of similarity and difference in how ministers experience and perceive their relationships with the civil service; and a particular focus on how gendered norms and assumptions inflect these patterns.

- The first two steps of our analysis show that ministers generally have similar preferences and priorities in terms of the way they relate to people in their departments. But we find that beneath a surface-level consensus, there is significant divergence in how they go about building and managing these relationships. Indeed, we find that, consistent with literature on executive leadership in management studies, ministers tend to adopt one of two 'families' of disposition to intra-departmental relations: they either take more **transactional** approaches or they take more **transformational** approaches.

  Transactional ministers tend to see their departments as potential challenges to be controlled, as resources to be marshalled and optimised through effective incentives and the alignment of goals, or as posing risks to reputation that need to be minimised. Transformational ministers tend to reflect either on advocating for and innovating with collaborative engagement within their departments, or on adopting an incremental approach to building trust, respect and mutual understanding through a more informal, gradual and piecemeal process of relationship-building. This more fine-grained account of managerial styles, we hope, can help officials better anticipate and accommodate the preferences of incoming ministers in conditions of regular leadership 'churn'.

- The last step of our analysis tentatively suggests that these patterns relate to and reflect gendered norms and expectations. Although the sample size in the Ministers Reflect archive is small and imperfect, we find some evidence that women ministers are somewhat more likely to adopt transformational than transactional approaches to leadership in their departments. We note that this is especially true of more recent women ministers, suggesting that a more diverse slate of leadership styles may be becoming more common, with greater diversity in executive government in Britain. Several women ministers also identify a masculine norm of the 'good' minister, which they had to adapt to or reject.

This paper consists of four further sections. First, we provide an overview of broad trends. Second, we identify the different subtypes of 'transactional' and 'transformational' leadership in ministerial work. Third, we look at how these patterns differ for men and women. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of this analysis for the practice of executive government and minister–civil service relations.

What do ministers say about the civil service?

We used automated text analysis to examine the overall patterns of what ministers talk about when they discuss their private office and the civil service. Figure 1 maps the relationship between different elements of the job, based on how ministers talk about policy, parliament, the department and the civil service. The thickness of the lines between words shows how often they co-occur in what ministers are saying, that is, the thicker the line, the more closely related the two elements are in the interviews.

Figure 1 **The strength of the relationship between elements of a minister's job**
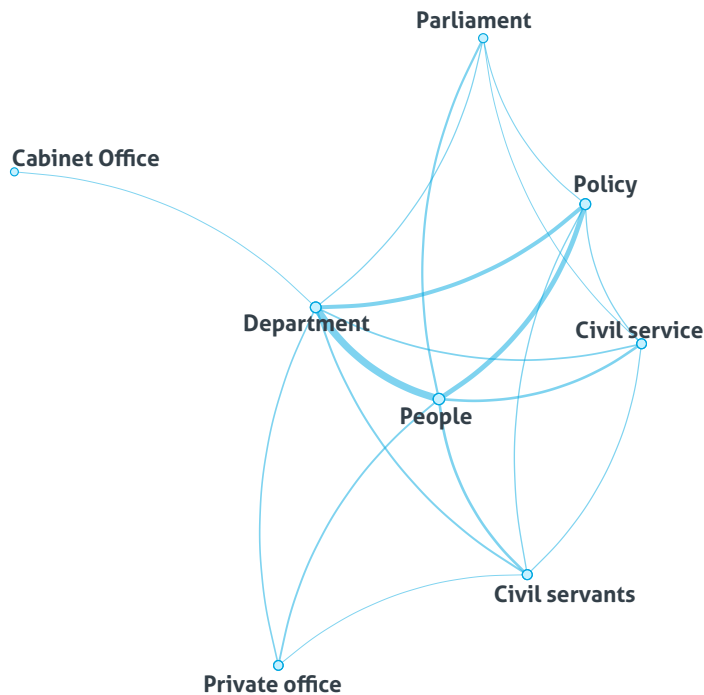
Source: Authors' analysis.

This analysis graphically points to some of the key broad trends that we picked up in a more exhaustive qualitative analysis. Combined, we can draw on them to highlight overarching themes on which most ministers – regardless of rank, background and era – agree, and which reinforce salient lessons for future ministers and officials.

- One notable feature is the centrality of 'people' in connecting the 'department', 'policy', 'civil service' and 'private office'. This reflects our qualitative insight about the importance of personal relationships in the day-to-day work of ministers, and especially in their reliance on trusted officials to establish and maintain these relationships. Consistent with previous Institute for Government analysis, we find that most ministers reflect at length on the crucial role of the private office, and getting on top of mundane issues such as diary management to ensure time is carved out for the variety of roles and responsibilities they face.[5]

- Another notable feature is the sidelining of parliament from discussions. It is clear that ministers seldom associate the civil service and their role in the department with parliament – and we know from qualitative analysis that, where it exists, this association is typically negative, reflective of frustration that they receive little support to connect the dual components of their role in the legislature and in the executive. Indeed, one of the most common frustrations is that the private office and civil servants underappreciate that ministers remain committed to parliamentary duties. Damian Green perhaps put it most pithily:

"The one thing that I suppose most strikes me was how little knowledge of and worry about parliament there was. It was one of the messages that I spent a lot of time getting through to the extent of giving talks to civil servants that actually this is hugely important for ministers, and you know, good civil servants want to serve their ministers. This is almost the only medium in which you can lose your job in about half an hour, and a lot of officials don't get that at all."

- The last notable feature is the dense connections to a substantive 'policy' focus – reflective of a common focus on the nitty-gritty policy role that ministers see as their core business. In qualitative terms, we note not just an emphasis on making policy a key focus, but also that ministers share a belief in the importance of setting clear priorities from the outset to stay on top of the policy agenda. This finding reinforces existing Institute for Government analysis and advice to ministers. David Gauke, for instance, says that to be most effective in office, as a minister you must "work out pretty quickly what it is that you want to achieve from your time in office... focus on your priorities... pursue them vigorously, determinedly".

Perhaps more importantly, beneath this relatively surface-level consensus, we also find evidence of significant divergence in how to develop, communicate and pursue these shared ideas and preferences. To take the example above of setting policy priorities, it is clear that while ministers agree on the broad point, they disagree on how best to communicate and pursue these priorities. Gauke, for example, finishes his advice with the following: "Make sure [your priorities are] properly communicated to the department so they understand what you're about. Then bring people along with you... see the civil service as allies". Contrast this to Lord Heseltine, who takes a much harder 'taskmaster' approach to achieving these goals: "Set targets and monitor precisely, with no wiggle room."

We conducted a sentiment analysis – a technique of automated text analysis – to gain an overarching sense of similarity and difference in the way ministers think about their relationship with the civil service. Focusing in on the civil service, Figure 2 shows the sentiment of the 20 words used around the civil service in the interviews with ministers – words such as 'civil service', 'private office' and 'permanent secretary'.[6]

Figure 2 **Positive/negative sentiment within 20 words used to describe the relationship with the civil service – words such as 'civil service', 'private office' and permanent secretary'**
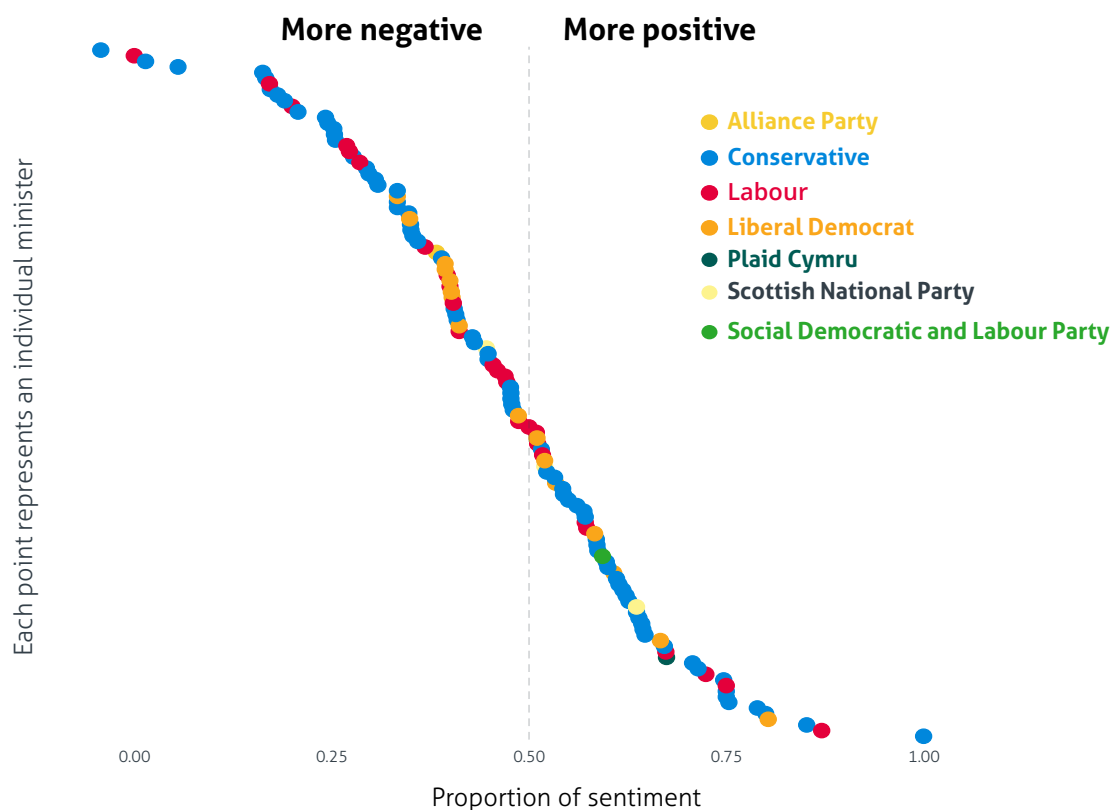
Source: Authors' analysis.

The analysis shows the range of sentiment ministers feel towards the civil service, with a near even split in those who fall on the side of being negative overall in their discussion compared with those who express overall positivity. The range of sentiment maps on to the qualitative findings in the proceeding section on the range of managerial styles that are to be found in the ministers' approaches to the civil service.

Within this varying sentiment and approach, however, there are some overarching patterns in the discussions of the civil service and managing a department, which can provide lessons for ministers and officials in Westminster alike.

General patterns in management style

While there is a consistent message that ministers need clear priorities when taking up office, there is a less uniform approach to how ministers work with their department and the civil service to achieve these goals. Ministers have a range of approaches to managing their relationship with the civil service – with experiences that reflect and reinforce these approaches. As the opening analysis showed, there is a large range in ministers' sentiment towards the civil service and the same can be said for approaches to managing their relationship with officials.

To help identify patterns in ministers' behaviour, we draw on scholarship on executive leadership in management studies, which identifies two broad management styles – transactional and transformational:[7]

- **Transactional leaders** view their relationship with those who work for them as contingent on performance, with sanctions for underperformance and rewards for meeting goals, and they promote a culture of individual responsibility for meeting said standards.

- **Transformational leaders** focus on communicating a clear vision of a shared purpose and attend to individual development and needs among those who work for them. They promote high standards through positive communication, and try to foster a communal culture in the workplace.

The categories of transactional and transformational management styles are useful frameworks for understanding different experiences and perceptions of ministerial work. But like most such frameworks, they are very broad catch-all categories that disguise important areas of overlap and variance. Moreover, they have emerged and largely been applied in private sector contexts; the public sector, not least the unique relationship between ministers and their departments, offers a more complex context. Actors in Westminster and Whitehall have greater variance in personal motivations, political convictions and levels of experience and expertise – in particular, they have a diversity of occupational backgrounds on which they inevitably draw to inform their management style. Unsurprisingly, then, we find that there are more fine-grained patterns in experience and belief. In the subsections that follow, we tease out these patterns in greater detail.

Transactional approaches

We find three distinct forms of transactional leadership across the Ministers Reflect archive: decisive direction, resource management and risk management. We outline these three subcategories in greater detail below.

Decisive direction

A small number of ministers – exclusively senior, older, male, Conservative politicians – reflect on their relationship with the civil service as being in accordance with a 'principal-agent' ideal.[8] This ideal, perhaps best known in this context via the traditional 'Westminster model', holds that ministers ought to have authority to exercise control over the impartial civil service. In practice, then, these ministers see their role as one to lead, and the civil service as one to follow. In this sense, this subset of ministers regard the civil service as unreliable in upholding their end of the bargain – as being potentially problematic or obstructionist, particularly in the face of reforms that upset the status quo or go against their perceived biases. For instance, Michael Fallon said of starting as a Conservative minister in a Department for Education opposed to liberalisation reforms: "Simply because they came to me straight away saying, 'This is why you shouldn't do it,' I immediately decided 'Right, that is the one thing I'm going to do.'"

These ministers reflect on learning skills and strategies to better control their departments and ensure that civil servants are working to deliver their ideas and proposals. One recurrent strategy is to turn the tables on initial efforts to 'brief the incoming minister'. Tim Loughton, for instance, reflected with relish on his unorthodox disarming of departmental efforts to steer his priorities at the very outset of his tenure in Education:

> "[The] first meeting I had was with the permanent secretary, the director generals, all the senior officials. And one got the clear impression that the meeting was basically to tell you what your job was going to be and I sort of got wind of this. So… I said, 'Now, everybody have a jelly baby.' I hand around this jar, so everybody thought oh god, we've got a nutter here. And so everybody tentatively took a jelly baby and handed this jar around. It was so funny to watch. And when they were all tucking into their jelly babies, I said now we're going to do psychometric testing to see how everybody eats their jelly babies, I'm very interested in this. So it completely disarmed them and unnerved them."

Another common strategy is to 'put a stamp' on the routines and procedures of the department, such as the content or style of ministerial briefings. Alan Duncan, for instance, proudly recalled:

> "And part of the ministerial stamp on how to do things was to, in my case, rail against long, repetitive cut-and-paste briefs full of jargon and acronyms. I said, 'Stick it in logical prose or I will send it back.' And my office – in fact they gave it to me when I left – I had scribbled at the top of something 'execrable rot' and they framed it and they gave it to me at the end, in a frame, as we are not going to stand for waffle."

Ministers in this category also reflect on a heavy reliance on their private office to be their 'eyes and ears' in managing this political rivalry. Ken Clarke explained:

> "I relied on a very close relationship – the private office had to be double agents. They are your eyes and ears, as well as delivering for you and they manage your day, they manage your work, they book the meetings, they fill the box and all the rest of it. And then their other jobs, if you have got a really good private secretary, and I had some really good private secretaries, is they tell you what the department is really up to. That is how you discover what is happening and what is not happening."

Overall, then, ministers in this category learn to use the resources at their disposal to keep a tight rein on officials and the direction of their departments. Notably, however, this perspective is rare and increasingly uncommon among more recent cohorts of ministers, reflective more generally of a shift away from the textbook or classical Westminster model and towards a recognition of the complex webs of relations at the heart of contemporary British government.[9]

Resource management

A larger number of ministers reflect on their relationship with the civil service as more akin to a form of resource management. Ministers who share this set of experiences and ideas come from across a range of parties, demographic characteristics and eras, but share a prior background in business leadership or management consulting. They see the civil service as simply another set of human resources – albeit one that existing systems and cultures can fail to support or steer effectively. Indeed, for many, the prevailing public sector culture is a source of considerable frustration, which they hope to overcome with the incorporation of private sector techniques and ethos. Damian Green assessed the 'culture problem' this way:

> "[This] was summed up in a tremendous aperçu by a high-flying civil servant in my private office who is going on to great things. He just looked at me and said, 'Nobody ever got to be a permanent secretary by being able to run a benefits office efficiently.' That may be true, and even if it's not true it's certainly the attitude."

Moreover, they reflect with some frustration at the structural constraints on their capacity to influence change – not only do they lack the resources or flexibility to incentivise performance, but the dual management role with the permanent secretary also means a lack of neat, clear lines of authority. John Penrose summed it up this way:

> "That's the bit which is weird because it's only half a leadership role compared to many other sectors outside politics. It does not mean to say you mustn't lead, just you've got fewer tools at your disposal and you've got to bang those particular drums harder to make them work."

Accordingly, these ministers reflect on learning how best to apply their experience from the private sector to the public sector. They adopt and adapt strategies to stimulate and incentivise their departments to deliver on set goals. Andrew Mitchell, for instance, explained his role in changing the culture at the Department for International Development this way:

> "[We] wanted to achieve things, and therefore achieve them in the most cost effective way you can. And one of the things that we did was we said, 'Under Labour in the past, people around the world doing things in development have each year bid for an increase in their budget and everyone gets an extra 3%.' I said, 'We're not going to do it like that, we're going to buy results; we're going to have a bilateral aid review, and a multilateral aid review, and we're going to buy results.'"

In this sense, ministers in this category also reflect on adopting and adapting strategies to measure performance and enforce standards. Lord Heseltine put it pithily:

> "Set targets and monitor precisely, with no wiggle room. So this means when you have a meeting, you outline what your views are, what you want, the timescale in which you want it, and that you expect an interim report from the private secretary by a certain date. Then it will happen. But if you don't do those things it won't."

Ministers in this category also reflect on ongoing frustrations, however, which distract from the task. Some resort to hands-on training to give their staff the skills they need. Liam Byrne put things this way:

> "I had a reputation for being a tough bastard and often I was overly aggressive and demanding, but it really was born [out] of a frustration. My low point was teaching a bunch of Treasury civil servants how to do a discounted cash flow model in my office, because they just didn't have the basic skills that you get as a first year investment banker… the training that a Fast Stream civil servant gets is a mile behind what you get in a world-class consulting firm."

Overall, then, we see that ministers in this category tend to have come away frustrated with the perceived inefficiencies of the civil service. Theirs is a view rooted in a belief in the superiority of market mechanisms and private incentives that, after nearly four decades of experimentation around the world, remain an awkward fit for public sector management.[10]

Risk management

A larger-still proportion of ministers reflect on their relationship with the civil service as an exercise in constant vigilance and risk management. This perspective – prominent among more recent ministers of varying parties, ranks, demographic features and professional backgrounds – fits within a broader siege mentality, in which ministers emphasise the looming threat of scrutiny, crisis and scandal that hangs over their work.[11] The civil service, in this sense, is a potential source of controversy over which ministers feel they have little control. David Hanson recalled an amusing anecdote to sum this frustration up:

> "I was once on the front of *The Sun* with a dunce's cap on my head with a picture on the front saying, you know, 'Prison Dunce.' And the reason I was on the front of *The Sun* was because G4S [security services company] had tagged an individual who had been then seen in the pub having three or four pints and the victim had seen the individual in the pub having three or four pints and they'd gone to the press. And it turns out that G4S had tagged the individual in the house but they'd tagged his wooden leg which he'd taken off and left at home. So I ended up being on the front of *The Sun* because G4S have tagged the wrong leg. Now, what do I do about that?"

These ministers reflect on learning how to exercise tighter control over what happens in their departments and their political communications. Their disposition to the relationship is transactional in the sense of being focused on avoiding, correcting or punishing deviation from accepted performance standards. As such, many focus on getting on top of the detail of their brief, so they can limit nasty surprises and front-foot publicity should things go wrong. Jeremy Hunt explained how day-to-day management of the NHS especially occupied his time, despite formal accountability (under his predecessor Andrew Lansley's reforms) no longer sitting with the minister:

"I play it very differently to the way that Andrew Lansley had envisaged [laughs] because in the end, you know, like it or not, the health secretary is going to be held accountable for what happens in the NHS. And it was never going to fly in parliament to say: 'I'm sorry but what happens in the NHS is nothing to do with me anymore!'... I saw Simon Stevens [NHS England chief executive at the time] every Monday and we would sit around and have an NHS operational meeting, and we didn't ever really spend any time talking about what... who's constitutionally responsible."

To help get and keep on top of this level of detail, many rely heavily on their private office – which might happen to provide the support needed, or which they might manoeuvre to restaff with tried and trusted civil servants. Liam Fox explained, reflecting on missed opportunities and frustrations from his time in office:

"My private office was more difficult to manage. I think there are very strong arguments for, as quickly as you can, recreating a whole new private office. Civil servants, whether they think they're doing it or not, have an affinity to how things were done before and often have an affinity to former ministers. And had I my time over again, I would have changed more of my private office more quickly."

In sum, ministers in this category learn strategies and tactics to manage risks to reputation. The effect is a form of micromanagement across the detail of a portfolio. It is notable that this approach is more common among more recent cohorts of ministers – reflective perhaps of the increased scrutiny presented by the accelerating news cycle and strengthened mechanisms of accountability and transparency.

Transformational approaches

The transformational ethos tends to manifest in two forms – in some cases as a commitment to innovative and collaborative forms of leadership but, more commonly, as a reflection on the value of incremental adjustment, trust-building and mutual accommodation. We discuss both in more detail below.

Collaborative engagement

A small number of ministers – from across parties and demographic characteristics – reflect on learning and adopting innovative strategies to develop a collaborative and engaging relationship with the civil service. Drawing on ideas often from a business consulting or community organising background, they learn to tap into the potential of their departments through a more collaborative or affiliative style.

These ministers reflect on learning a set of strategies for coaxing civil servants out of their staid or formal practices and into a more collaborative mindset. They value the human touch, and first-hand experience. They build personal relationships through frequent visits and by maintaining a strong physical presence in and around their departments. Mark Prisk put things this way:

"I also took the view that it was important to be seen around the department. So I would always eat downstairs in the canteen. I would walk around the floors, very often unannounced, much to the horror of the managers initially. But people liked that... And they are just very simple things that actually motivate people, that don't actually take a great deal of time. They just require a little bit of thought about the team you're building. If the team is motivated and they feel confident in you, the team will produce the things you need."

Ministers in this category also reflect on a range of innovative techniques for formal or orchestrated collaboration. This might be as a way of setting a different, friendlier, more collaborative tone at the onset of a new ministerial relationship. Andrea Leadsom, for instance, spoke about the importance of instigating a 'town hall' meeting on her arrival at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra):

"My first couple of days there, I did what's called a 'town hall' meeting, in the beautiful atrium of our beautiful old office (which Defra is no longer in). It had this fantastic huge atrium, with sort of internal balconies, so people could be out on those internal balconies, as well as in the atrium. So we had a big town hall – it was videoed – and I and the ministerial team were very much focused on telling people, 'This is going to be great and we appreciate that many of you have differing views to us, but nevertheless there is a way through this and we are going to be really working to make a success of it.'"

Likewise, ministers in this category often bring in new routines and rituals, and both formal methods and more informal practices, including not just departmental officials but also wider ministerial teams. Nicky Morgan, for instance, explained of her role at Education:

"We had weekly team meetings involving ministers and parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers and I think people from private offices sat in as well. We got 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. I think we also just tried to create a bit more of a team atmosphere, which I think had been lacking. So we did also things like socials as well outside; just getting people together for drinks is really important."

For ministers in this category, innovative forms of engagement can also be at the heart of problem-solving efforts to overcome inefficiencies and misunderstandings. Ben Bradshaw, for example, explained how he instigated sociable 'away days' with his private office in his constituency to constructively demonstrate the conflicting roles ministers experience and the challenges they face:

"I tried in almost every job I did to take my private office on an away day to my constituency, because one of the things that surprisingly enough, not very many civil servants seem to realise, is that your ministerial job is only one of your jobs...

So I found that taking my private office and the civil servants to my constituency, getting them to sit on surgeries, follow me around for the day and have some down time in Exeter was really helpful as well as a bonding experience."

In sum, ministers in this category are happy to innovate with more or less formal modes of team-building and collaboration. They value the human touch. These perspectives are reflective of trends towards more affiliative modes of creating 'public value' in the civil service.[12]

Trust-building

The more common approach to transformational leadership, however, is a more subtle form of relationship-building. For these ministers – spread across the full range of backgrounds, demographics, parties and eras – the most important task is to build mutual understanding and trust with each new department and private office they are parachuted into. Theirs is a nuanced and slow-burning form of transformational leadership, one that draws on and draws out the qualities of the civil service. David Jones summed things up this way:

"I think a very important tip for any minister is to understand that they have a great resource in extremely high-quality people working for them. They are all highly intelligent and to seek to micromanage their work is a really bad idea. You should certainly get to know your officials but once you get to know them you will soon get to know their strengths and weaknesses and then you can just more or less say, 'Well, please do that.'"

These ministers reflect on the slow process of gaining skills and understanding – both general to managing and particular to their portfolios – to ensure a smooth relationship with the civil servants they manage. In particular, they stress the importance of taking time before making any rash decisions. Sam Gyimah, for instance, talked about how time in post gives ministers better power to "see around corners":

"You get to know the team, you build trust, get a certain trust in the team. You have time to work through problems. Often your first answer might not be the right one, but you can only get to the second or third answer once you've worked through the first one and not been successful... As with anything, you just... you can become better at seeing around corners."

In taking time to 'bed in', these ministers also stress the importance of establishing a strong relationship with key actors to ensure buy-in for later actions. Margaret Beckett explained:

"One of the most important lessons I think I learnt in the whole of this time was that there are two ways to build a team. One is you have to try and build relationships of trust with people with whom for whatever reason you have to work. It won't work with everybody, but that's what you have to try and do. Or you can surround yourself with people you already trust. The first is harder work, but

it's much better. The second is easier, but it produces less good results. And all through my whole political career in opposition and in government, people always said, 'Oh god, you got stuck with so and so, you won't be able to work with them' – I always waited to judge on my own experience. I took in what people said, but I never took the view, 'Oh, I won't be able to work with that.'"

As this might suggest, ministers in this category reflect on the importance of the private office in a slightly different way to those of a more transactional bent. Indeed, for these ministers, the private office typically seems to play as much an educative role in the functioning of the department as it does a substantive role in providing policy advice or managing political crises. Alistair Darling explained:

"I think the main piece of advice to them would be to ensure that their private office is functional, functioning properly and they take some time to talk to their private office and understand what everyone's responsibilities are and what they need to do. I'd do that before reading the briefing that you're given. If you're a secretary of state, well even if you're a junior minister, you've got someone in that department that deals with everyone else in this huge empire. So get to know them and get to understand more about what your function is in that department, what the hot issues are, what their take is, not by reading dry documentation but by listening, talking to them, and obviously to the permanent secretary who will generally have a much better overview."

Overall, then, many of these ministers reflect on taking a more ad hoc approach to 'learning by doing'. Their relationship with the civil service is one of mutual adaptation and accommodation.

Gendered dimensions of management

As we know from across executive politics, our ideas of what makes a 'good' political leader are gendered, with potentially different expectations and experiences for men and women politicians both within the institutions of government and in the public eye. This gendering applies not just to public performances but also to how a minister may operate within the machinery of government, including the framework of transformational and transactional leadership used in our analysis.

In traditional conceptions of gender stereotypes, transactional leadership would fit more with those traditional traits of leadership such as strength and dominance that are coded as masculine, whereas transformational leadership sits alongside feminised notions of communality. It may be expected that women ministers are more likely to be transformational in their leadership styles. This may be a result of socialised differences in men and women's learned behaviours or it can be more strategic for women to act in ways expected of them and not break gendered norms. The same behaviour may not result in the same consequences for men and women. Women may perform a more communal style of leadership to prevent a 'communality deficit' or backlash where women are punished for being too aggressive (read masculine) and insufficiently communal (read feminine).[13]

On the other hand, politics remains a masculine sphere. As Amber Rudd noted in her interview, "There is a kind of boys' club-type behaviour in parliament because it is still more like a public school or a university club than anywhere else you'll ever go." Success in such a sphere may require women to 'act like men' to get ahead, institutionalising themselves to the masculine norms of leadership.

Explicit discussions of the gendered nature of what a 'good' minister may look like took place in several of the interviews with women ministers. Explicit hostility to the idea of a woman minister, especially in higher positions, was only discussed by those of older generations of government, with Margaret Beckett, for instance, recalling a senior woman telling her, "You do realise there are people in the Foreign Office who don't think a woman should be foreign secretary." But those of more recent experience also recognised that the institution of government was built around a masculine idea. Kitty Ussher reflected on her "joke image" of the kind of person the system was designed for as:

> "a kind of stiff-upper-lip, middle-aged gentleman who would have Sunday lunch with his family and then his wife would take the children off... and the minister would sit at their large oak-panelled desk and their ministerial box... you know, I was doing mine at 1am. There was no desk or wife!"

And Jo Swinson discussed trying to initially adapt to that masculine notion:

> "I remember... looking around at people that I knew that were ministers who were mainly guys and the way in which they did it with, in some cases, a certain degree of swagger or a degree of alpha male syndrome in government and just not really feeling like that was me. And so then I sort of felt a little bit out of place... About six weeks in, I sort of realised that there was just not enough hours in the day to do anything else than just be myself. And I might be the only minister that wore pink shoes to the department, and, you know, that related in a very different way to officials in a briefing."

In terms of gendered patterns in self-reported styles of leadership, there is some suggestion from the Ministers Reflect interviews to date that women tend towards a more transformational style more often than men. Of course, this should be caveated with a note that a smaller number of women have taken part in the interviews compared to men (for obvious reasons, as there have been fewer women ministers than men in ministerial positions). Women ministers are more evenly split between transformational and transactional approaches – around half of women ministers express some transformational styles – whereas with men it splits more to around a third being transformational. That a gendered pattern is not clear cut should not be a surprise: women are not monolithic and we know that, especially in executive office, room to manoeuvre can be more limited and the institutionalisation of a more masculine way of working can be more constricting and more embedded than it is in legislative environments and behaviours.[14]

Although not universal, women who are more transactional tend to be House of Lords ministers from a legal or business background, or ministers of an older generation of government. Baroness Warsi, for instance, "kept a diary and extensive notes and would hold people to account against what was agreed and what progress had been made" and Patricia Hewitt compared problems in the department to "failed [mergers and acquisitions]". It may be that women's patterns of leadership change over time as their presence increases. Older generations may conform to masculine ideas of leadership but as women's presence in politics becomes more normalised and we see a higher presence of women in ministerial office, it is likely a more diverse slate of management styles will be seen.

What does this mean for ministerial–civil service relations?

In the analysis above, we have peered beneath surface-level agreement among ministers to identify the variety of ways in which they approach their managerial responsibilities, and the possible gendered norms that inflect these perspectives. We turn now to consider the implications of these insights for how these relationships work in practice.

In true academic fashion, we start with a key caveat – a reminder that the analysis does not represent an objective account of ministerial leadership styles, but our interpretations of ministers' own self-reported reflections and preferences. Our analysis, we hope, provides a unique window into how ministers interpret their managerial role – what they thought they were trying to do and what they learned along the way (not necessarily how they actually performed). The point is important not just because interviews inevitably entail a 'presentation of the self', but also because political leaders famously have limited control over how they are outwardly perceived. (Notably, this caveat might help explain why the gendered distinction did not come through as strongly as anticipated in the analysis. It is plausible that, due to social norms and expectations, women ministers might be attributed more of the stereotypically feminine qualities of transformational leadership than they self-identify as possessing, or may have been conscious of doing so in negotiating traditional ideas about a 'good' minister.)

So what can our analysis contribute to the real world of policy making? We have identified two key implications, each stemming from our core findings, and each relevant for slightly different audiences.

- **Key insight for working with ministers**
  Our analysis suggests that a better understanding of how ministers approach their managerial role can help officials to smooth transitions and flatten the 'learning curve' associated with ministerial churn. In essence, our analysis of how ministers approach their management role can offer a useful tool to help officials better anticipate the preferences of incoming ministers, prepare for any adjustments and accommodate different working styles. No doubt, experienced officials have ample personal experience of different ministerial styles and the challenges of

adapting to change. Our analysis can help underpin a broader array of templates for systematising key tasks such as preparing briefing packs, staffing private offices, planning diaries and filling red boxes.

In practical terms, then, officials can use these insights to help structure their preparation for a new minister's arrival. They might ask, for instance: What is the minister's background and what clues might that provide as to their priorities and preferences? How is the minister likely to approach problems, and what form of briefing is likely to be of greatest use to them? Is the private office staffed and set up to perform the right role for the minister – to protect the minister who is risk-averse from political flak, to be the 'eyes and ears' on the ground of the minister who wants to push through decisive action, or to provide the friendly support for the minister who prefers to learn on the job? Rather than assuming one size fits all, such an approach might lead to the development of a more varied set of resources or 'playbooks' to support transitions in a context of high ministerial churn.

- **Key insight for executive government make-up and ministerial teams**
  Our analysis also helps reinforce wider claims – drawn from organisation and management theory[15] – of the value of diversity in executive government. Leaving aside normative debates about symbolic value, we think the insights in this paper help to advance the substantive case for diversity. In doing so, we do not assert a simplistic argument that transformational leadership in government (associated with femininity) is better than transactional leadership (associated with masculinity). For a start, though greater representation of women in the executive may increase the prevalence of transformational attitudes at the top of British government, we have shown that gender is not neatly linked to these different dispositions in practice. Many men ministers exhibit a transformational disposition, just as some women ministers exhibit a transactional disposition. More fundamentally, there are sound reasons drawn from management and leadership scholarship to think that both transactional and transformational approaches ought to be part of an effective executive: that different approaches might better suit different roles of rank and responsibility at different times and in different political contexts.[16]
  Nevertheless, ministerial teams and the executive as a whole can benefit from a greater diversity of approaches to tackle the complex challenges of contemporary government. Pursuing greater descriptive representation is one useful way to ensure that diversity.[17] When appointing cabinets, a prime minister may then consider diversity in a wider sense than what may be the headline statistics of sex or party divisions. Diversity is valuable across a range of dimensions, not just gender, but it seems likely that ethnicity, socio-economic class and previous occupation will be important too – especially, in the case of the last of these, given the key role that occupational background plays in informing how ministers approach their task. Diversity, therefore, is a vitally important consideration in the appointment of ministers and the assembly of specific ministerial teams.

Ultimately, these insights highlight the value of exploring how ministers themselves see and experience their managerial role in executive government. By conducting a systematic analysis of the surprisingly rare 'view from the top' provided via the Ministers Reflect archive, we reveal patterns in leadership styles and gendered norms that have profound impacts on the relationship between ministers and civil servants – patterns that can inform both the everyday efforts of officials who interact with ministers and the more strategic efforts of reformers to improve executive government in Britain overall. In the context of inescapable co-dependence, systematic insights into the more opaque or seemingly idiosyncratic side of the relationship – the experiences and perceptions of ministers – can only aid in the pursuit of more effective government.

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June 2022