

# Ministers Reflect

## Douglas Alexander



14 February 2023

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

1997–2015: MP for Paisley and Renfrewshire South

2010: Shadow secretary of state for international development

2010–2011: Shadow secretary of state for work and pensions

2011–2015: Shadow foreign secretary

## Government career

2001–02: Minister of state for e-commerce and competitiveness

2002–03: Minister of state for the Cabinet Office

2003–04: Chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster

2004–05: Minister of state for trade

2005–06: Minister of state for Europe

2006–07: Secretary of state for transport and secretary of state for Scotland

2007–10: Secretary of state for international development

**Douglas Alexander was interviewed by Catherine Haddon and Maddy Bishop on 14 February 2023 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

Douglas Alexander discusses preparation for government in 1997, managing devolution, and running the Department for International Development.

**Catherine Haddon (CH):** Starting with your first appointment, as a minister of state at the Department for Trade and Industry. Can you remember how that came about and what the conversation was like? Did you go and see Blair, or did you hear it from somebody else?

**Douglas Alexander (DA):** I was unusual in that I had worked directly both with [Tony Blair](#) and Gordon Brown before being elected. When I became a solicitor in Edinburgh, in 1995, Tony Blair was my referee, because, Gordon was of the view that Tony would probably know more solicitors in Edinburgh than he did. So, when I was elected in November 1997 in the Paisley South by-election, I was in quite regular contact with both Gordon and Tony. I remember saying to Tony, “Should I be on a select committee? Would that be a good way of garnering experience?” And he said, “Douglas, you need to understand that your job is to get off a select committee and get into government, not to get onto a select committee.” He quite quickly asked if I would work on the Scottish parliamentary campaign, for the first Scottish parliament elections taking place in 1999. I was asked to do a PowerPoint presentation, which I worked very hard on. I spell checked every word of it apart from the cover page. So then I went into the study at Downing Street and the first words out of the prime minister’s mouth were, “Douglas, that’s not how you spell argument!” So it wasn’t a very auspicious start to the conversation, but he then asked if I would work directly within the Scottish parliamentary campaign, which I did. At the end of that campaign, I can clearly recollect Tony saying, “On any objective assessment, I should make you a minister tomorrow. But I need you to co-ordinate the 2001 general election campaign. So I give you my word – I’ll put you in as a minister of state after the 2001 election rather than as a parliamentary under-secretary before that election.” So that was the background, and after the 2001 election which I co-ordinated, I moved from Millbank Tower, where I’d been overseeing the ‘war room’, to the top floor in DTI [the Department for Trade and Industry].

**CH:** Can you remember what your first day was like going into the department?

**DA:** Yes, again, I’d known [Patricia \[Hewitt\]](#), then trade secretary] for a number of years – she was Neil’s [Kinnock, as leader of the opposition] press secretary – so I was delighted to be working with Patricia. I remember being very struck by how literally and figuratively hierarchical government was, in comparison with the literally horizontal structure of a ‘war room’. What was striking initially was quite how isolated you were. I’d been dealing with the senior leadership of the party on an hourly basis for the weeks of the election campaign, and suddenly I was sitting alone in a room on the top floor of the DTI, with a very capable principal private secretary, a private secretary and others in the outside room, very clearly keeping an eye on what the minister was doing and where the minister was. So I suppose one of the earliest impressions was of the physical and political isolation

of the role, and that took some getting used to – despite the fact that Patricia was secretary of state and the other ministers were very solicitous and accommodating.

**CH: How much did you already understand the brief that you were given?**

**DA:** Yes, my ministerial life at that stage was governed by a commitment that Tony had given to the most comprehensive and extensive broadband market in the G7, and I think we were under a commitment to hit that within five years. James Purnell, who was also a friend and was then an adviser at Number 10, subsequently admitted to me that he had written the target as ten years and, on the way to deliver the speech, the prime minister had thought, “That’s not ambitious enough, let’s make it five years.” So I then spent that year trying to deliver on that commitment, and we were dealing with the telecoms companies, a lot with BT, but it was very much focused on how you actually deliver broadband at the time.

**CH: What did you make of the department and the civil servants who worked there?**

**DA:** ‘E-commerce and Competitiveness’ sounds rather more modern and glamorous than the reality of what I spent a lot of time doing. I was also minister for the Post Office and had sponsorship responsibilities for a number of other areas of policy. I think a particularly inauspicious and low point for me was when I discovered that I was the British minister for fashion [*laughter*]. One of my predecessors in that role, although he had done it as secretary of state, was Stephen Byers. He had been turned over by The Sun, I think, for wearing an Italian suit to London Fashion Week. If you’ve ever crawled about your bedroom with all your suits on the floor, trying to find out if Marks and Spencer actually manufacture any suits in the UK, you’ll know what it was like. I then did go to London Fashion Week, and it was like entering the land of the giants. So, I had sponsorship responsibility for a range of different sectors. There was a big focus on e-commerce early in that transition, there was inevitably a big focus on the Post Office, and then there were other sponsorship responsibilities.

One of the genuine privileges of ministerial life is working with the civil service. I honestly loved working with civil servants and really missed it when we left government. You have got, appropriately, very limited discretion in terms of which civil servants you work with, but you do have discretion in terms of your private office, and in that sense I feel incredibly fortunate in terms of the private offices that I was able to work with and benefit from. I think as I proceeded in ministerial office over the subsequent nine years, I became more confident in seeking to benefit directly from the knowledge and expertise of the civil service. As a very young minister, there was probably an understandable but misplaced anxiety that they would find out that my depth of knowledge of the domain – of the department – was limited. When actually, consistently, I found that if you leant into that and sought advice and assistance in building your knowledge level, 99 times out of 100 they would overdeliver and show you in a better light for the willingness to ask those questions.

**CH: Relationships between ministers and officials is quite topical, at the moment. What are the things that you think get the best out of the civil service? How do you challenge them whilst also working effectively with them?**

**DA:** Firstly, having self-knowledge about how you work is really important. I undertook 360-degree appraisals and requested that that went all the way to the cabinet secretary. I asked for an executive coach, because I'd never been a minister before, and the novelty with which that was viewed shocked me. This was pre-Freedom of Information [the Freedom of Information Act 2000] and there were concerns at the time about how those conversations could happen in an appropriately confidential manner. But from the get-go I sought advice and guidance from the department and from officials.

In terms of what behaviours matter, I think self-knowledge is important, because you aren't an administrator, you are there to exercise your political and policy judgement. For example, how do you absorb large volumes of information in a timely fashion? If I was appearing before a select committee, by the end of my time as a minister, I would allocate three one-and-a-half hour time blocks and I would say to my officials, "In the first time block, I am probably going to ask you some very dumb questions, but your job is to teach and tutor me so that, by the second session, I'm asking reasonably sensible questions and, by the third session, I'll be appropriately prepared to offer an authentic and effective account of the department's work to members of parliament." Getting the right people in the room is key to that, but how do you absorb that information quickly?

The other image that I hold in my mind is that I would say to officials, "Your job is to build my knowledge sufficiently so that I can exercise my judgement. Those are two discrete and important tasks and I accept full responsibility for the judgements that I'll make, but I would ask you to share the responsibility for equipping me with sufficient knowledge to be able to exercise that judgement effectively."

**CH: Another contemporary theme is preparation for government. What reflections do you have on the period in the run up to 1997? How much did you see of it? What worked particularly well, or what do you wish now you'd worked more on?**

**DA:** Truthfully, I wasn't involved in the formal preparations that the shadow cabinet and others were involved in. But, although I was based in Scotland at the time, I continued to work very closely with Tony and Gordon. My observation is that, if you look at that transition in 1997, the dog that never barked was this was a group of people who weren't prepared for government. Overwhelmingly, Labour hit the ground running, and if I try and make sense of that, I'd offer a couple of thoughts.

One is, if you look at the principal figures in that government, Blair and Brown, they had been exercising agency and strategic judgement over the direction of the Labour Party for years, and that was almost like building a muscle. They were then well equipped to exercise that agency and strategic judgment in the conduct of government. So, in that sense, I think they were replete with the skills and expertise – although they would probably say that they learned on the job as well – but I think they were highly effective. I had a pass for the Treasury and for Number 10 as a backbencher when I was elected, because I spent quite a lot of time with them. One of my observations was how the two figures in government I encountered who had the most unallocated time in their diaries

were the prime minister and the chancellor. That was because they placed a premium on continuing to think and to strategise, not simply to administer. Both of them had the capacity to do the detailed work on policy when that was required, but recognised that that was not their principal responsibility. So they continued to ensure that there was always time for what was an iterative strategic conversation about the direction of the government.

I also think – and I was not part of the government between 1997 and 2001, but as quite a close observer – I think there’s a storable case that the three most effective departments in that 1997 to 2001 government were the Treasury, the Department for Education under David Blunkett, and DfID [the Department for International Development] under Clare Short. I don’t think it is coincidental that there was continuity of ministerial leadership for the entire parliament in all three of those departments. In all three of those departments you could distil down the core strategic objective of the department into a few words: economic stability for the Treasury, standards not structures for the Department for Education, and poverty reduction for DfID. If you are a civil servant and you think, “the secretary of state is here for a while and we need to find a way of getting with the programme”, that increases the effectiveness of the minister. If the minister is able to articulate very clearly the strategic rationale of the department, then the department is capable of focusing its attention and its direction more effectively. Also, in Clare Short, in David Blunkett and in Gordon [Brown], there were three very capable ministers who were very comfortable with the appropriate exercise of their authority.

**CH: Speaking of ministerial churn – you had a year as minister for e-commerce, then you went to the Cabinet Office and changed role again several times over the next three years. You were promoted to chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, moved again to become minister for trade and then to become minister for Europe. What are the challenges with holding ministerial roles for such a short period of time? Do you wish that you could have had longer in any of those jobs?**

**DA:** Yes, I think one of the weaknesses of the British system is the velocity with which you move as a minister. I think it was politics that informed my move from the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry] to the Cabinet Office, in that Tony [Blair] was quite keen to bring me into the centre. I was the minister of state to Gus Macdonald, who was the minister for the Cabinet Office and CDL [chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster] for the first year, and then I was promoted to run the Cabinet Office and be CDL for the second year.

In my first year in the Cabinet Office, I spent a lot of time in Downing Street helping to support the prime minister’s agenda, but I had residual responsibilities in terms of the Cabinet Office’s work: I was technically minister for the civil service at the time. But I was struck by how limited the political oversight of the Cabinet Office was relative to other departments, given that the cabinet secretary literally and figuratively sat in the Cabinet Office. A lot of the lines of accountability actually run to the cabinet secretary, and I had a good relationship with the cabinet secretary. But it was a very different... the character of the department was very different. I also think that, during those relatively early Blair years, or middle Blair years, the Cabinet Office was almost a halfway house between the traditional constitutional conception of the Cabinet Office – as the junction box in which

the secretariat supports the work of the cabinet sub-committees – to a position where it was closer to a prime minister’s department. In that sense, one of the real challenges for a minister in the Cabinet Office was the question of where does your authority come from? Because it didn’t come from allocation of resources; that rests with the Treasury. So your proximity to, and alignment with the prime minister, proved to be vital in the effectiveness of the work you were doing for the Cabinet Office.

**Maddy Bishop (MB):** Moving on to 2006, when you were promoted to become the secretary of state, it was a dual role I believe, so you were secretary of state for Scotland and for transport. But, after you left, they were separated out again. Did that dual arrangement make sense at the time? How did it work?

**DA:** I had moved by then from the Cabinet Office to the Foreign Office, so I knew the Foreign Office for two years. The background to that was that I was sitting in the Cabinet Office doing my job as minister for the Cabinet Office and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I got a phone call from Andrew Marr, who was the political editor of the BBC at the time, who said, “How do you feel about Alan Milburn [then health secretary] getting your job?” And I said, “Oh, I hadn’t heard,” at which point Andrew got off the phone very quickly. I literally called through to Downing Street and, within a few minutes, Tony said, “I am really sorry, I need your job because I am bringing Alan in to run the 2005 general election. You are my best minister of state. I would like to put you in the cabinet but I can’t do that until after the election – where do you want to go?” That was not a conversation that I was anticipating. So, I said, “I am conscious of all the time pressures on you prime minister but, if you give me a few minutes, I’ll come back to you.” I then scuttled back through to the Cabinet Office, where my very capable private secretary was still there, and I said, “Can you show me the full list of government positions.” I was reading Alan Clark’s diaries at the time, and he said the best job in government was to be the minister of trade and foreign affairs in the Foreign Office. I’d always been interested in the Foreign Office, so I phoned back through the Downing Street switchboard and said, “I’d be very grateful if I could be minister for trade, investment and foreign affairs”, and so that’s how I ended up doing the trade, investment and foreign affairs role.

At the end of my time as minister for trade, investment and foreign affairs, we were anticipating that there was going to be a referendum in the UK, not on membership of the EU but on the European constitution. [Jack Straw](#) had been an exemplary boss for me at the Foreign Office. I had learned a huge amount from Jack and he was a very accomplished and generous minister to work with. He wrote a memo to the prime minister saying, “We need to anticipate that there will be a referendum after the next election on the European constitution. We should give the responsibility for running that referendum to Douglas, so he should attend cabinet as minister for Europe and we’ll keep him in the Foreign Office.” That was what the prime minister did so, immediately after the 2005 election, I was appointed minister for Europe. We had the British presidency of the EU that year, so it was a fascinating year, but then the Dutch and the French rejected the European constitution before it came to the British people, so the prospect of a referendum on the European constitution went away.

So I’d been attending cabinet for a year by the time of that reshuffle. Des Browne and I [then chief secretary to the Treasury] were asked to stay on the Friday afternoon, which we took as being indicative of the fact that we were being promoted rather than sacked,

because Tony was courteous enough that, if you were leaving government, you would get a phone call rather than a visit. So we were asked to stay in London on the Friday. The standard public mantra is that the work of government continues during a reshuffle; in my experience, ministers are obsessively watching the television in their departments, trying to figure out what's happening. I remember being in my office in the Foreign Office and getting a phone call from Des, who was a very good friend of mine, saying, "Have you been called to Downing Street yet?" And I said, "No I haven't, I haven't had the call yet". And he said, "Well I have figured out that there are only two cabinet jobs left. Both of us are going to be in charge of armies of men in uniform, it's just one of them are going to be clippies!", because secretary of state for transport and secretary of state for defence were left. Sure enough, we were then both asked to go to Downing Street and I was appointed secretary of state for transport and secretary of state for Scotland that afternoon.

I left Downing Street with four ring binders of introductory reading on transport policy, and I stayed at a friend's house in London that weekend and tried, rather forlornly, to absorb four ring binders of information about transport policy before attending my first meeting in the department the following morning. On the Sunday afternoon, I actually phoned back to Des, who had just finished his time as chief secretary to the Treasury and had just been appointed defence secretary. There is an interesting lesson there: what do you do when you do not know the answer to a problem? You phone a friend. I was wading my way through these ring binders and realised I had no idea of the distinction in the government accounts between near-cash and non-cash. So I phoned Des and said, "You've got to help me, I am about to start as transport secretary tomorrow – what's the difference between them?" We had a conversation and Des said, "Are you online at the moment?" And I said yes – these were in the days when the BBC website was still the go-to source – and he said, "Have you seen John Reid [then newly-appointed home secretary] arriving in the Home Office?" And I said no, but I did then watch the clip.

John had just been appointed home secretary, having just left the defence department that Des was about to start in the next day. It was such a powerful lesson for me. John stepped out of the car at, I think, the new Home Office building on Merton Street, and said, "I have only three things to say to you today. Firstly, I have left the Ministry of Defence, where I have had the privilege of working with the very best of British, the men and women of the armed forces, and I want to pay tribute to them. Secondly, I will not be answering your questions today, although it's customary that I answer questions, because I think it's important to establish the facts before offering answers. Thirdly, I want to acknowledge to you that I am entering a department where there are significant policy challenges, so I offer you the undertaking that I have offered on receipt of every previous ministerial role, which is simply that I will do my best." And with that he turned around and walked into the department for the first time. As a brand new secretary of state, that was such a powerful insight into how to establish personal authority when arriving in a new department. I don't think John would have known the detail of the immigration figures at that moment, as surely as I did not know the distinction between near-cash and non-cash at that moment, but he had the experience, the maturity, and the wisdom to recognise that there were attributes, authority, and leadership qualities that he could bring to his public pronouncements when he arrived in that department. And I remember thinking that was a really powerful lesson in terms of how you start in a department. So, in fact, as I moved through my ministerial positions, I would not seek, as



I had done in my earlier positions, to study, read, and learn and then expose my limited knowledge to the department – far better to get out in front of the staff immediately. So when I subsequently arrived in DfID, I had an open all staff question and answer session, within half an hour of arriving in the department. That was informed by observing John and other colleagues.

**MB: It sounds like quite a lot of your attention was focused around the transport part of the brief – coming in and getting across that technical detail. How did it work holding the Scotland brief alongside that?**

**DA:** Well, Scotland’s in my soul, so I think it would be fair to say that – in terms of the detail of policy – I had decades of experience for the Scotland Office and therefore had to allocate a significant portion of time early on to getting on top of the transport brief. One such undertaking was that I asked for an immediate tabletop exercise for a major terrorist incident and that proved to be prescient, as I was appointed in the early summer. I then worked I think as hard as I have ever worked in ministerial office in the first six or seven weeks as transport secretary because we had a major review – I think it was a roads review – that we were publishing in the department, so I needed to be across all of that detail.

Then in August 2006 we had the liquid bomb plot. I’d just gone on holiday to the Isle of Mull, and I remember receiving a phone call from my permanent secretary. That permanent secretary, Sir David Rowlands, has now passed away... I think he was one of the finest civil servants I ever had the privilege of working with. On my first day as transport secretary, he invited me into his office – in the Department for Transport, the secretary of state’s office is literally across the corridor from the permanent secretary’s office – and very unusually he invited me into his office – he spent a lot of time in my office – and he sat there, we had a drink, and he said, “Listen, this is your first job in the cabinet and this is my last job in government. You have a huge interest in not screwing this up, and I have a huge interest in you not screwing this up. So our interests are completely aligned.” That was a language that I understood and respected. David was, for me, the exemplar of the very best of the civil service, in that he didn’t impose himself on conversations, but would consistently make an observation in the course of a discussion, about policy or about the direction of the department, that would just change the light in the room – just redirect the conversation on the basis of decades of experience. When I think about who the civil servants that I enjoyed working with, and there are many, David would be high up on that list.

So, anyway, I had just gone on holiday and I was pretty tired after the first few weeks in the role. David phoned me in the evening at the cottage on Mull and said, “I can’t talk to you on an open line, but I am sending somebody from the agencies to be with you tomorrow morning.” I had to explain that our house was extremely remote and the Hebrides are pretty remote from London, so I ended up meeting this official on the jetty of the nearby port in Mull, accompanying him back to the cottage where I had my wife and two very young children at the time, where he insisted on locking my wife in the other room in order that he could share the information that we had a group of suspects under surveillance. He said to me, “We’ll have about 18 hours between executive action commencing and you being required in London, so you can just stay on holiday.” So first I had to ask what executive action actually meant. He said, “That’s kicking in doors and

arresting them. But just stay on holiday.” So, I phoned David back and I said, “I’ve had the circumstances described to me, and in the circumstances I think the only responsible course of action is that I return to London immediately and lead the department’s response.” And he said, “Oh, I am so relieved you said that, we’ve got 32 Squadron on standby!” So the next morning a helicopter, the Queen’s Flight, arrived and fuelled in front of the house and proceeded to bring me back to London.

The serious point is – without being disrespectful to subsequent cabinet colleagues and other administrations – the British state is good at getting ministers to where they need to be. So, when I read about other secretaries of state lying on sun loungers when they should be leading major international responses, I am totally incredulous, because it was for me instinctive and immediate that my responsibility was to be back where the department was, doing its work. And to continue that example, it turned out that the Pakistani authorities lifted one of the individuals involved in the plot, without the knowledge of the British government, the next day. So had I not returned immediately to the department, I would have been in the wrong place and not able to lead the response. David Rowlands was there, Eliza Manningham-Buller [then-director general of MI5], who was still in post, had returned from her chicken farm in North Wales... I just love living in a country in which Eliza Manningham-Buller runs a chicken farm! But together we received that information. David literally put his head around the door and said, “The Pakistanis have lifted one of the ringleaders; we have to move immediately.” And that led to I think three COBR meetings, and overnight that first night where we changed the security regime.

The crisis lasted approximately five days. On the second day of that crisis, David again surprised me with his wisdom, when he started putting on his jacket and said, “I am going home.” And I said, “David we’re in the middle of a major terrorist incident, why are you going home?” And he said, “Because this crisis is going to last several days, and we are not going to make better decisions if we are exhausted. You and I need to model to the department that, actually, it’s okay to have appropriate levels of cover but to look after the team. Because, otherwise, everybody is going to stay, because I am staying and you are staying.” That was just a small example of many, many years of experience and understanding. So that was a good example of where, the immediate preparation to take in the Department for Transport set you up well for the year. Had I not undertaken that tabletop exercise at an early stage, I think my response might have been less effective.

**MB: Could you talk a little bit about how cabinet worked when you were secretary of state? What worked well and less well as a decision making forum?**

**DA:** I had been attending cabinet for a while, yes. From 1997 to 2001 I used to meet with Gordon Brown [then chancellor], Philip Gould [New Labour strategy and polling adviser], Alastair Campbell [then Downing Street press secretary] and the prime minister quite regularly before cabinet for a political discussion. But first as Europe minister, then as transport and Scotland secretary, the cabinet was relatively formal. But what was striking was that there was often quite limited business. It was not what I had read about in the Crossman diaries [Richard Crossman’s *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*] or the Benn diaries [Tony Benn’s *The Benn Diaries*] in terms of meetings under Callaghan that lasted for many hours. The meetings were quite short, quiet often with a more limited number of agenda items, and with presentations followed by discussions. The character of the

cabinet meetings changed, certainly, under Gordon's premiership from 2007, but Tony was very comfortable in the role and had a fairly clear view in terms of cabinet government by the time I was attending in 2005, 2006.

**MB: In 2021, the Dunlop Review found that there had been a prevailing attitude in Whitehall of 'devolve and forget,' in terms of inter-governmental institutions. Looking back, do you think that New Labour should have handled devolution differently?**

**DA:** Well, I inherited the responsibility in the Scotland Office after what had been pretty fractious and bumpy relationships between the secretary of state for Scotland and the new devolved administration in Edinburgh – what became the Scottish Government. Personal relationships and history matters. My sister had been Donald Dewar's [first Scottish first minister] special adviser between 1997 and 1999, so had helped draft the Scotland Act. I had personally been very committed to devolution. And my sister was then subsequently elected for the neighbouring constituency as a member of the Scottish parliament. So I never felt the anxiety or, worse, disdain that some of my parliamentary colleagues felt towards the new show in town which was the Scottish parliament. I'd always had an admiration for the individuals and respect for the institution. So I was keen when I became secretary of state for Scotland to recognise both the limitations as well as the opportunities of that role, rather than to appear to be in some kind of tug-of-war for legitimacy, authority, or visibility with the first minister.

Every subsequent government since devolution, not limited to the New Labour years, has not recognised quite how challenging and vital it is to manage those relationships. I actually read a brilliant Harvard Business Review article by Charles Handy, the management thinker, around that time. He described the process of moving to devolved structures of managements within Shell, the oil company, where he'd worked, I think, in Malaysia. He said when they moved to a devolved rather than to a unitary business structure, they'd learned some very hard lessons. Firstly, the centre needs to work a whole lot harder than when you are in a unitary structure, where the centre's mandate almost by osmosis informs the unitary structure. Secondly, the job of leadership changes, to being almost like an orchestra conductor, where you are trying to find harmony amidst diversity. Thirdly, they needed to have almost evangelical or missionary work from the centre to the devolved business units, about how Shell does business. Otherwise you tended towards injury. I think there's a lot of wisdom in that article about how you work with devolved entities, and I still think the British state has not got its head fully round how effectively to harness the potential and the strength of devolution, while being responsible and recognising the different but vital responsibilities at the centre. That is partly to do with machinery of government; I think if you are in the Wales Office or the Scotland Office, you don't carry the authority of the Cabinet Office, but devolution and the engagement with the devolved governments has, certainly in my time, never been defined as a central responsibility of the Cabinet Office.

So I think that there is more work to do to figure out how the centre of the UK government engages constructively and positively with devolution on an ongoing basis. Does that responsibility lie with the prime minister? Does that responsibility lie with the Cabinet Office? Is that the responsibility of the Welsh or Scottish or Northern Irish secretary? I think there is thought that needs to be given to that challenge, and I certainly think there are important lessons still to be learned.

**CH:** Let's move on to the Brown premiership, which you've already raised, when you became secretary of state for international development. What was the conversation like when you took on that role? What was the thinking behind that move?

**DA:** I remember having that conversation. Actually, it was in the flat in, I think, Number 11 rather than Number 10 because that was where Gordon was based at that moment.

**CH:** Is this in the run up to becoming prime minister?

**DA:** Yes, this was prior to his appointment as prime minister, when he asked where I would like to go. We talked about various options, but I said that my choice would be to go to DfID. I had a very long-standing and deep commitment to development. I grew up in a manse in Scotland, and I still remember in our kitchen we had a Christian Aid poster that said, 'Live more simply, so others can simply live.' My parents were very committed to international help and I, as a minister, long admired the work that the department was doing. So I asked to be appointed development secretary and Gordon was gracious enough to appoint me to that role.

**CH:** What were your reflections on the department when you took it on? You had been round quite a lot of Whitehall by that point and seen quite a lot of different departments.

**DA:** DfID was an incredibly very high performing department. We topped the Whitehall tables for the capability review, both preceding my arrival and when I was there. DfID benefited from – rather like the Foreign Office and the Treasury – civil servants who particularly wanted to work in that department. I found an incredibly engaged, incredibly committed group of department officials with high morale, a clear sense of purpose, and a pretty clear sense of direction. So I really enjoyed my time at DfID. I appointed Minouche Shafik as permanent secretary during my time, and she is a hugely talented woman and a really impressive leader. By that time my kids were a little older and so one of the small things that Minouche and I did was to alter the time that we had meetings, because we both had kids that were relatively young at the time. One of my reflections is that the more senior you become in government, the more capacity you have to effect change – be that on important but internal matters, like what time meetings start so people can take their kids to school. I actually worked with Yvette [Cooper] to change the time of cabinet meetings, with Gordon's approval, for the same reason. So we instigated that same initiative in DfID. It was a genuine privilege of my life to be secretary of state at DfID. It was a hugely impressive team and a really well-run, well-directed department.

**CH:** It was also the time that the government moved towards the target of raising overseas aid to 0.7% of GDP – another ongoing issue. What were the internal conversations like about that? Did it help that you had a close relationship with the prime minister?

**DA:** Yes. Gordon was unyielding in his support for development and I benefited every day from the knowledge within the department and around the department that Gordon was a strong advocate and supporter of international development. I did have a fairly robust conversation with Gordon about establishing that it should be a DfID civil servant, not a Treasury civil servant, who should be our representative at the World Bank. My argument was that it was likely, if it was a Treasury official, that their principal focus,

understandably, would always be on the responsibilities of the IMF [International Monetary Foundation]. Given the scale of resource that we were now committing as the UK to the World Bank, I argued it was appropriate that – as well as the DfID secretary of state formally being the UK governor to the World Bank – we should also make sure that there was a permanent representative who was on that full-time, and we instigated that change when I was there.

I was intrigued when I arrived in the department that no previous secretary of state had visited Iraq, despite the fact that we had had staff on the ground since the intervention in 2003. I did feel that there was more work to be done to ensure that there was a fully coordinated approach between the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and DfID – partly because I got married in 2001, and there were not many politicians at my wedding, but both David Miliband and Des Browne were there, and they were at that time respectively foreign secretary and defence secretary. So I was personally, politically, and governmentally committed to DfID showing up, and being seen to show up, in relation to the comprehensive approach that was being taken in Afghanistan in particular. I thought if there were constituents of mine stepping out and beyond the wire every day, we needed to be absolutely certain that every part of the British government was working in a coordinated fashion to support those efforts. So, Afghanistan actually absorbed a lot of my time when I was at DfID. I think I was the minister that visited Afghanistan most frequently in those three years. Des, David, and I initiated monthly or bi-monthly meetings with the three secretaries of state. We started by meeting without officials, which was a source of, I think, crisis conversations between permanent secretaries and other officials in each of our departments, until they realised that there was a deep personal commitment to work in a coordinated way. The fact that there were strong and deep personal relationships between the three of us served us well and I think served the three departments well. So Afghanistan was a big focus, and cross-government working was a big focus.

One of the points that I would consistently make to officials in DfID was that there was no unwillingness on my part to defend, explain, and, if necessary, argue DfID's corner in cross-Whitehall conversations, but they needed to equip me with the facts and the arguments to be able to give an effective account of the department's interest. That learning actually stretched back to my time in DTI, when the DTI's position was to establish a broadband fibre network across the UK at the cost of, I think, several hundred million pounds of taxpayers' money. Patricia Hewitt, with great wisdom, sent me like a lamb to the slaughter into a meeting with the prime minister and the chancellor. I remember arriving with the DTI brief as to why we should spend these hundreds of millions, which stretched to about three or four pages, and sitting on the sofa in Downing Street in Tony's study with Gordon, who arrived with a briefing from the Treasury on why we should not spend hundreds of millions of pounds on a broadband fibre network, which stretched to about 80 or 90 pages, and being fairly quickly eviscerated by the chancellor in front of the prime minister. So, in retrospect, it probably wasn't a coincidence that Patricia was otherwise engaged on that day. But I would tell that story in government and say it's not actually about the department's standing or the willingness of the minister to make the case, but you need to have the evidence and you need to have effective arguments if you are going to win conversations and persuade people across Whitehall. And in that sense, one of my objectives when I was at DfID was, ironically, to build the confidence of the department in its engagement with other departments, when it was a

department that was appropriately confident that it was doing very effective work internationally.

**CH: Obviously a big theme for the Brown premiership was the financial crash. How much did that effect the working of the department? How much were you involved in the core conversations around that – both in terms of the department’s budget and the work that you were doing?**

**DA:** Yes, so I was involved in the broader conversations across government – but as a member of the cabinet, rather than the conversations that were, appropriately, happening in the Treasury at the time. On DfID’s work, it essentially obliged us to make an argument post-2007 that, while the financial crisis was affecting people’s livelihoods in the UK, it was directly and immediately affecting people’s lives and their prospect of life internationally. We also had a very significant food crisis immediately in the aftermath of the financial crisis that I remember Gordon convening an international meeting in the cabinet room in Downing Street about. So, if you like, there were direct secondary events that cascaded across the developing world as a consequence of what we were living through in the developed world at the time. But it certainly made the task of making the case for international development harder and more challenging after the financial crisis. In the decade from 1997 to 2007 in the UK, we were befitting from the economic stability and the growth that was being delivered. So part of my challenge post-2007 was to argue that development was not a ‘nice to have’ in a nice decade, but was a fundamental part of the UK’s sense of self and how we showed up in the world.

In terms of policy making, I remember working with Gordon on his conference speech in 2009. Gordon was typing his speech personally and he said, “We need something on development.” I said we should commit to legislate on 0.7%. At that point, I was already anxious about our electoral prospects and I thought, “I want to try and put 0.7 out of reach of our political opponents.” I wanted it to be seen in similar terms to how the British political class see our membership of the UN security council or the British nuclear deterrent – as being part of the settled will of the British people. This conversation with Gordon happened about an hour before he delivered his speech and so, I am afraid, apparently without any reference to the Treasury or DfID officials, Gordon stepped onto the stage and announced that we were committing to legislate for 0.7%. We didn’t get the opportunity to deliver on that promise in government because we lost office in 2010, but it forced the hand of the Conservatives, who were keen at that time to assert equivalence on development, and it forced the hand of the Liberal Democrats. Thankfully, [Michael Moore](#) [then a Liberal Democrat MP] then took a private member’s bill through after 2010, legislating for 0.7%. So it was a rather unconventional way by which the policy ended up on the statute book, but it’s a good example of where policy literacy and personal relationships matter in terms of government announcements.

**CH:** I wanted to ask you about that period because there were challenges to Brown's premiership, as you say, and uncertainty about whether the Labour Party would stay in government. What's it like being a minister knowing that you might have a finite amount of time before you could be back in opposition? Do you lose momentum or does it galvanise you?

**DA:** It's infinitely better than opposition [*laughs*]! Truthfully, on your worst day in government, you have more agency and capacity for good than on your best day in opposition. If you are looking at tough opinion polls, if you are looking at the prospect of losing office, that, I think, for good ministers, deepens a conviction to try and make a difference while you are in that role.

Again, this is a personal story, but when I was secretary of state for Scotland, Michael Forsyth [former secretary of state for Scotland] reached out to me, Michael Forsyth being a very polarising figure during the Thatcher years – a talented but very polarising figure. He reached out to me and asked if I would be willing to meet him. I always thought you can disagree while not being disagreeable, so I agreed to meet him. It turned out he wanted to ask if Margaret Thatcher, now in retirement, could come to the Scotland office to unveil his portrait because there was a tradition that secretaries of state – I am afraid not including Labour colleagues – would have their portrait paid for by their friends and painted by a portrait artist and then hung in Dover House [the offices of the secretary of state for Scotland]. These were thankfully in days pre-social media, so I wanted to be gracious and I said yes, of course, she could come and unveil his portrait. But, anyway, when we were discussing this, he said to me, "Could I offer you a piece of advice? This is going to be over quicker than you think." And, with the conceit of youth, I thanked him for that advice but didn't really internalise it. I have reflected a lot on the wisdom of those words since 2010. When you are in government, you are so focused on the work that you are doing that you don't really think about what will happen if you lose the next election. But I think that sense that you are there for a finite time and your responsibility is to – consistent with your values – try and make the biggest difference that you can while you have that privilege and responsibility, is a very wise observation.

**CH:** Finally, a few questions that we ask everyone. What achievement are you most proud of from your time in office? And is there anything that you wish you had done differently?

**DA:** In terms of pride, the crisis response to the liquid bomb plot stands out as a particular moment, because your normal job as a secretary of state is spinning plates and managing a multiplicity of different priorities and responsibilities. When you are dealing with a genuine crisis, all those other priorities fall away and you are able to focus very directly on the immediate task in hand: what you need to do in the next half an hour, what you need to do in the next two hours, what you need to do in the next 24 hours. I worked very closely with John Reid [then Home Secretary] over those hours and days. That stands out as a particular moment.

In terms of policy, my time in DfID was significant. So much of the good work that we did then has now been undone, both by the loss of 0.7% and by the loss of the department. But I feel immense pride in not just the team that we built and the work that we did but the difference that we made during those years, between 2000 and 2010.

**CH:** Finally, what advice would you give to a new minister about how they can be most effective in office?

**DA:** Be intellectually rigorous but be intellectually humble. Recognise that you have the privilege of working with an extraordinarily gifted and well-motivated team of officials and have the courage to lead and to exercise your judgement, because that's why you are there.



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