Ministers Reflect
Hilary Benn

23 February 2023

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

1999 – present: MP for Leeds Central

2011: Shadow secretary of state for the environment, food and rural affairs

2011: Shadow leader of the House of Commons

2011–15: Shadow secretary of state for communities and local government

2015–16: Shadow foreign secretary

2016–21: Chair of the House of Commons Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union

Government career

2001–02: Parliamentary under secretary of state for international development

2002–03: Parliamentary under secretary of state for prisons and probation

2003: Minister of state for international development

2003–07: Secretary of state for international development

2007–10: Secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs

Hilary Benn MP was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Grant Dalton on 23 February 2023 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Hilary Benn discusses the Department for International Development, dealing with crises, and his time running the Brexit select committee.

Tim Durrant (TD): You entered government as parliamentary under secretary of state at the Department for International Development (DfID) in 2001. What conversation did you have with the prime minister about that and what were you asked to deal with on your first day?

Hilary Benn (HB): Well, after the 2001 election, I'd been in the House for two years – I was elected in a by-election in 1999. The phone rang, and I heard those words you come to learn, "This is the Number 10 switchboard. The prime minister would like to speak to you." And he came on and he said "I would like you to join the government." I said "Thank you very much." [He said] "I'd like you to go to the Department for International Development." And I said "Well, thank you." And that was basically it, because he's a busy bloke, you know, and ministerial formation is quite a task and a half. I once took a photograph of the magnetic whiteboard at Number 10, because there was the famous reshuffle where they actually dropped a minister by mistake, because they didn't have him in the right place. I think the whiteboard came in after that. That was it.

And then my private office must have got in touch; I can't remember whether it was the same day or the next day. I went into the department and off we went. Now, all ministerial experiences are different in time and place and personality. Clare Short had set up DfID in 1997 – she'd created this extraordinary department. And because she was so much in charge of everything, I wasn't entirely sure that she needed to have a junior minister, if I can put it like that, because she knew what she was doing. But it was an extraordinary experience for me, because it was an area of policy I had not really worked on before and, as you will know, ministers sometimes get appointed because they have got knowledge in the area, but very often knowing that they haven't and the system is trying them out to see whether they can do the job.

I did that for 11 months. I went to Ukraine at DfID, because at that time we still had a development programme in the east, in the Donbas: Donetsk and Luhansk. Little did I know then how things would turn out today. I learnt an enormous amount. I was very lucky because I came back to DfID about a year later but, in between, I was asked to move to the Home Office. And I remember asking, "What will I be doing?" And the prime minister said, "I am not entirely sure; you should talk to David [Blunkett, then home secretary] about that." Because it could have been asylum and immigration, but it turned out to be prisons and probation. So I did that for 11 months.

This gives me a chance to make a point about private office. Your working relationship with private office is fundamental to everything that you do and your success. They act as the bridge between the minister and the department. I had two years' experience as a special advisor to David Blunkett before I came into government and that really did help a lot. Because being a minister, being a special advisor, or being in private office are the

three jobs that give you an overview of how a department works, and how Whitehall works, that nothing else offers you. So as an apprenticeship goes, that was really, really beneficial. I think it's important to explain at the beginning how you like to work, what the ground rules are. So, one thing I said to all of my private offices was, unless we don't control the date, my constituency Fridays are sacrosanct, [and] my monthly Labour Party meetings and my advice surgeries, which were on a Friday or a Saturday. I know sometimes things are written about how ministers like to have submissions presented and so on. I am not sure that we ever quite formally did that, but I used to say, "Give me the main points in the submission and then you can attach as many appendices as you like, because I can dig into them if I want to."

I will make a point about correspondence. When you think about the time it takes, when you open your [ministerial] box... for the first six months I was at DfID, I went to bed at two o'clock in the morning every night, because there was so much to read, and I didn't know anything. But when you come across your correspondence folder in your red box at one o'clock in the morning… I am very particular about what letters say that I put my signature to. I don't think departments give enough priority to ministerial correspondence in terms of the quality of what's drafted.

I suppose [I have] three frustrations. One is just jargon: you have to try to squeeze that out of what is presented to you. It matters hugely. Because I always used to say "If you wrote the letter, what kind of reply would you like to receive?" It's a very simple test. The worst example I ever encountered was when I was a Home Office minister and I came across this draft reply. It said "Thank you very much for your letter. The government is extremely concerned about victims. We have a victim's strategy. We've invested X million in this, that and the other." Then I turned to the letter that the woman had actually written to me. And basically the letter said, "My boyfriend is beating me up and I am terrified he is going to do it again." I remember early that morning putting a huge blue line through the draft reply and I wrote out in hand the letter she got. It said "I am really, really sorry to hear about what your boyfriend is doing to you. If he does it again, it's really important that you contact the police, and I am copying your letter and my reply to the chief constable of your police force. Yours sincerely." Now, that comes obviously from the experience of being a constituency MP, because you deal with lots of correspondence there. But I tell that story because it's the worst example of somebody not having read it and thought, "Now, what shall I do?"

In other cases, the answer to the question would be in paragraph five rather than paragraph one. And if you are giving people good news, you don't need to spend a lot of time doing it. Sometimes I'd send letters saying, "Thanks for telling me about your climate change campaign in your village; this sounds great. Keep it up. Best wishes." Whereas civil servants might think, "Ministers don't write like that, surely! You have to have a full explanation." The reason I am making the point is that this is at a time when you are knackered, when you would like to go to sleep, but you are rewriting correspondence. It is not a productive use of my time. So it would help to get things right.

An MP wrote and said, "My constituent served in the women's land army during the second world war and there's never been any recognition of them. Couldn't there be a medal?" And the draft reply said, "The government is very grateful for the contribution of women's land army volunteers, and we appreciate it enormously. The question of a

medal has been considered previously and it has been decided it is not possible to award one." I read that reply and I wrote, "What about a badge?" in very large letters, and scrawled H on the bottom. Now this was directed at my private office, but someone had very dutifully thought, "Well, it's a slightly unusual way of signing a letter", folded it up and sent it back to the MP, who then wrote back and said, "Dear Hilary, do I take it that you're thinking about doing something?" And I certainly was thinking about doing something; and in the end, we decided to introduce a badge. 30,000 women who had served in the women's land army applied and the first 50 got theirs from Gordon Brown in Downing Street. So that's the power of correspondence – albeit by slightly clunky process – to bring about a change. The reason I suggested a badge was that I dealt with medals previously when I was at the Home Office and getting a medal is really difficult: there's a cabinet sub-committee and rules and so on. But a badge [is easier], and of course we had the veteran's badge and the women's transport auxiliary badge.

TD: You picked up a couple of interesting points there about the way different departments helped you with that aspect of your job. What were your reflections on the difference between DfID and the Home Office, the first two departments you worked in?

HB: Well, DfID was new, dynamic. People would come to do admin jobs with master's degrees, because this was the place where people wanted to work. I have to say, generally, the quality of the civil servants that I worked with in all of the ministerial jobs that I did was, with one or two exceptions, really, really high. The privilege of the job is to work with committed, hardworking people. The Home Office had a completely different culture. It was much more formal, and you know Charles Clarke's [former home secretary] famous comment about the Home Office: "The thing about being home secretary is at any moment ten civil servants are working on something that, if it goes wrong, will result in your resignation." It was a completely different feel [to DfID], more risk averse – for perfectly proper, understandable reasons.

I'd never been in a prison in my life so, at the end of my first week [at the Home Office], I queued up outside Leeds prison. And I visited 25 in the year. Interesting tip if anyone is going to be the prisons minister in future: my predecessor said to me you should do a mixture of announced and unannounced visits. So, I did. When I would go on an unannounced visit, me and my private secretary would turn up and they'd look at this bloke waving a pass saying, "I am the prisons minister and I have come to visit."

I would always say to the governor, "Look, I haven't come on an unannounced visit because there's something wrong, I just do a mixture [of announced and unannounced visits]. And because you didn't know I was coming, if you've got something more important to do, then ask one of your deputy governors to show me around." The prison governor who really impressed me was the one who said, "Well, thank you for that. As it so happens, I've got something that's long arranged, which I will do, and I will join you at the end of the tour." And I thought, there's someone who knows the difference between something apparently important – me turning up – and doing stuff that's going to enable him to do his job successfully.

Obviously, as a junior minister, you're in a different position, because you're down at the bottom of the hierarchy. Although, in the case of the Home Office, because the minister responsible for criminal justice was in the Lords, [Lord] Charlie Falconer, we had the

Criminal Justice Bill in 2003 and it was decided that I would take it through its committee stage. Now, from memory, I think there were 33-odd sessions. It was probably the most difficult and terrifying thing I did as a minister, because I went into that committee every day. I am not a lawyer, and behind me and in front of me: part time judges, QCs, lawyers. Lawyers to the left of him, lawyers to the right of him, into the Criminal Justice Bill Committee went the parliamentary under secretary of state for prisons and probation [*laughs*].

That brings me on to the handling of legislation; what's difficult about it is you have to upload on the weekend and a Monday what you're going to deal with on the Tuesday. And the moment Tuesday is out of the way, you have to forget all that and upload on the Wednesday what you are going to deal with on the Thursday, because that was the typical pattern for handling bills. The conclusion that I came to is that the natural presumption of the system is you draft your bill, you present it to the world and then, in committee, you repel all boarders, you oppose all amendments. Now, that's part of the reason why I am very much in favour of pre-leg[islative] scrutiny. Because I learnt, from my time dealing with legislation, that you may say to someone who is concerned, "But the bill doesn't say that." But, if the feeling takes hold in the political world out there that it does say that, you need to make an amendment.

Early on in the bill [the Criminal Justice Act 2003], an amendment was put down to delete the word 'to' and substitute the word 'from' in the phrase 'different to' or 'different from'. It was a linguistic point. I think the officials said, "You should resist this amendment, minister." And I got up and I said, "Look, I don't know whether my understanding of the English language is different from or different to that of the honourable member, but why don't we just have a vote?" And everyone just went, "What?" And we had a vote. And I think the amendment might have been carried. It was of no consequence whatsoever.

In another case, on double jeopardy – because that was one of the things in this [act], changing the law on double jeopardy – the argument was put by a member of the committee that because you can't just go back and retry cases, you needed to have a high threshold for going back to look at a murder case, where evidence has come forward that, because of DNA advances, shows the person probably did it. And they said, "If you set it in the way it's set out in the bill now, you are more or less saying to the Court of Appeal, "They did it, didn't they? So just find them guilty now."

I thought they had made a good argument so I said, reflecting on this, "I will go away and think about this." So, in one or two examples, it was a dynamic process and that's not normally what happens, but I think that's how we should deal with legislation in committee, which is very formal. The only bit of training I ever did as a minister was to go on a course about handling bills in parliament. And boy, did I learn a lot of very, very useful things. And so, I would strongly recommend to any minister, if you are going to be dealing with a bill: go on such a course.

Grant Dalton (GD): After the Home Office, you returned to DfID as minister of state and then fairly quickly as secretary of state. Having seen those three ministerial roles in the same department, how would you characterise the differences between the three jobs?

HB: Well, the one in the middle was slightly unusual because, when Clare [Short, then secretary of state for international development] resigned, Valerie Amos was appointed in the Lords. And Number 10 realised you can't have the spokesperson [in the House of Commons] for a department in the government being a parliamentary under-secretary. So, they created the job of minister of state, and I was asked to go back to DfID, from the Home Office, after 11 months, to take up that role. Then Gareth Williams [leader of the House of Lords, 2001–03] died, Valerie became leader of the House of Lords, and I was then made secretary of state.

I will be frank: I think it's a bit tricky to be the minister of state in the Commons when the secretary of state is in the Lords. Because parliament, in the end, wants to hear from the person at the top who is taking the decisions. But that was only about six months and then, in October, I became the secretary of state.

Obviously, when you are the secretary of state, the buck stops with you, and you are the one taking the decisions within the framework of collective cabinet responsibility and dealing with your colleagues. In the main, at DfID, we had our budget and we got on with it, because Clare had established the department with its own identity and presence. One of the things I said when I took over was that we don't need to give the impression, which we sometimes did to others, that we are bristling at being asked to work collaboratively, because I think everyone understands that DfID is now a separate, well-established department. Well, that's until the Conservatives abolished an independent development department for the third time in history. So, nothing in life is permanent.

You obviously have to divvy up the work with your team. So, when I became secretary of state in DfID, I had one junior minister, because they then abolished the minister of state post which had served its purpose, and we went back to two. Now that creates some challenges. It is a job that is very international, with a lot of travel, but you needed to have someone in Westminster if there was an urgent question, so occasionally you would get someone from the Foreign Office doing it. It also meant, for example, if there was a Westminster Hall debate on Darfur, I was the one who was dealing with it. I did two or three Westminster Hall debates as the secretary of state because I thought there's no point asking Gareth [Thomas], my deputy, to mug up on it – I'm the one who's been dealing with it, I've been there, I'll go and do the debate. I don't think that happens very often in Westminster Hall. But that's about playing to the knowledge and strengths of the team. It would also create a difficulty on a Friday because, if the whips say you've got to have someone from the department here on a Friday, if there's only two of you, that means if you divvy it up 50:50, half of your constituency Fridays have just been knocked on the head. You can't work as an MP like that, because doing a ministerial job is a whole additional job on top of being a constituency member of parliament.

Which allows me to make the point: constituencies are important and so is Judy, who runs my office. I had to explain [to my private office] that if Judy rings and needs to speak to me, then that's not a message you give me at the end of the day, that's one you give me now, because that is important. Helping the civil service to understand that

parliament is a really important part of what we do, not an extra that gets in the way of departmental work, it's fundamental to the success of the department. Because if you ask MPs, "What do you think of a department?" [They will ask,] "Do they answer my letters, and what do I think of the ministers and the policy the department is pursuing?" Those are the three tests that MPs apply. I never, ever refused to see a member of parliament who asked to come and see me – that's another important piece of advice – because you are there to serve parliament, and that's MPs of all parties. When I dealt with the floods [as environment secretary] in 2007, an MP complained I hadn't been to visit his constituency. I rang him up and said, "I'll come on Saturday." He said, "I'm going to a wedding." I said, "What time's the wedding?" He said, "11 o'clock." I said, "I'll be there at nine." And I went to visit his constituency. He didn't complain after that.

GD: That's a good prompt to move on to talk about Defra [the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs]. Your move to Defra coincided with the change in PM, with Gordon Brown coming in. What was your experience of that reshuffle? Was that a move that you wanted, or one that was instigated by the PM?

HB: I think being secretary of state at DfID was the... they were both great jobs but, when I left DfID, I said to the staff, "I will look back on this as the happiest and most fulfilling time of my ministerial life." Now, that was before going on to Defra and the things we did there that I am intensely proud of.

The brutality of the changeover is something you need to prepare yourself for, including the brutality of losing office. But I am lucky because I watched my dad [Tony Benn, a minister in the Harold Wilson and James Callaghan governments] as he opened the door to the man who came to take his seals of office from our house the day after we lost the 1970 general election. So, the phrase, 'the secretary of state is dead, long live the secretary of state', I understood.

But obviously there's a lot of speculation. Gordon called me into his office in the House of Commons – downstairs from where I am talking to you – and [after getting the news] you get back to the department, and you look in the eyes of your wonderful private office, and, if they like you, they are probably thinking, "We are very sorry he's going." But their other eye is thinking, "We need to get him out the door, because the new one is arriving!" It's nothing personal. Then I turned up outside Nobel House [then the Defra offices] and was greeted by the permanent secretary and my principal private secretary and in I went. It was a very, very big job because, at that time, it had all climate change policy, agriculture, natural environment and other things besides. It was huge. And when I would go to Europe, of course, there were environment ministers and there were agriculture ministers. But I think there was [only] one other [minister] who could go to both because of their responsibilities.

That changed the following year, when climate change international policy was taken out and put in DECC [the Department of Energy and Climate Change] when DECC was created. Now, nobody likes to lose areas of responsibility, and not all government reorganisations make sense, but that really did make sense. Because I remember bumping into Ed Miliband the day he was appointed [as energy secretary] and I said, "Now you can have a conversation with yourself about Kingsnorth." Kingsnorth was a coal-powered fire station and there was a big argument, reflecting where we are today: should we be having

new coal-fired power stations when we're trying to tackle climate change? Previously, I was expressing a climate change view to the business secretary, who had responsibility for energy policy. So, it was totally logical, because decarbonising energy is a fundamental part of tackling climate change.

The other difference [with the ministerial move] – and I really hope this doesn't happen to other people – is I walked in in the middle of the floods. When I had that conversation with Ed Miliband on the day, he was on the phone to the mayor of Doncaster, and when he put the phone down, he said, "Hilary, could you come to Doncaster with me this evening?" So I went with Ed, on my first evening as the secretary of state, to visit flooded areas in Doncaster, and went to a lot of flooded areas over the next few weeks.

This gives me the chance to make a point about dealing with crises. I'd dealt with different kinds of crises at DfID. There's always a question about when you go and visit. Now, in international crises – the [2004 Indian Ocean] tsunami, for example – you don't want to turn up and get in the way of the relief effort; that's really, really important. And yet, you need to be able to ask most effectively the only question you need to ask, in those circumstances, [which] is: "Have you got what you need? And if you haven't, tell me what it is, and I will go away and try and help you to get it." You need to go and see it for yourself. So, in the case of the tsunami in 2004, I flew out with the RAF with some relief supplies. We landed, we got in a van, and we went. Destruction I never, ever want to see again. The only comparison I had were the photos of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This giant tidal wave had literally wiped everything off the face of the earth. Whereas, I think when the American secretary of state turned up, they closed the airport for two hours before he arrived. But this was the airport where all the relief supplies were coming in and out! Whereas, with floods and domestic disasters, I think people want to see ministers, because very quickly the question comes: "Why haven't you been?" That is a fine judgement.

Anyway, thanks to Ed, I went on my first evening. You get to a point in a crisis like that – because it was August and I'd missed quite a bit of the family holiday: another part of ministerial life – and the question then arose, "When is it okay to go on holiday?" Having spent, I think it was, about four weeks [dealing with the floods] and then, sod's law, I arrive and the following day the phone rang, "We've got a case of foot and mouth [disease]." I said to my wife, "I am getting a plane back to Britain", which I did. And then I spent another three weeks on that, and then it was followed by bluetongue [another animal disease]. So, I had a particular run of floods, foot and mouth… Just the words, I knew, from remembering [the previous outbreak in] 2001, this is really serious business. Then trying to understand where it all came from, which did result in me doing something I never thought I'd do as a minister, which was asking to see the drainage plans of the Pirbright Institute [which studies infectious animal diseases]. Because the best explanation we have is that the foot and mouth came up the drains [of the Institute] and flooded out onto the road and a lorry went by and took it to the first farm. I mean, it is an extraordinary tale.

GD: What was your experience of dealing with crises as a minister? Were the structures and support for you in a crisis situation good enough? How does it change the ministerial job, if you are constantly having to deal with crises?

HB: It's a really, really good question. Now, in the case of DfID, we had our own department that dealt with it. So, what happened when there were earthquakes, the deal would be: CHASE or CHAD [DfID's Conflict Humanitarian and Security Department] would say we are chartering a plane for search and rescue teams; if you can be at whatever the airport is by seven o'clock tonight, you are on the plane. And because there are search and rescue teams and dogs all over the country, those who can get there, get there, get on a plane and go and provide support. Then the next question internationally is "What else do you need?" In the case of the [2004] tsunami, a lot of the helicopters coming in and out of the airport in Aceh [in Indonesia] were American, because there was an American [navy] fleet in the area. They were going along the coast both to inspect the extent of the damage and also to take supplies, because the roads had broken along the southern coast of Aceh, because of the force of the tidal wave. Then it's about mobilising the international system – the UN, the UN agencies, and the international NGOs – to provide. The needs are fairly obvious. if you've lost your home, you need somewhere to live: a tent. You need medical care, you need food, you need education, if you are going to be there a long time.

So, sometimes people will need helicopters. One conclusion I drew from my time there came from we once tried to charter two helicopters as DfID. I think a much better system is to say, "There's loads of helicopters in the world; they're held by the armed forces." We should have an international agreement that, where a disaster strikes, the helicopters of the armed forces in the area where the disaster is should agree to make a certain number available, so you can call them down. Because, if I would go to the Ministry of Defence, they had great pressures on helicopter capacity. Take the earthquake in Kashmir: in the end, I think two or three Chinooks were generously provided by the MoD, but their first instincts would be, "We need to keep them for fighting and supporting our troops."

This is a tale about experience leading to policy change. The biggest policy change that dealing with international disasters did for me was to say, the more I dealt with this, "Why is the first thing that happens an appeal for money?" Imagine there was a fire at the IfG [Institute for Government] now and you rang the fire brigade and they said, "We'll be on our way as soon as we can," put the phone down and then issued an appeal for ladders or money to buy diesel to put in the fire engine… So why does the international system work like that? That led to me proposing what has become the Central Emergency Relief Fund, the CERF. I went to New York and proposed it at the [UN] General Assembly and a whole load of countries signed up. Basically, we all put a pot of money in, so the UN system can get to work now, to do the immediate response, and then it can bid for more, depending on the nature of the crisis and how long it's going to last. So that was a reform to the international system based on my experience dealing with humanitarian disasters.

For domestic [crises], you've of course got the COBR [the committee convened to handle matters of national emergency or major disruption] system. That was convened during flooding, and it was convened during foot and mouth. I don't know whether it's still called the CRIP [Commonly Recognised Information Picture] – the daily document they produce

on how the crisis is going – but what's in there is only as good as the sources of information that come from those who are providing it up to the COBR team. And they are a wonderful team, I have to say, really, really impressive, but there are other sources of information about how disasters are unfolding and what the needs are: the TV, MP colleagues and others. You need to work that into answering the question: what do people need? Because the job in the centre is to support those who are responding, the gold command in the case of a flood.

When there was the flood in Cumbria in 2009, Cockermouth high street became a roaring torrent. I arrived at about one o'clock in the morning and then came back to London the next day. The following day the prime minister wanted to go up, and I went with him, and he announced, I think, an extra million [pounds] for the local authorities. One of the reasons we knew that was coming was from learning the lessons [from previous floods]. After the floods of 2007, we set up the Pitt Review. Now, ministers of governments are always nervous about setting up a review because they think, well, they might decide to criticise us all and say we are hopeless. But you need to do that. It happened in 2001, for foot and mouth, and the biggest recommendation from that review was: as soon as you get a case, stop all animal movement. And that's what we did on the day the first case in 2007 was identified. Because in 2001 it was all over the country before movements were stopped. That shows the benefits of lesson learning and then applying it, if it happens again.

One of [Sir Michael] Pitt's many really good recommendations – he did a fabulous job – was to say we ought to bring together the Environment Agency and the Met Office, because you get flooding from surface water flooding. Sheffield was the example then; Sheffield flooded because there was nowhere for the water to go. I always used to say, "If you pave, tarmac and concrete over your towns and cities, where do you expect the water to go when torrents fall out of the sky." And then there is river flooding. I went to visit the joint unit that was set up and there were people sitting side by side, producing a combined forecast, and the forecast said we are going to have flooding somewhere in Cumbria and, lo and behold, we did.

So, I think the political system demands reviews to learn lessons, and I think it's really important that government does that. Sometimes reviews of what happened take a lot longer than others when things are very sensitive – Bloody Sunday and Hillsborough being two cases in point, where you get to a moment in time when it's okay, finally, to accept the truth of what happened. But people are unwilling to do that immediately after the terrible events. And it [the review] was a huge moment of vindication for the Hillsborough campaigners and for the families of the people who were killed on Bloody Sunday.

GD: You mentioned earlier that you grew up in a political household – both your father and grandfather were ministers. How do you think that shaped your approach to being a minister and how you saw your ministerial career?

HB: Most MPs who come into parliament, but not all, would like to have the opportunity to be a minister. But like politics itself, it's completely unpredictable. I finally entered parliament because my predecessor Derek Fatchett, who was a wonderful man, tragically died. I became the secretary of state because Gareth Williams died, and Valerie [Amos] went to be the leader of the Lords. A political career is very unpredictable. It's a great

mistake to come in and think, “Well, I am going to do this, this, this and this”, because it is in the hands of others. All you can do is the best you can in the job that you’re given, and then others will judge you on whether you’ve done a good job or not. Nothing prepares you for doing it yourself.

I may have had a father and a grandfather who were MPs and ministers, so you know some things, but doing it is completely different. The first time I stood up as a backbencher to ask a question at PMQs, I made a complete hash of it and the speaker told me to sit down. I was a spectacular failure. But the great thing about spectacular failures is you learn from them, and I never made the same mistake again. Making mistakes and learning from them is also a very important part of politics, life and ministerial office. And in my experience, when mistakes happen, you need to fess up quickly and then set out what you’re going to do to put it right. I think that’s really important.

I remember one occasion where I discovered that some computer disks had gone missing at Defra, and they may or may not have been lost, and they may or may not have contained details of farmers – nobody really knew. I was a bit cross, because I first discovered [they were missing] when a farming newspaper rang up the department to ask about it. I had [parliamentary] questions I think the next day and I thought, “Well, I’d better get out here in front.” I said, “I am afraid I have to report to the House”... in that first answer you give, when topicals begin, I explained that this is what happened and what we were doing. And I remember someone saying, “Well, who’s responsible for this?” And I said, “I am. It’s my job.” The thing about being a minister is you are responsible, even if you didn’t know anything about it.

TD: What was it like in the last couple of years of the last Labour government, as you moved towards the 2010 election? How did it feel at that point? Did it feel like you were moving towards the end of your period in government, and was there an attempt to try and make the most of that time?

HB: Yes, I think looking back on it, it probably did feel like that. You could read the polls. You could see what was happening. Although, what the electorate did in 2010 was to say we don’t want you to continue in majority, but we don’t want to give the other ones [the Conservatives] a majority. And in the end, there weren’t enough Lib Dems to have made a Labour/Lib Dem coalition stable. There’s the famous television programme when Gordon finally says, “Nick [Clegg], I’ve got to go to the palace. Goodbye.” And off he went. So that was the judgement of the electorate: they weren’t absolutely sure about the Conservatives.

The second point is: all governments get tired. I cite the current government as my principal exhibit. They do, and they can get fractious. It got a bit fractious during Gordon’s time, with various people who weren’t terribly enamoured of his leadership. And you run out of steam a bit – there’s a huge difference from coming in as a minister in a new government, with a manifesto. So when I think of my time at DFEE [Department for Education and Employment], working with David [Blunkett, then education secretary], we had the new deal we wanted to implement, we had the literacy and numeracy strategy, and all the effort was focused on making that happen. Interestingly – and this reflects the culture of DFEE – because David decided to get the literacy and numeracy

strategy working, he needed to bring in outside expertise and capacity, rather than expecting the civil servants to do it. Because, in fairness to DFEE, it was something that it had never, ever been asked to do before. The approach to the school curriculum evolved over time: Ken Baker [education secretary in the 1980s], National Curriculum and so on. But it was not very hands-on and the literacy and numeracy strategy said, "Come on, we are all going to do this, because we can do better at raising standards in school." And the standards unit, Michael Barber [former chief advisor on school standards] and all of that, all of that happened. So there's a dynamism, there's a focus, and if you are delivering good policies and making good changes, and the public like it, then of course it's easier being in government when you're grappling with events or crises.

Covid was a huge crisis. Towards the end of my time at Defra, I sat on the cabinet committee that was looking at human pandemic flu, which was the most scary thing I ever did. Because you get these papers that said, "On any given day, if the infection rate is five percent, then five percent of teachers will be missing from school and five percent of children." And I remember saying at the meeting, "But if this is a disease that is killing not just older people, but young, fit, healthy people – go back to the Spanish flu pandemic, 1918 to 1922 – no parent is going to send their child to school. None. Indeed, are people going to sit on the supermarket checkouts to be breathed over by people who may be giving them a fatal disease?" Pretty soon you see the potential for breakdown of society. How do you keep it going in those circumstances?

Which is why we should take pandemic preparedness really, really seriously. One decision we took on that cabinet committee was to pre-order Tamiflu, the anti-viral, and advanced purchase contracts for vaccines. Now, I think the NAO [National Audit Office] wasn't entirely enamoured of the amount of money that we committed to that. But we had a meeting once and I said, "Who wants to be sitting round the table if we haven't ordered them, when this is visited upon us?" The pandemic really threw up a challenge for government, because we discovered we couldn't go shopping for everything we wanted in the global supermarket when it came to PPE and you need to have some basic capacity yourselves, in the same way as you need to have a farming industry. The view that some argue that we can always go shopping in the global supermarket – if you've been trying to buy fruit and veg in your local Sainsburys [due to food supply problems in February 2023] – it's not working at the moment, is it?

The other point I would make for colleagues who are preparing [for government], and I know they are doing a lot of work on this… I was the shadow secretary of state for communities and local government. I was there when we went into the access talks, preparing for the 2015 election. The DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] took those extremely seriously. We had about six meetings in the office I am talking to you from here [in parliament], and we had a clear idea of what we wanted to do and they had a clear idea of what they needed to prepare for. But nobody knew what the outcome of the election was going to be. It was felt there was a possibility that we might win. It didn't turn out like that. But that preparation is extremely important, particularly with the civil servants. The civil servants have a pretty good idea, they think, of who is going to win and the thickness of the briefing book for incoming ministers varies depending on who they think will win. So, I suspect the Lib Dem government in 1997 book was really quite thin, and the Labour one was pretty whopping.

TD: You were in the shadow cabinet after the 2010 election and then in 2016 you became chair of the [House of Commons] Exiting the EU Select Committee, after the EU referendum. How did you approach that role and do you think you had more influence as a minister or as a select committee chair?

HB: The most important thing to understand is that the Brexit select committee was like no other select committee ever. The tradition is that you reach consensus. I was on the receiving end of select committee recommendations as a minister. What do select committees want? They want to have an influence on government.

I sometimes felt that the recommendations and then the government response two months later was a bit formulaic. That came home to me the time I went to give evidence as the DfID secretary to the science and technology committee. I knew that their first question would be, "Is DfID going to have a chief scientific advisor?" The department didn't want to have one, and I thought that we should have one. So, when Ian Gibson [former Labour MP] asked me that question, I said, "Yes, and let me tell you why. And one of the reasons why is because I've listened carefully to what the select committee has had to say". And I think most government departments have a chief scientific advisor now, if it hasn't changed since my time.

Whereas the Brexit select committee… Brexit divided the nation down the middle, and people were pro- or anti-[Brexit] and that was it, and the committee was pro or anti. And I realised very early on that, if we only produced reports or words that expressed a consensus, there wouldn't be much point. People didn't like it that we voted so often on the recommendations. We got some things through because there were Conservative members on the committee – they had a majority of course – who were willing to vote for recommendations that those who were more hard-line Brexiteers were bitterly opposed to.

It was a bit difficult. I was accused of steamrollering stuff through the committee. The longest time I took for informal consideration of a report was eight hours. That is a really slow steamroller. And we only had one report with unanimity, which was saying that EU citizens should have the right to remain in what then became the Settled Status Scheme. That was the only one where we got agreement. So, I am a very bad advert for how to operate a select committee, and I hope no one finds themselves in that position again. Because it was polarised, there wasn't a lot of give in the middle, to be frank. I think if you asked a lot of MPs, given where we ended up on the economic [Brexit] deal, "If you went back and had your time again on some of the proposals that were put early on…?" I find that the hardest question to answer. If I had my time again, would I have voted for some things that I voted against, if I had known where we'd end up?

I am now co-chairing this thing called the UK Trade and Business Commission that is trying to carry on, in a way, the work of the select committee. We take evidence – we had a session this morning on financial services and fintech – to let evidence on the impact of our changed trading relationships with the EU and the rest of the world see the light. Because we are going to have to do something to fix what we've got at the moment.

TD: As that select committee chair, it was a very unusual time. There aren't that many MPs who've got pieces of legislation named after them [The European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019, known as the Benn Act, which required the government to avoid a no-deal Brexit], …

HB: Yes. The thing is there was a group of people who would meet quite often in the room that I am sitting in today – because it's close to the chamber – representing a range of parties, with a range of views about what they would regard as an acceptable Brexit outcome. But in respect of that bill – the Cooper bill first, and then the Benn-Burt bill as it came to be known – they were all very strongly opposed to a no-deal Brexit, and therefore voted for it. They were very honest and said, "The moment a deal comes along, I'll vote for it. But I am not supporting a no-deal Brexit."

It was an extraordinary time, because Theresa May had lost her majority; the government didn't bring forward any bills that were controversial because they had no idea whether it was going to get them through. And then Boris Johnson prorogued parliament for five weeks. I didn't think that the Supreme Court would want to dip its toes into that, given the Bill of Rights. But the judgement was absolutely fantastic in the way it worked its way through that, saying "Of course you can prorogue. And normally it's a week, no problem. Five weeks, your purpose is different; it's not prorogation, it's to deny parliament the right to pass things that you don't like." The select committee had some influence in getting stuff out of government: papers, or economic assessments that weren't economic assessments, that I always felt were probably written more fully after we asked for them, because it took a bit of time for the government to make them materialise. It was a very particular period in history.

The biggest lesson for me of the referendum, if you're a prime minister proposing to do this, is ask a question where it's absolutely clear what the answer is. It was clear we were leaving the [EU] institutions, but no one had asked "So, what kind of relationship are we going to have in the future?" And it morphed from the Leave campaign promise of a deal… That was the other reason for the Benn bill: they said, "You're trying to block Brexit". But we are holding the Leave campaign to what they promised. They said there will be a deal. And then it all changed and suddenly the referendum apparently meant no-deal. But we are revisiting another matter, which may be slightly outside your remit.

TD: Well, yes, and there will be PhDs to be written on it.

HB: Oh, and books!

TD: What achievement are you most proud of from your time in government?

HB: I will come to that immediately, except to say that high turnover of ministers is bad. You see, I was really lucky. I was at DfID from 2003 to 2007, so that's nearly four years. I was at Defra for three and a half years.

When you come into a department midway through a government, which is something you haven't dealt with before, the world looks at you and says, "Well? So, what's your plan for this, for that?" You've only just arrived through the door. The best thing you can do is get out there, meet people, listen, reflect on what they've said and then you can

form a view about what you think and what needs to be done. So don't be afraid to go out, because that is how you are going to learn.

What am I proud of? Well, the establishment of the CERF, which I've mentioned. I am proud of what we were able to do around debt relief at the Gleneagles Summit, the G8 [summit in 2005]. That was an extraordinary time.

I am proud of the Climate Change Bill [in 2008], which I was responsible for introducing – although, on the day of the second reading, I was catastrophically laid low by a bug and my poor old minister of state had to come all the way back from a trip somewhere to get up in the House of Commons and present the bill. A bill, interestingly, which the government under Tony Blair had decided it would introduce before we had yet bottomed out all of the policy. That is most unusual, in my experience, so it was an example of political commitment, and it became a world leader and a model, including creating the Committee on Climate Change, which is the referee in telling us, all governments, how we're doing in meeting that [climate targets]. So, I am proud of that.

I am proud of the Marine and Coastal Access Act [in 2009]. That was relatively easy to get through parliament, because we had all-party support. But it created the coastal path and marine conservation zones, because we had a planning system for land for years, but we had no planning system or proper protection for what's underneath the waters that surround the nation. When I first saw photographs of beautiful sea creatures and plants, if you'd asked me where they were taken, I'd have said, "The Bahamas, the Great Barrier Reef…?" And I was told, "No, in the North Sea." We don't know what's there, although we've lived amidst the North Sea for centuries. A lot of what's there we don't know.

Then there's the South Downs National Park. I happened to be in the job when the second inspectors' report turned up. In 1947, a man called Arthur Hobhouse drew up a list of the beautiful places he thought should be preserved for posterity as national parks. And in 1949, the Attlee government passed the National Parks Act. All of them were created, and the last one that hadn't been, on Arthur Hobhouse's list, was the South Downs National Park. It's an interesting point about relations with civil servants. The inspector said, "I think it should be this", but there are the following areas where it's up to the secretary of state to decide whether they're in or out of the park. So, I turned to my civil servants and said, "Right, we're going to go and have a look." Horror... "But, secretary of state, what do you mean go and have a look?" I said, "Well, if I am going to designate them, I am going to go and have a look." "But you can't do that." "But why can't I do that?" "Because you are acting in a quasi-judicial capacity. You might speak to people. They might unduly influence you. There might be judicial reviews." So, we reached an agreement: if anyone said "Good morning" to me, I would say "Good Morning" back, and the same in the afternoon.

So we spent a day going from one end of the park to the other. One of the areas was Ditchling. The people of Ditchling wanted to be in [the South Downs National Park]. So, I said, "What do I have to do to designate Ditchling in the park?" [And the civil servants said,] "Well, you have to be satisfied that the land is of National Park quality." Well, we drove up out of Ditchling, back down again, and I said, "Yup, looks like National Park quality to me." And at that moment I resolved that I'd go back to Ditchling to sign the papers, because you can see Ditchling Beacon – I don't know if you are familiar with it –

it looms over the crossroads in the centre of Ditchling, and we went to the tearoom and did this. And the night before [I signed the papers], I sent a copy of the map to my predecessors [as environment secretary] – Michael Meacher, David Miliband and Margaret Beckett – because they'd done loads of work on this, to say, "Thanks for what you did. Here's the park." I am very proud of that.

I will tell you one other story, which is in effect about individual casework. A woman came to see me. Her stillborn baby was involved in Alder Hey [when patients' organs were retained without family consent] and had been buried somewhere. And she had been traumatised to discover that some of her baby's parts had not been buried, because they took what they called 'samples' – I don't know if you are familiar with this – they kept samples that could be more than just what you might think of as a slice of tissue.

She'd got a permission to dig down to try and find her baby's coffin and they discovered two coffins. And they said, "We can't disturb one for which we don't have an authority". She came to see me and somehow we managed to issue another authorisation – I think she described what was in the coffin that she'd put with her stillborn baby. And they found it so she was able to reunite the samples that had been kept, about which she'd only discovered later. And so her much loved baby who'd died was now whole again. Now that's an example – and this happens all the time with ministers – individual cases where by meeting people, and using the powers that you have got to help someone, you can make a big difference. We must never forget, as ministers, the responsibility we have to deal with people who come to see us in our ministerial capacity who have a problem, in the same way that we would seek to deal with people who come to see us in our constituency capacity as their member of parliament.

Looking back on my time, the great thing about departments is – this is not disrespect, it's a slightly humorous comment – they'd have you working 24 hours a day, seven days a week if they could. Because civil servants are under pressure: "Can't you get the minister to come to this? Come to visit here? Go to our conference?" And so on. You need to be able to manage that. Your private office plays an important part in doing that. But, if I had my time again, setting aside time to think [is what I'd do]. Because if you're in the moment, going from engagement to engagement, box to box, you don't always get the time to think and you need to do that. One bit of advice I was given, which I am sure is given to all ministers: you need to focus on a small number of things, because they will take a lot of effort to get them through.

The one other bit of advice I would give is: two stories. When I became the Home Office minister, I found myself dealing with the Sex Offences Bill [which became the Sexual Offences Act 2003] in draft, updating of the law on sexual offences. One of the policies I inherited said that if you worked in a care home and had sex with someone who was living in the care home, you would be committing a criminal offence. Now, I am not talking about people who are vulnerable or have learning difficulties; you might fall in love with the person you are caring for! So I had a meeting of the officials, and I said "I don't really agree with this, because I think there's a distinction." I said, "What do you think?" And there was this sort of look: "What do you mean what do we think? Minister, this is the policy." I said, "No, what do you think?" And we went round the table, and it turned out that all of the five or six civil servants agreed with me that this was not a very sensible policy, so it went. Having a relationship with civil servants in which they can honestly

express what they think is really important, and it’s most important when you disagree with them.

And that’s the second story. I had to deal with badger culling: the pass-the-parcel that was on my desk when I arrived at Defra. I came to the conclusion that we were not going to give permission for the culling of badgers. I knew that most of the civil servants in the team fundamentally disagreed with me. But I said to them, “It’s really important that you put all the arguments to me as to why I’m wrong because, when I go out there, I am going to get them in spade loads from people.” Establishing that kind of relationship [is vital], because if civil servants think, “I am only going to say to the minister what I think the minister wants to hear,” they’re not doing right by you and you’re not doing right by yourself. That’s an important lesson. It does mean you have to have confidence, that you feel you can say, “I hear what you say but I disagree.”

In the end, you are the one responsible. You have to work it out in your own mind. When I got up in the House of Commons to announce that I was not approving badger culling, I think it was the only time in my ministerial career I was barracked, because there were a lot of MPs who thought I was completely wrong. But there you are.

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Published May 2023
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The Institute for Government is a registered charity in England and Wales (No. 1123926) with cross-party governance. Our main funder is the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts.