

Ministers Reflect Sir Brandon Lewis



21 June 2023

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2010 – present: MP for Great Yarmouth

Government career

2012—14: Parliamentary under-secretary in the Department for Communities and Local Government

2014—16: Minister of state in the Department for Communities and Local Government (housing and planning)

2016—17: Minister of state in the Home Office (policing and the fire service)

2017—18: Minister of state in the Home Office (immigration)

2018—19: Minister without portfolio and Conservative Party chairman

2019—20: Minister of state in the Home Office (security and deputy for EU exit and no deal preparation)

2020—22: Secretary of state for Northern Ireland

2022: Lord Chancellor and secretary of state for justice

Sir Brandon Lewis was interviewed by Jess Sargeant and Beatrice Barr on 21 June 2023 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.

Sir Brandon Lewis discusses the benefit of local government experience as a minister, the challenges of the Home Office and his time as Northern Ireland secretary dealing with the protocol.

Beatrice Barr (BB): You first entered government as a parliamentary under secretary in the Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], in 2012. What was the conversation with the prime minister like when he asked you to enter government?

Sir Brandon Lewis (BL): Immensely surreal because I wasn’t expecting it. It completely came out of the blue. What really sticks in my mind is I was at the end of the reshuffle, it was quite late, I think I was the last appointment. So you’ve got 24 to 48 hours, roughly, of various colleagues moving around, and there are jokes every time somebody walks quickly: “Oh, are you off to No.10?” Then I got a phone call I completely out of the blue, asking if I could come to No.10. And I remember people saying, “Oh, you’re off to No.10.” I was sort of laughing, thinking, “I can’t say anything, but yes.” It was a complete bolt out of the blue.

Actually, from memory, I think I was fine when I went in, but when I left, I was a bit emotional about it, because it was a complete shock. I’d only got elected in 2010; I had no expectations. So it was more emotional when I left and phoned my wife. And then I got a call from the secretary of state [[Eric Pickles](#)], who was actually a really close friend, who said, “Why aren’t you here already? Get your arse here!” Jokingly, but... it was very surreal.

And No.10 itself was really quiet. Intimidating isn’t quite right because it wasn’t scary. But it was intimidating in the sense of, “I’m sitting in No.10 in a reshuffle.” And, of course, you don’t really know you’re about to get a job. You sort of do, because you’ve been called in and you’re sat in one of those rooms, and you’ve all been split into different rooms, and you’ve never done it before. But there’s still an element of not wanting to get too excited because it could just be, “Oh look, we just want to have a quick word about something else.” It’s slightly weird. The first one was a really weird experience.

BB: So then you hurry over to the department. What was your first day in DCLG like?

BL: I think I got appointed quite late, so I just went in and said “hello” on day one. My first proper day was day two. What I do remember, and I’m pretty sure it was on the first day, was having a briefing from the officials. I’m dyslexic, so I quite like face-to-face conversations and talking through stuff, but I was given loads to read. And one of the officials who I think is still there said, “Minister, while you’re here, we’ve got your first ministerial letter to sign, it’s a guidance note.” I’d been a councillor, so I knew what a guidance note was, I knew it goes to all councils to explain the guidance on a particular issue. So he said, “If you could sign this, this will be your first note to go to every council in the country. We’ve worded it so you can introduce yourself.” And I read it – it was on something linked to planning – and I said, “This guidance note is explaining why on this

particular issue there is no government guidance.” And he did have the good decency to say, “Yes minister.” And to this day I don’t know if he was genuinely just being entertaining, or completely oblivious to the irony of the situation. I politely declined to sign that letter and got on with the rest of the day.

The rest of the day and the first few days were just full of briefings, because the brief was quite wide. It was local government, local government finance, fire, high streets, pubs – it was quite a varied brief.

BB: As you said, you’d been council leader in Brentwood before you became a minister. Do you think that affected your approach to the job?

BL: Oh yes, definitely. Because I had the advantage that I knew how local government works. I knew some of the characters, like the chairman of the LGA [Local Government Association] who I already knew well because I’d been involved with the LGA as a council leader, and obviously we interacted with the LGA and people like the LGA. So it definitely gave me an advantage in that sense. And, obviously, because I already knew the secretary of state, it meant I knew how he liked to work. I knew his view of the world generally, although he then sorted out what he wanted to do in DCLG.

BB: Was it ever frustrating working with people in the department who perhaps didn’t have the same experience of local government that you did?

BL: No, not at that point. Later, when I was in that department towards the back end, when I had more institutional knowledge than some of the civil servants because I’d been there for years, there were occasions when I sort of sat there going, “Look, we did try this three years ago and it didn’t work.” But not when I was first there, no. Partly because when you’re new and, for me, so unexpectedly, you’re just so excited to be there. But also, it was a good team. When I was first there we had Mark Prisk [then housing minister], we had [Nick Boles](#) [then planning minister] doing planning – even as a councillor, I’d always stayed away from planning committees, which I know is ironic bearing in mind what I ended up doing, so it wasn’t like I wanted to get involved in that. Mark was doing housing, which was not my area. So I had my own little area and we all got on very well. Eric [Pickles] – I appreciate I’m biased because he was already a friend – but he was a really good secretary of state. He ran the team meetings, prayers meetings, really well. So you all felt, from my point of view anyway, that you knew what was going on across the department. You felt part of a team, not just like you were doing your own thing. I had a good relationship with the special advisers. I generally found the civil servants really good and easy to work with, they certainly made me feel welcome. So I never found that particularly frustrating, no.

BB: Did it change your perspective on the relationship between Whitehall and local government when you were, for example, introducing local government cuts having been in local government before?

BL: Yes and no. Not so much then. I was very supportive of the cuts, because I felt, and I still feel, that there is wastage in local government. You’ve got an awful lot of local authorities with relatively small budgets who are running high-value managing teams – standalone chief execs, deputy chief execs, and all of that, spending the best part of £1

million of a £20 million budget on management. My view's been not that you should merge local authorities, but that they should merge their management structures, and there's still a lot to say there. And I did a lot on that while I was there, but still there's more to do. So I never had a problem with that, and I never had a problem being quite robust about that.

What I would say, though, the other side of it is, as time has gone on, I've felt there are too many MPs who don't have any experience of local government – and I might be biased because I come from that background – and therefore don't quite understand how local government works and the intricacies between districts, counties, unitaries, metropolitans, etc, and how to work with each of them. So more latterly, I found central government doesn't always understand local government. When I was there, I didn't feel that, but then I was there doing it so I probably wouldn't.

BB: Am I right in thinking you then moved to the policing brief?

BL: After that department. I did local government finance until 2014, but then I stayed in the department doing housing and planning until 2016, and then I went to the Home Office.

BB: Right, so what was the mood in the Home Office like in that period of limited funding before the police uplift?

BL: In fact, we were going to do – well, actually, I did do – a complete review of police funding, and we never could politically actually take it forward.

I did the policing role for a year, so I did the 2016 Policing Act. Theresa May put me in there. That was quite surreal. Because I didn't get called in to No.10, I remember being at home, and it was a phone call. I think I was the first one appointed after the cabinet: she phoned me, and she gave me the Privy Counsellorship and police and fire. Fire had just moved to the Home Office literally a couple of months earlier.

BB: What was the shift like from DCLG to the Home Office, especially having got on so well with your secretary of state?

BL: It was actually alright. It's the same building, so it was really just a few yards across and a floor down.

BB: You must have spent years there just moving around the same building.

BL: When DCLG moved from Eland House to Marsham Street, I was the minister responsible for overseeing the move with the civil service. So I moved to Marsham Street and then moved within Marsham Street. I have spent, probably, four, five, six, seven years in Marsham Street.

When I moved to the Home Office, I was quite fortunate because [Amber \[Rudd\]](#) became home sec. Amber was great to work with. Amber and I got on really well. We had Mark Sedwill as the permanent secretary, who was utterly brilliant. He made me feel welcome very much straightaway. I connected really well with him straightaway. We had a good

director of [crime,] policing [and fire], which was Paul Lincoln [2016–17] at the time, who then became head of Border Force. When I was at DCLG, I dealt with Ken Knight who was the chief fire adviser [2007–13], who was a superstar. Then it went over to Peter Holland [2013–20], who I actually appointed when I was at [D]CLG, so it was all people I kind of knew.

In all my time in government, I've been very lucky, I've in one way or another enjoyed all my jobs. The one I enjoyed the least was the policing job. It's not because there's anything wrong with policing per se, because the police force is great to work with. But we had just, as a government, devolved basically everything to the PCCs [police and crime commissioners]. So I found the policing job quite boring, because there's nothing to do, because it's all devolved to the PCCs – which I actually agreed with. That means the policing minister job is really going out and about, being an ear for them to feed things in, but there's not actually anything proactive to do. So because fire had come in, I actually spent a lot of time trying to do more to bring fire and policing closer together. When HMIC [HM Inspectorate of Constabulary] took over inspection of fire, I did that legislation and worked on that with Tom Winsor [then HM chief inspector of constabulary]. I put more into that than I probably would have, because it was something to get your teeth into. I'm not very... I couldn't be a Foreign Office minister, as brilliant as they all are, because I like doing stuff. So I found the policing role a bit tedious and I was quite pleased to be moved when Theresa moved me in July 2017 actually.

BB: So you moved on to the immigration brief in 2017 – still in the Home Office, but a very different side of it.

BL: Well, I enjoyed it a lot more, actually, because there was so much to do there.

BB: There's so much conversation about whether the various parts of the Home Office fit together, so I'm interested to know how much you felt like having come from another Home Office job actually prepared you for the immigration brief?

BL: Not at all. The immigration brief was very, very different. Much more complex. Theresa [May] had also asked me to chair some work on foreign national offenders, because that's an issue that sits across various departments. Nobody had a grip. So I then chaired a cross-departmental board to try and get a grip of that, which I actually really did enjoy.

I enjoyed immigration, because although it's actually really hard work – that job and the planning job are the two that probably gave me the biggest red boxes. I mean, planning, you're looking through planning stuff, several boxes a night on some nights. Immigration is similar, the sheer workload is probably one of the heaviest. But I really enjoyed it because there was a lot to do, complex as it was. I also, through that, had Border Force, which you have (technically) direct control over. I'm not pretending you can literally direct them, because you've got the head of Border Force, but they are directly answerable to you. You've actually got something you can do. So I actually did really enjoy that job.

But it did also show me, and I think this is one of the challenges at the Home Office, that it does work in siloes. My overarching view of the Home Office is I generally found the officials very good – there's one I thought was dreadful, and I think is partly to blame for

a lot of the problems the Home Office later had. He's not there anymore. Not in the civil service anymore, actually. But it works in siloes. I noticed the difference because, when I went back under Priti [Patel, home secretary 2019–22], the difference from when Mark Sedwill was there, to then have a different permanent secretary was dramatic. I felt that when I was there with Mark, there was a better cohesiveness, but, even then, different parts of the Home Office, I found, do work in their own silo.

The other overarching thing I always found at the Home Office, and this is not a critique, I think it's just a reality. All departments really want the secretary of state's attention. And obviously now having been a secretary of state, I see that a different way. But in my experience, that is more extreme in the Home Office than anywhere else. I can see why junior ministers in the Home Office would sometimes feel, kind of, in the way. They really want everything to go through the home secretary, which isn't practical. Both with Amber and with Priti, I had to early on say, "Sending subs [submissions – documents of written advice from civil servants] in parallel is ridiculous, because, if we disagree, the first time we know it is when we're actually arguing about it." And because I get on really well with both of them, saying that wasn't a problem. As the junior minister, my view was that I should get the sub first, give a view, you're the home secretary, if you disagree, whether I like it or not, that's hierarchy, that's fair. But you should be disagreeing with me knowing that you disagree with me, rather than us not knowing and suddenly we're in conflict when we don't need to be. The Home Office, I think, created that kind of situation. Both with Amber, but then again with Priti, we resolved this and just had the conversation, and she directed the private offices not to do it that way. But we had to do it and then we had to do it again. The automatic direction in the Home Office was everything goes to the home secretary.

BB: Do you think it is right that those different responsibilities stay in the same department?

BL: I don't have a problem with the different responsibilities, I don't think that's such an issue. It's just that there isn't enough cohesiveness across the department. When we used to do team meetings – prayers meetings – they weren't as joined up as they were at DCLG. Eric was already a very experienced guy in local government and all that too, but the joining up just wasn't quite as good.

BB: You then became Conservative Party chair before returning to the Home Office. It wasn't the easiest period for party unity, and you'd done quite public service-focused jobs before that. What was your experience of moving to the party role like? What were the particular challenges and things to get used to?

BL: I really enjoyed being party chairman. I had been an association chair, so I knew the party. I kind of had an idea that I might get that job at some stage, just because of things that had been said in the few months leading up to it. So I kind of knew it was coming.

That was a great job. It was full on. Because I went to CCHQ [Conservative Campaign Headquarters], I was effectively secretary of state level – and I was in cabinet at secretary of state level – and running CCHQ was like running a small department, so you have the ability to just get on and do things. We had a really good team, and the PM was brilliant in that she just trusted us to do our job – I had a really good relationship with Theresa. I

just found that a very, very enjoyable job. It was full on, but again that's part of what made it interesting.

I should also say, as party chair I ran the 2019 leadership campaign. That was fantastic. That was a really good experience. Then I became security minister.

Jess Sargeant (JS): After going back to the Home Office, you became Northern Ireland secretary, which was your first official secretary of state position. What was it like when you were offered that job?

BL: That I didn't expect. I got a phone call very early in the morning from somebody in No.10 to say, "I hope you're going to stay by your phone because you are going to get a phone call but wait for the phone call." Then about two minutes later, Laura Kuenssberg [then BBC political editor] tweeted out rumours that Brandon Lewis might be... I can still to this day guess who briefed Laura Kuenssberg about what job I was going to get. That was a bit too coincidental. Although when I became chairman, I also had the experience of being in the car on my way to No.10 to be made chairman when Laura Kuenssberg tweeted that [former secretary of state] [Chris Grayling](#) had been made chairman and I remember thinking, "Well, what am I doing then?"

Anyway, I was one of the first in, and reshuffles are a weird thing, but it was a very weird day. Because having got that call really early, then Sajid [Javid] resigned [as chancellor] and everything suddenly came to standstill. I then got a phone call saying, "There's a bit of delay, you've probably seen the news, but just be patient." And I was thinking, "This could change everything," because I know from when I was chairman that one little thing can make quite big changes. I was in there once when somebody turned a job down which changed everything thereafter. So that was a very, very weird day. It was also the day after I had my investiture for getting the CBE. I had a dinner that night that I had organised with some family friends to say thanks for their support, to celebrate my CBE. So I had this weird day of my wife being like, "You are going to be at the dinner aren't you?" And I'm like, "I don't know!" *[Laughter]*

And that was surreal. I didn't expect it – as chairman I had to put Boris [Johnson] through a disciplinary process. He'd moved me from being chairman of the party to security minister, in cabinet but not secretary of state. So I didn't particularly expect to be moved up. It was quite a shock, and I was really pleased. There was something about the job that interested me. I was quite intrigued by it because, also, of that surreal thing where you come out and you're taken into another room and then told, "You're going to have police protection and everything's about to change." They already knew about my wife and kids and my plans. That was a bit surreal. That was quite surreal, actually. And the PM, Boris, was very kind around what he said and why he wanted me to do it, and very clear about what he wanted me to do.

I really enjoyed that job because there was so much going on. Because of Brexit, because I was tasked with dealing with some of the challenges that had come from NDNA [the [New Decade, New Approach deal](#) which restored the [NI executive](#)] didn't particularly work in the UK government's favour, they wanted to deal with legacy which is obviously a really historic issue. So it was quite full on, and I really enjoyed that. Actually, a previous Labour secretary of state – I won't name him because it's just not fair without knowing

he's happy with it – said to me, “You will find being secretary of state is one, if not the best, job you’ve ever had. But the only people who would know that are the ones who actually do it.” I kind of now know what he means. Because not a lot of MPs want to be secretary of state for Northern Ireland but having done it, it really is brilliant. You’re across so much, because, although obviously you’ve got devolution, you have got to have an interest in all of it, you’ve got to keep an eye on everything. That’s really interesting. And as a politician, the dynamics between five parties in power sharing who disagree with each other on everything is a really interesting thing to be in the middle of, and a large part of the secretary of state’s role in Northern Ireland is the bit that never gets talked about, it’s being the oil between the wheels of the five parties. It’s not the stuff you actually do, it’s the stuff you help not develop, as it were.

JS: That role was obviously a bit different to some of your other briefs and there are lots of complex issues in Northern Ireland to get your head around. How did you go about trying to understand some of the challenges that were facing Northern Ireland, and building relationships with the political parties?

BL: Yes, so I was not a Northern Ireland expert. I had a bit of knowledge, because when I was chairman, I was also a Cabinet Office minister and I did some stuff in Northern Ireland around Brexit. As security minister, I was deputy for no deal, so I had done quite a bit around Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland security. But I was in no way an expert.

I was quite lucky in that five days or so before I was appointed, the NIO [Northern Ireland Office] had a new permanent secretary [Madeleine Alessandri]. She was brilliant. A great, great individual. I really enjoyed working with her. When we were both relatively new, I think that was quite good. Hopefully – well, she can tell you for herself – but for me I feel it made my life easier. Rather than having deal with somebody where the whole institution feels that the permanent secretary has been there for ever, so they know much more. So we were both new, and I think that worked. And from my point of view, we got on very well. I was very lucky in that. And I made a point of knowing what her past career was and talking to her about it.

We also had some brilliant civil servants in the NIO, who had been there a while. Like Colin Perry and Chris Flatt [both directors at the NIO]. So I spent a fair bit of time in the beginning, because of what it was and the complexities of Northern Ireland, before I went out and did much publicly, I wanted to spend a bit of time to really make sure I understood it, meeting party leaders, getting to know them a little bit. I spoke to a few of my predecessors and a few ex-PMs. I’ve got to say, ex-PMs are generally very generous with their time, there was only one I never got to speak to. David Cameron was very generous with his time, Tony Blair was very generous with his time, actually. John Major was as well, and Theresa. They were all generous. So I was quite lucky in that I had quite a big pool of people I was able to speak to. And then, actually, for me, quite early on, I had to just get out into Northern Ireland and meet people and just get into it, and sort of learn as you go. I like physically being out and about and seeing things.

BB: [NI secretary] [Chris Heaton-Harris spoke at the IfG recently](#), and one of the things he mentioned that really struck me was what his week actually looks like, how much time he spends in London and Northern Ireland and trying to make time for his family life too. How did it affect your day-to-day life, moving from quite senior government roles but based full-time in England, to the NIO?

BL: Yeah, and also I had Covid. I hadn't been involved very long when Covid hit. But because of the national security angle, I still had to go out there most weeks. I spent a lot of time on British Airways flights feeling like I had a private plane. There was literally no one else on the plane.

I was more aware of it when I stopped doing the job, just how tiring literally flying there was. It's not a long flight, but that process of air travel is actually quite tiring. In that job, you are very, very fortunate because you get to have Hillsborough [Castle] as your official residence. But as lovely as Hillsborough is, because of police protection and because the gardens are open to the public, it's not like you can just go wandering around enjoying a country house. You are kind of stuck there. And also, more so in Northern Ireland than here, you can't just go, "Actually, I'm going to pop down to the pub." You can go to the pub, but everything's got to be organised and planned. So I found that quite restrictive because if I've got an hour free in an hour's time, I want to decide what to do then, not three days earlier. So I found that not tiring at the time, but afterwards, I suddenly realised I was tired.

The diary balance is a nightmare. I was very, very lucky. I have got the most amazing wife. My kids are just a bit older, they're now 22 and 19, so they were obviously three/four years younger, but one was at uni, so she was able to be a stability for them at home, which freed me up to go and do it. The bit that suffered was my constituency time. My constituents and my association officers and my local councillors were brilliant, in that they kind of said to me, "We know you've got this job, you're going to be travelling a lot and going to be away a lot, we understand." And I never really had any hassle locally for being in Northern Ireland instead of being in Great Yarmouth. I will always have a debt to the people of Great Yarmouth, and to my councillors, because they accepted and understood that. And I like to hope they were quite proud to have an MP who was a secretary of state, because they'd not had that before.

But it is a big diary pressure, because you are over there two, three days a week. Sometimes I was even flying out and back more than once a week. So, diary-wise, it is really, really hard.

JS: The [Northern Ireland protocol](#) had been agreed shortly before you took up the position. What was your role in figuring out the implementation of the protocol and, when it did come, was it what you expected?

BL: I was concerned before I was Northern Ireland secretary. When I was in the security minister job, I was in a few meetings where I expressed some concerns about us saying there was going to be no new infrastructure [for checks on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland] and yet, what was being talked about looked like pretty big infrastructure to me, and was going to be an issue. What we were going to do at the ports – 60,000 sq ft warehouses is quite big infrastructure – I used to be in wholesale way back,

so I knew exactly what the scale of that was! But that was before I was Northern Ireland secretary, it a different secretary of state and a different department that made those decisions.

What took us by surprise was, very early on, when I was early in the job, when it [the Northern Ireland protocol] came in, and I can remember Arlene Foster [first minister of Northern Ireland at the time] as well, we were all on the TV saying that there will be teething trouble because this is new, but we will make this work, it's going take a few weeks. What we didn't expect was just how dogmatic and unpragmatic the EU were going to be about implementation. And I voted with and campaigned for Remain, so I don't come at this from a Brexiteer point of view. But they were, and that made it really difficult. It created a lot of bad will in Northern Ireland.

I still think to this day the reason this has gone on for so long and become so intransigent – and we haven't fixed the problem yet, really – is that the EU would not move early and wouldn't show flexibility early, so people became more and more entrenched. I think it would have been easier to fix things earlier and compromise and find ways through it in that first three months. Then eventually Boris put [David Frost](#) in to sort of fix the problems. But I can remember sitting in No.10 and saying, "Look, we're going to get to the point where people will get so angry about what's not working that they won't accept a compromise, and they'll start looking for more things." And that's exactly what happened. Instead of getting easier, it got harder, because people become more polarised, more entrenched than they were at the beginning. I do think the EU made it much harder by refusing to be flexible in the early stages.

So implementation was definitely worse than we expected. It was the Cabinet Office that owned the protocol, and the NIO's role to make sure that they were aware of what the issues and feelings were on the ground in Northern Ireland. When David Frost was doing it [as Cabinet Office minister], I've got to say the interaction was actually very good. It came as a complete transparent and worked very well across the two departments, I think. The officials worked pretty well together. There were certain officials who worked on it who were quite insular, who used to brief the press before they'd brief us. But David and I got on very well. I didn't really know him before, but we got on very well. I think that worked quite well in terms of information and collegiate working. And our special advisers as well.

But by then it was already kind of too late, in terms of the feeling on the ground in Northern Ireland, particularly in the unionist community. And at the same time, I was starting to have to work on other issues where the unionist community had some challenges, things like women's access to healthcare and abortion, things like that, which I actually felt very strongly about. To be fair, so did Boris, he was very supportive on that. So there was a lot going on at that time. Although the protocol was a big issue, there were a lot of other really important things that we were doing below the radar as well.

JS: To continue on the protocol for now, obviously the UK government introduced the UK Internal Market Bill, which as introduced included clauses that would override parts of the Withdrawal Agreement.

BL: I was the minister who had to stand up and say...

JS: “Specific and limited” [Lewis’s description of the way in which the bill would break international law]

BL: I’m sure that will be on my gravestone. I never actually said that was a good thing, I just made a statement of fact.

JS: What exactly was your role in that decision-making process? And afterwards, there was quite a strong reaction by certain political parties in Northern Ireland, how did you deal with the fallout?

BL: So the UK Internal Market Bill, that was actually a cabinet decision. It wasn’t an NIO-led thing anyway – I think it was basically No.10.

My view generally of the bill was that we didn’t have any choice. We probably didn’t do a good enough job of outlining this at the time, but what people forget is that at that point we didn’t have a TCA [Trade and Cooperation Agreement, between the EU and UK]. That was in September 2020, so we were coming to a point that, if we didn’t get a deal by the end of December, then in January we were either going to have to break the Withdrawal Agreement – which was technically not complete because we hadn’t got the fuller TCA agreed – by doing this, or we would be in breach of the Good Friday Agreement, because GB–NI trade would effectively almost come to a standstill, so the east-west link of the Good Friday Agreement would be broken. As Northern Ireland secretary, if you’re going to break international law whichever way – you’re either going to break the international law of the Good Friday Agreement, or of the Withdrawal Agreement that’s not actually complete – that’s a no brainer. I don’t want to break international law at all, but if I’ve got no choice, I’m not breaking the Good Friday Agreement. So in that sense, I had no issue with it.

The reason what I said on the floor of the House came about was that we were asked to do a UQ [urgent question].¹ I know some of my colleagues well enough, and particularly, I just thought, if Bob Neill is in the room – and he hadn’t said anything to me – but I just thought, if somebody like Bob Neill [chair of the Justice Select Committee] asks a question, he’s a bloody good lawyer, he’s going to ask the very specific question, “Does this break international law?” I am not misleading the House. I’m not making any statement about that, but just as a matter of fact, I’m not doing that. I’ve always done things by the book. I’ve got a reputation for being straight and I’m not putting that in jeopardy over this. And the reality is, this will break international law, one way or the other. I’m happy to make the point that we’ve got no choice, we’re going to break one or the other, but we can’t deny. So I fed back to No.10, “If I’m doing the UQ [urgent question], I’m giving a straight answer.” No.10 were fine with that. The lawyers worked it up.

Generally, at the despatch box, I don’t use notes, I tend to just answer questions and speak. Some people did at the time pick up, correctly, that that line was very specifically read, and a very specific set of words that the lawyers in No.10 and the NIO had signed off, so that I got it right. That did a couple of things. One, it meant I gave a very honest

¹ House of Commons, Hansard, Commons Chamber, Northern Ireland Protocol, volume 679, 8 September 2020

answer and a correct, direct answer to a question that Bob did ask, as directly as he could have possibly done. I mean, there was no room.

But the other thing was, there was also, I think, for No.10 – and others will probably have to speak to this better than I because I wasn't in the room – a strategic thought that we kind of needed to get the EU to see we were serious. Standing up and saying, "We are so serious that we are prepared to break international law to get the right result for the United Kingdom" was also going to be a bit of a wake-up call to the EU that were actually going to do this. Some of the people who had that view would argue that it did work because, of course, we then were able to drop those clauses because we got the deal. And I made it clear on the floor of the House, "If we get the deal that works, then we will drop these clauses, it's purely to stop us breaking the Good Friday Agreement. If you get a deal that avoids that, great." And that's what happened. So it worked. But it was also, for me, about making sure people were clear that if you ask me a straight question, I will give you a straight answer.

JS: As you mentioned earlier, there was also a big piece of work going on in the NIO around the legacy of the Troubles [culminating in the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill 2023]. This was obviously an issue on which there were very strong views in Northern Ireland, but also some of your Conservative colleagues had very strong views on the issue. How did you try to balance those competing considerations, and do you think you got the balance right?

BL: Delicately! There were very strong views, and quite understandably. Because if you are somebody who lost loved ones through the Troubles, to whichever side, you're going to feel strongly about it, you're going to feel emotional about it. If somebody who cares about our armed forces and wants to do the right thing, you're going to feel strongly about it. So I knew I was dealing with very strong and genuine emotions on both sides of it.

It was immensely complicated because, if it wasn't, it would have been fixed back in 1997. In fact, we were 23, 24 years on at that point. Again, great credit to a number of past secretaries of state and PMs who gave me a lot of time privately and never briefed or leaked, we were talking about really sensitive issues, and they helped me understand – including president [Bill] Clinton actually – what was in their minds at the time and why they didn't do this. And actually, they were quite open about the fact that they did look at this and basically said, "We wish we could have done this." And I got all of their support. Jonathan Powell [former No.10 chief of staff who played a key role in the Good Friday Agreement] actually wrote a very supportive article at the time which gives an indication of where their view was. [Former first secretary of state Lord] [Peter Mandelson](#) as well. So it was very difficult.

One of the things with Covid was it gave us a lot of time to have lots of Zoom meetings to talk to lots of people across the wider community in Northern Ireland, about a whole range of things. Legacy always came up in these conversations. Even if not expressly, it would always come up in some way. I just had a very strong sense that, in all the conversations we were having, people wanted to find a way to take this out of the courtrooms and put it into the history a little bit. To find a way to move forward. I was not initially particularly keen on the methodology we eventually came up with. But the

more we worked through it, and all the civil servants going through it and all the teams working there, eventually convinced me that there was no other way of doing it. If you're going to draw a line, you kind of have to draw a line. But we were all uncomfortable, as people are, about an amnesty, and therefore we looked at this idea of a statute of limitations, which there are some international precedents for. And if you link that to information recovery, then you suddenly start on a pathway that does two things that I think are important. One is you start to draw a line for people who want to draw a line, and for those in the armed forces who feel that they've been through unnecessary pain, worrying about what may or may not happen. But also for families who still don't know the truth of what happened, you create an information recovery pathway, which means you might actually get to the truth in a few more cases than you would otherwise ever get.

We were also very conscious of the age of people now who were alive at the time of the Troubles and were active on whichever side. They're in their 80s, so if we don't do something quite quickly, they're literally not going to be with us anymore to answer these questions even if they're willing to do so. By creating a statute of limitations, it gives them the protection and confidence that they can come forward without fear of prosecution. I knew people would find that difficult, but my logic in the end was convinced by the fact that they're not coming forward anyway. So yes, they might get protection against prosecution, but the families might get some truth that they're just not going to get otherwise. Because if they haven't come forward in the last 20 years, they're not about to do it tomorrow at risk of prosecution. It became the only way; we went through everything. Because of Covid, we had a year longer to work on this than we would have otherwise done. So we probably had a good couple of years' work before we actually landed in parliament, which is pretty thorough.

I felt in the end it was the right package, and probably the right balance. With something like that, it's always going to be controversial, it's always going to be difficult for some people. I was always aware of that. I knew there would be people very unhappy about it. Even after we landed it, I was meeting victims' groups who felt very, very strongly about it and were very clear about that, and I absolutely respect that. But equally, we're not doing them any justice by pretending that, if we change nothing, eventually somebody isn't going to get prosecuted who is about to die, or who hasn't come forward before and has got no incentive to come forward tomorrow either. So we had to do something. On balance, in a very imperfect situation, we came up with probably the best product outcome, a pathway that is potentially available.

What reassures me about that is the conversations I've privately had with ex-PMs and ex-secretaries of state. They agreed with me. Including some Labour ones, one of whom did it in the tearoom [in parliament] – I remember going for a cup of tea with Peter Kyle [shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland] to have a chat through, and a Labour ex-secretary of state for Northern Ireland came up to us and said, "You've got to back him, he's doing the right thing."

So I'm not pretending it was easy, and I know people feel very strongly about it. But I still, to this day, don't think there was another way of doing it, unless we're all going to pretend and do nothing. And I was tasked with doing something.

JS: Let's talk about your departure from government. You were the fourth cabinet minister to resign from Boris Johnson's government in July 2022. Can you tell us a bit about how you came to that decision?

BL: It was really difficult. Actually, quite painful. Quite emotional as well, because I really enjoyed the job. I really struggled with stepping away from a job I felt very passionately about, loved Northern Ireland, felt we did some really important stuff. We had landed legacy – we'd done the second reading, so it was basically done. We'd got the access to abortion, healthcare for women in Northern Ireland. So we'd done a few of those things, but I still felt very strongly about the role. I also felt very strongly about, and I really struggled with walking away from, something that's got national security element at a time of instability. But equally, I just felt... there were a lot of junior ministers resigning at the time, 30 or 40 by that point, and I felt that a few of us in cabinet needed to step up and recognise that, and not leave a lot of junior ministers out there on their own. I also felt that a few more of us needed to step up and just say... it was over.

I don't mean that in such a direct personal critique of Boris as it sounds. I actually think the whole situation was hugely unfair. He got a massive mandate from our members, he got a massive mandate from the country, and I think that MPs should have respected that. Frustrating as it was, he should have been able to see through his time as PM. I actually think there is a fundamental problem with the structure of our party that somebody can get that big a mandate and a relatively small group of MPs can override that – and I appreciate I was technically part of that. But I just felt it was untenable at that point. I was in No.10 for two or three hours the night before, and I actually said to him, "When you can't field a government, as unfair as it is, it's over." And he couldn't really field a government. I saw the whiteboard, them sitting there trying to fill the gaps on the whiteboard. He offered me two promotions the night before, which I turned down. One of them meant looking at the whiteboard. And it just proved the point: you can't seriously field a government. I also felt my position was untenable because he had offered me two promotions. If it hadn't been so late at night and the [Buckingham] Palace had gone to bed, he would have announced one of them, because he kind of just said, "You're doing it." And I was a bit like, "I'm not sure about this." I just thought, I can't do that, and I've effectively now been moved from Northern Ireland to do this other thing, so my position's untenable anyway. It was just farcical.

So I just felt I had no choice. But I found it really difficult. Very good friends of mine were staying for all the right reasons. The one thing at the back of my mind is I'm not sure if I should have stayed because of the national security thing. I'm not sure I got that right, but I just thought I had no choice, and I probably would do the same thing again today.

JS: And you weren't out of government long. You quickly came back as justice secretary under Liz Truss, and you both quickly had success in ending the barristers' strike. How did you do it? And what advice might you give to ministers dealing with strikes today?

BL: The short but glorious period I was in the MoJ [Ministry of Justice]... I'm actually really proud of the time we had at MoJ because we ended the bar strike, we expanded tagging, we dealt with trans prisoners, we found one or one and a half billion – depending on how you want to calculate it – of savings, we basically finished off the Victims [and Prisoners]

Bill. We got a lot done in a short period of time. Some of it got re-announced later, but if you look back at it, the team did those things. It wasn't me, it was the team.

A couple of things stood out to me. Very early on, one of the best bits of advice I got was from Eric Pickles, when I was a first a minister, when I had that first introductory meeting with him. It was, "Whatever you do in government, in any job you have, and however many jobs you have, make sure you do something." And in every job I've had, I've done something. A piece of legislation, a change – whether people like it or not, I can look back in every role I've had and say I've delivered actual real change. And in that job that particularly applied, to get on and do stuff, and also to move quite quickly. Obviously, we didn't know how short it [the Truss government] was going to be at the beginning, but we really wanted to show momentum, that this government was up and running. I did have an advantage in that I knew for quite a while that, if Liz won, I was going to be doing that job, so I had a fair few weeks to get my head round what I wanted to do. We also kind of knew, for a few weeks, that Liz had won, so I had the confidence to think about it. So I went in with a bit of an outline.

I also qualified as a barrister, but I didn't practice, and the reason I didn't practice relates to the reason they were on strike. I disagreed with the way they were going on strike and how they they'd gone on strike, and actually the fact they were on strike, but I understood the problem, and I agreed with their position that this was a problem that needed fixing. So I was already of the mind that I wanted to fix this. Liz was very clear: "If you can, fix the bar strike and get the court backlog down." And the two things were intertwined. It wasn't just about the bar strike, they were intertwined. I'd also dealt with a strike before, because I had dealt with the FBU [Fire Brigades Union]. Also – I didn't know this at the time, but I've found out since – the [Criminal] Bar Association had also registered that I had dealt with the FBU. What they had picked up from that – which is true – was that I am straight, and when I said to the FBU, "Here's a deal, if you don't accept, it the deal gets worse," I had stood by that. I didn't back off. So they knew, instinctively, that I don't bluff.

There was also a new chair [of the criminal bar]. And the previous chair, in my opinion, it might be very unfair, but I think was a bit of a politician. Wants to be a Labour MP, etc. I actually quite like him, but it's the reality. The new chair, Kirsty Brimelow, came in around the same time as me, so she had the opportunity to have a fresh approach to the MoJ, and she had the fresh opportunity because of the new secretary of state. We both had that clear water to play with. I wanted to end the strike. I didn't have to go to the Treasury asking for money. I also have to say, I found the officials at the MoJ utterly brilliant. I found Antonia Romeo [permanent secretary] superb to work with, the whole team there I found really, really good. The head of policy is a brilliant guy, there's a really good private office – bigger, I think, than the secretary of state needs, but that's for other reasons, I inherited that. So I found a team of officials who wanted to do stuff. One of the things I picked up since is I suspect they felt a bit of relief that they could get on and do stuff, and I was interested in their views and wanted to engage them around how they think things should work.

But I inherently wanted to fix it. I inherently wanted to resolve the problem that the bar wanted resolved. We might have some different opinions, and they would still probably have liked more money, but, to me, the core principle is to establish that for section 28

[pre-recorded witness examination] you should get paid. You can argue quantity for years, but you need to get the principle first. And also I was quite straight: I put the package together, it was all that I could do, it was all I could afford. I was quite blunt with them and I said to them, “Look, this is the deal which I will do. If you don’t take this deal, there is no negotiating upwards. If you don’t take this deal, I am going to go away and look at a public defender service. I will go completely the other way. Because politically, in the House, I can do that, with my party.” I think they understood that that was genuine. I don’t think it would have been a good outcome for anybody. But it would have been the only way we could go.

So the timing worked, and officials worked through the night. In fairness to Kirsty Brimelow and her team, I’ve spoken to her since and said to her, “You genuinely did get the best deal that was on offer. It wasn’t getting any better.” I think they made the right judgement call on that. They were tough. They pushed around the edges, and we made some movements around that and we got some stuff we needed from them. There was a moment there when there was a win-win for everybody. And the officials were literally working through the night, they were brilliant. The MoJ really shone.

JS: Liz Truss was your fourth prime minister. Can you tell us a bit about what it was like to be in government during the Truss period and some of the challenges that she was facing?

BL: It was a different relationship, because Boris, David [Cameron], and Theresa were all different intakes, and Liz was a contemporary. So it was a different personal relationship as well. I got on really well with Theresa May, I really liked her, but I was a junior minister under Cameron. Even as a cabinet member under Theresa and Boris, it was a slightly different relationship. I had more of a direct relationship with Liz.

At the beginning, we came in and then within days we had this huge change with Her Majesty’s [Queen Elizabeth II] passing, which just changed everything. We also came in knowing there was a section of the parliamentary party that was never going to accept the result, and didn’t, so it was challenging. Having gone through the dark days with Theresa at the back end, it was very similar to when she had a no confidence vote, and then three months after that we had another one. So sadly, it wasn’t unprecedented for me. And in the last couple of days, Liz’s team asked me to go and help in No.10, as they suddenly remembered that I actually had some experience of this because I’d been through it. So it wasn’t particularly unique, but it was quite surreal. And it was quite obvious in the last few days that we were in the last few days.

JS: We have three questions we always ask, and the first one is my favourite. What achievement are you most proud of in your time in office, and would you do anything differently?

BL: They’re not necessarily the biggest pieces of work I’ve done. Arguably it should be the legacy stuff, but actually I would have to decide between ending the bar strike and getting access to abortion for women in Northern Ireland. And I’ve done lots of legislation, probably at least as much as anyone else. Covid legislation aside. So probably between those two. Neither were easy. With abortion, having met some women who had been through this dreadful situation, and the battle against it in my own party and in

government and on the ground in Northern Ireland... actually, probably that. From a humanistic point of view.

JS: What advice would you give to a new minister about how they could be most effective in office?

BL: Be clear about what you want. Be focused and recognise that you only deliver when you deliver together as a team. Don't fight the civil service, work with them. There will always be different individuals, but they've got a lot of experience. When people say to me, "The civil service will slow things down...", sometimes that is true. I've worked with some civil servants who are better than others, I've work with civil servants who clearly wanted to stop things happening – like I wanted to reform the local government pension scheme, which is still a problem. If you are clear about what you want to do, and you are focused on it, and you are determined about it, you can get it done. That doesn't mean be aggressive, be polite, but if you focus, the civil service will deliver. So work with the civil service, be focused, be clear. Don't try and do 10 things at once, focus on two or three things. Other things have to be done, but if you've got a clear idea of the three things you want to do, just don't deviate from that.

JS: Finally, is there anything that we haven't asked you that you'd like to mention?

BL: I think the most surreal thing, which a journalist pointed out to me recently, is that I've been in the room, effectively, for the last 24 hours of the last three PMs. I was with Theresa, literally, for the last couple of days. I was there for three hours the night before with Boris, and I was obviously in the room with Liz for the last week. That's quite weird. I have never been through anything quite as surreal as the night before Boris resigned. That was the most bizarre. If I wrote down, word for word, the script of that night, the producer of *The Thick of It* would tell me it was far-fetched.

I was very lucky: in 10 years of continual government service, I've enjoyed, in different ways, all of it. We, as Brits, are sometimes afraid of being open about the fact as, clichéd and as twee as it sounds, doing something to make your country, community, whatever, better. Whoever you are, whatever you're doing, whatever party, trying to make something better is a really nice thing and an enjoyable thing to do, and you make a difference. I've been very lucky. I signed the accession document for the King as the lord chancellor. These are moments in time, in history, that you certainly can't put a price on and can't really put an emotion to it. It's surreal. I've been very lucky to have that experience through government, thanks to four PMs. I've been fortunate.

And genuinely, I will say, there are always exceptions to the rule but, generally, I found the civil service brilliant. I've enjoyed working with the officials I've worked with. There are only one or two notable exceptions. The ones I've worked with in a prominent way have been brilliant.

Citations

This archive is an open resource and we encourage you to quote from it. Please ensure that you cite the Institute for Government correctly:

In publications (e.g. academic articles, research or policy papers) you can footnote or endnote the interview you are quoting from as follows:

Transcript, [Name of Interviewee], [Date of Interview], Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: [Web Address of Transcript], Accessed: [Download Date].

For example: Transcript, George Young, 21 July 2015, Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/george-young>. Accessed: 15 December 2015

On social media, please hyperlink to the site: www.instituteforgovernment.co.uk/ministers-reflect. You can also use [#ministersreflect](#) and mention us [@instituteforgov](#) if you are quoting from the archive on Twitter.

Journalists wishing to quote from the archive are free to do so, but we do ask that you mention the Institute for Government as a source and link to the archive in online articles. Please direct any media enquiries to press@instituteforgovernment.org.uk.

The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.

Copies of interviews undertaken as part of this project are available at:
www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect

Email: enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

Twitter: [@instituteforgov](https://twitter.com/instituteforgov)

Institute for Government
2 Carlton Gardens, London SW1Y 5AA
United Kingdom

Tel: **+44 (0) 20 7747 0400**

Fax: **+44 (0) 20 7766 0700**

Published 6 September 2023

© Institute for Government

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.