

# Whips Reflect Anne Milton



17 July 2023

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2005—19: MP for Guildford

## Whips' Office career

2012—14: Government whip (Lord Commissioner of HM Treasury)

2014—15: Government whip (Vice Chamberlain of HM Household)

2015—17: Deputy chief whip

## **Anne Milton was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Beatrice Barr on 17 July 2023 for the Institute for Government’s Whips Reflect series.**

Anne Milton discusses pastoral support for MPs, whipping during the coalition years and working with opposition whips.

**Beatrice Barr (BB):** Let’s start with your experience going into the Whips’ Office. You had three jobs in the Whips’ Office, and before that you had been a junior minister. How did you react when you were first asked to become a whip? Do you feel you took naturally to it?

**Anne Milton (AM):** I was junior health minister responsible for public health, at the time the [Health and Social Care Act](#) [2012] was going through parliament. Although I wasn’t involved in it, there were some implications for public health. I think it was a bit of shock when I was asked to go in to the Whips’ Office. I’d just never really thought that that was where I’d go. [Andrew Mitchell](#) was chief whip, and I was told at the time he specifically wanted the gender balance to change in the Whips’ Office, and that was one of the reasons he asked me.

**BB: Did you feel like you took naturally to it?**

**AM:** It was quite a big shock. I’d spent five years in opposition and two years as a health minister, so I knew very little about the workings of the House of Commons. No, I suppose I didn’t take naturally to it, but one of the problems generally in government – actually one of the problems of being an MP – is there is no job description. So when you become a minister there’s no job description, and you’re not given a job description when you’re going into the Whips’ Office. It is assumed that you will know what to do. Actually, Andrew Mitchell was very good. He was quite clear that he wanted to change the tone and the way the Whips’ Office conducted its business. That was refreshing; I was part of something that was going to be new and different.

**BB: When you talk about changing the tone of the Whips’ Office, what did that look like to you in practice?**

**AM:** Well, in practice, Andrew Mitchell was not chief whip for very long [Mitchell resigned in October 2012] and he was succeeded by [Sir George Young](#) who also – although he wouldn’t have articulated it – had a very different attitude to whipping, I think, from what was known of old. I think he’d been a whip back in the day, I mean a long time ago, and he never thought he was going to have another job in government. This came as quite a shock to him. So it was going to be different.

It was a great time to be in the Whips’ Office. But at that time, of course, we were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, so we had, in effect, an 80-seat majority. All the rows and arguments about policy, or bills, or clauses of bills, all went on elsewhere before a bill ever came to the floor of the House of Commons. So the whipping was relatively straightforward; although, at that time, it was still felt important to keep Conservative MPs on side if we could.

**BB:** People often talk about the different aspects of the role – parliamentary handling, legislation, but also the more pastoral side of being a whip. Did you see it as a balance between those different aspects? How much time did you spend focussing on each of them?

**AM:** When I became deputy chief whip [in 2017], we had a much smaller majority. I think we had, in effect, a 17-vote majority, which is tiny compared to the heady days of coalition. It was clear to me that you are a cross between a management lackey and a union shop steward. I very early on felt that that was where you needed to be. Because MPs are elected to represent their constituents, and some MPs, on top of that, have issues that they feel very strongly about. With only a 17-vote majority, you are not going to get through your business unless the government is fully aware of what issues MPs have. Bullying or pushing people in to voting a certain way was never the way I would have conducted business.

**BB:** You've been credited by a number of people we've spoken to about the Whips' Office, with bringing in a new emphasis on pastoral support for MPs. Was that something that you consciously wanted to do? How did you approach that?

**AM:** It wasn't something I consciously did. But, don't forget, I spent 25 years working in the health service, so I'd come from a very different background. My view in my job as a minister, as an MP, in everything I did, was always that if you want to get the best out of people, then you do it by bringing out the best in them. That means listening to them, being aware of the problems they have, being aware of the issues they have, and then working with them to come to a resolution. So having trained as a nurse, as I say having worked in the health service for 25 years, my skill, I suppose, was conflict resolution.

**BB:** You talked about being a union shop steward: what was it like feeding the views of MPs up into the party machine and the management structure? Were people receptive or interested in what people in parliament were thinking?

**AM:** Well, they were with a 17-vote majority. To some extent you can discount the years we were in coalition because the majority was so big. But by the time we were governing with a small majority, if a minister said to me, "it's really important that we get this bit of the bill through," I would say to him, "it's not going to happen. You don't need many people to change their mind to lose a vote, so what compromise can you get?" So a lot of the time in the Whips' Office was spent with ministers meeting MPs who weren't happy, and seeing if there was something that they could do or say that would reassure the individual MP. That's where the union shop steward and government lackey role comes in. And I think very effectively. I remember when I was deputy chief whip, saying to one whip in the office, who I thought had been unnecessarily aggressive in their approach, "you might win the vote tonight, but what's going to happen in three months' time? You have got in bad favour with this particular MP, so they're not going to be inclined to do what you want next time." It's about having an enduring relationship with MPs so that they are more likely to help you and they trust you to do your best for them, which is the other side of it. There's got to be trust in the Whips' Office.

**BB: What was your approach, with the chief whip, to managing your team of whips? Did you have any say in who they were? Did you have to teach them to whip in a certain way that was, maybe, less aggressive?**

**AM:** I would, certainly. Every whip has a flock, which I'm sure others have spoken about. Andrew Mitchell actually had an interesting way of sorting out flocks: he asked us all to choose what flock we wanted. That was in line with what I believed. You pick the people you know well and you have a good relationship with. Sometimes, certainly when I was deputy chief whip, I moved people out of some members' flocks if an MP came to me and said, "look, I just can't get on with X whip," then I would move them, because there's no point in butting against the tide. You want people who can form good relationships.

I would tell all whips the same thing: you don't have a defined role, your job is to make sure that the people in your flock have the support they feel is necessary. We had access to things like mental health support, and that was what was increased while I was deputy chief whip. The speaker at the time [John Bercow] was very generous with that. To help them through their lives, to be aware of the constituency issues they have, build a relationship with them. If they have problems with any particular piece of legislation, then bring it to me, let's get the minister in, let's see if we can resolve it.

**BB: You mentioned Andrew Mitchell and Sir George Young, how important were their personalities as to how the office worked?**

**AM:** I've worked with five chief whips – Michael Gove after Sir George Young. I think it was five, I've lost count to be honest! But George Young definitely had a similar attitude to it, Michael Gove had a similar attitude to it. I think Michael Gove was particularly fascinated by the parliamentary party. He'd never been in that sort of role before, and you get to see the colleagues that you work with day-to-day in a very different light and you hear about their lives. I think with all of those chief whips, trust was really important. I think the reason, probably, that my reputation is of having a strong attitude to the pastoral role is because I set myself up as somebody who could be trusted. And I was somebody who could be trusted; people came to me.

**BB: How did you set yourself up as that?**

**AM:** Well, you don't set yourself up for people to trust you; you're either trusted or you're not. So it's how you deal with the information that you receive. You can't pretend to be a trusted person. You either are or you are not.

**BB: Did you feel like all those different chief whips were part of a long-term evolution of the Whips' Office in a particular direction, or did it change depending on who was there?**

**AM:** It changed quite a lot when Gavin Williamson became chief whip. I think the reputation of the Whips' Office has persisted for decades, beyond a time when it was actually and saying, "you're going vote this way or you're going to lose money in your constituency", or grabbing people by the balls and all the rest of it. That had gone a long time ago. And I think the Whips' Office, in a rather jocular manner, has always tried to keep that alive. I didn't try to keep that alive, which is one of the reasons maybe that I gained trust. It has no place in the modern workplace.

**BB:** Has that evolution towards gaining trust and not trying to keep that reputation alive continued at all, or do you think that the office still tries to set itself up as having this scary reputation?

**AM:** Now I don't know. I'm not sure that it's easy to look back inside when I'm outside, so I wouldn't know. I would hope not. There is nothing terribly clever about bullying people in to voting a certain way.

**BB:** Going back to your time as a junior whip, I'm interested to hear more about what your relationship was like with the Liberal Democrats in the Whips' Office?

**AM:** It was quite interesting for me because I have always fought Liberal Democrats at elections. But in fact it was very, very good. The Conservative Whips' Office and the Liberal Democrat Whips' Office got on extremely well. We were wedded to the fact that we were in government together, that it was our job to get the government's business through. As I say, all the difficult discussions had happened before it ever came to us, so you could say our job was easier. But it worked extremely well and all credit to the Liberal Democrats, because they suffered a big electoral loss as a result of that coalition but they really did play a very, very good game for the greater good of the country.

**Tim Durrant (TD):** What about after that election in 2015, and then indeed after the [Brexit] referendum, obviously the Conservative Party started arguing a lot internally. You said all the difficult discussions during the coalition were held before things got to parliament, whereas it seemed like the Brexit debate was playing out in parliament after the referendum. What was the difference like?

**AM:** I moved out of the Whips' Office in June 2017, so before it had really gained a head of steam, to be honest. But I should think it was very difficult. None of it should have come as a surprise. Everybody knew where this was heading and, apropos of what I said earlier – you might get the vote tonight, but you might not get it in two months' time – it would be true of all the Brexit debates that happened thereafter. You could see what was coming down the road at you and if you can see the juggernaut in the distance, then be ready for what's coming.

**BB:** How did you see your role on the non-pastoral side of things – for example, seeing those things coming and maybe feeding that back to No. 10. What did that look like for you while you were in the office?

**AM:** A lot of it was very informal. The chief whip used to attend the morning meetings [in No. 10] and I'm sure made clear what the feeling of the parliamentary party was, we used to report back to the chief whip what the feeling was. How much notice No. 10 take of that is up to No. 10, but the relationship between No. 10 and the Whips' Office is very, very key.

There was one particular vote when I remember saying to the minister whose pet subject it was, "you are going to lose the vote." And he said, "well, I want to have the vote." And I said, "you will lose it." And he said, "well, I want to have the vote." It was something of minority interest, but he decided that he would risk a defeat for the government on this particular vote and, indeed, the government was defeated on this particular vote. But

sometimes, you know, it matters to have the vote. And the job of the Whips' Office is to get the numbers right, so what you always want to do is be spot-on on the numbers that you think will vote for particular pieces of legislation. You can afford yourself one or two out, but on a 17-vote majority, we couldn't even afford ourselves one or two out.

**BB: There's also a feedback loop on backbenchers' and even junior ministers' career progression. Did you have a role in reshuffles or ministerial careers in the longer term?**

**AM:** In theory, yes; in practice, I think probably not very much. It's not a meritocracy. You will have heard this lots of times. Bad people get promoted, and good people get demoted. What is slightly surprising is the naivety of some people who've been in parliament quite a long time who, when they were demoted, would say, "but I was really good at the job." And I would say: "It's not a meritocracy." And they would say: "I did so much!" And I would say, "it's not a meritocracy!" But they still hadn't quite taken on board just how the decisions were made. I think the Whips' Office has some input, certainly on people who are promoted from the backbenches for the first time. I think then you can have quite an influence. But the decision as to who's in government is really complicated.

**BB: How did you interact with the Whips' Office once you had become a non-whip minister? You had the experience of then going on to something else- how did that affect your interaction with it and how you thought about the legislation you were working on?**

**AM:** Even before I'd been in the Whips' Office – maybe it's my background, I don't know – but I always understood the fact that your first responsibility is to parliament and your constituents. So as a constituency MP, a backbench MP, you have a responsibility to your constituents, as a minister you have a responsibility to parliament first and foremost. So before I'd been in the Whips Office I understood that my job was to keep MPs informed of what was going on in my areas of responsibility. I would hold briefing sessions; I can remember, once I held a session in Westminster Hall for MPs to come up with their constituents who were worried about a particular issue. It's got to be a collective endeavour. It can't be collective if, as a minister, you don't interact with backbenchers. Irrespective of legislation or not, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose by keeping backbenchers informed of what you're doing.

So it didn't alter in any way. I think the only thing that really struck me when I became a minister after having served in the Whips' Office was that my private office used to say, "you need to go and vote," and I always used to say to my private office, "that is not your responsibility." As a minister, you are responsible, because in my five years in the Whips' Office the number of ministers who used to say, "oh, my private office didn't tell me there was going to be a vote." And I used to say, "it is your responsibility to know when you have to go and vote."

**TD: We've talked about No. 10 and we've talked about the chief whip, but what about the leader of the House of Commons? How does the Whips' Office work with the leader to ensure things are done?**

**AM:** We used to have weekly meetings; as deputy chief whip I used to have weekly meetings. Again, it depends a little bit on the personality of the leader of the House, but



they could be useful allies actually. If you think you're going to have problems, they could be another route into No. 10. It should work very well.

All those relationships are really important because what you're after, in my view, was the smooth running of government. If necessary that meant that government had to back down a bit, but you want it to run smoothly. Similarly, the other relationship that's equally important is the Lords, of course. We've seen in recent years, I think, the Lords flexing their muscles a lot more. So making sure that ministers had conversations with the Lords, briefed Lords early on about the legislation they were putting through. Those are all critical relationships.

**TD: What about the opposition whips? How did that relationship, also called the "usual channels," work while you were in the Whips' Office?**

**AM:** Very well. Again, actually, government and opposition Whips' Offices work very closely together, not least to make sure that you get cooperation when people are unwell and can't vote. One of the difficult issues that I encountered as deputy chief whip was about how staff report abuse, be it sexual or bullying. I worked quite closely with the opposition whips to try and get something done about that. So, some external support for parliament, because it was doing parliament no good to have these stories coming out like this, it was not serving the victims or the alleged perpetrators well. That worked very well, and those relationships do work very well.

**BB: What was that transition like coming from another ministerial job and then later leaving for another ministerial job where the opposition are much more "the enemy," to then come into a role where you were working really closely, really frequently, with the opposition Whips' Office?**

**AM:** Well, it depends if you see them as the enemy. That is not the word that I would use. I think all the relationships, with the leader's office, with No. 10, with the opposition Whips' Office, with the Lords, it's about the respect you have for their individual roles. So the opposition, they are His Majesty's Opposition. They have a role that they have to perform, and you would be foolish not to respect that role. So knowing that they had to oppose, it was their job, really, to oppose. It goes against what the public would love, because the number of times you hear people say, "what we need is cross-party consensus." Well, parliament is not set up for that. But you have to respect their roles and if you respect the roles of everybody involved, backbench MPs included, then you will make some progress.

**TD: What would your advice be to someone entering the Whips' Office for the first time? How do you be a good whip?**

**AM:** Have a great deal of respect for backbenchers; actually, for everybody involved. Get to know the backbenchers you work with. Maintain their trust at all times. Be readily available for them and understand that you will not get their cooperation unless you cooperate with them.



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

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

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

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