



# THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A MINISTER

*Defining and developing ministerial effectiveness*

*Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn & Liz Carolan*

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# Foreword

I was lucky. I became a minister in 2005 after seven years as a special adviser (SpAd) in Tony Blair's Number 10, dealing constantly with ministers and civil servants. As a SpAd I learned a huge amount about how Whitehall and Westminster work, and how they can be *made* to work. I worked closely with the Prime Minister and other ministers, observed their contrasting styles, their rise and (all too often) their fall, their successes and failures, and advised on successive reshuffles.

However maligned the office of SpAd may be, it is an excellent preparation – in many ways an apprenticeship – for ministerial office. Apprenticeships are a good thing; we need more of them in all fields of employment. Far from decrying the reign of ex-SpAds – David Cameron, George Osborne, Ed Miliband, Ed Balls et al. – we should welcome the fact that at least some ministers come to office with an apprenticeship worth the name, beyond service in the House of Commons. In the case of key members of the present Cabinet, it was their only apprenticeship; their 1997 counterparts, from the Prime Minister downwards, lacked even this.

So at one level, ministerial life came to me as no surprise. But nothing really prepared me for the rough and tumble, the weight of responsibility, the media pressures, and the range and diversity of roles and responsibilities. Preparation – more and better – is rightly one agenda of this report. However, two others are equally important, namely how ministers are selected and appraised, and the pool from which ministers are drawn.

Ministerial selection, especially of junior ministers, is too often casual, even cavalier, while appraisal is well nigh non-existent, which reinforces the weaknesses in selection. This needs to change. Without ignoring party political considerations, more ministers should be chosen because of their evident competence and capacity, and formal appraisal should apply to ministers as it does within virtually every other profession, including the Civil Service, which supports ministers.

The pool from which ministers are drawn also needs to be widened. A virtue of the House of Lords is that it enables some ministers to be appointed with wider and/or specialist experience than is available in the House of Commons. Ministers have always been drawn from the Lords for this reason. Gordon Brown used the Lords on a larger scale to appoint a group of ministers, dubbed GOATs ('government of all the talents'), with specialist expertise. There is a good case for continuing with this practice, especially in departments like health and the Treasury where there are large ministerial teams which would be enriched by including at least one serious specialist, provided the GOATs in question combine expertise with a good indication of capacity to acquire the requisite political and media skills. They then need to be properly trained in these political and media roles.

Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn and Liz Carolan explore all these themes, applying the fruits of many interviews and extensive research. They are not remotely naive about the exigencies of party politics and the pressure-cooker worlds of Whitehall and Westminster. But they are rightly critical of the status quo, and they make a compelling case for reform in the way that ministers are appointed, trained and appraised, and the pool from which ministers are drawn. Reform needs to follow.



**Andrew Adonis**  
Director, Institute for Government



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# About the authors

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**Zoe Gruhn** is the Director of Leadership Development and Learning; she joined the Institute in December 2008 and is responsible for the Institute's focus on effective leadership for government. Her work includes research and development of Whitehall boards, ministerial and opposition effectiveness, the impact of select committees and leadership in the Senior Civil Service. She was previously Global Head of Leadership and Learning for Global Finance at HSBC. Before that she was Head of Leadership Transformation Services and then Head of the Executive and Team Coaching Practice at Hay Group. She has extensive experience of working at senior levels across the public and private sectors including top team and leadership development and coaching CEOs, board members and government ministers.

**Liz Carolan** has been working at the Institute since October 2010. Her research has focused on the international comparison of ministers and cabinets, the role of senior experts in the development of health policy, and the selection of candidates to be MPs. She recently received a postgraduate degree from the London School of Economics, having spent a number of years doing research and development work with civil society and academic organisations in Ireland, the Balkans and Australia.

# Acknowledgements

Many people have generously contributed time and expertise to this report. We would particularly like to thank our interviewees, the previous and current ministers, special advisers, civil servants and heads of external organisations closely connected with government. Without their generosity of time, their candour and their openness, this report would have been very difficult to produce. We very much hope that they will find their views fairly reflected in the pages to come.

We are grateful to a number of current and former colleagues for their help in completing this report. Sam Drabble did an extensive literature review on leadership, entrepreneurialism and the impact of politicians. His initial analysis was very helpful in pulling together some early findings. We are also indebted to the contribution of Jennifer Gold, who assisted with a detailed analysis of the interviews and helped with final proofreading. We are particularly appreciative of the thoughtful comments that we have received from our Chair and governors, David Sainsbury, David Simon, Andrew Cahn, Dennis Stevenson, Michael Heseltine and Miranda Curtis.

We wish to make a special point of thanking Andrew Adonis whose steer and guidance from his previous experience as a secretary of state and other key roles that he has had has proved to be invaluable.

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*Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn and Liz Carolan*



# Preface

Ministers have never been reticent about how they have performed in office. There are shelves full of memoirs about their triumphs and, occasionally, their disasters. There have also been some popular, and amusing, handbooks, notably Sir Gerald Kaufman's more than 30 year old *How to be a Minister*, as well as the nearly contemporary *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* television series. Since then we have had ministerial diaries galore, plus *The Thick of It*. All have reinforced the picture of ministers fighting against, and being manipulated by, wily civil servants, and, more recently, SpAds. But they have barely tackled the question of what ministers are for, and what they do.

Our ambition is different: to look at what makes a minister effective in being able to define and take forward his or her policy objectives. In short, what attributes and skills define a successful minister and, above all, what can be done to improve their performance. Our research is based on more than 50 interviews with current and former ministers, civil servants, SpAds and leading outsiders who have had dealings with government, as well as on references in many works by politicians, academic political scientists and parliamentary inquiries. We have focused on departmental ministers and not discussed the separate question of the effectiveness of prime ministers in running their governments.

This report on ministerial effectiveness continues the research that the Institute for Government has been doing looking at how Whitehall operates and how the work of ministers and civil servants can be improved. These reports have examined the working of the coalition (*United We Stand*); the effectiveness and accountability of arms-length bodies (*Read Before Burning*); IT in central government (*System Error*); the structure of new Whitehall boards (*All Aboard*); and policy making (*Making Policy Better*).

# 1. Introduction

“On 2 May 1997, I walked into Downing Street as PM for the first time. I had never held office, not even as the most junior of junior ministers. It was my first and only job in government.” – Tony Blair, *A Journey*

“I do not recall ever being given any indication of what was expected of me on being appointed to any political job.” – Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography*

Effective ministers are easy to describe, but much harder to find and develop. Almost everyone has an identikit picture of such a paragon of ministerial virtues; one such picture of an ideal minister can be seen in Figure 1. This all sounds straightforward. But it is not.

**Figure 1: Identikit of an ideal minister**

- Sets clear goals
- Makes decisions; has good judgment
- Prepares and prioritises
- Listens
- Can learn quickly from experience
- Has personal resilience and stamina
- Copes well and maintains good relationships under pressure
- Knows how to motivate ministers, civil servants and to use a department
- Has authority within Government and externally with Parliament, the media and the public
- Achieves objectives for change

One of the running themes of our report is that a higher proportion of ministers should be more effective: we avoid the term good because it is too imprecise. Civil servants and politicians alike complain about how ill-prepared new ministers are for their largely unfamiliar responsibilities. We therefore look closely at how effectiveness could be improved. Our aim is not the creation of the ministerial superman or superwoman, but the more modest one of identifying how ministers might be helped to become more effective. There is a close link between the effectiveness of individual ministers and the effectiveness of governments. We concentrate on the former and we do not discuss the related, but separate, issue of how prime ministers can be effective.

This introductory chapter seeks to define the central questions. What does a minister do? How do we define ministerial effectiveness? And how far can ministers be compared to leaders in other sectors? Defining effectiveness is tricky, in part because of the very diversity of the roles that ministers play. The working definition we have devised is: an ability to define clear policy objectives, and to mobilise support internally within departments and externally with cabinet colleagues, in Parliament, with the media and the public, in order to achieve these goals and help deliver the collective agenda of the government.

A central assumption of this report is that ministers matter: the strengths and weaknesses of their performances can have a big and often decisive impact on policy and, therefore, on the standing of governments. The interviews we conducted for this research, discussed in detail in chapter 2, underline how much depends on the personalities not only of ministers but also of civil servants. The formal constitutional dividing lines between the two are often blurred in practice. The parallel Institute report, *Making Policy Better*,<sup>1</sup> underlines the need for ministers who are good at the political side of their job but can also work well with civil servants. Revealingly all the attempts over the past decade and a half to improve policy making were directed at civil servants and ignored the role of ministers.

Yet the quality of ministers is crucial. Most key policy initiatives of the past 30 years have been associated with strong, determined and effective ministers who have made a difference: and these are not just prime ministers. Nigel Lawson is remembered for privatisation and changing the tax structure; Michael Heseltine for council house sales and inner city regeneration; Kenneth Baker for schools reform; Gordon Brown for giving independence to the Bank of England; David Blunkett for improving standards in primary schools; Clare Short for changing the objectives of international development policy; John Hutton for pensions reform; and Andrew Adonis for the creation of academies. And there are many others.

Being a minister in central government is very different from being a leader of one of the devolved governments or a local authority. However, the experience of being a councillor, let alone a leader, can be a useful preparation for life at Westminster and as a minister. Clement Attlee's period as Mayor of Stepney was a crucial influence on him, while Neville Chamberlain and Herbert Morrison in the 1930s and 1940s made a successful shift from City Hall to Whitehall, as did David Blunkett in the recent era. However, relatively few council leaders have chosen to make the shift at all. Indeed, so far in the brief life of the devolved administrations, and of directly elected mayors, the movement has been one way, from Westminster to the localities. It will be interesting to see whether, in time, there is a movement back to the centre, as happens in Germany, where regional or *Länder* leaders have often become ministers in Berlin, and in the USA, where state governors become cabinet secretaries in Washington.

Comparisons, often erroneous, are made with the heads of private sector organisations. There are no obvious models in the business world. The parallels are, in reality, only at the most rudimentary level: clarity of goals, the ability to inspire and communicate, and having basic managerial skills and the ability to delegate. Skills cannot easily be transferred from the rest of the public sector and the private sector to central government.

The differences between the business and political worlds, however, are far reaching in terms of experience and accountability:

- Most ministers have virtually no previous experience of working at a top level or in the management of a large organisation. Many ministers' prior experience, whether before being elected or as backbench MPs, is similar to that of sole traders, small business owners or entrepreneurs.
- Ministers are subject to diverse constitutional and political constraints, rather than having a straightforward legal responsibility to shareholders. They are dependent for their standing on the need to satisfy a wide range of people and groups, and, above all, the prime minister.

The limited overlap between a minister and a corporate leader underlines the scale of differences, notably in the nature and scale of accountability. However, our interviewees disagree about how far a secretary of state should be a chairman or chief executive. Almost all civil servants, and many politicians, see the head of department in the former role, defining what needs to be done but leaving others to implement these goals. But some ministers believe that a secretary of state with a reform agenda has to drive it forward personally, otherwise change will not happen. We explore the implications in the next chapter.

However, what is rarely understood outside Westminster and Whitehall is the wide range of roles that ministers have to perform. The balance varies between senior and junior ministers and between departments, but the main roles are listed in Figure 2.

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**Figure 2: Roles of a government minister**

**Parliamentary** – a good performance in Parliament is vital for a minister's effectiveness. This includes the ability to answer questions; to make statements on new policy initiatives and urgent issues; to appear in front of select committees; to speak in debates; and to take legislation through Parliament. Ministers also need to spend time in Parliament building and maintaining relationships with backbenchers.

**Executive and policy** – although ministers are not conventional chief executives, they have to lead their departments, approving all key decisions and public statements; develop and set out policy objectives; personally take the lead when driving forward reform programmes; monitor progress; and handle correspondence and case work.

**Departmental advocate** – ministers need strong advocacy and negotiating skills to argue their department's case, including for resources, in the cabinet, its committees, within Whitehall, with the Treasury, as well as in Brussels and other international bodies.

**Collective government and party role** – ministers participate in, and take responsibility for, collective decision making by the cabinet and cabinet committees.

**Public advocate** – ministers have to give much of their time to presenting and defending policy, their departments and themselves to the media.

In addition, ministers in the House of Commons have both constituency and parliamentary responsibilities. These involve a big time commitment; to handle correspondence, to visit constituencies regularly, and to sustain relationships with parliamentary colleagues. Ministers also need time for their families and private lives. Ministers have to manage their time rigorously, balancing their governmental, parliamentary, constituency party and personal responsibilities. (Many of our ministerial interviewees complained about the failure of their private offices sufficiently to appreciate their parliamentary roles, as we discuss in the next chapter.)

The existing literature on the topic<sup>2</sup> underlines how ill-suited and under-prepared most ministers are for their posts. Most come to the role without adequate training and experience, often with little expertise in the subject matter of their department, knowing that the insights required to perform the job effectively may only be gained through experience. It is hard to think of another

profession or career where an individual could rise to the very top, and assume a position of heavy responsibility, having had no previous acquaintance with that line of work. An analysis by the Public Administration Select Committee of the Commons (PASC) in 2006-07 noted: "Our particular democratic system limits the pool from which ministers can be drawn, and obviously does not use the same competence based selection processes as for civil servants."<sup>3</sup>

As our research and previous reports show, many MPs, party whips and the media believe that ministers' public performances in the Commons and on radio and television matter more than their ability to handle an executive role. However, an emphasis on distinctive political skills – developed mainly through experience of Westminster – can turn into a circular argument. Ministers are said to be effective because they possess some mysterious political skills, which are not possessed by non-politicians. In short, are political skills enough? Marsh and his colleagues concluded from an extensive survey of cabinet ministers that the characteristic of an effective minister was "decisiveness and political judgment".<sup>4</sup> From his long experience as a civil servant, David Laughrin concludes that the specific contribution of ministers is the insight of their political philosophy, and a feel for what is "politically necessary, practical, acceptable".<sup>5</sup>

Political skills increasingly involve the media. Explaining and defending policies is no longer primarily, or even predominantly, to do with Parliament. Among the opinion forming elite (including MPs, advisers, civil servants, journalists and so on), an appearance on the *Today* programme or *Newsnight* is more likely to be noticed than a Commons statement. These are also the skills required in opposition but being a minister demands these plus other attributes. The need to learn additional skills is also why many successful opposition attack dogs do not successfully adapt to the very different demands of government. The ability to capture political and media attention in opposition does not prepare politicians for the demands of ministerial life.

This study focuses on the views of participants themselves, as discussed in the next chapter. Many of the key attributes are about personality and character. Our interviewees agree that most ineffective ministers are insecure, and lack the ability either to trust other people (notably civil servants and other politicians) or to inspire trust from them. However, it is possible to identify factors that may help a minister become more effective. Among the most widely noticed flaws is the absence of sufficient preparation for politicians, while effectiveness is also hindered by the rapid turnover of ministers as a result of over frequent reshuffles.

Many of these questions can be illuminated by looking at experience elsewhere. While each country has its own traditions and practices, lessons can be learnt, if only to challenge our usually insular thinking. In chapter 5 we have looked at ministerial career patterns in different countries and the problems that heads of government face in putting together effective teams.

The existence of such challenges to effectiveness is seen by many politicians and civil servants as endemic to the system. But this is too pessimistic. We believe there is scope to reduce some of the barriers to greater effectiveness. Many of those we interviewed recognised that better preparation could have made a big difference to their performance. Chapter 6 of this report addresses what can be done to improve preparations, and also how serving ministers could benefit from continuing professional development. We make recommendations about how some form of regular appraisal of ministers might improve the handling of reshuffles.

In chapter 4 we also discuss how ministers are recruited. We look in particular at the pluses and minuses of the route from being a SpAd to becoming a fully fledged minister; and also how far the talent pool from which ministers are drawn might be expanded by the greater use of non-politicians.

Our main aim is to look at the qualities determining effectiveness and, in particular, at why ministers are so often frustrated. It is too easy to shrug your shoulders, as many politicians and civil servants do, and say that is the way of the world, now and forever. You cannot transform the nature of politicians but you can help improve the performance of ministers.

## 2. What makes an effective minister

There is no simple way to measure effectiveness. The attributes involved are too diffuse for any simple benchmark and there is no single route to effectiveness. One effective minister may have one set of attributes and another effective minister different ones, as we investigate in the next chapter when we discuss Michael Heseltine, comparing him with his very different contemporary Nigel Lawson.

The report is based on a series of in-depth interviews with 28 ministers (former and current), 14 civil servants (including seven permanent secretaries at the time of being interviewed), five former SpAds and five senior figures from other parts of the public sector or sector wide groups that deal with government.

The timing of the interviews, in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the 2010 general election inevitably meant that we interviewed more Labour politicians and advisers than Conservative ones, since it was 13 years since the latter were ministers. However, towards the end of the research, we talked to some Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers about their experiences after six months in office. The unavoidable party imbalance has no impact on the findings since we found a broad measure of agreement across party lines about the criteria of the effectiveness of ministers. The civil service experience is broader since many recent permanent secretaries have served under ministers of both main parties, and are therefore able to take a longer view.

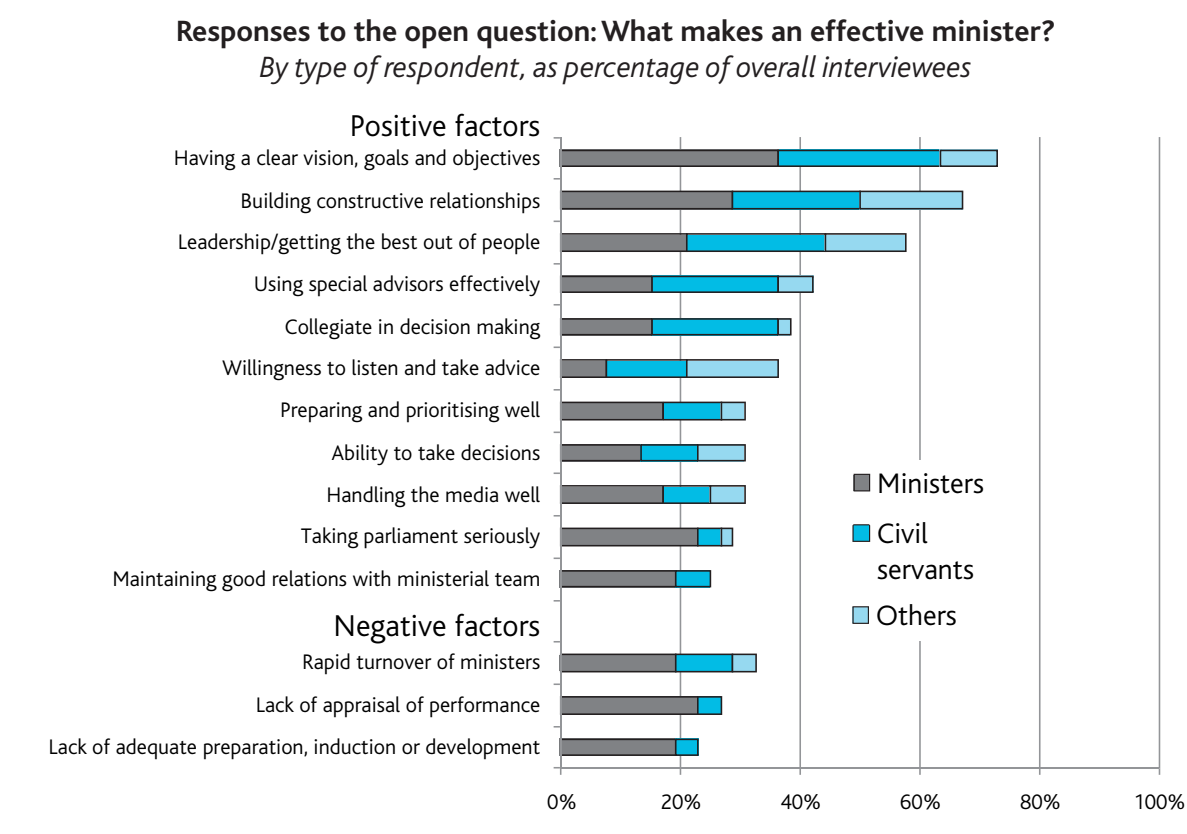
We start by offering a broad summary of our findings and then go through them in detail with quotations from those interviewed. To ensure candour and to protect currently serving ministers and civil servants, all quotations are unattributable, apart from indicating whether they come from someone with ministerial or civil service experience (though these descriptions cover both current and former occupants).

The interviews reveal that ineffective ministers are seen as those who consistently fail to demonstrate most, if not all, the skills required to be an effective minister outlined in chapter 1. There is a substantial measure of agreement between civil servants and ministers on the qualities of both effective and ineffective ministers. Differences are generally of emphasis and nuance. From a civil service perspective, poorly performing ministers are indecisive and unable to present a coherent vision. Politicians have somewhat different criteria, less about effectiveness within departments than about a failure to command the respect of the House of Commons.

The unusual combination of qualities required was underlined by Lord Simon of Highbury, a former senior businessman who had run BP before becoming a minister in the Lords. He compared effectiveness in leading a department to conducting an orchestra, being able to conduct different instruments, the strings of the civil service and the brass of the politicians (a delightfully ambiguous term). Discussing two very different trade and industry (later business) secretaries, he said Margaret Beckett "knew too well how to get the brass playing and make them play but the strings got drowned out. She had a great focus on Parliament but was never tough enough on the strings." By contrast, he believed Peter Mandelson "made the strings play exactly how he wanted them as well as converting the brass to wind if necessary. Complete mastery of the whole orchestra."

The format of the interviews was intentionally broad brush. We asked similar general questions such as what makes for an effective/ineffective minister, and about relations between senior and junior ministers, prior experience, appraisal and so on. There was no prompting so the comments were self-generated, demonstrating what the interviewees themselves regard as priorities. Figure 3 lists the factors that respondents most frequently mentioned as important determinants of ministerial effectiveness.

**Figure 3: Most frequently mentioned factors determining ministerial effectiveness**



Interviewees occasionally mentioned several other attributes, such as an ability to delegate; patience and an ability not to flap or panic under pressure (mentioned almost solely by civil servants); being able to see policy through to implementation (mentioned mostly by non-civil servants); understanding finance; managing time; and skill at chairing meetings. These attributes are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Effective ministers are likely to combine several of them, such as being able to set clear goals and objectives, being willing to listen, knowing how to get the best out of people, and being collegiate.

The mixture of attributes determining what makes an effective, or an ineffective, minister is brought out by the comments of interviewees, all made anonymously, which are discussed below.

## Having clear goals and objectives

There is almost universal agreement that effective ministers have to possess, and articulate, a clear view about what they want to do. This is expressed in remarkably similar terms by civil servants and ministers. For one very experienced civil servant, who worked with several secretaries of state, the requirement is straightforward: "a clear vision of what they want to achieve; not getting distracted by the minutiae of everyday life; the ability to communicate that vision and translate a set of priorities in terms of planning". But clarity of decision needs to be matched by "efficiency in the use of time and the ability, having taken the decision, to go out and explain in whatever forum – whether Parliament or in the pubs – and not agonising too much over it".



Ministers are similarly clear in defining the objective, but add the political dimension – “a secretary of state having their own agenda about what they want to achieve – consistent with Number 10 but which you own”. One former minister stresses the need for clarity over priorities not least for the Civil Service:

*If it is not clear, civil servants will give you reasons not to do it – a consistency of analysis and principle which helps guide a range of big and small decisions that will crop up – clear particulars for the Civil Service. This involves an ability to understand the complexities and not to be swallowed up by them: to keep the big picture in mind, while understanding how to operate in a way that takes on board complexity of policy and implementation.*

Ministers stress the importance of “a sense of purpose, knowing where you’re going and what the objective is – not closing your mind to make a few diversions on the way”. However, they are aware of their own impermanence – in the words of one long-serving minister, “the biggest single problem is time scale, trying to make policy for a whole parliament and not just one session. Short-term policy initiatives lead to short-term political effectiveness.”

A key issue thrown up in the interviews and other research is to what extent should ministers be managers? This is partly a question of language. Civil servants often use the term manage about ministers in a pejorative sense, meaning micro-manage. What they do not want is ministers who seek to administer their departments: that is seen as the function of the permanent secretary. Yet ministers generally see themselves as leaders, setting objectives and getting the best out of people, one of the main attributes of conventional management. Effective ministers have often been associated with driving forward reform programmes, again a function of management. So effective ministers have to be good managers, but not detailed administrators. These issues have been exposed by the Coalition’s decision that departmental boards should be chaired by a secretary of state, backed up a new group of non-executive directors. Their work will define a new balance in ministerial–civil service relations.

Civil servants are, in general, scathing about ministers who try to micro-manage. As one senior official put it, with a somewhat world weary air, “The main thing we’ve got to do is to convince them that we are competent – they ask us to do something, we deliver it.” From the ministerial side, John Reid, as Home Secretary, put the point succinctly in 2006 in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee: “It is not my job to manage this department – it is my job to lead this department, to set a policy, to give the leadership, to give the strategic direction; managers are there to micro-manage it, and, as they expect competence from me, I expect competence from them.”<sup>6</sup> Yet how are ministers to be satisfied that civil servants are competent? Gillian Shephard, who served in the Major Cabinet, told the Public Administration Select Committee in 2007: “At the very least, ministers should satisfy themselves that parts of the department are being run properly by examining what is being done: by looking at objectives to see if they are being realised; by – if it really gets to the ridiculous – testing help lines to see if there is anybody on the other end. You really have to.”<sup>7</sup>

The danger – reported, or rather complained of, by more civil servants than ministers – is that this leads to micro-management: ministers become obsessed, and often overwhelmed, with detail, which prevents them taking a broader picture. By chance, we talked to a secretary of state and a permanent secretary who worked together in the same department. They had very different perspectives. What, for the minister, was necessary checking up on what was happening in the

department was, for the civil servant, unnecessary and counter-productive interference in administration, which made it harder to take a strategic view. The permanent secretary regarded the secretary of state as "obsessed with detail", when he should have been saying "I'm not responsible for management". The secretary of state believed in asking lots of questions, "that's how you learn". Revealingly, he criticised the civil service for the megaphone effect, exaggerating the impact of what a minister says.

## Building relationships; getting the most out of people

A frequent, and related, complaint of civil servants is that ministers do not understand how to get the best out of people. In the civil service view, that is because "very few have worked in a big organisation" – at least, at a senior executive level. Civil servants like to talk in terms of a team, underlying their willingness to work with you (ministers): "We want a minister who has correct judgement and is pretty normal." There is a reciprocal, though not Faustian, bargain. The Civil Service wants "to be valued, want to be involved and have a relationship" – but that is a two way process. The most effective ministers do involve their civil servants, getting them on side and trusting them. One recent cabinet minister is praised by ministerial colleagues:

*Most effective, a good team player, who valued the team (both junior ministers and civil servants), whereas for a lot of them are concerned about what is in it for them. He was brave, intelligent, had a clear vision, clear objectives, formed partnerships with officials.*

One former cabinet minister talks of "not running a policy until you can find a civil servant who will work with you on it and you have to form the basis of a relationship. If you come up with an idea, you can't run it against the department – you have to persuade somebody." Another minister put a more impatient gloss on the relationship: "If you want to achieve a great deal in a short time, you have to assume the civil service won't do it unless they're pushed." He was not a popular minister.

Ineffective, and generally disliked, ministers fail to develop relationships with their civil servants, but, rather, rely on small groups of close political advisers. As was said well before his fall, one minister who very publicly came unstuck during the Blair years, he was "not easy to work with – civil servants feared him more than liked him". Almost all the civil servants we interviewed had stories about ministers who behaved badly – and the same few names came up again and again. On the whole, they were not stupid – many were clever. But a common feature was personal insecurity and an inability to trust others. They lacked the self-confidence to open out to civil servants whom they had not known before taking office.

But it is a two way process. Ministers, even those highly rated for their effectiveness, have complaints about the Civil Service – above all, for the inadequacy of their submissions and draft correspondence. The latter point cropped up again and again. Typical was the comment of one minister:

*Correspondence is not given the attention it deserves – with slabs of stale prose which is not handled by sufficiently skilled individuals. It is not just because of failures to spell and use grammar. Also, too many civil servants seem too concerned to flesh out all the detail they know to pay attention to the impact of logic and narrative.*

Civil servants are often blamed for being "poor on briefing, on what lines to take, and on the drafting of speeches – which are poor, undeliverable and have no narrative". However, there are many other areas that civil servants can do to make ministers more effective.

The comments in this section highlight the futility of trying to differentiate between ministers deciding on policy and civil servants executing and managing. Effective ministers are bound to be involved in some management tasks, not just setting and monitoring objectives but acting as policy entrepreneurs on high priority reform programmes. Their active involvement is essential to their success. But ministers are unsuited to seek to administer their departments. Some officials we interviewed talked about the relationship with ministers – that this is his business and my business. Others disagree because “everything is politics”.

## Junior ministers

Secretaries of state have dominated the discussion on ministerial performance in previous studies and memoirs. But there are four times as many junior ministers as those in the cabinet and their role has often been neglected (with the significant exception of Kevin Theakston’s invaluable work<sup>8</sup>). Ministers of state and under-secretaries often play a very important role in delivering change and implementing policies – and they are, of course, the cabinet ministers of the future, even if only a few make it that far. But their appointment can often be haphazard. Prime ministers do not – in the view of both ministers and civil servants – give enough attention to junior ministerial posts. In our interviews, ministers and civil servants were in complete agreement about the often random and arbitrary way in which such ministers are appointed and dismissed. Not only is there little attention to which minister has the appropriate experience and skills for a post, but prime ministers often negotiate with powerful secretaries of state keen to protect their allies and protégés. In other cases, weaker or new heads of departments had no real say in the choice of junior ministers: “it all depends on your place in the pecking order”, as one cabinet minister ruefully noted about the bargaining and bartering that went on for the most promising junior ministers ahead of any reshuffle.

One successful junior minister, who had a brief, unhappy time in the cabinet, argued that there should be a more sensible system. Ideally, preparations for a reshuffle should have taken place six months before an election. A prime minister should have said, “You are one of ten people I might put in the cabinet. I have arranged for a few people to talk to you and make sure you do thinking and are ready before day one.”

The ambiguous position of ministers is summed up by these comments by them. First, “the danger of the system is that junior ministers who do well are those who appear most enthusiastic to support the centre”. Second, there is a need “to make more of junior ministers pursuing the aim of Number 10 – who could provide a vision of organisation and direction”. Of course, being seen as the prime minister’s person may complicate, and undermine, a minister’s relationship with a secretary of state. Such a minister can be seen as an informer for Number 10 and even a rival for the secretary of state’s job in a future reshuffle.

Within departments, “relationships between secretaries of state and junior ministers are absolutely crucial – a lot of secretaries of state are very bad at delegating”. Politicians are not good at creating a team approach because they are potential rivals. Civil servants observe how a secretary of state needs confidence not to regard juniors in this way: “Often, it is not a team as a secretary of state struggles with junior ministers seen as a fifth column.” Junior ministers go up the food chain by delivering on initiatives, not by cooperating. The key question for civil servants about an active and ambitious junior minister is: “Does the secretary of state back their initiative?”

By contrast, the best secretaries of state trust other ministers, and delegate responsibilities to them. David Blunkett, for instance, made a practice of phoning junior ministers on Sunday evenings. This

was to listen to their views and to involve them in his own thinking. Forty years ago, Peter Walker pioneered the holding of daily 'prayer' meetings of ministers each morning when Parliament was sitting. We explore in chapter 6 the question of how to improve team building by ministers.

One junior minister, who never rose higher, accepted a subsidiary role:

*If you don't drop the ball, then you've done a good job. I said to each secretary of state I worked with – my job is to support you in what you do, to alert you to any point if I think there's a problem coming up in an area. It is basically to try and share the shit so that it doesn't land on your desk.*

Civil servants have an ambivalent view of junior ministers – akin in many ways to their view of SpAds: "If you have too many junior ministers, there is a real risk of too many initiatives which cost money and divert people." On the other hand, effective junior ministers can make the machine think. One permanent secretary named a recent junior minister who had never hit the headlines, but who was "right on top of the briefings, not seeking the public limelight but holding the department's feet to the fire and getting on with doing what the secretary of state wants explaining".

But the main criterion for promotion remains parliamentary, rather than necessarily administrative, skills. The former represents the public face of a minister's performance noted by the whips, and by fellow ministers and MPs, while the latter is mainly noted internally within departments, and occasionally by Number 10. As Lord Norton told the PASC in evidence to its inquiry *Smaller Government: What do ministers do?*:

*Members who are good at the Dispatch Box and in committee are more likely to be promoted than those who may have strong managerial skills but who are poor parliamentary performers. Some ministers survive because of their performances in the House even though they may not be good at taking decisions and managing their departments.<sup>9</sup>*

This underlines the need for a strong process of appraisal looking at all aspects of a minister's performance before reshuffles, as discussed in chapter 6.

Professor Kevin Theakston, a leading academic student of junior ministers, says the pattern of appointment and promotions has not altered much since the Victorian era:

*a backbench apprenticeship in the House of Commons, leading to one or more junior posts on the ministerial hierarchy before promotion to the Cabinet or (more likely) a return to the backbenchers or retirement from politics. Today, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, MPs continue to win office primarily for political reasons and because of their skills as parliamentarians, and not because of specialist subject expertise or extra parliamentary executive experience.<sup>10</sup>*

## Relations with Parliament

One of the most frequent complaints of the ministers we interviewed is that their civil servants did not understand the importance of Parliament for them – and their effectiveness. Ministers said this was demonstrated in civil servants' reluctance to give time in diaries to them spending time in the Palace of Westminster unless a minister was specifically answering questions, making a statement, taking part in a debate or guiding legislation through the House. Ministers say their private offices tend to regard time spent at Westminster as somehow wasted or leisure, "like going to the cinema

in the afternoon”, in the words of one. The civil service view is that time away from the office messes up the diary very badly, especially given that time is such a precious commodity. But ministers argue that spending time at Westminster, talking to colleagues, is central to their jobs. Fellow ministers noted approvingly that Alan Johnson always walked over to the Commons for lunch with fellow MPs, even when he was in the demanding post of Home Secretary.

This is partly a matter of psychology. After all, before becoming ministers, most MPs – even if shadow spokesmen and women in opposition – have spent most of their time with their parliamentary colleagues in the Palace of Westminster. One minister complained of feeling almost ‘home sick’ for other MPs and feeling a sense of distance, even if in reality it was only a couple of hundred yards, when spending most of the day in a departmental office.

But there is also a more substantial risk for ministers of being, or being seen to be, prisoners of their departments and their civil servants. Their authority derives, as noted above, not just from their weight within a department but also from their authority outside, notably in Parliament. Therefore being accessible to fellow MPs, and building and sustaining relationships, is central to the political role of ministers. This applies particularly when a minister runs into trouble, when a policy goes wrong, or an unexpected problem emerges and an explanation has to be offered in the Commons. The ability to survive, and defuse controversy, often depends on whether a minister is liked and can call on reserves of support built up and nurtured over the years.

Ministers argued that understanding politics, and Parliament, should be central to the training of civil servants: “It is nonsense to imagine that policy and politics are not wedded.” That is why service in a minister’s private office used to be regarded as a key training experience for promising younger civil servants. But many officials have had little experience of ministers or of Parliament, unless they happen to have worked on a bill team taking legislation through the Commons and Lords. By contrast, in local government, quite junior staff deal with local councillors on a range of business all the time. And there is no Whitehall–Westminster division since they all work in the same town halls or city halls.

## Continuity and the perils of excessive turnover

A real constraint on ministerial effectiveness is that many ministers do not stay in their posts long enough, as a result of over-frequent reshuffles. A consistent theme of our interviews – and in much of the research on ministers – was that the relatively short tenure of ministers in their posts can undermine their effectiveness. This point was made by ministers and those we interviewed working in industry. Few ministers are in the same job long enough to see a policy through from inception, via legislation, to implementation. Most ministers will only have around 27 months to do what they can; the average tenure between 1947 and 1997 was 26.8 months for junior ministers, 27.2 for ministers of cabinet rank, and 28 months for cabinet ministers.<sup>11</sup>

The frequency of changes in important posts may be familiar but is still startling: during the 13 Labour years in office, there were six defence secretaries, eight trade and industry secretaries, eight business secretaries, and six home secretaries (including three in four years). These upheavals unquestionably damage the quality of government. Of course, there are big variations within governments. The top ministers, not only prime ministers but also Chancellors of the Exchequer and foreign secretaries, tend to serve longer than other secretaries of state. Until the 2010 election, there had been just seven chancellors in 31 years (serving respectively four years, six and a half years, one year, two and a half years, four years, over 10 years and nearly three years), and 10 foreign secretaries (one of whom served for six years, two for more than five years and one for four



years). The unusual nature of the rapid turnover in some posts in the UK is vividly illustrated by a comparison with Germany. As shown in chapter 5, since 1949, Germany (including the former West Germany) has had just 15 ministers for the economy (not the same as finance), while the UK has had 35 ministers in the equivalent position (in the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and its predecessors). And the UK has hardly had a superior industrial performance.

One minister noted that: "unless you leave ministers there for some time, actual ministerial power is hugely constrained". Another said, "rotating people really quickly is ridiculous". John Reid, who held seven cabinet posts in eight years (including the major portfolios of Health, Defence and the Home Office in four years), commented in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee:

*[Ministers are] assumed to have made their mark within a year or two... they are going to want to do something quickly. The last thing they are going to want to do is to focus on maintaining a programme that is going to take 10 years to produce results when they will not be there to get the benefit of the praise. That, I think, is an insidious culture.*<sup>12</sup>

Charles Clarke (in evidence to the Public Administration Committee in 2006-07) noted:

*Changing Europe ministers frequently is a terrible mistake, particularly that job. If you talk about stakeholders, the range of contacts across European politics which the individual has is an absolutely prize asset, which is why many countries have foreign secretaries who are very long-standing because those networks are very important.*<sup>13</sup>

There is, of course, a fine balance between serving long enough and too long. Much depends on the performance of the minister. It is sensible to get rid of ministers who are manifestly not up to the job rather than leave them in post. And there are always casualties produced by scandals (either personal or in ministerial performance), as well as the accidents of life. The problem is, rather, the appearance of moving ministers around who have started to do a reasonable job and could make a larger impact if left there for another year.

A common civil service view is that ministers are "most effective after a year, but not the opposite extreme of being stuck for five or six years". A minister commented:

*You can't do anything in 18 months [one estimate of the average tenure<sup>14</sup>] – but three or four years is a bit long because you come round to things you have done before. There is a tendency to lose energy. Two or three years is probably about optimal.*

A senior civil servant agreed: "A reasonable amount of time in post is hugely important – 18 months at a minimum and two and a half years [is] good."

Outsiders in big national trade associations find the rapid turnover "daft – jobs are designed for individuals rather than individuals for jobs". The fault lies less with secretaries of state – who often have little say in the appointment of junior ministers – than with prime ministers: "There is no rhyme or reason to it – it is driven by politics rather than by suitability for a particular role."

David Cameron appears to accept this argument about the dangers of too frequent reshuffles. In a recent interview, he said: "I'm not a great believer in endlessly moving people between different jobs." He criticised the rapidity of previous changes: "We had 12 energy ministers in nine years. And the tourism minister changed more often than people got off planes at Heathrow. It was hopeless. I think you've got to try to appoint good people and keep them".<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusions

Our interviews with ministers and senior civil servants – on top of earlier research – have identified some unambiguous conclusions about what makes an effective minister: having a clear vision and set of objectives; the ability to pursue such priorities without getting bogged down in the details of administration; a willingness to listen and to take advice; and wider political skills of communication and understanding the media. Our interviews also identified a number of problems: a rapid turnover of ministers; a lack of preparation for becoming a minister; and the almost complete absence of proper appraisal of performance in office. We have not discussed all these issues in this chapter but have left some for discussion later in the report.

The next chapter looks at the attributes and performance of Michael Heseltine, regarded by a large number of our civil service interviewees, and several ministers, as the most effective minister with whom they dealt. We compare him with Nigel Lawson, one of his contemporaries, who was also acknowledged to be an effective minister but who had a very different style and approach.

In later chapters we look at experience overseas, then at how development and appraisal might improve the effectiveness of ministers so that support for ministers can be enhanced. This is linked with the increased support for ministers in policy making suggested in the parallel report from the Institute.<sup>16</sup> We also examine the twin questions of how being a special adviser is a good training for being a minister, and how the pool of potential ministers can be broadened by bringing in outsiders, the GOATs.

Finally, we make a number of specific recommendations to improve the effectiveness of ministers and governments.

### 3. Michael Heseltine – exemplar or exception?

Michael Heseltine was, by a large margin, the most frequently mentioned example of an effective minister in recent years according to our interviewees, particularly senior civil servants who worked for him but also ministers – even though he last held office in 1997. One, far from starry eyed, senior official described Heseltine as a “dream minister” with a clear vision, who was not distracted by day to day trivia, and able to translate a set of priorities into plans and to punch his weight in cabinet. Another who worked with him closely says he was “a magic combination – managed to do the job without being very high maintenance and having a sense of where he wanted to go. He had a magic wand.” The civil servants who worked with him saw Heseltine as an exceptional motivator with an unusual ability to inspire and enthuse.

Yet he crossed what permanent secretaries often regard as a clear dividing line by being interested in management – “the only senior figure who was truly interested in management – who set objectives about how to use resources” – according to one senior official. Heseltine himself said: “I totally rejected the convention that ministers decide on policy and officials execute and administer.” However, as discussed earlier, in many respects this is a false distinction since an effective minister has to be interested in setting objectives, and their implementation. What was unusual with Heseltine was the extent of his involvement in view of his own prior experience in the detailed administration of his publishing company. He was keen, according to an official who worked for him, to get into “the detail of things – you want to have a minister who is strategic in relation to policy and who understands how you could turn round an organisation – something of which most of them have no direct experience”. But, the official added, he was the exception.

That is the dilemma. How far was Michael Heseltine an example to be followed by other ministers and how far an exception? Many other ministers rated as effective have been completely unlike Heseltine. Nigel Lawson, his contemporary, and Chancellor for nearly six and half years, was unquestionably a highly effective minister – pushing through not only far-reaching privatisation programmes but also substantial changes to the tax structure and public spending controls. But his personal style and approach were as different as possible from Heseltine’s. Lawson was involved in senior appointments at the Treasury – and good at spotting rising talent – but he had no interest at all in the details of administration. Similarly, a later Conservative Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, was seen as decisive and effective but also laid back and with no interest in the detailed administration of the Treasury. Of course, the Treasury is much smaller, and unlike the departments which Heseltine headed (Environment twice, Defence, and Trade and Industry), having few direct executive responsibilities (with the Revenue departments operating largely at arm’s length), and being mainly concerned with policy making.

Lawson reflects in his masterly memoirs, *The View from Number 11*, on the attributes of leading politicians. He says he was seen by Margaret Thatcher as lacking presentational skills and, more generally, as being less of a politician than he really was. He also acknowledges that the aspect at which he was worst was being “good with people, and with backbench colleagues and the press in particular”, and that his parliamentary and television performances were uneven.

In his view,

*The most important yet most overlooked dimensions of being a politician are the least visible. These range from being a loyal and reliable colleague to being a fertile source of workable political ideas and able to make accurate political judgements – that is to say what both the short-term and long-term consequences are likely to be of a particular course of action or turn of events; what the public will accept at a particular time and what it will not; or how best to present a particular policy, irrespective of who will be making the speeches.<sup>17</sup>*



In Lawson's view effective political judgement involves knowing how to entrench a policy and how to affect the long-term political climate. What he describes as his political shortcomings were sufficient to ensure that he was never a candidate to be elected party leader and thus prime minister, which meant that he did not arouse the suspicions of his colleagues about his ambitions nor have a faction to support him.

Heseltine was unusual in becoming a highly successful businessman before he became an MP and a minister. In this he was similar to his friend and mentor Peter Walker. But those businessmen/politicians have had a mixed record at cabinet level, exemplified by the unhappy experience of John Davies in the Heath Government and later. We explore the theme of the outsider as minister more in a later chapter, but two key points need to be stressed: Heseltine and Walker were always politicians first, and businessmen second; and they were both entrepreneurs who created their own businesses – Davies came from a managerial background at Shell and the CBI. As Heseltine, who worked for Davies as a junior minister, pointed out, Shell had "a huge, bureaucratic committee type structure".<sup>18</sup> In some respects, of course, this is like Whitehall. What Davies lacked, however, were political skills – the intuitive and risk-taking approach that an entrepreneur requires and Walker and Heseltine possessed. Heseltine wrote in his autobiography (*Life in the Jungle, My Autobiography*): "Very few examples exist of people who have made a successful leap from outside life directly into the forefront of politics"; Davies "lacked political antennae and cutting edge which come from years of battling through debates in the House of Commons".<sup>19</sup> He recalls at a later stage of his ministerial career attending a meeting of the leaders of big public companies to discuss their experiences when one, Allen (later Lord) Sheppard, chairman of Grand Metropolitan, concluded: "We think our businesses are so different from you that we cannot offer any insight into the right way to manage government, but none of us can understand why you allow the finance director to run the company."<sup>20</sup>

Heseltine admitted his approach involved "a culture shock" for many in the departments he headed. David Edmonds, one of his private secretaries, is quoted by Michael Crick (in *Michael Heseltine: A Biography*) as reporting the civil service dislike of this interest:

*They feel it is the permanent secretary's job to manage the department, not the minister's. For the secretary of state to challenge the amount of resources needed, to refuse to believe the range of bleeding stump arguments, to grill under-secretaries on their management, was anathema.*<sup>21</sup>

In particular, Heseltine set out his Management Information System for Ministers (MINIS), first in the Department of the Environment in 1979, and then in other departments he headed. This involved establishing what everyone in the department did, and what it cost. He personally questioned the 57 heads of significant divisions within the Environment Department – asking them to produce "a document which costed what your officials are doing, down to the nearest £1000.00, so we can all see what they're doing. It was a revolution; there was no such information available to anyone in the department." This was not just about finding savings from activities that were unnecessary and duplicated, though it did that, but also finding where there was scope for improvement and expansion.

He admits that the process was very demanding, a "hell of a grind". Civil servants were initially – and some remain – sceptical, and Heseltine was only able to sustain direct personal involvement for the first six months or so. But MINIS continued, under official control, and was reviewed annually in the departments he headed. However, as Heseltine freely admits, it was not taken up

elsewhere by other ministers and there was virtually no media interest. MINIS came to be regarded almost as a personal eccentricity, and did not survive his departure in its original form. When, at Margaret Thatcher's invitation, he made a presentation about it to the full cabinet, many fellow ministers appeared indifferent, while Sir John Nott was openly dismissive, provoking a fierce row with Thatcher. That ended any chance of a reasoned debate, or the idea being picked up elsewhere.

Heseltine was less the exception than the exemplar in two other respects. First, as civil servants we interviewed remark, he had a clear vision about what he wanted to do. No one who worked for him had any doubt about his priorities. This was also true of other effective ministers such as Lawson and Clarke. Second, as a Secretary of State, he closely involved other ministers in his department and civil servants by delegating responsibility. He took up the example of Peter Walker in enhancing the role of junior ministers, allocating each their own sphere of responsibility. This freed him to take an overall strategic view and press forward with his main priorities.

The clearest measure of Heseltine's effectiveness is his record in office. He proved this through his role in regenerating Merseyside (notably after the 1981 riots in Liverpool), and the docklands of east London; by playing a leading role in replacing the poll tax by the council tax; by constructing High Speed One; and, more controversially, in pushing through the construction of the Millennium Dome. There were downsides too. He miscalculated the reaction to coal mine closures in autumn 1992, while the partial privatisation of the Post Office was blocked because of the political weakness of the government. But his successes – mostly large-scale projects – revealed his personal input as an effective minister.

As Lawson remarks in *The View from Number 11*, "There are many different kinds of politician, and most are probably needed. A paragon who combines the advantages of all and the drawbacks of none is unlikely to exist – and, if he did, he would almost certainly be impossible to live with."<sup>22</sup> What unites the Heseltines and the Lawsons is not their different ways of running their departments but their clear view of their priorities and determination to pursue these objectives.

## 4. Increasing the talent pool – the role of outsiders

British prime ministers have increasingly believed that the potential pool of talent in the House of Commons for recruiting ministers is too small – and have looked outside to broaden the range of expertise, with mixed results. This chapter examines whether the proportion of effective ministers might be increased if more were recruited from outside politics, and what needs to be done to ensure such outsiders are more effective.

The UK is often seen as unusual among western democracies in limiting its ministers mainly to those elected to its popular legislative chamber. But, as Chapter 5 shows, the reality is not quite so straightforward. France, the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden do allow ministers to be drawn from outside the legislature, but, in practice, many ministers with no national legislative background have other political experience in party positions or other tiers of government. In Germany, for example, nearly a quarter of ministers have not come from the Bundestag, but most of these have occupied leading positions in the *Länder*, or regional governments. These are as much political insiders as members of the Bundestag.

Second, in bicameral Westminster style legislatures overseas, ministers are drawn from the second chamber as well as the popularly elected one. In India, a third of senior ministers come from the Upper House, which is only indirectly elected, nominated by elected officials from each part of the country.

Third, in the UK, the well-publicised appointment in June and July 2007 by Gordon Brown of the original five GOATs (Lords ministers intended to be part of 'a government of all the talents') without political backgrounds was not quite as novel as it was presented and has overshadowed the longer-term trend of appointing more peers to significant ministerial posts.

At the heart of these changes is a debate about the attributes and experience that ministers need. As earlier chapters make clear, neither the 'all that matters is political experience' nor the 'executive/managerial model' fit. What is required is a mixture of the two: an understanding of how large organisations should be led plus a feel for politics in carrying proposals through Parliament and convincing the media and the public of their merits. These twin factors explain both the demand for more outsiders and their mixed record.

The essential argument for outside appointments is that the convention of recruitment principally from the House of Commons restricts the choice too much. There is a statutory limit of 95 ministers in the Commons, though ministers in the Lords raise the total to 109 (up from just over 80 half a century ago). This includes law officers and whips, but excludes unpaid ministers and parliamentary private secretaries who boost the effective size of the payroll vote. Just including unpaid ministers raises the total to nearer 120. This is more than most comparable parliamentary democracies. Canada has 64 senior and junior ministers, South Africa 66 and India 78. If, however, you compare the number of MPs with the size of the main elected chamber, there is one Commons minister to every 6.1 MPs in the UK. This is fewer than in Canada, at 4.8, or Ireland, at 5.5, but many more than in France, at 19.2.

In Britain, these ministers are selected from around 300 to 360 MPs on the government side. This amounts to around one in four MPs from the governing party (or parties), even omitting those drawn from the Lords and parliamentary private secretaries. In practice, the choice is more restricted once you rule out the unsuitable ('the mad and the bad', of whom there are a number in every party), the old, the inexperienced and the disaffected. The problem gets worse the longer a party remains in office and the number of ex-ministers rises. Of course, this is partly a matter of prime ministerial whim, political and personal preference, since some talented MPs, with proven experience,

find their faces do not fit. One solution, urged by PASC, is to reduce the number of ministers. Definitions on what constitutes a minister, particularly a junior minister, vary from country to country but the UK proportion is higher than in comparable parliamentary democracies. A reduction in the total number will not address the issue of experience and expertise.

One of the main strands of the debate is the rise of the career or professional politician (as identified by Professor Anthony King and Peter Riddell<sup>23</sup>). Sir John Major asked the PASC in November 2009:

*If you compare the House of Commons today with, say, 30, 40 years ago, where are the businessmen, the farmers, the soldiers?... Politics has changed, I do not disparage the role of someone who is a professional politician at all; it is the question of whether you have the right mixture in the House of Commons.*<sup>24</sup>

There are still businessmen, farmers and soldiers (a few more of the latter, now with service on the front line, than a decade or so ago), but they are not in leadership positions. They are generally on the backbenches. The career politicians – those whose pre-election paid employment was in politics as a researcher, adviser and the like – remain a minority of the whole House. But they represent a growing share of the new intake at each election and are now the dominant players. Lord Turnbull, the former Cabinet Secretary, made the point to the same PASC inquiry:

*There is a growing trend for people to come into politics more or less straight from university. They lick envelopes in Central Office, become a special adviser, on and on it goes, and by the time they are in their mid-thirties, they are Cabinet Ministers, barely touching the sides of real life.*<sup>25</sup>

He exaggerates a little, but only a little, since this description fits the careers of the current Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Chancellor and the Shadow Chancellor. However significant their current positions, David Cameron and George Osborne are the only two members of the full Cabinet who served as SpAds, and there are only six others among Commons ministers in the rest of the government, though others served as party researchers in opposition. Lord Turnbull went on to argue,

*You have no chance if you come in at 50 years old of getting anywhere in politics, so how can you develop in a senior position in local government, or in trade unions, or in business? You are so far behind in the climb up the greasy pole that you never catch up.*

The rise of the career or professional politician has often been deplored, but they have advantages and skills useful for being ministers. This has been associated with the growing number of SpAds. But the two are not the same. Many career politicians have worked as local councillors, as union officials, on the research staff of parties or as advisers in opposition. All that helps them understand the working of politics. But only SpAds have the extra advantage of having worked in Whitehall and therefore having experience of what ministers do.

This is the key link to ministerial effectiveness. Special advisers have become an important part of the life of ministers over the past three decades. Every cabinet minister is currently entitled to two such politically appointed advisers and other ministers attending cabinet can have one. There has been a big increase in the number of SpAds since the mid-1990s – up from the range of 34 to 38 during the Major government to a peak of 84 in 2001 and then down to around the mid-1970s before the 2010 election, and just under 70 afterwards. The biggest rises were in 10 Downing Street and the Treasury rather than in departments. There is no longer much dispute over their existence:

the issue is more what they should, and should not, do. As one senior civil servant commented: "SpAds are completely indispensable – they do things we can't do. But we do not want them running projects for us." That is also the danger, and fear, of senior officials that SpAds will complicate decision-making through these other cross-Whitehall networks. The best advisers work in close partnership with civil servants in ministers' private offices. The risk, according to civil servants, is when they are weak and ineffective, and when they become part of a protective coterie or comfort zone around a minister.

The experience learnt as SpAds is clearly a big advantage if they become ministers. Our view is that being a SpAd is a good preparation for being a minister. The route from SpAd to minister has been more common on the Labour than the Conservative side. Both Miliband brothers, Ed Balls, Andrew Adonis, Andy Burnham and James Purnell are the most prominent Labour examples who went from being SpAds to the Cabinet within the span of the 13 years of Blair and Brown governments. And, as noted above, there are only eight former advisers at all levels of the present government. The former SpAds attract attention by their prominence rather than by their numbers.

Working as a SpAd means that both David Cameron and George Osborne were more familiar with the workings of Whitehall than most of their new ministerial colleagues in May 2010. There is some anecdotal evidence that this helped them settle into their ministerial jobs more smoothly in May and June 2010 than Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did in 1997. Former advisers often have the political skills not only to advance their ministerial careers but also to operate in Whitehall and with the media. Being a SpAd is in many ways a useful apprenticeship for becoming a minister. But this still leaves a gap: a lack of detailed knowledge and understanding of the outside world and much of the rest of the public sector. And with the limited exception of those who have worked in Brussels, such as Nick Clegg, few career politicians have much, if any, international experience.

At the same time, the state has become more active and interventionist under governments of all parties, putting more pressures on ministers. That has created a demand for ministers with more outside experience and with specialist and often executive skills. Prime ministers have believed there is a shortage of such people in the Commons and hence have looked to the Lords. At first, this did not involve total outsiders to politics. There have been some over the years, but, generally, only a small number. Normally, Lords ministers have been existing political sympathisers and members, who are either appointed to the Lords and then become ministers or become peers at the same time as becoming ministers, such as Lord Falconer in 1997 and Lord Adonis in 2005.

Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century, many Lords ministers had been primarily spokesmen for their departments, taking legislation through the Upper House, but with few executive responsibilities in their departments. There had been exceptions during the Thatcher era, such as Lords Carrington and Whitelaw, plus successive lord chancellors, as well as Lord Bellwin, with local government experience, Lord Cockfield, a tax and financial expert, and Lord Young of Graffham, a successful property developer. The latter three were all committed to the Tories but their roles owed a lot to their previous experience. After losing her Wallasey seat in 1992, Lynda Chalker remained Overseas Development Minister, and deputy to the Foreign Secretary, but in the Lords rather than the Commons.

Even earlier, Harold Wilson had recruited and ennobled Lords Caradon and Chalfont to work in the Foreign Office and Lord Snow (the novelist and public commentator C. P. Snow) at Technology. The latter can be regarded as early GOATs.

But most Lords ministers did not play a significant departmental role. That began to change in the 1990s, particularly under the first Blair government when a number of Lords ministers, such as Lords Hunt of Kings Heath, Sainsbury of Turville, Simon of Highbury, Macdonald of Tradeston and Falconer of Thoroton, and Baronesses Blackstone, Symons, Hayman, Jay and Hollis, were appointed as ministers with real executive responsibilities. Almost all were publicly committed to Labour before their appointment as ministers, unlike the later GOATs. They were divided between those who had been active politically before 1997 (the majority) and those who were primarily known for their business interests.

Their appointment did not fundamentally alter the balance of numbers between Commons and Lords ministers. The numbers have varied but, in the past 20 years, Lords ministers have amounted to around a fifth of the total, down from more than half in 1900 – but what has changed is their role. The trend was taken further during the Blair years with the appointment in 2005 of Andrew Adonis, previously head of policy in 10 Downing Street as a junior education minister in the Lords, before he later moved to Transport, ultimately in the cabinet. Lord Drayson, a successful entrepreneur and businessman, was brought in, first to handle defence procurement and then, after a gap, science and innovation.

Most of these peers had outside experience of chairing or senior management as well as political skills. An effective minister has to have both. But there is a very important distinction between experience and expertise. Should ministers be appointed to areas where they are already specialists? Should the health secretary be a doctor, or a nurse? The education secretary a former teacher? And the defence secretary a former serving officer? British politicians, like senior civil servants, have traditionally seen their roles as not requiring specialist knowledge or experience; and, in the case of ministers, representing the broader public interests against the specific interest of producers and the professions. But there have always been significant exceptions: not just the obvious requirement that law officers should be barristers. The Lord Chancellor was statutorily required to be a lawyer until 2005, but since then – when the Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary has been able to sit in the Commons, and does not have to be a lawyer – the three occupants of the post have still all been barristers. Peter Walker, Michael Heseltine and Lord Young of Graffham, let alone the hapless John Davies, had all had successful business careers before being responsible for Trade and Industry, while Gillian Shephard had run a local education authority and Estelle Morris had been a teacher before they became education secretary. And several former agriculture ministers had either been farmers or represented rural constituencies. Not all these have been successful and some have been seen as advocates for, and defenders of, their particular interests.

There is a strong argument for having one or two junior ministers in any department with specialist knowledge of its brief. They can add their expertise and knowledge, but their role is essentially subsidiary to the secretary of state, with a broader political remit. In other countries, however, specialists are more often appointed to departments, particularly, as noted in chapter 5, where ministers are regularly drawn from outside the legislature. As shown in the example above, France has usually had a minister with a medical background in their health department, and both Germany and the Netherlands have had a doctor as minister about a quarter of the time. In most of these countries, there has been far less debate than in the UK about the basic structures and funding of health provision. In Britain, none of the 11 health secretaries since the post was created in 1988 have had any medical background.

The appointment of the GOATs in June and July 2007 was not an innovation in itself, as the examples quoted above show. What was different was the number: five at one go with more to



follow, and the arguments used by Gordon Brown for their appointment. He presented them as an attempt both to recruit talented experts with established reputations and to cross party lines, hence 'government of all the talents', or GOATs. Most – Lord Malloch-Brown (former journalist and diplomat at the United Nations), Lord Darzi (surgeon), Lord West (former First Sea Lord) – had no previous political commitment to Labour, and one, Lord (Digby) Jones of Birmingham, never joined or backed the party. Only Baroness Vadera (a former banker) had been politically involved before as an adviser to Gordon Brown. Later, they were joined by Lord Carter of Barnes (a businessman and Downing Street adviser), Lord Myners (a businessman) and Lord Davies of Abersoch (a former leading banker). Only Lord Mandelson and Baroness Kinnock could not be regarded as political novices – far from it.

Most of the GOATs were given departmental responsibilities closely linked to their former activities: Malloch-Brown in foreign affairs; Darzi in health system reform; West on security issues; Jones in trade; Vadera in finance (though her initial brief was in international development where she had considerable expertise); and Carter in media. In other cases, such as Myners, his broad experience of chairing very large companies was relevant to the banking rescue package. This was similar to the previous pattern with the Wilson appointments in 1964, in the Thatcher government with Lord Bellwin (local government) and Lord Cockfield (tax), and in the Blair era with Lord Simon (business) and Lord Falconer (the law).

The primary appeal of most of this post-2007 group to Brown was their outside non-political reputations and expertise – as reflected in the slogan 'government of all the talents'. But neither Brown nor the ministers fully appreciated that they were there not just as authoritative experts (almost super-SpAds or policy tsars), they also had a political role as ministers, not least in answering questions and taking legislation through the Lords. In their excellent Constitution Unit report, Ben Yong and Robert Hazell noted the lack of understanding of prime ministers about the role of the House of Lords: the Prime Minister told one minister "not to worry much about the Lords: he said I wouldn't be spending much time there".<sup>26</sup> He soon learnt better. Some of the GOATs adapted successfully, others did not. It is clear that outsider ministers found their parliamentary roles most difficult and enjoyed much more their policy and departmental roles, which was largely why they had joined the government in the first place.

David Cameron continued this trend. Before the general election, he used his allocation of working peers to bring in two people with considerable outside experience in the expectation that they would become ministers if the Conservatives formed a government: Dame Pauline Neville-Jones in the field of national security, and David Freud, a former banker, on welfare reform. In May 2010, Cameron appointed two more outsiders as Lords ministers: Lord Hill of Oareford, a former political secretary at 10 Downing Street in the Major years and a public affairs consultant, as a junior education minister, and Lord Sassoon, a former bank and Treasury civil servant, as Commercial Secretary to the Treasury. Later, in early 2011, Stephen Green, the former chairman of HSBC, went to the Lords and became Trade Minister. As Yong and Hazell point out, certain portfolios may be better suited to outside experience, notably trade minister, where someone with business experience and contacts may be best suited to 'selling' Britain. The current minister, and his two predecessors, have all been GOATs.

The overall record of outsider ministers has been uneven. There are the infamous examples of Frank Cousins and John Davies in the 1960s and 1970s, neither of whom made a lasting impact, and whose failures have been widely seen as warnings against the appointment of non-politicians straight into the cabinet. Lords Cockfield and Young of Graffham served in the Thatcher Cabinets in

the 1980s. The former had a low profile within government and made more impact as the European commissioner who championed the creation of the European single market. Lord Young served for five years in the Cabinet and for a time had considerable influence in pushing forward labour market and industrial reforms. There were, however, limits to Young's role when running a department from the Lords, notably when he faced dissent from MPs over some proposals.

The more recent record under Blair and Brown was also mixed. Lord Simon lasted just over two years. Lord Sainsbury served for more than eight years. The contrast is, at least, partly explained by the very specific brief which Lord Sainsbury had as Science Minister in an area in which he had a long personal interest and where he received strong backing from both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, and was not really contentious politically. Lord Simon, however, operated in a less clearly defined area of Europe policy where the lead from the top was ambiguous, and often contradictory, given the different approaches of Blair and Brown.

It is revealing that only one of the five original GOATs, Lord West, served for the whole two years and 11 months of the Brown government. Lord Jones left after 16 months, while Lords Malloch-Brown and Darzi went after two years and a month, and Baroness Vadera two months later. Lord Carter managed just nine months. In both his case and Lord Darzi's, they had completed the specific tasks they had been asked to perform: reviews into digital Britain and the future of the NHS. Darzi told the PASC inquiry: "I felt I had done what I was brought in to do... It is a bit like surgery you know, you need to know when you have done the job and discharge the patient." And Baroness Neville-Jones lasted just a year.

In practice, all non-Commons ministers, whether they already have a prior party commitment, or none, as with the post-2007 GOATs, face similar constitutional and political constraints. The attractions of bringing in non-MPs as ministers with responsible executive positions (in addition to their parliamentary roles) is that they can bring experience and expertise to specific policy areas, which would otherwise not be available. They broaden the gene pool of talent and skills available to a Prime Minister.

However, the limitations also need to be recognised. If democratic accountability is to be maintained, senior ministers should primarily come from the elected House, the Commons. As Lord Adonis told the PASC inquiry, the "democratic character of the government" needs to be maintained. That might change if the second chamber became either wholly or predominantly elected. But the present composition of the Lords limits the number of non-MP ministers with executive responsibilities. It should be possible to improve accountability mechanisms so that Lords ministers can be questioned by MPs generally and not just by small numbers on select committees. After the appointment of Lords Adonis and Mandelson to head important departments in the final years of the Brown government, proposals, which they backed, for questioning by MPs in the parallel debating chamber of Westminster Hall were blocked by Commons traditionalists. Cross-chamber appearances by ministers from either House could alleviate the accountability problems. Questioning by members of select committees is not sufficient.

There is a side issue of whether ministers need to be members of either House, as has occurred from time to time with Scottish law officers in the pre-devolution era. But for a minister not to be either an MP or a peer would remove them too far from the political arena, and a minister – as opposed to a civil servant or an adviser – has to have political links, as well as skills, to perform their job. Some GOATs have only served for a short time as ministers, but remain members of the Lords for life. Consequently, some critics have argued that they should resign from the Lords (at present



only permanent leave of absence is allowed) or be appointed temporary peers. The small number of GOATs is a side issue against the bigger question of how to reduce the size of the Lords.

Outsiders have strengthened recent governments. They have brought a fresh perspective and experience, which can improve the overall effectiveness and performance of a department, notably in handling new projects or reform programmes. In several cases, such as Lords Darzi, Drayson and Sainsbury, outsiders made a bigger impact than their predecessors, or successors from the Commons. Their distinctive stamp may partly have been because they were appointed to undertake a particular task and did not have wider ambitions. But the latter point is double edged and in most cases limited their wider influence on their departments. In some cases, it might have been better to have employed people with this outside experience and expertise as advisers (possibly with civil service status, such as Michael Barber), tsars or heads of special policy commissions (Adair Turner), rather than turning them into fully fledged ministers requiring political skills, which some lacked and did not want to develop. Lords Carter and Darzi, who were responsible for specific reviews, could have fitted into these categories – though another peer would have had to handle their Lords responsibilities. Some of these advisers/tsars have had more influence on policy than many ministers.

The real question is about what roles outsiders should perform. This involves a proper understanding of their role, both by them and, above all, by the prime minister who appoints them. The key limitation on the role of outsider ministers is the absence of political skills and background. As argued earlier in the report, the outside experience and expertise that GOATs and other outsiders can bring to government is crucially dependent on their ability to operate in a political environment within Whitehall and in Parliament. Few Lords ministers have the political weight, experience and authority to command authority among their cabinet colleagues. Lord Mandelson was a notable recent exception, as was Lord Carrington in an earlier era until the Falklands crisis erupted, and then Lord Whitelaw during the middle 1980s.

There is no straightforward formula for a successful outsider. For instance, few businessmen have made the leap at one go from the boardroom to a secretary of state's office. The demands and requirements of the two are very different. Outside experience in large organisations, whether in the private sector, other parts of the public sector or the voluntary sector, can help. But it has to be married to political skills of persuasion, communication and leadership – otherwise the outsider flounders, usually leaving office within a year or two bewildered and often bitter, as Digby Jones was.

There are three reasons for the mixed record of GOATs/outside ministers. First, the skills needed to be a company chairman or chief executive officer are very different from those required to be a minister, as we discuss earlier. Second, while many of the skills needed to be an effective minister can be learnt, the political nous and acumen needed to be a successful minister are much harder to predict or develop. They are more nature than nurture. Mervyn Davies had it, but Digby Jones did not. Third, political life is all consuming, even obsessive. Many people outside politics find these all-embracing demands unappealing. This may be why many outsiders do not stay in office for long, and why many outsiders are not attracted in the first place. But there is a more general point. To be an effective minister requires a wide range of skills which few people have, even if they have been career politicians all their lives. So it is not surprising that many outsiders do not succeed, neither do many insiders.

Yong and Hazell talk of "hybrid candidates who have both technocratic and (transferable) political skills rather than being purely technocratic appointments".<sup>27</sup> Moreover, to avoid the misunderstandings and tensions that developed after 2007, new appointees need to be fully aware that they are not titled advisers but ministers with often demanding responsibilities in the Lords.

## Categories of ministers outside the Commons

There are broadly three categories (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Three categories of ministers outside the Commons**

1. Lords ministers with a political background who can handle big picture political issues, such as Lords Whitelaw, Wakeham and Mandelson. There are unlikely to be more than one or two of these at the top level in any government.
2. Outsiders who are recruited to handle specific policy areas in essentially technocratic roles, such as Lords Darzi, West, Malloch-Brown, Myners and Davies, or Lords Freud, Green and Sassoon in the current administration. But they still need the political skills to be accountable and to handle the Lords.
3. Outsiders brought in primarily to provide advice and support for the prime minister, such as Baroness Vadera, who should be classified as advisers and should not become ministers.

This chapter suggests that the effectiveness of government – especially in handling areas such as defence procurement, science, trade promotion and public service reform – can be enhanced by the recruitment of some outsiders as ministers. The key proviso is that their roles are properly defined and understood both by them and the prime minister who appoints them.

## Recommendations

Our Recommendations are as follows:

1. At least half a dozen outsiders should be appointed as ministers to broaden the range of expertise, experience and project management capacity of ministerial teams. The requirements will vary but such outsiders are particularly suited to education, health, welfare reform, defence and investment and trade promotion. These are likely to be a combination of non-MPs with a previous political commitment and involvement, though generally with considerable outside experience, and those with no political background, the GOATs. However, in the case of some time-limited projects or reviews, it may be better to appoint them as advisers rather than ministers.
2. Such appointments should maintain the present relative balance of ministers between the Lords and Commons, in order to ensure the primacy of the elected chamber. The exact numbers should depend in part on whether the overall number of ministers is cut in line with the reduction in the size of the Commons at the next general election.
3. Outsiders should be made aware before their appointment of their ministerial responsibilities in the Lords, as well as in their departments. They should be given specific, planned assistance to make the adjustment from their previous non-political lives. This development work should not just involve a brief initial induction but, as with other ministers, should continue during their time in office.

4. Senior Lords ministers, either secretaries of state or those responsible for major programmes, should be permitted to answer questions in the Commons, whether in the full chamber or Westminster Hall, as well as, now, in front of select committees.
5. Above all, appointing a limited number of outsiders as ministers is no substitute for improving the professional development of Commons ministers. That remains the key to improving the effectiveness of ministers and government.

## 5. International perspective

Many of the issues that came up in our interviews were obviously particular to the UK political system. Questions concerning which career paths can lead to ministerial office, or the length of time a person remains in post, emerged as important influences on effectiveness. In order to understand how far these applied just to the UK, and how far they had a broader resonance, we looked at international experience.

We took a representative sample of political systems similar to and distinct from Westminster, and excluded the United States because of its fundamentally different political structure.<sup>28</sup> We decided to include India, as the world's largest democracy, to have a non-OECD perspective. The key features of these countries' political systems can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of the key features of the political systems of the countries investigated**

Country	Pool of ministers	Minister must resign seat?	Reshuffles?	Electoral system in lower house	Electoral system in upper house	Coalition government?
UK	Lower and upper house	No	Yes	FPTP	Non-elected	Yes
Australia	Lower and upper house	No	Yes	Preferential (AV)	Elected	No
Canada	Lower and upper house	No	Yes	FPTP	Non-elected	No
France	Anyone	Yes	Yes	2 round system	Elected	No
Germany	Anyone	No	Yes	Semi-PR (MMP)	State govts	Yes
Ireland	Lower and upper house	No	Yes	PR (STV)	Non-elected	Yes
India	Lower and upper house	No	Yes	FPTP	State assemblies	Yes
Netherlands	Anyone	Yes	No	List PR	Elected	Yes
Spain	Lower and upper house	No	Yes	List PR	Mixed	No

We found a wide variety of structures and mechanisms, which place the UK and the wider discussion in this report in perspective. These included multiple paths to office, much overlap in the factors heads of government must consider in allocating posts, and differing approaches to how ministers are removed from office.

### Paths to recruitment to ministerial office

#### The parliamentary path

In Westminster systems, including Canada, Australia, Ireland and the UK, whether by rule or convention, admission to the ministerial pool is mainly limited to members of the legislature. This ensures that ministers are accountable to democratic institutions and representatives of the electorate, a feature assumed to produce responsive policy making.

However, this restriction has two consequences. When forming a cabinet, a head of government may only draw from a small pool limited in not only size but also diversity. Second, it shapes possible career paths for persons aspiring to attain senior political office, restricting them to pursuing a representative role in national parliament.

Efforts can be identified in some of these states to draft in persons with additional skills, experience and expertise from beyond parliament, primarily through the upper house. Making appointments to the House of Lords so that individuals may become ministers has been contentious in the UK (see Chapter 6), and has not proven acceptable in similar institutions internationally.

The Irish Taoiseach, for example, has the constitutional right to select two ministers from the Upper House, to which he or she appoints 11 people on assuming the premiership.<sup>29</sup> However, just three senators have been appointed ministers since 1973.<sup>30</sup> This is due in part to the low prestige with which the undemocratic appointed chamber is held in Ireland – the reform committee of the House acknowledged that many members of the public viewed it as “weak, ineffective and of questionable value”.<sup>31</sup> In Canada, the unelected nature of the Senate also makes it increasingly politically unacceptable to make appointments in this manner, even though members of the senate have in the past been appointed to provide a regional balance at cabinet in the absence of appropriate members of parliament.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, in Canada, a creative avenue is sometimes used to get an identified ‘outsider’ into the ministerial pool using the upper house in a more indirect way. A member of parliament occupying a safe seat will be appointed to the Senate, leaving the identified potential outsider minister to take the vacated seat in the lower house in a by-election.<sup>33</sup> In fact, ministers such as Stephane Dion (see International Profile 1) have even been appointed prior to winning their safe by-election.

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### International profile 1: Stephane Dion

A Canadian academic who specialised in public administration, Dion was made Minister for Intergovernmental Affairs in 1996, later becoming Environment Minister and the Liberal party leader in opposition. He won a lower house seat in a by-election in a Liberal stronghold in Montreal, when MP Shirley Maheu freed the seat by taking an appointment to the Senate. So certain were his prospects of a seat, that he in fact received his first ministerial appointment prior to winning the election.

Australia and India, by contrast, frequently draw ministers directly from their respective upper houses, the key difference being that these are elected chambers. In Australia five of the 20 current members of cabinet are senators, each of whom have been elected by a full electorate for a fixed six year term. However, unlike the AV ballot used for lower house elections, in Senate elections voters have a choice of either ranking candidates using STV or using a List PR system. In practice 95% of the electorate choose to use the list,<sup>34</sup> so the top places in each main party list in each state are guaranteed a seat. This effectively delegates to parties the power to determine which individuals gain senate seats and join the ministerial pool.

India has more ministers from its Upper House than other Westminster democracies; a full one third of the 33 current senior ministers sit in this chamber. A democratic mandate gives this house

legitimacy, even though senators are in fact indirectly elected, nominated by elected officials in each federal unit. Manmohan Singh was elected to the Senate to be made Minister of Finance in 1991, and has subsequently risen to assume prime ministerial office despite a failed attempt to gain a seat in the lower house in a different district (see International Profile 2). This makes him the only non-directly elected head of government in our study.

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### International profile 2: Manmohan Singh

Manmohan Singh, a distinguished economist and one-time political adviser, held many public roles including governor of the Reserve Bank of India before his first appointment as Minister of Finance in 1991. This followed his indirect election to the Upper House by the state legislature of Assam, which has long been dominated by his party. Despite his unsuccessful contestation for a lower house seat in 1999, he remains a member of the Senate and was made Prime Minister in 2004.

When these avenues are used to recruit outside talent, as in the cases of Singh and Dion, it tends to be as a means of recruiting non-parliamentarians with a specific expertise. Of course, some political systems do not restrict cabinet posts to members of the legislature.

### Alternative paths: parliamentary outsiders

Irish Taoiseach Jack Lynch “envied” his French counterpart’s capacity to “pick the best brains in the country”<sup>35</sup> for ministerial positions. In addition to frequently cited France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany also allow ministers to be drawn from all sections of society. In France, the Netherlands and Sweden not only is it possible for ministers to be drawn from outside parliament, but cabinet members are in fact constitutionally prohibited from holding seats in the legislature, and must resign their seats if appointed.<sup>36</sup> The proportion of ministers without prior experience as a deputy or senator has been put at 25–30% in France,<sup>37</sup> one third in the Netherlands<sup>38</sup> and 42% in Sweden.<sup>39</sup> While Germany does not have the same separation of the executive and the legislature, from the first post war government up to 2007 23% of ministers did not come from the Bundestag.<sup>40</sup>

Yet parliamentary outsider is not the same as political outsider. A study of France and the Netherlands found that the most likely result of these systems is the recruitment of ministers with hybrid skills from both the political and non-political worlds.<sup>41</sup> The opening of ministerial positions widens the pool of potential ministers beyond parliament although not necessarily beyond politics; it makes available a much wider pool of suitably qualified and experienced political figures from outside the national legislature.

An example is the current Dutch parliament. All senior ministers are essentially politicians; those who were not in either house before appointment held senior party leadership or mayoral positions. Similarly French ministers are regularly drawn from the private sector, the civil service and academia, yet they are very rarely political outsiders and tend to be drawn from within France’s other political spheres<sup>42</sup> – although parliamentarians tend to secure the more politically important posts.<sup>43</sup>

In Germany a few high profile cases exist of full outsiders, such as the appointment of non-party member Werner Müller as economics minister in 1998. However, such appointments are rare (Müller is one of only three non-party member ministers since 1949<sup>44</sup>), and are interpreted as

"symbolic acts".<sup>45</sup> They also tend to be less successful – a study found that non-party ministers spent an average of 2.9 years in government (a total figure, including all ministerial posts held), compared with the overall average of 4.9.<sup>46</sup> Few incentives exist to appoint from outside the main political parties, and most of the non-Bundestag appointments are filled by members from high profile regional political positions – who spent an average 5.7 years in government, again across all posts held.<sup>47</sup> The longest tenure is, tellingly, found in those who manage to secure both parliamentary and federal experience, averaging 6.1 years.<sup>48</sup>

Sweden is an anomaly in this group, as 33% of its ministers have not held senior positions within political parties before their appointment.<sup>49</sup> This has led to a tendency for ministers to bring with them sector specific skills and experience. In social and economic departments, for example, 46% of ministers were policy 'experts' on assuming office, holding either relevant education and or professional backgrounds for their policy brief.<sup>50</sup> Yet even in Sweden some prime ministers have been reluctant to draw from outside a tight political pool – Tage Erlander maintained a tight parliamentary connection in his cabinet during his 23 years as prime minister,<sup>51</sup> while Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson insisted that a "large share" of ministers should come from the legislature.<sup>52</sup>

Political skills and experience are still broadly acknowledged as central when appointing ministers. Research on France and Germany shows that those with parliamentary and governmental experience still tend to be more successful ministers, and heads of government rarely bring in complete political novices. However, in many countries this does not mean maintaining a ministerial closed shop as in the UK House of Commons – when given the choice prime ministers have topped up parliamentary talent from outside sources.

Opening cabinet posts to non-members of the executive widens the pool of potential ministers. It also diversifies it substantially, making available a much wider cohort of suitably qualified and experienced political figures from outside the national legislature. As we shall now see, these more open systems remove the restriction of having to follow a tight parliamentary path to become involved in senior policy making, and can provide avenues for the engagement of a wider political class with a variety of backgrounds.

### Comparing routes: health ministers

A look at ministers in health departments across six countries compares the UK and the Westminster model with those systems that allow for outsider recruitment. Looking at ministries since the year 2000, we found that more open systems are much more likely to be able to place senior sector experts in executive positions.

Up until December 2010, France has very rarely been without a health expert as a minister, with a person with senior experience in a health profession for 90% of months, while both Germany and the Netherlands had experienced health professionals about one quarter of the time.<sup>53</sup> (See International Profile 3.) Over the same period, neither the UK nor Canada had a minister with senior medical experience, while in Australia one – a MP and deputy party leader – had a background as a GP.

Yet where 'expert ministers' have been deployed, they have been party insiders who had strong political credentials, holding an office in the party or at a regional assembly, for example. The difference is that these political systems are better at finding ways to cultivate and engage a wider political class in high level policy making. Experts are able to build substantial careers outside politics, while still having political lives and building political skill and experience.



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### International profile 3: Bernard Kouchner

A medical doctor by training, having set up the international NGO Doctors without Borders, Kouchner was made a health minister by the socialist government having held previous positions in humanitarian affairs and social integration. He was subsequently brought into Cabinet as Foreign minister by Nicholas Sarkozy, in the centre Right President's efforts to appear above the political divide. He was shuffled out in 2010, by which time his position had been reduced to 'little more than a symbol'. (See Pape, 2010).

### The political balancing act of cabinet formation

It has already been noted that ministerial selection differs greatly from other forms of recruitment, and literature on international cases brings out three political factors to balance in cabinet formation. The first is familiar in the UK – the need to balance intra-party dynamics. The second factor is one that the UK has recent experience of – multi-party coalitions. Finally, there is a further factor, which makes a less overt impact on the way cabinet formation is discussed: the need to be shown to represent different sections of society.

#### Intra-party politics: patronage

Ministerial positions are one of the main incentives for securing continued loyalty to a leader and party, and a mechanism for balancing intra-party tensions. Patronage is one of the few powers available to a head of government to reward and retain loyalty. This in part may explain why, as shown above, regardless of the breadth of ministerial pools, heads of governments across states see their parliamentary party as the primary source of ministers.

Losing additional roles to outsiders could breed resentment and decrease the prime minister's capacity to maintain the confidence and loyalty of his party. The Irish Taoiseach has about 30 ministerial positions at his disposal. As an analysis of interviews with ex-Taoisigh conceded, "A Taoiseach's political dependence on TDs (MPs) prevents the Senate route being taken... to appoint senators would be politically costly in terms of how it would affect ability to control TDs."<sup>54</sup>

Heads of government also need to satisfy intra-party dynamics. Across states, parties have different fractions and ideological splits, which require a balancing of ministerial appointments. This process in many ways mirrors the constraints on government formation in a more overt way in coalition formation.

#### Coalition building

Coalitions provide the most overt restrictions on the freedom a head of government has in selecting ministers for posts. Ministerial positions are some of the main bargaining chips in coalition negotiations, and smaller parties often end up with disproportionately more executive posts than their share of the legislature would suggest.<sup>55</sup> While formal coalitions are something the UK government has only recently had to deal with, it has been a reality in many other countries for decades.

In the Netherlands, the prime minister is said to have "no power to determine ministerial appointment".<sup>56</sup> Ministries are divided among coalition partners on government formation, and the leaders of the coalition parties then themselves distribute the ministerial seats, and also determine de-selection.<sup>57</sup> A coalition approach to government is so strong in the Netherlands that a study of



it gave rise to the idea of consociationalism, the form of multiparty power-sharing government seen in the Northern Irish Stormont executive.<sup>58</sup>

The power of coalition partners in Germany is perhaps best exemplified in the departure of the economy minister in 2009. Michael Glos' resignation was publicly submitted in the first instance not to the Chancellor but to his party leader, a secondary partner in Germany's coalition government, who is head of Bavaria's regional government and not a member of cabinet (see International Profile4).

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#### International profile 4: Michael Glos

Michael Glos, a member of minor coalition partner the CSU, was Germany's economy minister until his resignation in 2009. He caused some controversy when he sent his resignation letter to Horst Seehofer, head of his party, and premier of Bavaria, and not to the Chancellor. However in many coalitions, it is the head of political parties rather than the head of government which oversees ministerial allocations.

In Ireland the party leader of the minority partner in coalition "effectively chooses" the ministers for the portfolios assigned to it in the coalition negotiations, although the Taoiseach reserves the right to veto.<sup>59</sup> There was a recent and public example of this when the Green Party blocked Taoiseach Brian Cowen's attempts to perform a reshuffle, when six cabinet members resigned in a matter of days in March 2011. Despite insistence that it was his constitutional "prerogative"<sup>60</sup> to reassign ministries, the Greens managed to block the reformation of the government, resulting in its collapse and the bringing forward of a planned general election.

#### Representativeness and diversity

As political bodies, cabinets should comprise "individuals that aptly represent various interests".<sup>61</sup> The need for 'representativeness', as one Swedish academic puts it, often exists in tension with the fact that the personal qualities needed for being a member of a government, to empower government with the skill and experience it needs, may require ministers with exclusive social and educational backgrounds.<sup>62</sup> As Ludvig Beckman put it, "The aim to ensure representativeness is distinct from the aim of securing expertise and competence in Cabinet... the rule of the people is not the rule of experts, the dilemma of competence and democracy appears inescapable."<sup>63</sup>

The need for a balance of ministers representing the various regions is one way this manifests itself. In Canada this has historically been important;<sup>64</sup> the Senate has been used to provide ministers from underrepresented regions at cabinet level, when "a governing party did not manage to elect any members to the House of Commons from one or other of the provinces".<sup>65</sup> Some have complained that this negatively impacts on ministerial effectiveness, with one respected journalist writing that in a reshuffle, "the need for regional balance ensures any dumped weaklings will be replaced by the weak, while strong MPs from heavily represented areas will be sidelined".<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, German chancellors are under pressure to ensure representation from the various German *Länder*, while there has been at least one minister from the old East Germany in every cabinet since reunification. This is in large part due to the power of the regional associations in intra-party

politics,<sup>67</sup> reinforced by the linkage the Chancellor benefits from by having leaders of the various regions at the cabinet table. 'Outsider' ministerial appointments tend to be for this purpose.

Ensuring gender representativeness in Cabinet has proven politically beneficial in a number of European countries. In Sweden in 1994, Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson built a cabinet with 50/50 gender parity, keeping a successful election promise made to that effect. In Spain PSOE leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero similarly promised gender parity, which was delivered after his party's victory in the 2004 election.<sup>68</sup>

## Refreshing and reshuffling ministers

Unprompted, one third of the ministers and officials interviewed in this research mentioned a high turnover rate as damaging ministerial effectiveness. Excessive turnover can reduce a minister's capacity to build up the expertise and experience required to oversee complex modern bureaucracies.<sup>69</sup> However, an examination of international cases and studies shows that reshuffles have several contradictory potential impacts on effectiveness; and that there are widely differing approaches to carrying them out.

### Why reshuffle?

Creating an effective cabinet is rarely a once per term job. Over time a minister may show talent and deserve greater responsibility, or may prove ill placed for their skills and require moving to a more appropriate department. Reshuffles can rotate the highest performing ministers between portfolios, providing a mechanism to share the best talent around, as researchers have found occurs in Ireland.<sup>70</sup> As already discussed, there is a relatively small pool of talent from which ministers can be drawn, and over the life of a government this pool decreases further<sup>71</sup> as talent is lost through ageing and retirement, and demotions and firing.

Once in place an individual may not show sufficient skill to be an effective minister or may become embroiled in scandal. Reshuffles are, as one German academic put it, an "elegant instrument for sacking unsuccessful or tainted ministers".<sup>72</sup> All heads of government have an incentive to remove poorly performing ministers, and reshuffles provide heads of governments with a means to "fire those who fail".<sup>73</sup> They can also be a useful remedy for ministers who prove unpopular, as resignations were found by researchers to correct the drop in government popularity resulting from a politically damaging policy failure or scandal.<sup>74</sup>

Yet evaluation of performance is relative rather than absolute. The likelihood that a minister will lose his or her position in response to a resignation call is at least as dependent on their colleagues' performance as it is on their own.<sup>75</sup> The better colleagues are performing, and the more ineffective a minister appears relative to them, the more likely it is he or she will be returned to the backbench. It also can have little to do with the talent or capability of an individual; a study of the timing of reshuffles across five countries found that prime ministers employ them to retain power in the face of both intra-party and electoral challenges to their leadership.<sup>76</sup>

Simply having the capacity to move ministers around provides heads of government with excellent incentive structures to promote effectiveness once ministers are in place. The threat of replacement alone can be enough to encourage better performance, while the possibility of promotion to a higher rank and more prominent department during the reshaping of cabinet is a major motivation for politicians to prove their worth as effective ministers. Experience in Australia<sup>77</sup> has shown that reshuffles can also help heads of government offset risks associated with delegating power to ministers by providing an incentive structure to deliver the party agenda.

## Frequency of reshuffles

Given these benefits, it is easy to see when heads of governments are prone to use reshuffles. However, their frequent use in Westminster systems, occurring on average every 11 months of across Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the UK,<sup>78</sup> is by no means universal. Spain, for example, has had a more systematic approach, with reshuffles forming part of the electoral cycle, two years into each parliamentary session.<sup>79</sup>

In Germany, midterm reshuffles are rare – there were just six from 1949 to 2006.<sup>80</sup> This may be connected to the dominant role of coalitions in German politics. Coalitions make reshuffles less frequent because of the limitations on the head of government's freedom. Resignations are also rare in coalition governments; there were just 17 'coerced' resignations in Germany between 1949 and 2007.<sup>81</sup>

While one commentator noted that "concerning the de-selection of ministers, Germany appears to be a boring country",<sup>82</sup> the results paint a striking contrast to the UK. Since 1949 Germany has had 15 ministers for economics; in the same period the UK has been through 35 secretaries of state in the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and its predecessor departments<sup>83</sup>.

Germany is not alone. In the Netherlands, fixed tenure length and the prime minister's limited power mean there is no tradition of reshuffles. In fact there are relatively low rates of ministerial turnover – less than 15% of ministers step down before the end of a government's term of office, and an estimated 5% are forced to stand down.<sup>84</sup>

## Relevance for the UK

Our comparative study shows that, regardless of political structure, heads of government select their ministers from highly restricted pools. In non-Westminster systems, when parliamentary outsiders are used, there is still a near universal preference for political leaders in other tiers of government. In a few Westminster style governments, ministers have been recruited from outside the legislature, though these tend to be rare. The opening of ministerial positions widens the pool of potential ministers beyond parliament although not necessarily beyond politics; it makes available a much wider pool of suitably qualified and experienced political figures from outside the national legislature.

Political factors constrain the allocation of portfolios including satisfying coalition arrangements, intra-party politics and patronage, and the need to be seen to be representative. A number of trade-offs must be made on ministerial effectiveness – between competence on the one hand and representativeness on the other. Meanwhile, the length of ministerial tenure and reshuffles can have a contradictory impact on ministerial effectiveness, yet a comparison shows that the frequency of reshuffles seen in the UK is not inevitable.

## 6. Developing and improving ministerial effectiveness

### Preparing for office

One of the most consistent themes of our interviews is how ill-prepared new ministers are for their new roles. This is partly because so few have led and managed large organisations, although they may have worked for example as teachers, councillors, SpAds, academics and journalists. Therefore many new ministers are typically not used to the challenges posed by the leadership of Whitehall departments. One senior minister admitted: "I had no idea of what was involved. I had to learn to be a minister, moving from decision to decision, seeing how they get made. I had no managerial training." The PASC inquiry in 2006-07, noted: "We recognise that it is inevitable that some ministers will have little or no experience of leading large organisations or little sector specific knowledge."<sup>85</sup>

Politicians very often argue that they are already well prepared because of their experience in the Commons. David Richards in his study *New Labour and the Civil Service*<sup>86</sup> quotes Margaret Beckett as saying, "no training could prepare you for the pressure of ministerial life, only experience helps". Similarly, Anne Tiernan and Patrick Weller's study of the post-2007 Rudd administration in Australia notes the comments of an unnamed former Australian cabinet minister:

*There are courses for almost every occupation, but there is no course that teaches you how to be a member of parliament, and there's no course that teaches you how to be a minister. It's assumed that if you are elected, you can be an effective minister. There is no training course and, unless you ask, no one volunteers to help, so basically it's what you can glean from watching others and from applying what you think are commonsense principles to the sorts of things that you are called upon to do.*<sup>87</sup>

Two junior ministers in the coalition, both in the Transport Department, expressed the scepticism of many of their colleagues in evidence to the PASC inquiry in 2010-11. Mike Penning said: "I would really worry if you had to do a course and pass a course to be ministers, because we're not clones, we're individuals... I'd have failed the course: whatever course you put me on." Similarly, Norman Baker argued,

*Part of the skills of being a politician, in so far as you have them, you learn them before you get to office: how to communicate with people, I hope; how to prioritise your time; and how to absorb information quickly. Those are the skills that a member of parliament has to have, so in that sense a minister just has the same skills.*<sup>88</sup>

What this reflects is a commonly held view that little would be gained from engagement in systematic support for career development. Many ministers interviewed stated that the role is unique and not comparable to any other job, so there would be no development suited to this role. We know more about what failure in a ministerial role looks like than we do about how to improve performance. Why should it be that this group of people has no need for the tools and support which are now taken as givens elsewhere in the private or public sectors?

To take the position that there are no systematic ways to help ministers improve their performance would be to argue that performance in the highest offices in the land is down to chance and entirely a matter for ministers personally. Performance reviews and personal development activities are undertaken because organisations recognise it is in their best interests to do so. This enables strengths and weaknesses to be managed and performance to be maximised. They are used throughout organisations, albeit in different ways. For example, the UK Corporate Governance Code states that boards should evaluate their own performance annually and the boards of FTSE 350 companies should be externally evaluated every three years.

One could argue that ministers are individual performers, rather like successful sports stars or musicians. However, those at the top of their game have only reached this position after many years of development and a continuous improvement programme. You don't need to be ill to get better; there is always value in keeping up to the mark and refreshing knowledge and skills. A cabinet minister in the coalition with a corporate background argued strongly that continuous professional development including feedback from a range of sources, known as 360 degree feedback, was useful for performance enhancement.

There is also often a misconception that development means going on training courses. Development, as a whole, ranges much more widely including attending seminars and discussions, one to one sessions, mentoring and leadership coaching. At senior levels it is about structured self-development and team development. Relying on your wits and flying by the seat of your pants, as many ministers seem to do, can impact adversely on departments and lead to careers ending in tears. New ministers are struck by the bewildering speed of events and the huge demands that office brings, for which they are so often unprepared. Personal development should be seen as normal custom and practice in helping to meet these challenges.

At the start their careers in office, aspiring ministers may well have engaged in various forms of relevant development, for example working as a SpAd or as a parliamentary private secretary. One of the problems, as the 2006-07 PASC report noted, is that, "while ministers are willing to be trained in technical matters, there is stigma around attending too much training, especially in areas such as interpersonal skills: admitting a need is seen as a sign of weakness".<sup>89</sup> There has been an unhelpful culture historically because ministers have felt reluctant to acknowledge publicly they were participating in such training and development. The underlying concern is likely to be that if political colleagues or constituents knew this was happening, the individual could be perceived as being ineffectual and not up to the job. This could be seen as a form of job shadowing where a potential minister works alongside a more senior colleague with the aim of understanding the nature of the work and challenges faced as well as becoming aware of the kinds of decisions and actions that can be taken.

Through an analysis of the responses to a question on ministerial development by those we interviewed, we can isolate the three key misconceptions expressed about this type of support:

- **Training and development would be threatening** – politicians often believe that a core source of their authority is their reputation and this could suffer both with colleagues and the wider public if they were perceived as needing help. Also asking those who work for them for feedback whether through a 360 degree review or some other mechanism would similarly undermine their authority.
- **Training and development would be inappropriate** – the argument here is that comparisons with what happens in large organisations are spurious. The role of a politician is completely different; it relies on individual endeavour through innate and intuitive political skills and learning takes place through doing the job.
- **Training and development would be inadequate** – this rests on the belief that those who have risen to ministerial rank are already highly specialised and skilled, and at the peak of their profession. There would thus be little or no added value from developmental activity.

These last two concerns are likely to stem from the politician's mindset of what being a minister means, which they appear to see as about being able to perform in the media and in Parliament.

Yet do any of these arguments really hold? These are not 'superpeople' without imperfections. There is no shame in recognising that in some areas performance and knowledge could be improved. This is widely acknowledged in the public and private sectors; those there who participate in learning and developmental activity clearly do not believe that their positions and status are undermined by doing so. Politicians who employ this argument reflect a narrow and outdated perception of what ministerial authority and competence means. For example, senior people elsewhere consciously work to improve themselves through their peer networks and those they have met on the way up. Interestingly, creating networks and maintaining and fostering them are among the activities at which politicians excel. Those who know do not underestimate the value of 'working the tea room'.

Similarly, the argument that politicians are just different and should be treated as such is unpersuasive. Different working environments and skill sets do not of themselves militate against the benefits of development. Everyone to some extent learns on the job but that job can be done so much better through support and development. Continuous professional development is now the norm for CEOs, directors and professionals.

So the 'university of life' view is unconvincing, and has failed to persuade two inquiries by the Public Administration Select Committee. Its 2011 report (*Smaller Government: What do Ministers Do?*) concluded,

*Undoubtedly Parliamentary experience does provide many of the skills that Members of Parliament need to perform well as a minister. However, other skills notably those required to oversee a large and complex organisation are unlikely to be developed during a member's career in the House.*<sup>90</sup>

## Ministerial development currently undertaken

The current level of preparation, both before an election and on appointment, is inadequate. The general view is that the seminars held at the then Templeton College, Oxford, before the 1997 election were of limited value (as discussed in the Institute for Government's November 2009 report, *Transitions: Preparing for Changes of Government*). Many of the then shadow Labour ministers found the discussion of management, strategy and change irrelevant to their own experience as politicians. As discussed in the Institute's follow up report, *Transitions: Lessons Learned*, the Conservatives were more successful before the 2010 election in holding some sessions with members of the Shadow Cabinet and some other key players in discussing what being a minister involved. The Institute for Government worked closely with Francis Maude and his implementation team in this process, which involved former ministers and senior civil servants.

But the pre-election work was still patchy, especially for junior ministers, and non-existent for SpAds. The Liberal Democrats did virtually nothing to prepare their spokesmen for the possibility of participating in government – even though it was their political and electoral goal. This was partly for fear they would be seen as presumptuous if such preparations became known. Prior to the election, one Liberal Democrat minister did not see the value of attending a session called 'Understanding Whitehall', and now in post, does not see the relevance of feedback (as he gets it daily from the media) and developing his leadership and personal skills. Whilst respecting his view, feedback of this kind cannot fully reflect performance in its totality, which the media is unaware of.



Above all, such feedback does not provide the help to perform better.

The Institute for Government also ran a well-attended programme for junior ministers in the last government (some of whom are now in the Shadow Cabinet) sponsored by a former secretary of state. This covered a wide range of issues including leadership and ministerial team development, budget and resource management, working with the centre past and future, reflections on what it is like to be a minister, managing relations with civil servants, working with civil servants and private offices, understanding the links between making policy and implementing it, exploring the relationships between ministers and departmental boards and arms length bodies, and what it means to be effective in the job. Senior civil servants, a chair of one of the largest non-departmental bodies and a serving cabinet office minister all contributed.

While the sessions were well received (including the provision of 360 feedback to some senior ministers), they came too late in the life of the previous government, only a few months before the general election. However, there was overwhelming support for the value of such a programme as something that should be offered much sooner for new ministers. The isolation at the top for the minister resonated very strongly with this group and with many of the previous and current ministers whom we have interviewed, and is a familiar feeling to CEOs and corporate chairs. Isolation was mentioned quite frequently during the interviews by former and current ministers. This was described as a feeling of loneliness and being cut off, which can lead to a skewed sense of what is actually happening and what impact the minister is making.

After the May 2010 election, there was limited induction for ministers. This just involved a short course on ethics and conflict of interest issues, and rudimentary advice on using the civil service machine, the role of private offices and diary management. The Institute for Government organised some later private seminars with ministers and SpAds, supported by practical booklets.<sup>91</sup>

This suggests that relatively little has changed over the years. One long-standing minister of state from the Blair era noted that no one took induction training seriously: "Ministerial responsibility was seen as appearing on the *Today* programme and working to please the secretary of state. The environment was highly political; ministers felt they were judged more according to their media performance rather than the effectiveness of what they did."

## Development needs and cultural obstacles

In their study of ministerial roles undertaken in 2008, where they interviewed 14 ministers of state and junior ministers, Kakabadse and Kakabadse concluded that ministers perform both transactional and transformational roles.<sup>92</sup> The transactional roles they identified as parliamentary accountability, policy development and design, attending to constituency needs and managing the minister's office. They argued that the efficient performance of these roles were not sufficient for ministers to become effective political leaders. Effectiveness required them to perform a series of successful transformational activities: teamwork, nurturing networks, role modelling, negotiating transition, handling ambiguity and sustaining personal resilience.

The value of this study and its particular relevance to our work is its differentiation between the knowledge and skills that senior politicians should have, and the range of activities ministers perform that determine political effectiveness. Clearly, it is easier to develop transactional capabilities in ministers than it is to provide development programmes that would help ministers to be effective in their political, transformational roles. This study is cautious about the possible helpfulness of developmental interventions. However, the authors comment on the value of coaching, team



development and a more open atmosphere which should encourage ministers to learn.

The difficulties of adopting a developmental approach are demonstrated by Baroness Shephard, who told the PASC of her experience on becoming a junior minister in 1989:

*We had some training. It was 20 minutes with Sir Robin, now Lord, Butler, and it consisted of the three new ministers, John Redwood, David Maclean and me, going into a room with Lord Butler, who said, "I wonder if you've read Edwina Currie's memoirs. It is so impressive that she began her ministerial career by setting out a list of objectives." I thought, "What is this organisation that thinks it is curious to have objectives?" That was my training.*<sup>93</sup>

During the Blair government some, mainly women, ministers pressed for more professional development for ministers. Hilary Armstrong, at that time Chief Whip, argued that "it was increasingly anomalous that ministers had no access to a professional development programme". She worked with Baroness Amos, Des Browne and the National School for Government on expanding opportunities for induction seminars for new ministers. The latter involved a two day leadership event for parliamentary secretaries and whips, workshops and individual briefing sessions. But the take up was patchy, as such events were regarded as optional in ministers' diaries.

Nick Raynsford MP told the 2006-07 PASC inquiry that the problem was a lack of a learning culture being inculcated from the top, encouraging and indeed requiring ministers to take part in appropriate training events: "Encouraging a culture where people learn from each others' successes and failures would help to improve the quality of ministerial performance."<sup>94</sup> Raynsford linked the lack of development with the way ministers are appointed:

*I was very struck in international meetings about how many ministers from other countries are appointed on the basis of their technical expertise in the area in which they have responsibility rather than simply because of political background. We have a culture which rightly emphasises the importance of political accountability to Parliament, and that means that the overwhelming majority of ministers come into the job without any technical expertise in the area for which they are responsible. That emphasises the importance of making sure there is consideration for their managerial skill and that there is some support and training to help them fulfil those roles.*

However, as Lord Norton told the PASC inquiry of 2010-11, "senior ministers are not trained in managing a department and do not necessarily know how to get the best out of their junior ministers. They may well be able to do more with less." Back in 2006-07, the PASC concluded in its report that more "could be done to professionalize the ministerial side of the business for government".<sup>95</sup> Its successor committee has endorsed the earlier recommendation that "there should be more systematic training, mentoring, coaching, and assessment of ministers".<sup>96</sup>

While we agree with the scepticism that it is impossible for any training or induction to prepare ministers for all the challenges they will face during their time in office, this does not mean that such training is useless, merely that its limitations should be understood. The purpose should be to help them identify areas of their performance where they can improve. This should not be seen as criticism of current ministers' performance, merely an acknowledgement that everyone, including ministers, can always find ways to be better at their job. As one former Secretary of State said:

*The ideal way to become a secretary of state would be to be told about six months beforehand, without commitment, which would enable you to start to do the*

*thinking and get to know some key people. It would provide the space to think about key appointments and how to handle the media. I should have insisted on junior ministerial appointments but didn't.*

The basis for good ministerial performance starts before a minister is appointed. The selection of new ministers is from a small talent pool, so there is not an enormous choice when making ministerial appointments. Therefore issues concerning ministerial performance and development are apparent at an early stage. As one former minister told us:

*To be a good junior minister you need clarity of role, know what you're responsible for, have a degree of autonomy to get on with the job, not having the secretary of state breathing down your neck but knowing they will stand up for you.*

Two former ministers spoke of their secretary of state as being very good at engaging regularly with his ministers, making weekend phone calls and so on, but as a permanent under secretary of state you feel very low down the food chain; as a minister of state you feel more in charge and civil servants look to you for more guidance. A recently retired permanent secretary suggested, "It's not so much that you have to arrive with the knowledge and the expertise, but having some background in the subject is always helpful rather than unhelpful." He further suggested that there were a number of questions that should be asked when a minister is newly appointed:

- What does this job really require?
- What kind of a job is this?
- Is this fundamentally a relationship building job?
- Is this a job which is going to have a huge parliamentary load?
- Is this a job which is going to require a really deep understanding of technical issues, for example, pensions and tax?

Even established ministers need development. Jacqui Smith after leaving her role as Home Secretary admitted, "I think we should have been better trained. I think there should have been more induction." She also said, "When I became Home Secretary, I'd never run a major organisation. I hope I did a good job, but if I did it was more by luck than by any kind of development of those skills."<sup>97</sup> The claims that ministers are at their peak and can learn nothing seems naive. If this was the case then great sports stars such as Rafael Nadal would have no need for coaches. The fact that they do reflects a recognition that you can always get better, that games can be honed and performance improved. Coaching is not just about an athlete's physical condition but also about their mental attitude, which is a very important component of success. Surely it is better to have politicians who are as prepared as they can be for the challenges they face, than to have those who often have to muddle through because they have not addressed gaps in their skills sets?

Furthermore there is a difference between knowledge and skills in developing politicians' capabilities. Clearly, whether you are a minister or a professional in another sphere, a significant level of knowledge and understanding is essential if jobs are to be performed effectively. This can be particularly challenging for ministers who are often handed new and complex briefs in areas where they have had little or no previous experience: "Ministers are often catapulted into roles for which their previous lives have left them ill-prepared."<sup>98</sup> Alan Johnson reflected this with refreshing if unfortunate candour when he remarked that his first task on being appointed shadow chancellor was to read an economics primer; it did not do his reputation any good.

Some ministers have used academics from business schools to provide knowledge input and advice. The skills required of ministers range from leadership and management, for example to making an impact, handling the media, negotiating effectively with different stakeholders and lobby groups, and operating successfully in international fora. As one former SpAd emphasised, "It's a mixture of presence, impact, quality of presentation, ability to rise to the occasion and also to project in a range of forums to different audiences using a blend of styles." These skill requirements place enormous demands on ministers and it would be wise to take action to address them where necessary and improve levels of competence. The positioning and relevance of continuous professional development for ministers is crucial. One current permanent secretary mentioned that "trying to tell people how to be good ministers can be patronising. High level leadership team building would be valuable backed up by hearing directly of others' experiences."

## The way forward

In order to take development forward, we will have to overcome the sensitivities felt by ministers on this whole subject of performance appraisal and development. Building on the work we have described in this report, where we have sought to establish what ministerial effectiveness looks like, we should seek to engage ministers and other stakeholders in the debate about how performance management should be undertaken and what realistically can be done to develop ministers in the fast moving world of Westminster politics.

So the challenges are threefold – performance measurement, continuing appraisal and career development. It is not a question of 'one size fits all'. Different approaches and agendas will be needed depending on the target group: serving ministers from the cabinet downwards; the shadow cabinet and opposition spokespeople; and backbench MPs. No kind of appraisal or performance review system comparable to those for most other senior employees has ever existed for ministers, and the absence of such a process works to the detriment of ministers. Unless as junior ministers they worked with a secretary of state who takes seriously their role as manager of ministerial teams, they are unlikely to have the benefit of any structured feedback about their performance. If they have had high profile failures or successes they will, of course, know about it. But apart from the odd remark or whispering from the Whips Office, they will find it very difficult to assess how they are doing and where their reputation stands. There are plenty of examples of ministers who thought they were doing perfectly decent jobs only to find themselves unexpected casualties of reshuffles, for example, John Patten, Stephen Byers and Chris Smith. Many, consequently, felt surprised and in some cases bitter about the whole process.

So performance reviews very much benefit those being reviewed as many examples demonstrate across other sectors. Such reviews provide access to feedback from a range of sources and facilitate what should be a frank discussion about successes and areas for improvement. This applies as much to cabinet ministers as it does to junior ministers. It might be presumed that the former have regular access to the Prime Minister and No. 10 and therefore there is less need for a formalised system. The reality, however, is that unless the minister is involved in a high profile issue or crisis with which No. 10 is closely engaged, direct contact can be infrequent, this is also the case when the minister is perceived as doing a reasonable job in keeping things ticking over.

## Typical characteristics of a performance review system

Performance management systems are extensively used throughout public and private sector organisations across the globe. They were significantly improved for the Civil Service after the Fulton report (1968), when a job appraisal review system was introduced and extensive career management infrastructure was put in place.<sup>99</sup> Clearly we are dealing with a different group of people in the political arena in this chapter and we have outlined some of the sensitivities associated with any form of performance appraisal and development. Nevertheless, the principles of performance appraisal and development are necessary if we are to tackle the process of systematically reviewing and improving performance and developing ministers to a high level of effectiveness. The essential first step is for ministers to have clear objectives and for there to be agreed measures of effectiveness. Although the pace in politics is swift, issues arise quickly, and there is no control over external events, the same could be said of commercial organisations in the banking and commerce, communications, IT and FMCG (Fast Moving Consumable Goods) sectors. It is also apparent that public sector organisations, which also have to respond quickly, are able to set up performance management systems.

## How the system could be implemented within a ministerial context

Any performance review system would need to be light touch with as few as possible of the bureaucratic processes that can bedevil such systems. Also, anything complicated would not work and would soon be quietly dropped – the demands on ministers' time would see to that. The emphasis should be more on a constructive two way dialogue backed up by inputs from those who have regular contact with the person being reviewed. We therefore propose the approach described in Figure 5, which attempts to be both practical and pragmatic for individual ministers:

**Figure 5: Proposed appraisal system for individual ministers**

- **Cabinet ministers:** performance review conversation with the Prime Minister annually with inputs in advance from the Cabinet Secretary, taking advice from the departmental permanent secretary and others as appropriate. This would need to be collated by the Cabinet Secretary and a senior minister.
- **Junior ministers:** performance review conversations twice a year with the departmental secretary of state with inputs in advance from the departmental permanent secretary and others as appropriate. There should also be a short annual review conversation with the Prime Minister, given his responsibility for all ministerial appointments including junior ministers. Given the pressures on the Prime Minister's diary, this should be spread, on a rolling basis, throughout the year. In total this would amount to 40 to 50 hours annually. This would also enable the prime minister to look ahead, to plan for succession, and to understand the ambitions, strengths and weaknesses of the minister.

What sort of appraisal system might work given the natural aversion to appraisals of many of the participants and the demands on their time? It would have to be firmly focused on the needs of the individual, concentrating on performance and potential. It should aim to identify opportunities for improvement and any areas for future development:

- identify strengths and weaknesses in performance (one current permanent secretary pointed out that "knowing what your weaknesses are is a very useful quality of an effective minister; not many ministers perceive of themselves as leaders or have a sense of the kinds of leaders they are")
- identify where development activity could enhance future performance
- help to develop the person's capacity for self-assessment and awareness, identifying ways to achieve self improvement.

360 degree feedback should be an essential component of any appraisal system. Managed properly it can be a very useful device, providing a temperature check and helping to change behaviour and improve performance by:

- building confidence
- reinforcing desired behaviours that are important for role and context
- clarifying problems
- improving self-awareness of behaviours, attitudes, values and feelings from a combination of feedback from others and self reflection
- increasing the accountability for the effect and impact of behaviours; recognising that there are choices and that decisions are involved in how one appears to others and influences them. Being prepared to face up to the consequences of the choices one is consciously or unconsciously making
- taking action based on awareness and accountability in order to be more purposeful and deliberate which lead to the objectives you wish to achieve.

## Ministerial teams

As in the case of individual performance and development, when describing the establishment of ministerial teams we must acknowledge the political dimension. Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister with the involvement of the Chief Whip and, in the current administration, the Deputy Prime Minister. Although there are exceptions where powerful ministers have selected their own teams (such as Michael Heseltine), it is rare that ministers are consulted on the appointment of the junior ministers in the department. This is potentially divisive: first, any selection means that others will be left out; and second, in appointing individuals there will be competitive tensions between those persons and perceived threats to the careers of others through this identification of potential. For example, in the current administration a cabinet minister has selected the parliamentary private secretary for one of his junior ministers without giving that minister any choice in the matter. This suggests that personal patronage in this area is not yet dead.

Therefore there is an argument for ensuring that the development that does take place has a team dimension to it. This should cover issues such as team building, team relationships and how the lead minister can make the team collectively effective. After selecting his or her cabinet colleagues, the Prime Minister should discuss and agree with each secretary of state who should be part of the ministerial teams. If the prime minister set objectives for each department for the next couple of years it would provide a basis for development; the secretaries of state would need to consider whether she/he and the team had the necessary skills, experience and capabilities to achieve them. The core group to tackle this would need to be the ministers, SpAds, permanent secretary, directors general and some directors and his or her immediate management team. Ministerial development does not stand alone and is part of a bigger set of issues including delivering core agendas.

To ensure effectiveness, and within the constraints of reshuffles and promotions, ministerial teams should stay as a team. As one recently retired permanent secretary of a large delivery department argued, things generally work best when secretaries of state regards themselves as having a team not merely a set of other ministers. One former secretary of state had so many ministers reporting to him that he lost count of how many he had and questioned their value, apart from a few whose effectiveness he rated highly. There was a contrary view from one of his cabinet colleagues, who stressed the need to have transparent and trusting relationships with junior ministers while being clear about the areas they and you, as the boss, should focus on. He admitted with hindsight that he should have spent more time developing a relationship with his ministerial team. "With junior ministers a secretary of state needs to understand about building a team and effective delegation," one permanent secretary emphasised.

As mentioned earlier, David Blunkett was particularly good at getting the best from his ministers as he would consistently hold ministerial meetings as well as the Sunday evening telephone catch up. One former SpAd highlighted:

*You need people who can work effectively in a team within their department, across other departments and work effectively with the officials and SpAds [special advisers]... Politics is a solitary sport, so you know, the team building bit is important, and David used to put a lot of emphasis on that: away days, dinners, and a team meeting with no officials there other than his private secretary. So the secretary of state has the responsibility to make the team feel like a team, and you want them to talk to each other and to talk across their own sort of boundaries within the department – but you really want them to feel part of the broader governmental team, because none of these departments operates in isolation.*



## Conclusion and recommendations

In this chapter we have examined the difficulties involved in introducing development activities for ministers. However, we have also indicated the real contribution that development can make to performance if it is systematically applied. We set out below a number of practical recommendations, which we believe would have an impact on performance.

These recommendations draw on well-established and successful processes of leadership coaching including 360 degree feedback, self-development, mentoring, team building, and structured problem solving within ministerial teams, including working with the senior management team, interdepartmental reviews, expert briefings and seminars. For aspiring ministers, job shadowing is also useful. When there are cabinet reshuffles, the Prime Minister should look at future talent. Providing structured development over time is most likely to succeed and to improve ministerial effectiveness. These are our recommendations:

1. Political parties should take much more seriously the value of development for those holding office and those aspiring to it. There is a role for a formal non-bureaucratic appraisal system to be fully embedded.
2. Ministers should regularly review how they are managing their time to ensure they stay focused on their strategic agendas. The PM needs to encourage secretaries of state and ministers to undertake a diary analysis on a regular basis to assess the proportion of time spent on their overall agendas.
3. Politicians should learn from experience of development activities and appraisal systems across large private and public sector organisations, but any system adopted should be tailored to the specific needs of those ministers operating in a political environment.
4. Ministers should seek to enhance the collective capabilities of the department by encouraging collaborative working and problem solving.
5. Ministers from across departments should meet regularly to reflect on current performance issues affecting themselves and their colleagues.
6. When there is a vacancy or reshuffle, or at the start of an administration, permanent secretaries should provide a short profile of the ministerial role. This should help to ensure that the selected candidate is likely to be appropriate for the post.



## 7. Summary of conclusions and recommendations

The quality and effectiveness of ministers matters for the quality of government, but it varies considerably. The previous chapters highlight the attributes that ministers and civil servants regard as important. We can all assemble our list of what makes an effective minister. But that, in practice, does not get us very far, since so much is individual and related to the personalities of the ministers involved. You cannot easily cure personal insecurity, a lack of confidence and an inability to trust others. Our political system makes very high demands on ministers, and relatively few, whether career politicians or GOATs/outsideers, make the grade in being effective in office.

It is more useful to summarise some of the specific factors that help and hinder making ministers and governments more effective:

- a failure to understand how large organisations and, in particular, government departments work
- selection of ministers primarily from a small pool of members of the House of Commons, and a few from the House of Lords, with only very limited recruitment from outside the closed shop of Parliament
- inadequate preparation for the shift from backbench, and opposition, to ministerial life, underpinned by the widespread belief among MPs that political skills learnt in the legislature are sufficient for success in a ministerial post
- no sustained development or advice for ministers when in office, reinforced by the absence of any appraisal of their performance, unlike virtually any other public or private sector organisation
- often little sense of cohesion within departments as, unlike the heads of other public and private sector organisations, secretaries of state too often fail to see themselves as heads of ministerial teams and spend insufficient time and effort in building teams
- frequent reshuffles of ministers, on average after less than two years in post.

Together with the competitive nature of political life, these factors underline the isolation, even loneliness, of ministers. They are largely on their own, to sink or swim, with few sources of advice or help. You cannot mandate effective ministers, but it should be possible to change the norms to help them perform better. On their appointment, ministers are not instantly able to be on top of their jobs. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, for ministers to accept the need for formal advice, and to engage in development work before, and during, their periods in office. This should be accepted as a natural part of a minister's life, as it is for civil servants or anyone else at a senior level in a major organisation. Similarly, being subject to regular appraisal is not something to be embarrassed about but, again, to be treated as a normal part of a ministerial career. All this requires a change of ethos and attitude.

We believe there are a number of ways in which that ministerial performance can be improved and present our recommendations below.

### Recommendation 1

Opposition parties need to take more seriously the task of preparing their shadow teams for office by familiarising them with how government and departments work. This is quite separate from, and equally as important as, preparatory policy development and contacts with Whitehall departments. The ability to work as a shadow team in Opposition is necessary for operating in the same way in government. Such preparation is also needed for backbenchers who join governments in reshuffles in-between elections.

## Recommendation 2

The Civil Service could do more to support ministers in helping to make them more effective as outlined in the Institute's parallel report on policy making.<sup>100</sup> Civil servants should undertake more extensive development to understand how Parliament operates and the demands on ministers from being members of the Commons and the Lords. The lack of such knowledge was noted by a high proportion of our ministerial interviewees, and undermines their effectiveness since ministerial priorities are not always understood.

## Recommendation 3

When appointing secretaries of state, the Prime Minister should discuss and agree with them the composition of their ministerial team, taking account of relevant experience, expertise and compatibility, as well as political factors of internal party and regional balance. Secretaries of state should operate as teams with regular 'prayer' meetings of all ministers and advisers, to ensure clarity about roles and the clear cut delegation of responsibilities from senior to junior ministers.

## Recommendation 4

Prime ministers should aim to ensure that secretaries of state serve at least three years in one post, and junior ministers at least two years, to avoid the rapidity of changes that have undermined effectiveness in the past (in the view of ministerial and civil service interviewees). There will always be reshuffles because of scandals, personal problems and policy disagreements but, as David Cameron has argued, there is no point "in endlessly moving people between different jobs".<sup>101</sup>

## Recommendation 5

Political parties should take much more seriously the value of development for those holding office and those aspiring to it. An appraisal system, including 360 degree feedback, should be fully embedded as a regular part of the process.

## Recommendation 6

Ministers should regularly review how they are managing their time to ensure they stay focused on their strategic agendas. The PM needs to encourage secretaries of state and ministers to undertake an analysis of their diaries on a regular basis to assess the proportion of time spent on their main priorities and activities.

## Recommendation 7

Politicians should learn from the experience of development activities and appraisal systems across large private and public sector organisations, but any system adopted should be tailored to the specific needs of those ministers operating in a political environment, for instance, taking into account the views of fellow ministers and civil servants. Ministers at all levels should have an individual conversation with the prime minister about their performance and prospects

## Recommendation 8

Ministers should seek to enhance the collective capabilities of the department by encouraging collaborative working.

### **Recommendation 9**

Ministers from across departments should meet on a regular basis to reflect on current performance issues affecting themselves and their colleagues.

### **Recommendation 10**

When there is a vacancy or reshuffle, or at the start of an administration, permanent secretaries should provide a short profile of the ministerial role. This should help to ensure that the selected candidate is likely to be appropriate for the post.

These recommendations apply to existing ministers, but, in addition, prime ministers should continue to bring in outsiders to broaden the talent pool available to serve in the executive, and we make the following recommendations relating to this.

### **Recommendation 11**

At least half a dozen outsiders should be appointed as ministers to broaden the range of expertise, experience and project management capacity of ministerial teams. The requirements will vary but such outsiders are particularly suited to education, health, welfare reform, defence and promoting investment and trade. These are likely to be a combination of non-MPs with a previous political commitment and involvement, though generally with considerable outside experience, and those with no political background, the GOATs. However, in the case of some time-limited projects or reviews, it may be better to appoint them as advisers rather than ministers.

### **Recommendation 12**

Such appointments should maintain the present relative balance of ministers between the Lords and Commons, in order to ensure the primacy of the elected chamber. The exact numbers should depend in part on whether the overall number of ministers is cut in line with the reduction in the size of the Commons at the next general election.

### **Recommendation 13**

Outsiders should be made aware before their appointment of their ministerial responsibilities in the Lords, as well as in their departments. They should be given specific, planned assistance to make the adjustment from their previous non-political lives. This development work should not just involve a brief initial induction but, as with other ministers, should continue during their time in office.

### **Recommendation 14**

Senior Lords ministers, either secretaries of state or those responsible for major programmes, should be permitted to answer questions in the Commons, whether in the full chamber or Westminster Hall, as well as, as happens now, in front of select committees.

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