15 MINUTES OF POWER

THE UNCERTAIN LIFE OF BRITISH MINISTERS

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD

www.profilebooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Fournier by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 218 0
eISBN 978 1 78283 533 2

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Foreword

This book is about power and those who seek to exercise power as ministers – and the flaws in the political system which encourage the appointment of too many ministers serving for too brief a time, creating an excessively short-term outlook. The following chapters reflect a professional lifetime of conversations with politicians, civil servants and advisers – more than forty years that I have been observing British politics and government as a journalist, author of half a dozen books, commentator and, particularly, as chief executive/director of a think tank, the Institute for Government, which has interviewed a large number of former ministers. I start from a position of sympathy with the position of ministers: their powers and influence are balanced by the uncertainties of their existence. In every role I have occupied my longevity has, for better or worse, exceeded that of ministers with whom I have worked.

Much has been written about ministerial life in a multitude of memoirs and diaries. Many perceptions have been, and are still being, shaped by two products of the early 1980s: the late Gerald Kaufman's entertaining and astute *How to be a Minister* of 1980; and, even more, the thirty-eight episodes of the

television series *Yes Minister* (shown from 1980 to 1984) and its sequel *Yes, Prime Minister* (1986–8) with the memorable exchanges between Jim Hacker (played by the late Paul Eddington) and Sir Humphrey Appleby (played by the late Nigel Hawthorne). Both, though appearing during the Thatcher years, were inspired by the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the late 1970s and, indeed, Bernard Donoughue, head of the Policy Unit in this period, was one of the advisers to the late Sir Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, the writers of the series. The overlapping, and popular, *Spitting Image* satirical puppet series from 1984 to 1996 portrayed Cabinet ministers as weak and argumentative school children with Margaret Thatcher as a dominant teacher.

More recently, Armando Iannucci's *The Thick of It*, appearing intermittently between 2005 and 2012, portrayed the Blairite and Brownite world in which politically appointed special advisers cowed and bullied ineffective ministers struggling for a role and influence, before finally depicting the manoeuvrings of the coalition. The diaries of Chris Mullin, who was twice a minister in the Blair years, though much longer a Labour backbencher, portrayed a junior minister often vainly seeking to be more than a dogsbody of the Whitehall machine and of more senior ministers in making unreported speeches, signing letters and meeting obscure delegations, while achieving little, and attracting little notice compared with when he chaired a Select Committee.

These accounts all contain insights into how ministers operate, and about their relationships with civil servants and, more recently, with special advisers. This is why they are still widely cited and have influence, even though both Kaufman's book and the *Yes Minister* series can now appear dated in the

era of twenty-four-hour news, social media and constant tweeting. Moreover, the truths can easily be turned into caricatures which present a misleading overall impression of ministers and their lives. *Yes Minister* depicts ministers as being manipulated by wily civil servants who have their own agendas and policy preferences. In the case of *The Thick of It*, the running is made by special advisers supplying policies and soundbites to hapless ministers with few ideas of their own. Of course, there are examples of both. There is no single accurate version. The picture I have observed is different. Only relatively few ministers may be strong, dominant figures successfully driving forward their plans, but most have views and policy priorities which they seek to advance in the face of constraints of time and a short-termist political and media outlook. Few are the passive ciphers satirised on television in recent decades.

I am also indebted to the work of my friend of fifty years, Professor Peter Hennessy, now ennobled, who has caught the essence of the attitudes of the post-war Permanent Secretary cadre in many books and lectures. No writer on Whitehall can neglect the pathbreaking work on the world and influence of the Treasury by Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky in their 1974 work *The Private Government of Public Money* – combined with the largely neglected *Ministers and Mandarins*, produced in 1986 by Jock Bruce-Gardyne, a Conservative politician, briefly a minister, and perceptive observer of power. A nuanced historical analysis of the role of ministers has come in the wide-ranging work of Professor Kevin Theakston of Leeds University. Former Cabinet minister John (now Lord) Hutton and former Permanent Secretary Sir Leigh Lewis have offered discreet insights in their *How To*

be a Minister (over thirty years after Gerald Kaufman wrote his book with the same title). I would also highlight a series of reports over the past two decades by various House of Commons Select Committees on public administration and the constitution chaired by Tony Wright, Graham Allen and Sir Bernard Jenkin. All three have a commitment to good government and it is a pity that many of their recommendations were not accepted, and implemented, by the governments of the day.

There is a tendency to focus largely, if not exclusively, on those at the top – the Secretaries of State and heads of department, and, of course, Prime Ministers – and, with the exception of Chris Mullin and a few like him, largely to ignore the much more numerous ranks of Ministers of State and under-secretaries. But they also matter and feature in the following chapters.

The general portrayal of ministers on television is of the fully formed man or woman (as Rebecca Front showed in *The Thick of It*) with little discussion of how they arrived there, what preparation or training they had (usually very little in the formal sense), or what they were trying to achieve. It is the world of spin and crises, not the undramatic world of Commons adjournment debates, ministerial visits and meeting interest groups.

The direct inspiration for this book is a programme in which I was involved as, first, Senior Fellow, and then, for nearly five years as Director of the Institute for Government. The Institute was founded in 2008 by David Sainsbury, Lord Sainsbury of Turville, because, from his own experience as a long-serving minister for science and research, he did not think that government worked well. He believed that the way

that government operated could be improved. One important strand of that work was preparing politicians for serving as ministers and then assisting them while in office.

This programme had a number of different innovative features, but the linking theme was that it is possible to make ministers more effective. The precise definition of 'effective' is a question that runs through this book. The Institute has not just been an observer but has actively sought to help potential and actual ministers, through working with the Conservative shadow implementation team in 2009–10 in arranging sessions about how Whitehall worked, and then in intensive sessions with a number of Labour shadow teams ahead of the 2015 general election, as discussed in a report by Nehal Davison. A number of induction sessions were developed with new ministers after the 2010, 2015 and 2017 general elections, and following numerous mid-term reshuffles. Zoe Gruhn pioneered private appraisals to help develop ministers, which were innovative for them, though common in many other large organisations. She organised revealing 360-degree assessments of some Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers, which to the credit of her and those directly involved never leaked, to the surprise and scepticism of many in the gossipy political world.

A linked and longer-lasting initiative, the core of this book, was a series of exit interviews with former ministers which I launched as Director in the aftermath of the 2015 general election. This built up on an earlier report, *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, which I jointly wrote with Zoe Gruhn and Liz Carolan, and which was published in 2011. The roughly hour-long interviews are entitled Ministers Reflect, and concentrate on what it is like to work as a

minister, more than on particular policies. The transcripts of all the interviews have been put on the Institute's website, along with commentary and some audio interviews. Ministers Reflect was run in its formative years with good humour, patience and persistence by Nicola Hughes, with the support of Jen Gold and myself. Two of the three of us did most of the early interviews: Nicola and Jen putting up with my tendency to reminisce with interviewees, most of whom I had known for several years, if not decades. The programme was then developed by Daniel Thornton and Catherine Haddon, with the help of other members of the Institute staff. I also worked closely with Catherine on the two reports on Transitions in 2009 and 2011, to which I refer in Chapter Three. The use of the title's 'Reflect' by chance and coincidence overlaps with the *Reflections* series of radio interviews which Peter Hennessy and Rob Shepherd have conducted with household name figures about their lives in politics. But there is very little overlap of substance, since the aim of the Institute series has been to look at how ministers of all kinds, not just the big names, have developed their careers, have worked with the Civil Service, and their achievements and frustrations.

The initial intention of Ministers Reflect was to collect the views of Conservative and Liberal Democrat former members of the 2010–15 coalition – and the interviews are an invaluable source about how that fascinating experiment in government operated in practice. Seen by some of my colleagues as a one-off initiative, I am glad to say the programme expanded both backwards to include several Labour ministers from before 2010, and then forwards, during the hectic politics from 2015 onwards, to include a succession of former Conservative

ministers as they lost office. Several of the interviewees have returned to ministerial office again after being interviewed, in some cases twice; such has been the churn in appointments and resignations since 2015. There is so far only one case of someone being interviewed for a second time: David Jones, the former Secretary of State for Wales and then Brexit minister, after his second departure from office. The increased pace of ministerial changes and mainly Brexit-related resignations since the June 2017 general election is hard to keep up with, but is broadly accurate as of completion of the manuscript in January 2019, since when several more ministers have resigned. This hectic activity does not, however, affect the thrust of the conclusions about the uncertain life of ministers and their struggle to make an impact.

A key feature of the interviews is that they have not just been with well-known former Cabinet ministers (though most of the leading figures of recent governments feature); rather they include junior ministers, 'Goats' (ministers appointed to the Lords from outside politics) and law officers. That provides a depth of understanding about how ministers operate not found elsewhere, as well as a richness, and generally candour, of reflection. We found it best to leave it a few weeks, if not months, after someone had been sacked, resigned or been defeated at a general election before interviewing them.

At the time of writing, the eighty-six interviewees consist of fifty-one former Conservative ministers, twenty-one former Labour ones and fourteen Liberal Democrats – of whom thirty-eight served as full Cabinet members at one stage, sixteen are female, who are more open about the personal and the time pressures they faced. Seventeen served in

the Lords for most of their ministerial careers. Their experiences and views have little to do with their party affiliation, and the differences have much more to do with their positions, as a junior or senior minister, or being in the Commons or Lords. The transcripts of the interviews can be directly called up on the Institute website, but the following chapters draw on them along with many other sources, both from my personal experience and written to fulfill my aim to illuminate the work of ministers, the constraints they face and the ways they can have influence. The main focus is on the last twenty years, but where ministers, such as Kenneth Clarke, Sir George Young, Francis Maude, Andrew Mitchell, Alistair Burt and others, served in the Thatcher and Major administrations, that earlier experience has been drawn upon, and I have also provided some historical background in the first two chapters.

Whenever a Ministers Reflect interview is mentioned, it appears as (MR, with dates of ministerial office). A full list is provided after the bibliography. Another stylistic point: I have identified people as they were known at the time they were in office, except at times to clarify any confusion about identity. So I hope currently retired distinguished knights, dames and peers will forgive the use of the names they were known by during their ministerial careers. The main exceptions are politicians who have taken on a title different from their previous name.

I must emphasise one important disclaimer. I am currently Commissioner for Public Appointments, the regulator of appointments made to public bodies by ministers. I am a public office holder independent of government, but I work closely with ministers and civil servants. Nothing in this book

reflects my experience as Commissioner since April 2016. There is nothing in the following chapters about the public appointments process or ministers and civil servants with whom I have worked.

This book represents a welcome reunion with Andrew Franklin, twenty-six years after he published *Honest Opportunism*, an account of the rise of the career politician, which was intended as a warning but was seen by some subsequent MPs as a training manual. There is a clear link between the two books in their accounts of political life, though with the focus here much more on what politicians as ministers can, and cannot, achieve in office.

It has been a pleasure working with Andrew again after so long, though our conversations have been as much about the tumultuous political scene as the book itself. I am grateful to him and his team at Profile Books for their support. I would also like to thank David Sainsbury for suggesting that I should write this book back when I was still running the Institute, and to Bronwen Maddox, my successor as Director, for her strong support in ensuring that the book has materialised. We always agreed that it would be my book, and not an Institute report, but, of course, it would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and commitment of Institute staff, past and present, several of whom I have consulted during the course of writing, notably Catherine Haddon and Gavin Freeguard, while Jill Rutter's work on policymaking and policy successes has been influential on my thinking. My thanks to the IfG is reflected in the dedication.

I am, as ever, grateful for the love and encouragement of Avril, who was not yet my wife when the first edition of *Honest Opportunism* appeared, and our now adult daughter Emily.

Over the decades, they have supported and encouraged my fascination with government and politics, and Avril has revived her proofreading skills from long ago at *The Economist* in spotting, and preventing, misspellings and misuse of words, for which I am very grateful.

Finally, a word on the title. I wanted to indicate the temporary, always uncertain and provisional, nature of ministerial office. John Nott has already taken *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* as the title of his memoirs, derived from his famous vituperative interview with Robin Day in October 1982, from which he memorably walked out – before he left the government barely three months later. I quite liked 'Temporary Kings', one of the titles in Anthony Powell's great *Dance to the Music of Time* series. But this book is not about Prime Ministers or party leaders as such, and is primarily about other ministers who form 99 per cent of governments. So after considerable debate over wording, and rejecting 'Temporary Princes' as too narrow, not least on gender, we settled on *Fifteen Minutes of Power: The Uncertain Life of British Ministers*, which captures the central contradiction of ministerial life, its provisional nature, unpredictable term, yet the exalted status temporarily given to ministers.

Peter Riddell
April 2019

Preface

'When you first arrive, you are overwhelmed. All this stuff, people talk to you about all kinds of things – and if you are not careful, you will get a moment of panic. The next stage, after six months is you have got an agenda. You know exactly what you are going to do. The next stage, after two years, you are really on top of it – you are really comfortable, you are doing things. And then the phone rings and the Prime Minister is having a reshuffle and you move on to the next department and you are back at the beginning; there you are, panicking again.'

– Kenneth Clarke, holder of eight Cabinet posts between 1985 and 2014, Ministers Reflect interview, 2016

'If Prime Ministers had their way, they would appoint all the MPs on their benches to ministerial office. The payroll vote is an essential parliamentary tool, and the bigger it is the better.'

– Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli*, 2011, p142

The British breed ministers more than any other country, but they tend to have a much shorter active life in office than our favourite pets. Most ministers survive longer than the twelve months of a chameleon but few make it past the four years of the golden hamster and only the most successful remain in the

same position as long as the five years of a queen bee. So the life of a minister is generally precarious, and many politicians are unsure whether they will last beyond the annual cull, or 'reshuffle', as it is known in the political world. The only consolation is that most last longer than UK football managers, whose average tenure is around fifteen months.

This book is about uncertainty and achievement – the uncertain life of ministers and their attempt to make an impact. One of the conclusions is that, despite all the frustrations, some ministers can make a difference and can point to policy changes of greater or lesser scale.

There are eight main themes affecting the life of ministers.

First, there are a lot of ministers, and Prime Ministers are always trying to increase the number of MPs receiving jobs from them (the 'payroll vote', as it is known), even if quite a few do not receive additional pay for their work. Unusually in Western democracies, most ministers are drawn from the limited talent pool of the House of Commons and, to a much less significant extent nowadays, from the House of Lords.

Second, the length of ministers' time in office is not only uncertain and unpredictable but is shorter than in virtually any other leadership position in Britain. This situation has got worse in recent years, with an accelerating rate of change thanks to mainly Brexit-related resignations and replacements. By the beginning of 2019, barely a quarter of ministers in the House of Commons had been in the same posts only eighteen months earlier after Theresa May reshuffled her administration following the 2017 general election. Only half as many MPs, fourteen, had been in the same ministerial post since before the general election campaign. (There has been

much greater continuity amongst Lords ministers.) Two ministers, Amber Rudd and Chris Skidmore, had left the government and rejoined within the same calendar year of 2018, as did James Brokenshire after major surgery.

The result of these two long-standing trends, a rising number of ministers and their short tenures, is to create, what John (Lord) Birt, the former head of the BBC and adviser to Number 10 in the Labour years, has called 'the something must be done' approach. 'I need to attract attention because I am keen to have promotion.' So, as he told the Commons Public Administration Committee (2009, p9), 'a lot of junior ministers are extremely keen when they get into office to find the six sound bites that can get them noticed by the higher ups in their party over the twelve months that they are likely to be in position'. From the Civil Service perspective, Jonathan Baume, former General Secretary of the senior officials' union, the First Division Association, argued (2009, p10):

> The more junior ministers you have – and we have more than ever – the more work you have to find for them. One of the biggest single frustrations about the political process within the Civil Service is just the number of junior ministers you have and the work projects that then have to be designed and engineered to satisfy their particular interests.

Third, few new ministers have much idea of what doing the job involves – or have received sufficient, if any, preparation – apart from the still small, though prominent and influential, group of former special/political advisers. Future

Labour Cabinet minister Patricia Hewitt, who helped organise briefing sessions at Templeton College, Oxford, before the 1997 election, remembers (MR, in office 1998–2007) 'what was really depressing was that the Shadow Cabinet really didn't feel they needed any training or development'. They thought that as ministers they would be making decisions and implementation would be somebody else's problem. Parliamentary, and political, skills are important but are not sufficient to make for an effective minister.

Fourth, the initial experience of office has often been a shock for new ministers: from the circumstances of appointment by the Prime Minister by phone at Kempton racecourse or in the loo of a First Great Western train, to trying to work out what they can, and want to, do. Few ministers, at any rate junior ones, are given specific objectives, and many end up doing something in which they have no interest. Conservative Patrick McLoughlin was made responsible for shipping and aviation in 1989. When he said he had the most landlocked constituency in the UK and hated flying, his Secretary of State, the late Cecil Parkinson, said, 'Excellent, you'll bring an open mind to the subject'. What junior ministers do is heavily influenced by their relations with their Secretary of State. New ministers frequently complain of the stresses and strains of office, of how tired they are when faced with red boxes, decisions, constant meetings and travel, particularly when taking account of constituency and family commitments. At least now maternity leave for ministers who become mothers is established practice.

Fifth, how long will they serve in a post? Even if ministers master the intricate relationship with the Civil Service – 'we're the roadies, you're the talent', as Liberal Democrat

Steve Webb was told – they still have the problem of working out what they can do over the relatively short period they are likely to be in office. Damian Green, who served under Theresa May in the Home Office from 2010 until 2014, and then in two Cabinet posts after she became Prime Minister, notes (MR, in office, 2010–14 and 2016–17) that 'the amount of time it took from even everyone agreeing with a decision to actually seeing anything change on the ground is a number of years. And inherent in the way of politics is that you're very unlikely to see your successes through'. Many ministers therefore pick small-scale objectives which they may hope to achieve, or influence, in their couple of years in post.

Sixth, attempts to pull in talent from outside Parliament to become ministers via, for example, Gordon Brown's over-hyped experiment of the Government of All the Talents (Goats) had a mixed, and generally limited, impact. Former businessman Paul (Lord) Myners recalls (MR, in office 2008–10) how he and former banker Mervyn (Lord) Davies used to meet occasionally for coffee to reflect, and laugh, at how government makes decisions – and their rather naive belief that all ministers work to the same agenda with a common purpose instead of, in fact, being rivals and competitors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, few outsiders last more than a year or two in office, unless they have a clearly defined specialist role.

Seventh, in many ways it is surprising how much ministers can, and do, achieve. They are seldom pawns in the hands of the Civil Service or of special advisers, as *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It* suggest. Ministers can, and do, alter policy. Nor is the story all one of failure, as in *The Blunders of our Governments*, the 2013 book by the late Anthony King and Ivor Crewe. The reasons for the disasters they describe

– from the poll tax to all too many wasteful IT projects – are complicated, and can only partly be attributed to the excessive turnover and short life of ministers. There have been plenty of successes too, from the Olympics to the introduction of the national minimum wage, via behavioural changes such as the reduction in drink driving and the banning of smoking in public places, to improvements in school performance and the NHS. The Chris Mullin version of the junior minister largely wasting their time is contradicted by many more stories of junior ministers playing a key role in implementing changes in policy.

Eighth, the key to success is longevity in office – giving a minister time to prepare, discuss and take through new policies and to implement them. Time is not always the answer to policy innovation, as Andrew Lansley's six years shadowing Health in opposition, and twenty-eight months in office, and Iain Duncan Smith's near six-year tenure bringing in Universal Credit showed. But in other cases a long spell in one post can help a minister make an impact – reinforced by a clear focus on a limited number of priorities and an outward-looking collaborative attitude towards working with civil servants and key outside groups. Alistair Darling, who served at Cabinet level in a variety of posts in the Blair and Brown governments (MR, in office 1997–2010), does not think that a minister can make much of an impact inside three years. 'I think six years is probably too long. I thought four years was as long as you need to stay because you need fresh impetus. You're not a career specialist – it's not like being managing director of a company or something – so you can become departmentalised. But in a year you can do very, very little more than hold the fort frankly.' If you are involved in a

major infrastructure project, you are highly unlikely to be involved from beginning to end.

We have too many ministers and they are moved around too often. That produces a bias in favour of activity rather than reflection and preparation. Most of what ministers decide is what any minister, of whatever party, would probably do, so there is a narrow margin for any minister, however senior, to make a personal difference. George Osborne reckoned that just 10 per cent of decisions were his own, in which he could hope to leave his mark. Many ministers do leave office with positive achievements. There have been a number of clear policy successes as well as failures reflecting the positive impact of ministers. But in order to make an impact, ministers have to master uncertain, and often unfavourable, circumstances, as well as being lucky.