

# THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A MINISTER

*Summary and recommendations paper*

# About this summary

This short report summarises the results, analysis and recommendations of the Institute for Government's report *The Challenge of being a minister*. The longer report, available at [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk), discusses the findings of our research in greater detail, developing further the ideas briefly presented here. In particular, the role of outsiders as ministers, and induction and development work with ministers, are each explored in their own chapters. The full report also contains a profile of identified effective ministers, an examination of international case studies, and a foreword by the Institute's Director, Andrew Adonis, in which he reflects briefly on his time in Cabinet.

The findings outlined below are based upon an analysis of in-depth interviews with 28 former and current ministers from across the political spectrum; 14 senior civil servants, half of whom were or are permanent secretaries; five special advisers and five other leaders from different sectors who regularly engage with government.

In this report we concentrate on outlining our set of 14 recommendations. The central premise behind this piece of work is that the effectiveness of our most senior political figures is important, and, most vitally, can be improved. We invite you to read our contribution to how this improvement can be put into effect.

*Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn and Liz Carolan.*

# 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. 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.

**The working definition of an effective minister 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.**

## Ministerial effectiveness is important

The quality of ministers is crucial. 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. 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; Gordon Brown for giving independence to the Bank of England; 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.

## Ministers are different

Comparisons, often erroneous, are made with the heads of private sector organisations. 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. The limited overlap

between a minister and a corporate leader is most notable 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.

## Ministerial effectiveness can be improved

Challenges to effectiveness are seen by many politicians and civil servants as endemic within the system. However, it is possible to identify factors that may help any minister become more effective. Many of those we interviewed recognised that, for example, better preparation could have made a big difference to their performance, while they stated that effectiveness is also hindered by the rapid turnover of ministers as a result of over frequent reshuffles.

This study addresses what can be done to improve preparation, and also how serving ministers could benefit from performance appraisal and continuing professional development. We also discuss how ministers are recruited. We look in particular at the pluses and minuses of the route from being a special advisor 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.

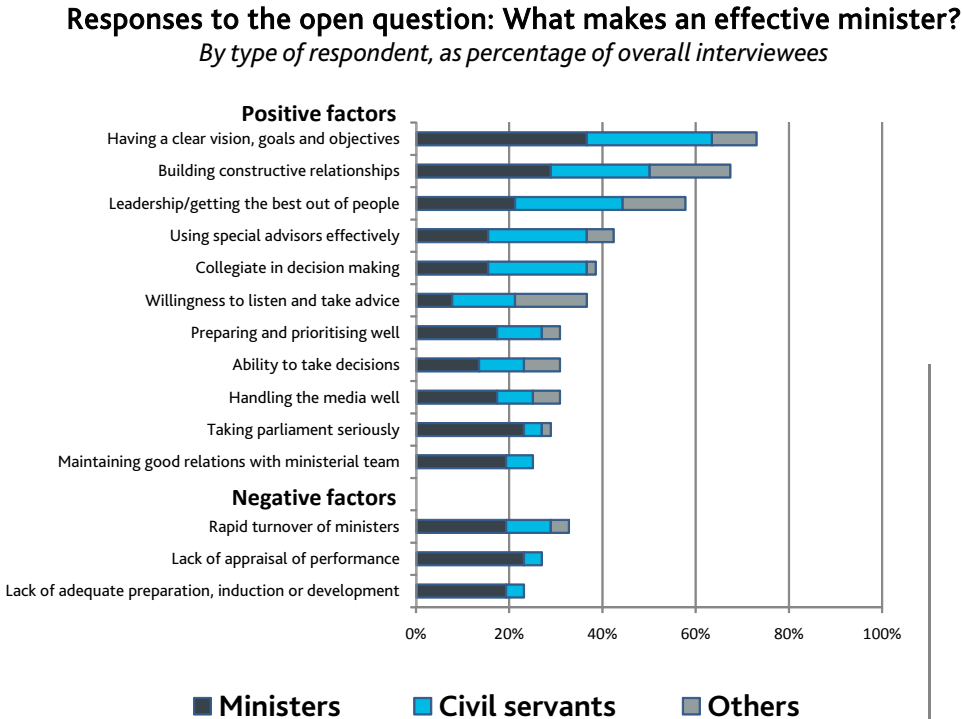
Our main aim is to look at the qualities determining effectiveness and, in particular, at why ministers are so often frustrated. It is too easy to shrug your shoulders, as many politicians and civil servants do, and say that is the way of the world, now and forever. You cannot transform the nature of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

# Summary of findings: 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.

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. An overview of their responses is given in figure 2, and explained in the full report.

**Figure 2: Most frequently mentioned factors determining ministerial effectiveness**



Taken together, we can present a summary of some of the specific factors that help and hinder ministers become more effective:

- 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 an absence of any appraisal of their performance, unlike virtually any other public or private sector organisation.
- Frequent reshuffles of ministers, on average after less than two years in post.
- 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.
- 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.
- A failure on the part of ministers to understand how large organisations and, in particular, government departments work.
- Effectiveness depends not only on ministers but also on 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.

## Performance Appraisal and Career Development

What this reflects is just how ill prepared so many secretaries of state are for the demands of office. Very few of them have any experience of holding senior or leadership roles within large organisations. They are therefore ill prepared to understand the complexities of how such organisations operate or to provide effective leadership, not least to their own ministerial teams. This is compounded by the absence of any formal performance appraisal mechanisms or access to career development programmes both of which would enable both cabinet and junior ministers to feel more confident and competent about what they do and how they do it.

<sup>1</sup> See Hallsworth, Michael and Rutter, Jill (2011) *Making Policy Better*, Institute for Government, available at [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/28/](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/28/).

## International perspective

In other jurisdictions where parliamentary outsiders are used e.g. France, the Netherlands, Germany and to some extent Sweden, there is still a near universal preference for the recruitment of political leaders from other tiers of government. A more open process of ministerial appointment widens the pool of potential ministers beyond parliament, although not necessarily beyond politics.

Political factors constrain the allocation of portfolios across states as they do in the UK - including satisfying coalition arrangements, intra-party politics and patronage, and the need to be seen to be representative. Where the UK differs significantly from other states is in the length of ministerial tenure and the frequency of reshuffles. There is, for example, a stark contrast with Germany which has had only 6 mid-term reshuffles since 1949.

## 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.



# Conclusions and recommendations

The effectiveness of ministers matters for the quality of government, but it varies considerably. Our research highlights the attributes that ministers and civil servants regard as important. We can all assemble our list of what makes an effective minister, but so much is individual and related to the personalities of the ministers involved.

Together with the competitive nature of political life, the factors we identify 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 that ministers be effective, but it is 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, should be treated as a normal part of a ministerial career. All this requires a change of ethos and attitude.

There are a number of ways in which that ministerial performance can be improved:

## 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>2</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.

<sup>2</sup> Hallsworth and Rutter *Policy making in the real world*.



### 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 rapid succession 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>3</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 should 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. However, any system adopted should be tailored to the specific needs of ministers and the political environment they operate in. For example, any process should take 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.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in an interview given to the *Sun* newspaper, 10 May 2011.

## Recommendation 9

Ministers from all 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, in addition to their current appearances in front of select committees.