

Leading a Government Department – the first 100 days

*The Rt Hon James Purnell
Sir Leigh Lewis*



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Foreword

When James Purnell and Leigh Lewis told me about their idea of jointly writing about their experience of running a major government department, I was intrigued. And after an hour's entertaining conversation, I was converted. Here, at last, would be a corrective to the much-loved but now rather dated beliefs about secretary of state/permanent secretary relations fostered by the 'Yes, Minister' and 'Yes, Prime Minister' comedy television series. Despite the latest, rather tired revival, the series was devised more than 30 years ago.

What better than to have an up-to-date view from two shrewd and successful practitioners at the top of government, starting with the first 100 days. This strikes a particular chord with the Institute for Government in view of the work that Catherine Haddon and I have done on transitions, in our initial report in November 2009, *Preparing for changes of government*, and our study in autumn 2011, *Transitions: lessons learned*. These both stressed the importance of getting initial relationships between a secretary of state and a permanent secretary on the right footing.

James Purnell and Leigh Lewis vividly illustrate both the opportunities and the pitfalls in the first few days and weeks. Their relationship worked very well, but all too many do not. Their advice, seen from the differing perspectives of a secretary of state and a permanent secretary, is witty as well as wise. They show how, if relations start off badly, they can often never be repaired and how many errors are easily avoidable.

As the Institute's work on ministerial effectiveness has shown, the arrival of a new secretary of state, frequently with little or no experience of big organisations or what a department does, is unlike what happens anywhere else.

The Institute for Government has been delighted to host two fascinating seminars with the authors and to collaborate with them, and with the Boston Consulting Group, on this must-read report.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PJR Riddell" with a flourish at the end.

The Rt Hon Peter Riddell
Director, Institute for Government

About the authors

The Rt Hon James Purnell is former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (2008-09) and Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (2007-08). After two decades in politics, James stood down from Parliament in 2010, and is now advising the Boston Consulting Group on public sector strategy. He is also chair of the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Sir Leigh Lewis retired from the Civil Service at the end of 2010 after a career spanning some 37 years, the last five as Permanent Secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions. Among his current roles he is the chair of the government-appointed Commission on a UK Bill of Rights, and Chair of the Board of Trustees of London-based homelessness charity, Broadway.

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Introduction

The Rt Hon James Purnell and Sir Leigh Lewis worked together for a year and a half from January 2008 to June 2009 as Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). They are collaborating on a forthcoming book on their experience of running a government department. In this extract they look at the importance of the first 100 days in the tenure of a secretary of state.

Leading a government department – the first 100 days

These were the famous ‘hundred days’, in the course of which Roosevelt saved American capitalism and – some would say – saved American democracy as well. The period set a standard by which the wisdom and effectiveness of future presidents was to be judged.

Godfrey Hodgson

Roosevelt set the standard. Prime ministers and presidents can't avoid being judged after a hundred days. In the private sector, planning for this period has become a staple business-school case.

However, the same question has barely been examined in respect of a new secretary of state. Yet, a new secretary of state faces leadership and policy challenges every bit as important as a newly installed company chief executive or even a prime minister.

As two people who recently worked together, we thought we would try to fill this gap. We wanted to look at both how a secretary of state new to a department might approach the challenge, and how a permanent secretary can get off on the right foot with a new minister. As part of our research we conducted interviews with both former ministers and former permanent secretaries, and held a private seminar at the Institute for Government.

Our aim has been to provide some practical guidelines and so we have combined our own experience with the advice of those who took part in our interviews. That experience and advice takes account of instances where the first 100 days were a clear success for the secretary of state concerned. But it takes account also of cases – by no means rarities – where the first 100 days went badly for the incoming secretary of state, the permanent secretary in situ, or both.

The first 100 days of a secretary of state

There can't be many more daunting challenges than becoming a secretary of state. You rarely get any notice and yet you immediately have to give interviews, make speeches and make decisions – quite possibly without any real idea at the outset of their consequences or importance, let alone knowing which ones could mean life or death to your career.

You may, of course, be in the slightly more fortunate position of at least knowing something about your department. You may have shadowed it in opposition or been a special adviser or junior minister in it. If so, depending on how recent that experience was, you may have a good idea about the issues you are going to face and what your priorities are going to be. However, even then there are dangers. Nothing stands still and the department you were in as a special adviser five years ago may now have changed out of all recognition. A far more difficult situation of course is when – until the prime minister told you that you were becoming its new secretary of state – you could have written all you know about your new department on the back of a postage stamp.

Of course, you can opt simply to buy time: say as little as possible; read all the briefings; meet your key staff and stakeholders; and put off any announcements until you are certain you understand all the complexities.

As a strategy buying time has some attractions. But it also has very real dangers – it allows the Opposition and the press to fill the vacuum and establish their version of what you are and what you want. It passes up the best opportunity you will ever have to set your own agenda. And worst of all, it leaves you shackled to someone else's caricature of you from which it can be almost impossible to escape.

In their first 100 days, new cabinet ministers need to strike a balance – making a good start without creating hostages to fortune. Their success at this stage often determines whether the rest of their tenure succeeds. Most new ministers get at least a 10-minute car journey to prepare – from Number 10 to their new department. We've therefore compressed our advice into the following 10 rules, which are designed to be read in those 10 minutes.

1. Decide whether to define yourself early

Most reshuffles happen on a Friday – often after less than encouraging mid-term elections. The weekend papers will normally devote their political pages to analysing what the reshuffle means, profiling the main winners and writing obituaries for the losers. This is the best opportunity a new cabinet minister has to explain who they are and what they want to do – not just to the public, but to their new civil servants and indeed new ministerial colleagues. If they take up one of these invitations, they will almost certainly get to do a major interview either on TV or in a newspaper. They can make a substantial policy speech. Or they can do both. But there's an obvious risk – telling everyone that your priority is public health, for example, before deciding two months later that reforming social care is your passion.

It's a calculated risk. Prime ministers who are adept at reshuffles (a rare breed) will identify early in the parliament the MPs who might make it into the Cabinet. They might work out which policy areas they've specialised in, and make them a junior minister in that department. If such an MP then ascends to secretary of state, they might know exactly what they want to say immediately. Or there may be a crisis in which case they may have very little choice but to say how they're going to resolve it. But even the best reshuffles will put some politicians in departments where they have no expertise – in that case, better to buy some time before doing that first big interview.

One other immediate issue, which arises if you have been brought in to sort out a mess, is the extent to which you want to talk publicly about what has gone wrong and what you're going to do about it. In these circumstances it's almost impossible to avoid passing some comment on what has happened. But remember that virtually everyone in the department, from the permanent secretary downwards, is going to listen to and remember what you say. If they feel unfairly maligned, or even worse humiliated, by your comments it may be a very long time before, deep down, they will give you the time of day.

2. Decide your priority

Ministers fail in many different ways. But a common one is to be a busy fool. Doing lots of things is very tempting – in theory, a secretary of state can decide everything their department does – but they should resist that temptation. Ministers have very little time, in the week and in the job. The current Coalition should be commended for trying to keep ministers in place longer than the 18 months that had become the standard under the last government.¹ Nevertheless, four Whitehall departments have already had a change of cabinet minister since May 2010.

The solution is to pick one or, at most, two really key priorities and focus on them relentlessly: welfare reform; school choice; prisoner rehabilitation. That will also lead the department to focus its resources – people, money, bills – on your priorities. Even if you can't get down to fewer than two or three priorities, that's better than a dozen.

3. Establish trust with your permanent secretary

Almost certainly (but see below) your permanent secretary is going to be waiting to greet you as your car pulls up outside the department. You may already have met, but just as likely not. In any case go out of your way to make clear how much you are looking forward to working together. Politicians can succeed without having a good relationship with the permanent secretary in their department – but it's rare and makes life much harder.

Your first few meetings together should be used – without others in the room – to have a really honest discussion about what you both want from the relationship. You need to communicate your priorities and how closely you want to be involved in the rest of the department's business. You also need to establish the rules of how you want to work together – with the expectation that your permanent secretary will let you know early when things are going wrong, and certainly before the press or Parliament find out. And

¹ http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Ministerial_Churn.pdf

you will almost certainly want to make a pact to agree publicly and disagree privately. Nothing runs round the department more quickly, or more destructively, than the two of you falling out in a room full of people.

4. Build a ministerial team – or at least establish authority

A further virtue of choosing just one or two really key priorities is that it leaves some room, and some meat, for the rest of your ministerial team. Few jobs are as frustrating as being a junior minister in a department run by a control freak. Junior ministers often watch in despair as their political superior has neither the time nor interest to take decisions properly, but won't trust them to do so either. The result is delay at best, permanent crisis management at worst.

Building a ministerial team isn't like building a management team. Unless you really do have the prime minister's ear the chances are that you will have had little or no say in who your junior ministers are. Indeed some may have been appointed as a deliberate counterweight to you. Unlike a chief executive you can't fire them either. That's up to the prime minister too. And those who are fired don't go to another company. They just reappear in the voting lobby, often bearing a grudge, or at least a new-found interest in finding fault with almost everything about the department from which they have been evicted.

But that doesn't mean that there's nothing you can or should do. On the contrary, there have been highly effective secretaries of state who have managed to create genuine ministerial teams. On the other hand, there have also been secretaries of state so totally dismissive of their junior ministers that the latter's sense of grievance is known even to the tea lady. In the end, unless you really do want to rule as a latter-day Napoleon, you are almost certainly going to be better off spending some serious time and effort trying to build a genuine team.

As part of that, the most effective secretaries of state make clear the policies on which they will take the decisions – sparing the junior minister the embarrassment of taking decisions only to see them overturned. The converse is that they are clear on what they are going to genuinely leave to their ministerial team. They also judge which ministers can lead on which policy areas, and make clear how often they should come back to check on progress and key decisions. They adapt their approach to the strengths and weaknesses of each minister: leaving a more experienced minister of state whom they trust with a wide berth of decision but finding time to coach a more timorous parliamentary under secretary.

They also set out the behaviours they expect from their ministers. If you really do want a department in which ministers routinely administer kickings to their civil servants, fine. But if you don't – and all our experience is that nothing makes your and the department's failure more likely – then make that very clear from the outset, particularly if you think that one or more of your team is inclined in that direction.

And remember that routine helps. A regular 'ministers' meeting' should be held every week and cancelled rarely. An away-day in the first 100 days is a must.

5. Communicate your direction to the department

Some departments have a few hundred staff – some have a hundred thousand or more. But whatever their size most of those staff will want to feel that you do at least have some interest in them and what they do. Of course, political leaders will always worry about the cynicism of some of their civil servants. But one sure way of earning that cynicism is to ignore your staff for your first 100 days.

A new minister might well hold sessions with frontline workers or spend a couple of days going 'back to the floor'. They could pick a bit of their department that feels ignored or one that reveals its pinch points. At DWP, any politician spending a day listening to calls coming in to one of its call centres, or sitting in on interviews in a jobcentre, will get a far better idea of the problems the department and its staff face than they will through any number of briefings from the human resources director, however good he or she may be. And if you are seen to be making a serious and sustained attempt to get to know your department, rather than simply paying the statutory one-off 'royal visit', you may be amazed at how much good will you generate. You will also be amazed at how much you learn.

6. Meet with 10 major stakeholders for an outside-in view of the department

In the first few weeks, go out of your way to reach out to key stakeholders. Ring them over your first weekend; they will never forget that you did. Arrange to meet the most senior and interesting people in the department's field in the first few weeks. This is when you most need their view from outside the department and when you are not yet so committed to your policies that you can't act on what they say. Listen carefully, receive feedback gracefully and make sure to respond, preferably by doing what those experts say (when they're right).

One key group in this respect is your department's non-executive directors. Arrange to meet your lead non-executive within your first week and all of the non-executives not long afterwards. Ask them for their honest assessment of the department's strengths and weaknesses and listen carefully to what they say. Ask them in particular about key risks to the department and how well they think they are being managed.

After the first few weeks, you should become more strategic about stakeholder meetings. Frankly, they could fill your whole diary. But then you won't have any time to act on what you find out. Meet the people who will make or break your key priorities. You've got a ministerial team and dozens of senior officials to meet everyone else.

7. Decide how you are going to behave

For the first few weeks, your every move, untouched red box, and barked coffee order will be scrutinised. Imagine that you're being projected on to a 50-foot screen – and then ask yourself whether turning up for a meeting with 10 officials without knowing what the agenda is will reflect well. On the other hand, you need to win your first battle – whether it's with the Treasury, or with an official who refuses to listen to the new priority you've set. Just do so courteously.

This is also the time to be clear about your management style: how you will treat others and how they should treat you. Doing so will save everyone from wasting valuable energy trying to figure out how to please you.

Don't be afraid to set some rules – it's helpful, rather than prissy. After JFK's assassination, Lyndon Johnson kept on many of the Kennedy staff. But they never paid enough attention to LBJ's style, and in particular that he learnt by talking rather than reading. A set of personal do's and don'ts would have helped. It's fine to say you want your red box at 7.00 pm, not 11.00 pm. It's fine to say you don't work on Sundays. It's fine to say you'd like someone to fetch a sandwich at lunchtime – as we say, how you use your time is your most important decision.

Get control of your diary. The senior civil servants in your department will have been badgering your diary secretary to get in to see you as soon as possible, and certainly before their colleagues. You need to make sure that your diary is organised around your priorities, not the department's. You may need to clear the diary and start again. And then do that again two weeks later, once the meetings you refused have all mysteriously reappeared.

Above all, decide how you are going to behave on the bad days – and you are certainly going to have them – when it all goes pear-shaped. On such days you will probably feel both worried and, particularly if your department has screwed up, very cross. But if your reaction is to shout, throw your toys out of the pram and demand someone's head on a platter you will rapidly find yourself heading a department ruled by fear. If on the other hand you can keep your cool, not only will it help get people focused on getting out of the hole but it will mark you out as a minister to be respected and supported. There will always be time for the inquest a bit further down the track.

8. Understand the money

Meet your finance director, with your permanent secretary, in your first week. Is a spending review due? If so, make sure everyone knows it's a priority and what you want out of it. Set up a dedicated team. If you don't have confidence in the officials in charge of the money, ask the permanent secretary if they can be moved. Nothing is worse than losing out in a spending review because you didn't have the right people. If there's no spending review on the horizon, you may want to hold an internal one. Unless you're just aping your predecessor, you will need to shift money around. You'll need to cut some old priorities to fund your new ones.

9. Keep a running list of quick hits and band aids

You'll have lots to read, and even more meetings. Make the most of them. Keep a list of what you want to change or get one of your private secretaries to do it. If something small can be fixed straight away, do it straight away.

Ask your permanent secretary to make a list of the big problems the department faces. This is the time to make the u-turns that your predecessor couldn't. They may not have been able to admit that their cherished policy had failed, but you can – and better to do

so now than wait for it to become associated with you too. The first 100 days are the time to bring out the dead.

10. Don't forget you're a politician

Once you've worked out what you want to do, start to build alliances. Meet the select committee for your department. Identify the dozen or so MPs who take the most interest in your department, especially those who are the biggest thorns in your side. At worst, you'll be ready for their toughest question in your first orals session. At best, you may begin to win them round.

Spend time with your key cabinet colleagues, not just in formal, minuted meetings. A regular dinner with the two or three most important can help and act as an early-warning system. And see the PM and chancellor. You won't be able to do much without them.

By the end of your first 100 days, the public, the Opposition and the media should understand what you are trying to do with your department. You should have provided a frame through which they interpret its activities. If you don't provide such a frame, someone else will and it will not be the one you want.

The first 100 days with a secretary of state

So those are 10 rules for the new secretary of state. But what about some thoughts for permanent secretaries on their first 100 days with a new secretary of state?

At least politicians only do their first 100 days in each department once. A permanent secretary has to repeat the exercise every time they get a new cabinet minister. By the fifth or sixth time, it can be hard to maintain enthusiasm for yet another new secretary of state. The temptation simply to pull the 'Welcome to the department' note out of the saved documents folder and get your office to update the dates and names, but otherwise adopt an air of somewhat weary resignation, can be quite powerful.

But it is also a major mistake. Quite simply you are there to support the secretary of state and if that means starting over enthusiastically again with your third or fourth secretary of state in as many years, so be it. We both know of permanent secretary/secretary of state relationships that went wrong in the first 100 days and never recovered. But they are also tricky to get right. They require a balance of support and candour on the part of the permanent secretary. Resist every request or suggestion and your secretary of state will go round you to get things done. But acquiesce in everything, no matter how unwise, and you'll simply be storing up trouble for the department and actually for the two of you as well.

Every secretary of state/permanent secretary relationship will differ. But there are some fundamentals of general application. So here are 10 rules of thumb that the permanent secretary could read in those 10 minutes while waiting for their new secretary of state to arrive.

1. Be there

Be there when the secretary of state arrives – even if it's the middle of the night. It's worth losing a night's sleep to get off on the right foot. Permanent secretaries who didn't make that sacrifice have often found that the relationship never recovered.

Get the new secretary of state's name and photo up before they walk in, or by the next morning at the very latest. Listen very hard to any first requests and sort them out instantly if you possibly can. Never regard anything as too trivial or beneath you. Have your IT and buildings people immediately available.

2. Regard your new secretary of state as your top priority in their first 100 days

This may sound obvious, but we came across a surprising number of cabinet ministers who were given the distinct feeling that they were simply an imposition on their permanent secretary's time. Make a point of asking the secretary of state frequently if there are any issues they want your help to resolve. Check regularly with their private secretary on any emerging frustrations and try to resolve them before they escalate. Recognise that,

however much you may personally have been committed to the policies of the secretary of state's predecessor, some are going to change. In general try to avoid reminding the new incumbent of how sensible their predecessor was. Even if they were in the same party, they are unlikely to thank you.

3. Reach out to the new secretary of state's political team

Spend lots of time with your new secretary of state's team, particularly the special advisers. Don't try to relocate them to Westminster Jobcentre; you'll fail anyway. All the senior civil servants to whom we spoke saw a good political team around the secretary of state as an asset, rather than a hindrance. Good special advisers oil the wheels of the department, helping to translate the political rhetoric into Mandarin speak, and vice versa. The excellent ones also add real value to policy making and communication. If, as is increasingly often the case, the new secretary of state also wants to bring in one or two genuine experts from outside, try to find ways within the rules of making that happen. Make sure there is no possibility of real impropriety or conflict of interest, but do not allow the department to conjure up theoretical obstacles that are unlikely ever to materialise.

4. Go to lots, but not all, of the secretary of state's early meetings

This is quite a difficult balance to get right. If you appear at every meeting, the secretary of state may start to wonder if you're there primarily as a minder to control what they're being told. But if you hardly ever appear, you risk giving the opposite impression: that you're far too busy and grand to bother with a mere minister. Importantly, when you are in the room allow debate and argument to flow round the table; don't appear as wanting to stifle discussion. And trivial as it may seem, try not to position yourself directly opposite the secretary of state across the table; nothing conveys a sense more of being on opposite sides.

5. Don't disagree with the secretary of state's initial ideas unless they're truly mad or dangerous

'There will always be another day' is a good rule of thumb. As time passes you'll get lots of chances to feed in your views without it appearing as if you're simply trying to stop or block. And don't stand in the way of small things even if they're silly; save your fire for what really matters. Conversely, try to find one or two occasions early on when you can help the secretary of state achieve something they want either by removing a blockage in the department or by oiling the wheels with one of your fellow permanent secretaries in another department. Nothing gains trust more quickly than being seen as an effective fixer.

6. Present your department honestly

Don't paper over the cracks or hide the problems; they won't go away but your credibility will. Give plain and straightforward advice when asked; don't obfuscate. If there are any ticking time-bombs, find the chance to tell the secretary of state about them early on.

All of which said, this may be a good opportunity to kill off any of the barmier ideas of the new secretary of state's predecessor that you previously left for another day (see 9 above).

7. Build an alliance with the principal private secretary

There are always three people in this marriage – a good principal private secretary makes the relationship between the permanent secretary and secretary of state work. They manage to be on both sides at the same time. They help talk down the secretary of state from mad ideas. They make sure you know when something really matters to the secretary of state or when, wittingly or unwittingly, you yourself are getting something wrong.

Choose the PPS wisely – they need to excel in particular at managing people and processes, rather than seeing those as secondary to policy. Recognise that they have a really tough job and make sure that they feel able to tell you what they need to, without fear that you are going to shoot the messenger.

8. Don't disagree with each other in a room full of officials

This is the mirror of the advice to the secretary of state. If you have a disagreement, that's what your weekly private one-to-ones are for. If you start arguing outside them, it just makes you look weak, and the department confused. Go to whatever lengths necessary to present a united front especially where, in private, you may disagree.

9. Never talk disparagingly about your secretary of state to anyone – ever

As we have both witnessed, nothing breaks the trust between a secretary of state and a permanent secretary more completely, and more finally, than if the secretary of state believes that they are being disparaged by their own permanent secretary. If you break that trust, you can't complain about being cast aside. And you will deserve to be.

That applies even within the sanctum of the permanent secretary group. Of course that is and needs to be a safe space in which permanent secretaries can speak freely to each other, not least to seek and give mutual support at difficult times. But even there the bond of trust between secretary of state and permanent secretary needs to exist. Just as permanent secretaries are entitled to expect that they will not be gossiped about by ministers, so ministers are entitled to that same degree of respect.

10. Never compromise your integrity

Having said all of the above, never be afraid to stand up even to a new secretary of state - and however uncomfortable it may be – for what really matters. In the end your integrity is the only thing you have. Say 'no' if something seriously improper is being asked or proposed. While it may not seem likely at the time, even an angry secretary of state may in time come to be grateful to the permanent secretary who stood their ground and said no.

Conclusion

No first 100 days are the same.

However, we were struck in our discussions by how much common ground there was. Many of these rules came up again and again. A core approach emerged that typified those political-civil service relationships that had worked well.

Those relationships matter. The Whitehall system is not the only way to run a government. Indeed, with the Civil Service Reform White Paper, other models are being considered. But whatever model one chooses, it will not be an answer by itself.

Good professional relationships can make most structures work. Those relationships are set in the first 100 days. For many, they pass in a blur of activity, and sometimes crisis. But it is our belief, born of experience, that those who invest in managing that first period in office well – whether as secretary of state or permanent secretary – will reap the rewards.

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