From the Office of the Secretary of the State

Reflections on the policymaking process and their time in office from nine former Secretaries of State for Education, 1986 – 2019

February 2022

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Interviews by Ed Dorrell, Director, Public First

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Introduction

The 1988-2019 period represents one of the most packed of any periods of statecraft in education policy. In many ways, the modern way in which teachers and students experience education in the state sector in England was created in 1988.

But while there have been many reflections on the educational impact of policy during this period, there has been less focus on the ways in which the person holding the most senior position – the Secretary of State for Education[1] - carried out their role. What was their vision for their time in office? How did that gather evidence and set policy? Do they think they had sufficient time and control in office, or did they want more? And how much were they driven by the actions of their predecessors and existing policy?

This essay collection came as part of a wider project run by Patrick Wall and edpol.net with a goal to "present evidence-based insight into education policy making problems and how to improve them". This work was commissioned by edpol.net to Public First, and all interviews were carried out by Public First. The aim of the interviews was to explore with the former Secretaries of State how they carried out their time in office, and reflections on it. Apart from the cover essay from Jonathan Simons which starts this collection, which contains his own analysis, the remainder of this publication is the lightly edited transcripts of the conversations, carried out by Ed Dorrell for Public First. This is the Secretaries of State in their own words.

We hope that these reflections will be of interest to students of education policy, and of policymaking in general. But if this collection of essays has a wider purpose than simple interest, it is to make the case that the process of policymaking needs to be regularly reviewed and considered as part of a whole to ensure a coherent system. This does not mean depoliticising the system. But it means recognising that education is too important to be purely within the gift of Ministers, and that the right type of environment – people, research, programmes, insight and intelligence – needs to be around them in order to support effective policymaking and address some of the biggest 'wicked' problems within the system. Many loose ends remain in English education policy, more than 30 years after 1988.

[1] The postholders were known by various titles during this period as the name of the Department which oversaw state education in England changed its name and responsibilities. For ease, all postholders are referred to generically as the Secretary of State for Education in this publication.

Foreword

I am delighted to write a foreword to this important collection of interviews and reflections from nine former Secretaries of State, which edpol has commissioned as part of our work on a smarter approach to education policy making.

The main question which strikes me on reading the series of reflections is that we still have many "loose ends", critical issues unaddressed or unresolved, and there are significant differences on how to move forward. Why are we still in this unsatisfactory position?

With a broader perspective, we can see that policy making has become increasingly centralized, while the influence of established groups and authorities has fallen away. The power and responsibility of a Secretary of State has grown enormously, as has the level of detail they are engaged with.

Extraordinary effort has been expended, and undoubtably progress made. But most minister have expressed misgivings and regrets. In some areas progress has been slow, in others, established initiatives undone. No doubt, the policy making approach could be improved, for example, if ministerial tenure was longer and if there was consistent, expert support ("whether sector, academic or bureaucratic"). But would this be enough?

Education policy is extremely complex: all policy levers are interdependent (curriculum, assessment, accountability etc) and system coherence extremely hard to achieve. Initiatives are littered with unintended consequences and policy churn reduces teacher effectiveness and retention. It is critical for policy change to be right first time, accretive and enduring. Both edpol and FED would argue that structural change is necessary to bring about a more productive policy making process.

Structural change requires measures of delegation, devolution, long-term planning, systematic piloting, harnessing of international experience and in some areas at least, forums to develop cross-party agreement. This does not mean taking the politics out of education policy. It could mean establishing a better balance between experts, stakeholders, regions and ministers, so that the latter can operative more effectively.

I am very grateful to all previous Secretaries of State for giving their time so generously to this piece of work, and to the team at Public First for bringing it all together

Patrick Wall

Founder, edpol.net

A period of continuity, and of change – Jonathan Simons, Public First

One can mark the main events in the period in question by three dates – 1988, 1997, and 2010. It is clear from the reflections of office holders at the beginning of this period that 1988 really did mark a dramatic shift. Ken Baker, in his essay, makes clear that he wanted to try something "which had never been done before" – running schools independently of local government. He also makes clear that he was aware of the significance of the shift, and its long term consequences. Ken Clarke – his successor but one – also makes clear in his interview that he was put into the Department solely to finalise and implement these reforms, following his track record at delivering similar reforms in health. He saw his role to break civil service and wider intransigence. There is no pretence at consensus here. His job was to drive change, and make 1988 a turning point.

The latter two turning points – 1997 and 2010 – represent General Elections and a change of government (Conservative to Labour, and then Labour to Conservative majority in a Coalition, respectively). What is interesting from the interviews with office holders at the time is that 1997 was more of a consensus period in education policymaking than of change. Estelle Morris, for example, discusses how she had changed her mind on previous reforms (including those pre 1988) and that informed her wider perspective on the need to evolve policy rather than change it. David Blunkett says that Labour's approach was to understand what went on before and build on it. By contrast, there are very different views on the change in 2010. Conservative office holders during this whole period – pre and post 2010 – see broad consistency. Ken Baker draws a direct line from his City Technology Colleges to Blair's Academies and then to the "proliferation" of Academies post 2010. Michael Gove similarly dates all the changes from Ken Baker, noting how Baker "came in, made the reforms and put the critical elements in place"– and argues that although Labour (in his view) decelerated changes, "we injected more energy, but broadly it was that same programme". Damian Hinds sees a consistency throughout the post 2010 period, and one which drew on what went before as well. Labour postholders, by contrast, see much more of a break in 2010, and argue that rhetoric of consistency is not matched by actions. Charles Clarke castigates Labour for being "asleep at the wheel" in allowing post 2010 governments to claim consistency of their approach with regards to things like academies and supporting school underperformance; a policy approach on Academisation he calls "madness". Ed Balls says that the changes to the role of the Local Authority post 2010 are a big unanswered question and a change from what went before. David Blunkett and Estelle Morris, while in general in their contributions being more sympathetic to the consistency, nevertheless list several things which have been lost since 2010, including on early years, and on school leadership.

Why does this happen? In some senses, one can see the rhetorical attraction of claiming consistency. Each Secretary of State can put themselves in their predecessor's mantle and give themselves a direction of travel. Even for those taking office after a change in governing party, there is often a gain to be made in tilting towards bipartisanship. Certainly this was the judgement in 1997 and 2010.

But change happens for a number of reasons. Of these, the most obvious, but in some senses least well discussed in our interviews, is that a new Secretary of State wanted to take forward a new agenda. Perhaps only Ken Baker, Ed Balls, David Blunkett and Michael Gove can be said to have come in with a very clear idea of what they wanted to do. Perhaps not coincidentally, all of those came into office after a General Election, or a change in Prime Minister. They had time to consider their options – a precious commodity lacking in some of their peers in this collection. Many of our interviewees reflected on a general knowledge of the sector, but not a detailed understanding. This is not surprising. The way in which the great offices of state are handed out can be chaotic, and without a firm view from the Prime Minister, or a manifesto commitment, the 'tramlines' of priorities can be unclear. Ken Baker expresses his surprise that Thatcher didn't have a plan for what she wanted him to do. Charles Clarke agreed with Blair that they wanted to address higher education funding, but with no set agenda as to how. Estelle Morris came into the role well briefed on schools' issues, but aware of her lack of experience more broadly. Secretaries of State who entered the role when the government was weak, or distracted with other issues, or when money was tight, were up against it right from the start – Damian Hinds and Nicky Morgan especially.

Oftentimes, change happens because that is the reason why a Secretary of State is appointed. Nicky Morgan was clear she came in with a brief to continue the Gove reforms, but to take some of the hard edges off. Ken Clarke came into office to continue Ken Baker's plan, but as an explicit rejection of his immediate predecessor's caution on the issue. Michael Gove reflects that in specific areas, he made mistakes – principally Building Schools for the Future, where he says "I got carried away with myself.....it was a complete fiasco....I was completely tone deaf" – but says that "It's very, very difficult to make that definitive judgement" as to whether his reforms (and the extent to which they were carried on or not by his successors) were successful.

And change happens because different parties do prioritise different things. It is clear that the Labour government of 1997-2010 did things in education which were broadly consistent in many ways with some of the high level principles of 1988-1997, including around school autonomy; but also made additional changes including in early years which would not have happened in the same way under a different party. Similarly – and in the views of our interviewees, to an even greater extent – the successive Conservative Secretaries of State since 2010 have rowed back on various Labour priorities and made different decisions, on things like Academies.

At the most macro level, therefore, we can see one continual path from 1988. We might say that this includes a shared view of funding delegated to school level; of

choice and competition between schools; of transparent performance information; and of increasing numbers of powers taken from local government (some of which go down to schools, and many of which flowed back up to the control of the Secretary of State). Of our interviewees, Michael Gove, Estelle Morris and David Blunkett hold most closely to this view that there has been a consensus over the period.

But we can also see – by matter of conscious choice, or as a reflection of weak policymaking infrastructure – changes over the years. We also see a lot of loose ends. Many of which, dispiritingly for those students of public policy who see government's purpose to solve social issues, have been evident since 1988. Ken Baker talked of poor basic skills among unemployed adults and poor quality vocational education. Much of that still rings true 30 years later (and Ken Baker is clear in placing the blame at his successors' doors). Almost all of our interviewees recognised issues which they wanted to see resolved, and concluded that they ought to have done more to safeguard them, or reflected angrily or hopefully that they wished they might still be addressed.

We asked our interviewees why this was, and what their reflections were on how they made policy during their time in office. Almost all reflected on how hard it was. Some felt that this was because of insufficient time in the day, across a wide brief. Most felt that they did not have long enough in office to change issues which take many years to fully resolve. Many also critiqued the policymaking infrastructure. Education evidence was felt to be mixed. Some Secretaries of State welcomed the ability of governments to commission data and evaluate programmes. But the consensus among interviewees was that the academic process of bidding for funding, conducting often long timescale research, and producing lengthy papers which could focus more on methodological findings and less about public policy consequences, and the way that that links into policymaking, was never a major driver for decision making. Some Secretaries of State welcomed the input from external bodies – particularly the school profession itself. Because of the increasing decentralization of the system, more recent interviewees were particularly keen on gaining the support of "hearts and minds", as Ed Balls termed it. But many also felt that although there were talented individuals within their civil service department, it was a "weird set up" to use Damian Hinds' words, with "strengths but not strength in depth" to quote Estelle Morris.

Secretaries of State are not simply – as David Blunkett expressed so eloquently – "cogs in the machine". Some wanted to be wide ranging and expansive. Some wanted – or were asked – to deliver a specific policy. They all had clear political instructions or a political strategy to work within. But within that, their approaches reflect their own personality – and whether they focussed on partnership with the sector, or making change, or delivering new policy, or implementing issues, or thinking about how to structure the Whitehall architecture. When one combines the erratic way in which Secretaries of State are appointed; the short tenures that most of them held (and all regretted); the inconsistent sources of support, whether academic,

sector, or bureaucratic; the wider political circumstances which affected their scope for manoeuvre; and the complexity of taking action in a decentralised system – it may be asked whether the question ought to be not why there still remain loose ends, but why there are not more.

Jonathan Simons

Partner and Head of the Education Practice, Public First

Lord Ken Baker (21 May 1986 - 24 July 1989)

How did you come to be Education Secretary? What was the process?

Well, I'd always been interested in education. When I was a technology Minister back in '81, I'd visited a college in Notting Hill which was teaching youngsters who left school with virtually no qualifications at all – they were principally black – and they were being taught basic computing. And I liked it so much that I said we should try and replicate this across the country.

What we found were that the youngsters who, after literally 15 years state education had got nothing, were really switched on by computing. They realised they were onto something which could get them a job in some way, shape or form.

A little later, when Keith Joseph became Education Secretary, we tried to set up a sponsored technology college for 16-18-year-olds with Cranfield University. But there were all sorts of difficulties and although we tried very hard, but we didn't get anywhere.

So I came to the job not unfamiliar with the terrain. Also, the education authority that I had to deal with in my constituency – the Inner London Education Authority – was doing a very bad job at education: it had closed the only grammar school, and the rest of the schools were, frankly appalling.

I remember going to one presentation on a Saturday morning by teachers who invited me to a primary school to see how they were doing. And they were clearly a very left-wing bunch because they had devised a board game called Conflict on a big mat on the floor. There were channels like a snakes and ladders type thing, and there were all the problems that people had in life and conflict. You had a conflict between somebody wearing a top hat, a boss, or a capitalist, and the poor. And I was appalled at this and I found myself asking, "why are you teaching primary children this for God's sake?"

When Margaret asked me to become Education Secretary I assumed she was going to give me a list of things to do. Not at all, not at all. She said have a look at this.

And so I said, I have two ideas. I want to reform technical education, making it much better in our schools. And I wanted to see whether you can run schools independently of Local Education Authorities, which had never been done before. She said, go away, work up your proposals and come back to me in three weeks' time.

I then spoke to Keith Joseph [my immediate predecessor] to ask if there were any pending problems, and he gave me a list of about 10 things, but they were really all minor issues. One was about the effectiveness of the Japanese method of teaching

violins. I had great admiration for Keith. Keith was far more intellectually distinguished than I am, and I liked his ideas, but he was not really an executive.

Anyway, I was put in by Margaret because there was a great disgruntlement from British companies about the output from schools. They were saying again and again that they're basically not literate or numerate. So there was a groundswell of opinion that something had to be done. That was the feeling really strongly. And so that's how it started.

So one of your priorities was bringing a degree of independence to schools. That sounds like a very, very significant moment in the kind of recent 30- or 40-year history of education policy: the idea of disaggregating schools from LEAs becoming formal policy. Did you have any sense that you were starting something which would go on and have ramifications for decades to come?

A bit, yes. I think that was probably one of the most profound changes I introduced.

I soon discovered that there was an experiment going on, I think in Cambridgeshire, of devolving the budget of a school from the local authority to a secondary school. And I asked to be kept informed about this and I studied it, and it seemed to me that this was going to be the pathway to making schools more independent from local authorities.

But I took it slowly because I wanted to see it succeeded. Some of the right wing were saying when they learned about that we should introduce it straight away – but we had to train teachers, particularly head teachers and the senior teachers, in management control. Because the only thing they had ever controlled of this kind was repairing a broken window or getting the plumbing to work or something of that sort. They never had to consider the full budget of the school, which involved of course, the number of teachers and salaries, but also buying of equipment and how much they can afford and all the rest of it. And I knew that that would take some time to settle in and so I set up other experiments in other parts of the country to show it could work.

This was the beginning of City Technology Colleges.

I knew that if I was going to get CTCs off the ground, I'd have to get some money from somewhere. And I approached various groups of industrialists and asked them to put up initially £2m, but in the end that became £1m, to help the schools to start. Now, what was interesting about that when I approached the big companies – Rolls Royce, ICI etc. – they really didn't like the idea, in fact they wouldn't support it.

The people who did step up in the end were entrepreneurs: people like Harry Djanogly who funded one of the first ones – other entrepreneurs around the country stepped

up too. In the end we got 16 approved and up and running and there were, and still are in many cases, among the best schools in the country.

I wanted to show that state schools could be run by an independent group of people. And these entrepreneurs took it to the job of being governors and chairman of governors very seriously – and did a really great job.

In many ways, the legacy of the CTCs, you can now see everywhere with the proliferation of academies.

Without CTCs you would never have had Blair's academies; you would not have had the proliferation of academies out there now. And that's a big change.

Tell me about how you effected such change in the DfE?

I had three senior civil servants around me and they were highly effective. I had a Permanent Secretary who was very, very helpful to me. He was very loyal. And I had meetings with him and the three Deputy Secretaries as well. And I had open discussions with them regularly, two or three times a week, talking about what we were trying to achieve.

We debated many policies: Things like the rigid limits on the number of students a school was allowed to have - so that when a school, a good school, had got up to 650 or 700, they weren't allowed to take in anymore.

I remember a long discussion with one of these colleagues and he was defending it really very effectively, I thought, but wrongly. And so one of the first things I did was to abandon that limit, so that good schools got the chance to increase their numbers. Students were therefore not being sent to those that required improvement or that were inadequate. Small change like that can make a big difference.

But that's a huge change. Like you say, it sounds like something that's very technical and bureaucratic, but actually at a system level, it is enormous. Did you change the policy-making processes?

I used to insist that under-secretaries and assistant secretaries joined us in meetings. I wanted to give voice to the more junior people in the department. They often came up with interesting ideas. In those days, the quality of civil servants was much higher

than at the present Department of Education – the present DfE is completely hollowed out.

One area that must have required a huge amount of focus was your creation of a National Curriculum?

I knew from my experience that there were some very poor curriculums [sic] around the country. I had seen one that was teaching peace studies somewhere. Even before I was at education, I knew there was something very wrong in the state of curriculums being taught. And so I wanted to establish a common core of education, which all children should have. It's what Butler had said in the 1944 Act: that he wanted a common mill of education.

And so I set up working groups to determine what should constitute the curriculum. And we came up with quite a range of subjects.

One of my mistakes was I made it too large to begin with, quite frankly, and it did become very difficult, right up to 16 – and with too many subjects.

I set up committees for each subject, expecting some, like history, to be more controversial than others, like maths. But I was wrong - I soon discovered that feudal armies marched across the plains in the process of trying to agree the correct approach to maths. Some would say you don't need to learn times tables at all; others would say abandon fractions as quickly as you can. The armies formed up on either side, and I had to reappoint new members to the committee.

English was even more difficult. Some of the first people I appointed recommended abandoning grammar altogether. So I had to appoint new people.

It was a huge reform agenda.

It was interesting. As a result of me putting forward these ideas to Margaret, we had nine pages on education in the 1987 manifesto, setting all the proposals out, which was an incredible document. It had all these things we've been discussing, but also removing polytechnics from Local Authority control and also tackling the problem of appointing dons to tenure – it was very controversial.

This legislative programme is considered by many to be one of the great defining pieces of public policy reform of the last 40 odd years. When you look at it in the narrative arc of education policy now, do you think where we're at today reflects

what you were trying to trying to achieve?

Broadly it does, but I've now moved on a bit. What I would do today if I was Education Secretary is I would stop the national curriculum at 14. The country that has the smallest number of NEETS in Europe is Austria, and they stop the national curriculum at 14, and then they have a series of colleges. They have one for engineering, they have one for forestry, for agriculture, for classic studies, for business studies, for logistics, for hospitality, for nursing and for social care. And I would think now that you need a national curriculum up to 14, because I agree with this idea of the common mill of education but children below 16 need to get some skills training while they're at school.

What's happened in our education system because of the bigotry of Gove, the EBacc and Progress 8 is that we concentrate on academic subjects only, and schools are judged entirely on English, maths, the three sciences, history or geography and a foreign language.

I think that's totally wrong – and as a result, alternative education, technical education below 16 is now being squeezed out of English schools. It is absolutely appalling. We are the only country in the world that declines to give skills training below 16 for young people, the only country, not in Europe, but in the world. Progress 8 is an Edwardian curriculum.

As a result of this Gove curriculum, you've got a very significant decline in design and technology, which I introduced as a subject. It's gone from 300,000 students taking it to minuscule numbers because schools aren't judged by it. They've also cut music, drama and dance by 25% and 30%. And I think it's outrageous.

Can I take you back to the formulation of the act when you were in government? How efficient at the time did you feel that the Department for Education was?

It worked pretty efficiently. They set up units to promote grant-maintained schools and city technology colleges. They were really co-operative and they appointed good Under Secretaries to run them.

Did you have much in the way of support from your private office?

It was a strong private office. I only had one political advisor, Tony Coppell, who was a very close personal friend. I only had one and that was it but he got on very well with

the department, they respected him. They knew that he was really speaking for me when he spoke to them and that's very important.

The DfE is impoverished today. It really is a poor department. Every attempt to cut numbers, the Department of Education has led the way. And the people that I dealt with 10 years ago when I was first setting up UTCs were much high caliber then the ones I'm having to deal with today.

So the civil service when you were education secretary were very willing to go with your quite speedy and radical reform agenda?

I think the reason for that is that I had Margaret completely behind me, They knew that she backed me. She wouldn't give way, and I wouldn't give way. And departments like that. If you have the backing of the prime minister, the department knows that such money as needed will be found, and that was the case. I also resolved a lengthy teacher strike that my predecessors had failed to bring to a close which Margaret was pleased about too; that increased the support I had from her for my reforms.

You were only in the role for three years and you got a lot done in that time. Do you wish you had had longer? In theory would it have been better to have had longer in the job?

Yes. I'd like to have done one more thing which I regret not doing. I wanted to extend the teaching day by one period because schools were then finishing at 3 or 3:30. But I couldn't do that because it would have meant renegotiating the teachers' settlement. I just could not take on another battle and it would have been a big one – NUT general secretary Fred Jarvis was the trade union leader I dealt with and we couldn't have another fight.

When you were thinking about and then writing your education bill, to what extent were actual teachers and heads involved? Do you think the input of teachers and heads in policymaking was important?

Well, I encourage them all to write in to the bodies that were doing the curriculum reviews. I didn't want to silence them. I wanted their voices to be heard because they actually do know how schools are run. And I knew all the time that my department did

not know how schools were run. They did not know it, no experience in it. None of them, quite frankly. I tried to make all my changes as inclusive as possible.

I'd like to talk about your legacy. I'm interested to know the extent to which you felt like you were following the in the footsteps of Jim Callaghan's Ruskin speech?

That's where it started. But when he made that speech virtually nothing changed. They did virtually nothing. When Labour was out of office in '79 they could point to nothing good in education that they had done.

It's interesting to imagine a narrative arc from Ruskin through you to Michael Gove, but it sounds to me like you reject most of Michael Gove's performance. Does that include academisation?

He pushed ahead with the academies because it was the right thing to do. And I agreed with that, but I always urged people not to make every school an academy: you should make it a slow process and only make when schools really want to do it themselves. But they did push ahead too fast.

How much did academic research and evaluation play a part in your policymaking?

I had meetings with the Institute of Education – and they were very strong defenders of comprehensive education. And they felt that what I was doing was undermining it, which, to some extent, there's absolutely no question about. And so they would write to me and complain and all the rest of it. But I would say, "look this is the policy and we're implementing it - you know, I'd like you to support it." But they wouldn't.

Lord Ken Clarke (2 November 1990 – 10 April 1992)

How did you come to be Education Secretary?

It was yet another reshuffle; I have a much-reshuffled career and I had the longest ministerial career of anybody now living. I served in the government of four Prime Ministers.

Before I moved to education, I'd had quite a turbulent spell at the Department of Health. I introduced quite drastic reforms to the way in which the health service was organised. It was called the Internal Market, but that wasn't my name for it, because there was no bottom line involved. These reforms had a ferociously controversial time being opposed by the BMA very publicly. They always resist change, the BMA: they resisted the setting up of the Health Service, and they've resisted every change to the Health Service since.

True to form, they [the BMA] got very excited about my reforms, and so I had this fantastically turbulent two and a half years at the Department of Health. We managed to get the reforms through, and we were expecting to introduce them. Suddenly Margaret [Thatcher] had decided to have a reshuffle and rang me up and said she would like me to move to the Department of Education. We still hadn't actually implemented the NHS reforms – we were two months away – and she said well, somebody else could do that, and I said I wanted to be there when we pressed the button. It was all a conversation I had on the telephone; I was standing naked having got out of the bath to answer the phone. I had quite a lot of rows with Margaret Thatcher but that was the only one where I was stark [redacted] naked.

So I got moved to Education. I later worked out why she had done it, which I may have approved of with hindsight. What appears to have happened was that the Department of Education had persuaded my immediate predecessor John McGregor, to proceed very cautiously and carefully with Ken Baker's reforms. Ken had announced these reforms, debated them, got the legislation, but they hadn't been fully implemented. And when I arrived at the Department the advice I got, when I enquired about these changes was very interesting: "Yes of course Secretary of State, we find it very interesting. What we suggest is in a few years' time we review these first things, evaluate them and if we find they've succeeded will proceed further."

So this was your first priority?

Practically the entire of the civil service in the Department of Education was strongly opposed to almost all of Ken's reforms – and Margaret was concerned. I think she thought that now we were about to implement the NHS reforms, it was time to remove somebody like me from the Department of Health. I'd raised the temperature more than she would have wished really. So she put in somebody less controversial to calm down the Health Service and ensure the smooth implementation of the reforms went ahead, which they did. She decided that the Department of Education had become too quiet for her taste, and she didn't mind if I raised the temperature there. She knew someone had to take on not only the teaching trade unions, but the Department as well, which she probably realised was by and large happy to drag its feet on the Ken Baker reform line.

Which of Ken's reforms were they dragging their feet on specifically?

Well, they hadn't introduced the National Curriculum and we hadn't introduced SATs either. And the introduction of grant-maintained schools was also very controversial.

What I remember most is the problem I had over the publishing of the results of SATs, which I insisted on. And the other thing was the arguments I had over National Curriculum.

To be fair, publishing SATs was what would have led directly to league tables.

The newspapers did unfortunately turn it into league tables.

That was the intention I presume?

Well, while I did not particularly wish to have league tables, I didn't mind them either. I thought it was a bit crude and slightly demoralising for those who weren't doing very well.

The key thing was resistance to any way of schools being accountable to the general public, in terms of their pupil's attainment and performance. The idea that anybody, most particularly parents of children at the school, should know about pupils'

performance through regular testing, and that they should be able to compare that outcome across similar schools, was regarded as outrageous.

The fact was there was no appropriate way of assessing the performance of any school at all. Schools just felt they should be able to choose their way of teaching, develop their own culture and the pupils would attain whatever standard of performance the school's culture produced. And they were fiercely opposed to any of this having public accountability.

There was also the ideological argument, which there always is, about the whole idea of testing.

So you felt you had to take on this opposition in the Department?

I don't approve of the way Special Advisors are put in these days, but I had a couple of policy ones and with their help I just said, "It's been decided, we're going ahead."

I ran most of my Departments like a debating society – while we had ferocious debates, they didn't get personally unpleasant – but there were many officials in my Department who would desperately try to persuade me to drop SATs, and to drop the league tables. In the end I had to just tell them it's a Government policy, it's been decided and we're going ahead.

But then what I had to find out was how much the Department actually acted on the decision. One of the roles of the civil servants in my private office was to keep me informed as to what actually was being done to move on the preparation of the SATs, all the logistics, the delivery. Because unless we chased them – and this wasn't the only Department where I found this problem – if officials don't really agree with the decisions you'd reached, if you weren't careful, you'd find in two- or three-months' time absolutely nobody had done anything about it.

It's interesting that you've talked about the Department's civil servants like that. Ken Baker is very polite about them.

They're very bright people. In all Departments the civil service will try to resist doing what they didn't really want to do if they didn't agree with you; Health was a bit like that, the Home Office was a bit like that. But the Department of Education was the only one where the opposition was straightforwardly political. In my Conservative opinion, and I'm not the most right-wing Conservative, they were firmly rooted in the

educational consensus of the 1960s, and were great advocates for it and weren't going to move from it.

One thing I did of my own volition which generated huge opposition in the DfE that wasn't Ken Baker's idea, was to get rid of the inspectorate and introduce Ofsted.

That was a huge decision.

It *was* a huge decision. My own underlying principle was, as it had been at Health, that industrial relations should not be the key objective of public services, but instead it should be performance, for patients or pupils.

The principal I adopted in my reforms in Health was quite similar to Ken Baker's education reforms: putting more of the responsibility for performance down at the local level, at the most practical local level you could make it. In the case of education, this level is schools. And so, responsibility was placed upon the Head of the school to raise the performance of the school, and deliver outcomes for pupils that matched their abilities. The way to do it was to put responsibility on them, to make them accountable. And as I say, in education even more than health, people were ferociously resistant to the idea they should be accountable.

The first thing was SATs, testing the measurement in objective terms of progress that pupils made in particular subject. And the second one was inspection: checking that all was well, they were on an improving path and evaluating school's performance.

I rapidly found the old schools inspectorate was useless at that. They didn't regard that as their principal job anymore. They didn't carry out many inspections: teachers could go their whole career and never be part of a school's inspection. There was no feedback to anybody when they did inspect, and certainly not for the public. I think the inspectorate did not regard that as their principal job.

Instead, the inspectorate was a formidable body inside the Department who thought their main job was to give advice to the Secretary of State. When Department officials had wearied of arguing with me, they would say I should take the advice of the inspectorate.

Someone would come from the inspectorate and say that we should stop teaching history in the Victorian tradition; kings and battles. People should be just encouraged to empathise with the past and so on, which was a very popular theory pushed upon me by not only the inspectorate, but quite regularly by people in the teaching profession, people in the Department and by the educational establishment at the time. And in English literature, I would be advised that we should stop teaching the work of dead white males.

There were people who took it to extremes, for example so we should stop teaching Shakespeare, Wordsworth, even Dickens. Dead white males were to be moved out.

Which leads us to the development of the National Curriculum

Ken [Baker] had set up various committees to advise on the different subjects. Unfortunately, I think he devolved it to the Department, trusting the Department too much in appointing people to those committees.

And so, although it began with what I am sure was the correct principle – that it's a dangerous path to start going down when the Minister takes decisions on what is taught – I felt obliged to intervene when I was shown the drafts of the National Curriculum.

People think that one's exaggerating when one goes on about some of the extraordinary things that went on in the 1970s and 1980s, the left and this influence on public services and local government. I promise you I'm not exaggerating. My time in the Department of Education was one continuous battle with the officials.

I succeeded in scotching the draft curriculum. But now I had to ensure that something was produced which was more satisfactory, without feeling guilty myself that the political Minister of the day should not start determining history. But what was being put to me was political. They thought working class pupils should be taught on the basis that enabled them to empathise with the working-class struggle over the ages. That was history, none of this kings and battles stuff.

To what extent does the current education system reflect what you and Ken Baker were trying to achieve at the time?

It is still hugely improved by what Ken Baker tried to do.

Ofsted is a highly controversial body. Everybody gets highly worked up about Ofsted inspections, but I do think schools need to be accountable. Those reforms that have survived have had some of the effects that Ken would have wanted, and I wanted, when I introduced them: people do have regard to performance including the actual academic education performance in school compared with others. And I think things are better.

I also think the bulk of the teaching profession is far less committed to opposition to all this stuff then their representatives would have you believe.

Ken's measures had an overwhelmingly desirable effect. These days very few schools produce school leavers who are scarcely literature and scarcely numerate. Schools weren't spotting gaps in the curriculum they were teaching: they didn't think it was what they were for.

Can I briefly take you back to something you touched upon a little earlier about how the Department functioned when you were there? You mentioned your private office, this is at a time when the idea of Special Advisors were just in their infancy.

I had two of them only. Tessa Keswick was the person who persuaded me to take the drastic step of abolishing the inspectorate and introducing Ofsted. She wasn't solely the sole author of the idea, but she was wildly enthusiastic about that.

That was a huge battle.

It was. The inspectorate was regarded as superior in its class. They did nothing. They were purely political and philosophical. And I'm sure they regarded me as a right-wing extremist, but I don't think I was: I very much committed myself to the reform of public services because I was so committed to them. There's no more important public service than education and health.

I was lucky enough to work on absolutely vital reform without which we'd have had ultimately a very serious crisis of educational standards.

Do you wish you'd had longer?

Yes, because I never really moved on to an agenda of my own. There are lots of things I'd have liked to have done, especially in Further Education and Sixth Forms.

We have some very bad Sixth Forms, which just concentrate on keeping themselves alive by taking in pupils who are not ready for the Sixth Form. And also, more importantly, this is also true of the high ability pupils who just as a matter of routine go

into the Sixth Form, the schools are possibly resistant to the idea that they might go off and pursue more vocational, technical, high-quality qualifications.

Something you've touched upon in this conversation so far, is how political education is. There are many who think that much of the politics should be taken out of education – that teachers and schools should be treated in the way that doctors are treated in the health service: they make the ultimate decisions.

In the health service, which is equally political, I was always absolutely insistent that clinical decision-making is entirely a matter for those qualified: the doctors, the medical profession. The idea that the politician starts pushing their clinical opinion on any of the medics, we've never done that. The trouble is the medics think that should be extended to complete autonomy over everything, so they can tell me what their job is, how they do it, how much time they spend on it.

But you do have to have a system of management.

People would argue for a degree of clinical independence for teachers and headteacher.

In principle, I could not agree more. I was very worried about the fact that I was insinuating my opinions on the curriculum. But I regarded the draft curriculum I was being presented with as extremely political. And what I was disagreeing with, I persuaded myself, was not the educational advice, the academic advice of those professional teachers who gave feedback, it was the political opinions of the authors which had plainly dominated what they were proposing for the curriculum.

Did you struggle to find out what actual teachers, and actual headteachers thought of your reforms?

I didn't struggle to do so, no. I'm afraid I can't claim that I sought it out, not in any organised way. The Department was desperately keen that I spend a high proportion of my working week meeting schools and visiting colleges, and getting out of London, which I did a bit of. But I probably did much less of than is normal now. I'm afraid I thought it was obviously a way of getting rid of me, stopping me devoting so much time to interfering with policy making in the office. Civil servants held up to me as a

model, a Labour predecessor of mine, who they said spent several days a week visiting schools. But I probably made a school visit once every 10 days or fortnight. They may be right and it probably was somewhat inadequate, but school visits can have a totally artificial air about them.

It is quite hard to get a proper conversation where you sit down with a good head, in which he or she gives candid opinions. All presentations are made to you about all these things they've been doing and you can come away with, as is true of any VIP visitor, a somewhat misleading impression of a place.

One of my predecessors when I was Minister of Health told me he used to make a point, when he made hospital visits, of just refusing to follow the people who were leading him round, and going off course and looking around, going to another building to see what was going on there. I never got quite so difficult as that, but I would suddenly spot something and go wandering off and get somebody to tell me what this was. That was always very informative.

Right at the start of this conversation you mentioned that you had the most diverse Ministerial positions. Do you think overall, the turnover of Minsters is too high? Do you think it would be better to have longer periods of stability?

Turnover has become ridiculously high in recent years, partly because of the political crisis inside the Conservative party, and the divisions. One of the difficulties with the present government, some of whom are semi-able, some of whom are useless, is that they're terribly inexperienced.

And it would better if they did longer stints in those roles?

The story of a Ministerial life, as an old friend used to say, is that you get sent to a Department, and, if you've got any sense, you don't do anything for the first month until you've really got to know what was going on. The one thing you shouldn't do is sign anything when the Permanent Secretary comes in and says "can you just sign this, Secretary of State…" They'll have been doing that to every new Minister they've ever had. Don't do that.

You can start potentially doing things after a month, when you've settled in a bit, and you've done the work, and you've read the papers, and you've discovered that you didn't know as much about transport or whatever it was as you thought you did when you arrived.

After six months you reach a stage where you've got it, you've sorted it out, you've decided what your agenda is: "What am I here for? What am I going to do while I'm here?" And away you go, you're in charge of your portfolio and you run it properly and have a good relationship with your officials.

After two years you'll realise that you hadn't quite understood it fully as you thought you did. You can see where you've gone wrong, and now you really know what your priorities are. Now you can put it on the floor: time to really implement the Clarke agenda.

Then the phone call comes, and you're asked to go to Downing Street, another reshuffle and somebody replaces you who's back at square one. And you go back to square one in whichever Department you've been sent to. That is what happens. You do need at least 18 months to 2 years to really get to terms with what your Department is, and I didn't have that from my time in education. Education being such an important and interesting subject, one of my particular regrets is I had such a short time in education.

It's hugely fascinating in terms of the end results. You oversaw an enormous reform agenda, some of your own, some of Ken Baker's.

It's the only job I did that did not match my description of the life-cycle of a Minister. I didn't have time to form my own agenda at all, but I almost instantly decided, Margaret told me this anyway, that the agenda to follow was Ken Baker's. These were the Baker reforms, and my agenda was not my agenda. It was the Baker agenda which fortunately I totally agreed with.

I think you do yourself a slight disservice.

One thing I added in, and even there I'm prepared to attribute quite a lot of credit to Tessa [Keswick], was Ofsted.

It was remarkable what the reaction was when I first proposed this as a policy I'd like to be developed. The officials, they went absolutely bananas. But we appointed, rather too rapidly, as chief inspector a strong man. He turned out to be too strong. He was positively hostile.

I'm probably making it sound like I'm personally positively hostile to officials and teachers, and I'm not. But I was persuaded to go for someone really tough: Chris

Woodhead. When I looked afterwards in subsequent warfare, it was a little unhelpful. He enjoyed nothing so much as publicly engaging in battle with the education establishment. It was a mistake appointing him.

Lord David Blunkett (2 May 1997 - 8 June 2001)

How did it feel when you arrived in the Department for Education and Employment on that May morning straight after the extraordinary 1997 landslide?

It was both exhilarating and daunting. I was well aware of the major challenges, expectations that existed, and the imperative to move fast. It was necessary, with the support of the Permanent Secretary Michael Bichard (now Lord, then Sir Michael), to review the urgent restructuring that was necessary, both in terms of the education portfolio and the employment brief – given the big challenge of setting up the New Deal for the young unemployed, which was part of our manifesto commitments.

It was quickly agreed that Michael Barber would be asked to join us and work to convince Robin Butler [the Head of the Civil Service] that we should recruit a significant number of officials from outside the civil service.

You had had plenty of time to prepare for this moment…?

It was clear that the outgoing [Conservative] government knew that the election was lost sometime in advance and because of this we had been able to have meetings with the senior management team of the Department over the previous six months, providing them with the necessary reports and material (and some of which had been approved at the Party Conference in '95 and '96), and the ongoing work of my own researchers. The Civil Service was therefore in a position to present us with its take on how best to proceed from day one. This gave us a head start and ensured that the necessary communication throughout the Department was positive, clear, and based on the programme that we had already put together.

What do you regret? Are there things you could have done better? You moved at extraordinary pace.

You're right. Our White Paper, laying out the terms for the subsequent Standards and Framework Act, was produced in 63 days from 2nd May. I think that's still a record.

But I wish we had embedded key policies better and ensured that it was more difficult for them to be overturned; that would have been an obvious thing we could have done better, for example Sure Start Centres.

The areas in which we did some work on, but perhaps could have done a lot more, related to family education, lifelong learning and our Learning Age Green Paper of 1998.

Social mobility was clearly something that was just emerging as a major challenge during my time as Education Secretary. It was a challenge because those parents with the means to do so were prepared to pay heavily for tutors for their own children, even when they were already paying for private education. We had no idea at the time what a big problem this would become.

But in 1997 the gap between the haves and have-nots was already widening. In a democracy you can't stop people having tutors for their children – even if you wanted to – so doing something more positive to match it was clearly the way forward. And so we created Learning Mentors and after-school clubs.

Specifically, we established a cohort of Learning Mentors who were attached to schools and went out to families. This was the beginning of our programme of work that ultimately included the “wrap around" support of breakfast clubs going through to after-school clubs and other activity, including at the weekends.

We also got 50 summer schools off the ground by the August of 1997 which was a legitimate logistical miracle. These were akin to a “recovery programme" in their work to link primary children with entry to secondary in the Autumn. I had issued a challenge that the DfE would match whatever a philanthropist was prepared to put up to get the them up and running. [Philanthropist] Maurice Hatter agreed to put up £1 million – which we then matched. It was very successful.

Unfortunately, over the succeeding 13 years, the emphasis on this link to the charitable sector diminished. I couldn’t help but feel that the coalition government reinvented some skills [building bridges between government and the charitable sector] as though they'd never existed before!

Did your policies have the impact and results that you had hoped or expected?

In one sense, I was very fortunate. We had done a lot of work in opposition so that in government in the first four years of the Labour administration from 1997 it was genuinely possible to make rapid progress. This was true on the development of Sure Start, the first ever national programme for nursery education and, of course, the literacy and numeracy programs in primary school.

It was also possible with a contribution from the initial windfall levy on the utility companies, to be able to invest, for the first time for some years, in rebuilding, refurbishing and re-equipping schools and colleges. This was a long haul that

started with a contribution of a billion pounds, gradually rising to 6 billion before I left office, which was 10 times the amount that was being spent in ’96 to‘97.

The biggest challenge was that Sure Start, the Education Maintenance Allowance and the teaching of citizenship in schools, were subsequently either watered down completely or abolished. The lesson I learnt from that is that you really do have to embed policies, not just in terms of funding, but also in the psyche of the department, and of the bottom-line imperative of those on the ground. If people think they get accolades for engaging with and defending a particular programme, then that's what they will do.

Of course, there are policies and programmes which have an ideological basis and therefore political opponents will see them as fair game. There are others where simply “making your name" involves trashing or reinventing policies.

The Pupil Premium is a good example. In 2000 we put together something called the Pupil Learning Credit (PLC), which was to be available in the Excellence In Cities areas where we were doing our best to dramatically lift the standard of education and narrow the gap between the highest and lowest performers.

The incoming coalition government, in this case the Deputy Prime Minister [Nick Clegg], claimed the Pupil Premium as his idea. This he was able to do because unfortunately, the PLC had been phased out by one of my [Labour] successors. This was because the Treasury did not like specific earmarked funding and we clearly hadn't made a sufficient case for how the PLC would impact on changing life chances, improving quality and developing experiences that the youngsters would not otherwise have had.

The Excellence in Cities programme itself was little known until it was further developed into the London Challenge. Even our opponents recognised that this was a great success.

What lessons did you learn from this?

You win some, you lose some. Some of the things in relation to dramatic improvement across the board have stood the test of time, but others (and I regret many of those that have disappeared), really could have made a long-term difference. The National College for School Leadership is a good example. It was a mystery to me as to why this obviously sensible measure to ensure that leaders in the education profession learnt from and were able to adapt and deliver the best available evidence across the world, should have been undermined and then abolished!

Do you still see echoes of your policy work in education today? There are those who talk about there being one narrative political ark starting in 1988 with the Baker reforms that takes us through to today.

In one sense the genuine cross-party agreement on the imperative of raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap, is a legacy. It sounds a very strange thing to say, but the debate in the 1990s had been more about systems and structures than it had been about a dramatic change in the standard of education in the classroom and the quality of leadership. Whatever I think about the last 12 years, there has undoubtedly been an acceptance that learning from the best practitioners and building on it makes sense.

The pandemic has raised the issue again of the gap between the haves and have-nots, the societal impact that affects what those in the education profession can achieve, and of course the inequalities which need to be overcome. One thing is very clear, there's not been a return to the idea that you can provide education on a shoestring. Gillian Shephard, my Conservative predecessor, was very clear that the Treasury's decision to withhold funding made an enormous difference to what she could do and was a significant own goal by John Major's government.

It allowed us to make enormous political gains through "Education, education, education."

Despite the impact of austerity since 2010, cuts such as those experienced by schools in the 1990s have not been inflicted on the education service and there is at least, in the three-year programme of funding which was agreed last year [in 2019 before the last general election], a recognition that you simply can't go back to those days. Albeit that by 2024/25, the funding settlement for schools will merely have returned as, in real terms, to 2010 per-pupil spending.

With hindsight, were there notable successes and failures?

Some of the successes were not recognised until it was too late – Sure Start would be an example. Clearly the literacy and numeracy programmes were a success because they had a dramatic impact on outcomes at Key Stage 2 and therefore the transfer from primary to secondary. Opening up higher education to reflect the desire to improve standards in schools and therefore dramatically widen the number of young people expecting to go through to higher education was both necessary and successful. It was, of course, at a price that changed the landscape not only in terms of access, but also in terms of funding for universities.

Further education was heavily funded between 1997 and 2001, but this is often forgotten. I had a personal interest as I had both received my qualifications in further education and then taught in a further education college [having received a PGCE for adult learning], and three of my sons succeeded in getting to university through further education. Sadly, this did not carry forward.

It is an absolute truism that there are very few people working in the Treasury who have either experienced a further education college (or even been in one) or had any of their relatives succeed through FE. It makes a difference in the battle between the departments, and therefore is very dependent on the drive and commitment of the Secretary of State and the backing of the Prime Minister.

What does your experience tell us about the efficacy of the policy making process?

It tells us that if there are a very clear and agreed set of priorities underpinned by values, you can achieve a lot very quickly. Even where this is the case, individuals do make a difference because they have their own focus and clear prioritisation, but they are also politicians. Their success in statecraft, in winning battles inside government, make an enormous difference. Politicians are not simply cogs in the wheel. They are actors in being able to carry through what they really believe in – and if they don't believe in it very much, that shows.

In my case, of course, the policies had been well worked through in advance of the 1997 election. Not just within the Labour Party's policy-making process, but actually with outside expertise, setting up working groups and getting common purpose. This was way beyond any kind of party political cabal and because very few of them existed then, it wasn't about think tanks either. These days think tanks do have a bigger impact but tend to focus on very specific policy areas.

One of the problems of government is the lack of crosscutting interdepartmental working which tackles wider challenges, rather than focusing on very specific individual policies in isolation.

So clearly you think that education policy formation can be improved – and that there are lessons from how you went about it?

Listening to and learning about what is working across the world is one obvious example – remembering to adapt it, of course, to domestic circumstances, rather than believing that what might work in Singapore would work in Manchester.

Similarly, it is important to learn from what has worked at home – and to listen to the most innovative, creative and go-getting members of the profession. It would also help to not simply trash things because they were “not invented here" – by which I mean, were not policies adopted by the current government

There is so much that people understand and hold in common, and if they built on that and were creative in updating, such an outlook can prove to be really successful. This is why we didn't do away with league tables when we came in, but instead improved them. It's why we didn't do away with certain teacher training initiatives, but sought to improve them. It is why we tried to pick up the best of what was called “Grant-Maintained” status and transferred it into the Foundation schools – which then became the Academies programme.

How effective is the internal DfE and civil service process?

It changes. There was no one in the DfE who had recent experience in a school or a local authority when Labour entered government in ‘97. That's why we set up the Standards and Effectiveness unit under Michael Barber, to bring in teachers and head teachers who could contribute directly - not just to policy-making but also working on how best to implement it. Delivering policies in schools and classrooms is the real key. You can have the best policies in the world, but if people have not a clue how to pull the levers to make it work on the ground then it won't work.

Was there sufficient use of research and evaluation?

Yes, we used it extensively. Sometimes mistakenly. Traditional patterns of commissioning research led, in my view, to commissioning the same people over and over again – whether their expertise in the area was valid or not.

But I think we were genuinely innovative in this space – just look at the work of Michael Barber, who is a world-leader in using research, data and evaluation to really understand the formulation and impact of policy.

Do frequent changes in Education Secretaries and ministers cause problems of policy churn/has there been too much policy change in education?

Yes. Building on the best and holding on to what works makes more sense than simply trashing what's come before; that is surely the best approach.

But there will always be differences, not just of emphasis, but of genuine philosophy. Just look at how the stand-alone academies and free schools were brought in [by the coalition government in 2010], which is not something we would have done – and of course they then had to be iterated, to take account of the fact that it wasn't working, with the development of Multi-Academy Trusts.

The idea you can take either values or politics out of education is endearingly naïve. What you can do is ensure that you test your predilections against reality. That is what we tried to do.

Baroness Estelle Morris (8 June 2001 – 24 October 2002)

First of all, could you just tell me about what you thought when you first got the job? You'd already been a junior minister?

That fact does make a difference. I'd been a minister in the department both as parliamentary under-secretary and minister of state since 1997. I had enjoyed both posts, so when I got the job, it's was a combination of excitement and to be honest a fair degree of apprehension as well. It's very difficult. You have both the human emotional reaction to it and a professional reaction to it. And I think for the first few days, they get intertwined. I had a very marginal seat and I'd held onto it [in the 2001 general election] but I hadn't been sure whether or not I would still be in Parliament let alone be a Minister.

Although I realised the enormity of the task, I had been in the department before and I didn't think it was something I couldn't handle. There was that feeling of continuity, but there was also that feeling of not being able to believe that I'd got the job.

Do you think it made a difference that you'd had a career in education before that?

Yes, I do. I do. The people we become are in part, influenced by the things we've done. Everyone's former jobs influences them to some extent. If you were a doctor or an accountant or a lobbyist before you become a minister, it influences how you do the job, because it's part of you. So, of course, my old job – 18 years teaching in an inner-city school – influenced the way I did my new job.

The reason you may ask the question is because I think that it's quite an unusual situation to be running a department in an area in which you used to work. And I was conscious of that. There was a thing about being poacher-turned-gamekeeper

For example, I was teaching when the 1988 Education Reform Act came in and was critical of a great deal of it in the same way that I think was the case with many teachers at the time. Looking back, I now see that the scale of the change inevitably would mean a change to how I had done the job and change on that scale can be threatening. But when I became a Labour MP [in 1992], I had to act on behalf of

constituents with education problems and it gave me a view of education from a different perspective. So I didn't just have a teacher's view: I had a bit of both perspectives.

Can you give me an example of where you've changed your mind?

Yeah, I'll give you perfect example of my attitude to the publication of examination results. I always remember this one case: I was doing a surgery in a secondary school on an outer ring estate. It isn't a hugely affluent area but a comfortable neighbourhood with a lot of skilled workers. I remember a parent coming in to ask if I could help as his child hadn't been given their first choice of school. He was a lovely man who lived with his family on a near-by council estate. He sat in front of me and he said, 'Before we put this school down, I went through all the exam results and saw what each of them was doing.' He'd gone to the published Sats results and found the information he needed to make his decision. The minute he left, I reflected that without the '88 Reform Act, he couldn't have had that conversation with me because he wouldn't have had access to the information. And the knowledge he had, he was entitled to have and he was entitled to bring it into the conversation.

That was sort of the moment when it really came home to me and although I still had many concerns about the direction of change I thought, "No, no, the world has changed, and we're going to have to bring the two together."

I did worry that the teachers wouldn't trust me because they would think I had forgotten what it was like to be a teacher and others wouldn't trust me because they thought I was a captive of the profession. So I was always conscious that I had to somehow not allow either of those things to be true. I felt my experience of being a teacher was an important thing that I bought to the post but that wasn't why I had gone into politics. You don't go into politics unless you want to change things.

Do you think your concerns about that was because of the nature of politics: that you had to be one or the other, and you couldn't be both?

To some extent, it was. There was a view that any change worth having had to have conflict as part of achieving it. It is one thing that some of the teaching unions didn't seem to understand. If politicians were given a rough ride at their conferences it showed the government taking on change and the unions resisting it.

I know that No 10 sometimes wondered if I was up for the changes but I would argue that I knew better than they did about some of the things you have to take into account when you're bringing about reform in schools. So I think the fact that I was a teacher was very important. And I had taught in a tough school. Whatever teachers felt about me – and that will be very mixed – I think they all gave me credit for having done those 18 years and were prepared to listen to me, even if they did not always agree with me.

When you arrived in the big office what was your number one concern? What were the priorities in education policy?

We had quite a good first term. Our polling was good on education. But the three things the prime minister had raised in the brief interview he had when he offered me the job, were, first, that was that we had to be less 'top down' in our policies. Second, we needed to sort out the number of exams associated with AS levels (because that had come up in the doorstep) and third university fees.

So Tony Blair gave you these priorities? What were your own priorities?

I was conscious that I knew the school policy agenda well and I was confident about it. My priority at the start of the job was to become as knowledgeable about the department's other areas of responsibilities, higher education, further education, workplace skills. In those first few hours, some of my thoughts would would have been how quickly I could get my head around those other policy areas. We had sort of parked the HE fees issue before the election

I also had to stop doing my old job and get the Department as a whole to see that I had changed roles as well. It couldn't just be a continuation of my old role, even though it was a job I had enjoyed.

With that in mind, are you able to kind of pinpoint policies you brought about as education secretary that you're particularly proud of as, as opposed to policies that you enacted as schools minister or minister of state

I find that very difficult, because a lot of them run through the whole period.

When I'd been minister of state I'd done the work on the green paper on Teacher Workforce Reform [paving the way for reform of the senior management structure in schools, new professional development opportunities as well as Teaching Assistants, and school business managers]. And when I became Secretary of State, I continued

to contribute to that. That is my proudest achievement of that period, partly because I think I bought that agenda to the government and it reflected what I thought needed to happen to improve both the performance and attractiveness of the profession. The work continued with first, Stephen Timms and then David Miliband as Minister for School Standards.

The other thing, which we started prior to the general election with somewhat less success was secondary school reform. We'd very much concentrated on primary school reform in our first term.

At the very beginning of the first term, we'd acted on underperforming local authorities but I think, David [Blunkett] and I had managed that well, in that we'd not gone for the "abolish the lot" approach. We had put in alternative providers in some authorities like Hackney and Islington but in most cases, we'd been tough but sought to improve the performance. But I think when I was Secretary of state, we did begin the debate about the middle tier and I did a lot of work looking at whether local authorities needed further reform or thinking about alternatives for middle tier. It is still not resolved many years later.

Obviously, it helped that Labour very, very big majorities if you wanted to get things done politically. But what did you think about the process of policymaking in the department? Did you find policymaking a satisfactory process?

I did but there were weaknesses. I enjoyed working with Civil Servants and have great respect for them. It has strengths but not necessarily in depth. The same group of people tended to be allocated to key tasks and I think once you've got below that very senior level, it was more administrative and it was fearful of expressing a view. We bought in people from outside the civil service, from the education service and they were absolutely vital in getting the policies right. I think the question became, how willing was the Permanent Secretary to use those non-traditional civil servants, as well as their own civil servants? My experience in the Department for Education was that these people were welcomed into the department and many held senior posts. My working relationship with the Civil Service was very important and I felt that it was a positive one.

So was there – would you say – an identifiable problem with the civil service below the very senior levels?

The civil service is caught between thinking its job is merely to come back with the best ways of implementing your views, or to come back having gone beyond that, challenging it or saying: "Look, there are alternatives", or saying, "if you do that it won't work like this". And I think that unless you've got a good working relationships relationship with the minister, that's quite tough. If you are a civil servant who can

come back and you say, “Look Estelle, this is it” and then there's a proper conversation. With the good civil servants, their papers led to a conversation. With the civil servants who weren't that confident, there wasn't a conversation to get out of the paper they'd given you.

Do you think that is a problem that could be reformed to be improved? Or is it a deeper problem with our current system of government?

It should be able to be reformed because they are essential and they have to adapt to changing circumstances. The civil service is very hierarchical and they’re not normally change makers.

You know, the great strength of the Civil Services is its continuity. And that makes it difficult to be change makers. But I enjoyed working with them, I respect them. But I think it's imperative that you bring in more of those people from the education sector, even if only on short term contracts.

Similarly do you think the system would benefit from having much longer term education secretaries who can really get to know their brief?

I think there's an academic argument for that, at the least. But, in truth between 1988 and now, there has been a heck of a lot of continuity. You look at that 1988 Act and it bought in assessment, publication of results, Ofsted, national curriculum, reporting to parents, the notion of choice, holding teachers accountable, appraisal. You go through it; it's all still in the system.

And so I don’t go for this argument that it's all up and down and changing all the time. There's an argument to be made that every government since 1988 has basically continued along the same path. And even if you look at what appears to be policy churn, it’s not always as significant change as it seems. If you take grant-maintained schools that were in the 1988 Act, and you take academies now, their aims are remarkably similar.

Where the churn comes is in the areas around the main policies and sometimes that is more a political decision than an education decision.

Can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

I could give you a myriad of examples of small policies – a homework policy, a uniform policy, a how-to-send-the-report-home policy, a minor change to the national curriculum – and they're not big stuff. A requirement to do that, a requirement to do the other. And it wears teachers down. If you're a teacher, it's all bits of paper. It all comes in. And it feels like constant change. The irony is, the main pillars of the system remain unchanged.

I'm not saying that nothing substantial has changed. We certainly made significant changes when we were in government: we did wonderful things. But, you know, we can think about the changes that were made and I reckon that most industries have had far greater change in 30 years. Where we made the big successful reforms – from education action zones to Excellence in Cities, to the work with the Youth Sports Trust – it was where we saw schools as communities rather than stressing their independence. And if teachers say that was policy churn, I'd say, yes, it was, but it was justifiable. I think the point I'm making is that some change is good.

That's an interesting question, and one that various education secretaries have tried to deal with over the years: the extent to which you need buy-in from school leaders if you want to achieve sustainable change.

Oh, yeah, you've got to have it. Even though the leverage you've got as education secretary no longer stops at the school gate or the classroom door because you've got the national curriculum, testing, and inspection, unless schools are well led, nothing happens. And all the evidence shows that. We did a lot of work on this, trying to show that we values headteachers and trying to keep them with us and trying to raise their status. I'm quite proud of that work. And the other thing we did, we tried to make a proper career path for school leaders. Do you remember until 97, it was very rare for a head teacher to even have more than one headship?

They got to headship and then they stayed in the headship until retirement. The whole idea of chief executives of a group of schools or being head of more than a school and going into school to turn it around, didn't happen. And as a result of changes we made such as qualifications for headship and the National College, that was changed.

They were big reforms, but the teachers worked with them because I think that they saw them as a natural policy development. It's the short-term directives that drive them mad, not the big sensible changes.

We miss the National College a lot. It was very important. Its abolition was a tragedy. It was a symbol. You know, when I used to go there, I used to smile and feel that it was an indication of the the importance that the nation put in school leaders.

Do you have any big regrets?

One of the things I think the Tories did which was good, in my view, was set up the Education Endowment Foundation.

I think we missed a trick there and it is something that I do regret. Our literacy and numeracy strategies were very good but I think it would have been even better if we'd persuaded the profession that although it was a policy of a political party it was essentially an education policy informed by an evidence base that they could respect.

We didn't do enough to make links with education researchers. Actually we were very good at evaluating our policies. But we weren't as good at looking at research to inform the policy in the first place. I wish we'd have done that because it would have been a signal that education should be evidence informed and that also includes how teachers make decisions about how they teach. It could also lead to a change in the role of politicians in education policymaking.

What is the proper role for politicians?

It is to lead the service, set the national priorities, allocate the resources give our education service strong aims and purpose and set up a system that can deliver it. It is not to decide how teachers should teach. That should be guided by evidence and I am pleased see that the evidence informed movement is gathering speed. I think that it is potentially a transformational change.

Something that I think is difficult for politicians is that they have to have priorities but when you say as a politician, look, we've got to prioritise numeracy, what other people hear is that we didn't think anything else matters. And I don't know how you get around that.

For example, on creativity, we tried to take the pressure of Ofsted inspections by asking the inspectorate to concentrate on the basics, but then schools stopped teaching anything else because wasn't inspecting it.

We've still not solved that problem. But we should have put more effort into saying how much we valued the creative curriculum. We really should, we didn't.

This might make you roll your eyes, but I have a feeling Michael Gove would say the same thing about the EBacc...

Ha. I think that is probably true for Nick Gibb as well. And that's the problem. Where I criticise Michael Gove is that the English Baccalaureate was meant to be a description of what mattered in education and it left no time for anything else. I don't think you could say that for the literacy and numeracy strategies. I can't think of much that the Tories have done to support or raise the profile of the arts or sports in schools.

But is it a problem that we've not solved. How do politicians have priorities without giving the impression to the system that they don't value anything else?

We've not got a measurement for the arts and politicians haven't developed a language to speak about such an important area of the curriculum.

Which slightly tangentially takes us on to Tomlinson...

We asked Mike Tomlinson to look at A level marking that year [2012] and that had thrown up a discussion about the 16 to 18 curriculum. So we asked him to do a longer piece of work on the 14 to 18 curriculum - and I left partway through that work.

So if I ask you as a Labour politician rather than as an ex-secretary of state, do you think that the demise of Tomlinson's reforms was a big failure?

Yes, it was. We should have grasped the nettle. We'd asked Tomlinson to solve a problem we'd identified. And I know Charles [Clarke] feels that that was a regret of his. But Number 10 did feel quite strongly that they didn't want to be responsible for abolishing the A level. And unless you were going to be brave enough to have that fight...

Charles Clarke (24 October 2002 – 15 December 2004)

Could tell me how you came to be Education Secretary and what was the most pressing thing on your mind? Tony Blair phones you up one day and says, "Charles I'd like you for Education Secretary". This is immediately after Estelle Morris had resigned. What did you think?

Estelle is a great woman. I'd been a Junior Minister at the Department Education in 1998 for a year working with Estelle, she was the Minister of State, I was Parliamentary Under-Secretary on Schools, and then I was moved to the Home Office to Minister of State for Police.

Then the General Election came in 2001 and Tony wanted to bring me into the Cabinet but without a mainline portfolio, so I was appointed Chair of the Party and I think he thought because of the work I'd done with Neil [Kinnock] on working with the party [in the 1980s] I was the right person to make that happen. For a number of reasons, I wasn't the right person. Estelle then finally decided to go, and so Tony asked me to move within the Cabinet but to Education, which I was obviously delighted to do.

When you look back, what are your reflections on policy making in government? Should there be more policy stability for the sake of the education sector?

I wrote this book called The Too Difficult Box [about the failure of governments to tackle the most challenging policy questions] on things such as reforming the welfare state, banking regulations, climate change and so on and education didn't feature, possibly because I was too close to it. But I do think some of the themes do come up time and again in education.

But if you want to talk about achieving greater policy stability, I think you're talking about the wrong thing. I think it's obvious that reform does need to be achieved in education – it can't just stay the same – because society is changing. This conversation should be about what changes are the right changes, how do you do plan them, how do you implement them successfully.

The core point of that is while the Government gets criticised for making change happen or, more accurately, *trying* to make it happen, there are changes in society happening – such as the growth of technology – that means reform is necessary and the role of the government is to make sure the professionals have the capacity to deal with it.

So the question is, in our adversarial politics, can you create long-termism and how do you do that? Many technocratic people talk about long-termism because they believe that people of goodwill would be able to achieve it, but they never involve the political people.

But for political people to agree to a long-termist approach is difficult for all kinds of reasons and I often argued that there should be a real effort to take one or two areas, social care is a very good example, where you say OK we're going to take this area and see whether we can get all-party agreement on how to proceed. But that is very hard.

The technocrats, in this case headteachers, might be centrists full of good sense, I mean nothing against them, but actually it won't work unless you get political commitment at a party leadership level.

I'm going to tell you one anecdote that I want to get off my chest. In 2014, I was appointed to a Royal Commission by the Royal Society to look into maths and science education. At the end of it one of the recommendations that came about was that maths and science education needed stability in the curriculum and less chopping and changes with Government ministers coming in and out and I thought that was right. We agreed to try and see if we could make that happen, so I went to see Michael Gove who was Secretary of State at the time and we had a very good conversation. Credit to Michael, I don't always give him credit, but I give him credit on this one because he was ready to engage in the process and he said he would come to a meeting convened by the Royal Society, and we had a breakfast meeting with Michael Gove and Liz Truss, who was the Minister of State at that time, David Laws as the senior Liberal at that time, and on the Labour side we had Tristram Hunt and Kevin Brennan. We had some people from some of the quangos too, and it was supported by the Permanent Secretary as well.

Everyone accepted that it might be possible to reach agreement, but the key area of contention was about the cutting of school labs – that was what the Government was doing – and could Labour accept that kind of change, or did they feel that they needed to make the argument that the Government were behaving disgracefully in this approach. And so, it was harder in a way for Labour to sign up for it but they did.

And so we had a very good two-hour meeting and it was agreed – including by Michael, I give him full credit on that – that I would chair a small group of Special Advisors from the three parties to see whether we could get to agreement on this and if we could agree a timescale about where it would be. And the concept at the end

was if agreement was reached, then there would be a statement that went out in all political parties' names saying we've agreed to X and Y and Z about the maths and science curriculum.

I really thought it was good progress and I was convinced by Michael that he thought that this was a worthwhile ambition. I argued to the Labour people that they would gain credibility in opposition by being seen to be serious and relatively statesmanlike in this sort of thing and not just doing a slag off on whatever was in front of them and they accepted that argument.

That afternoon Michael Gove was sacked as Secretary of State for Education and Liz Truss was moved on. I then wrote to Nicky Morgan to ask her if we could recover this and she never replied to the letter, and was never ready to engage in it.

It's one of the problems with the number of Secretaries of State for Education we get through. They just end up being very frightened of the job and they go tip-toeing through the process. And so our ambition just stopped. For me it was a symbol of the difficulties in this area.

It's very hard to depoliticise education...

Everybody thinks they know what a good sensible education is, what a good sensible curriculum would be, but you cannot say that there is some objective truth about how you teach and what you teach. Just look at the attempts to decolonise the curriculum, or the fact that the likelihood of getting to university relates to the economic decile in which you live. It's highly political, sorry.

What were your priorities when you became Education Secretary?

Now the key issue we had to take on was tuition fees and universities.

There were issues about schools and the first decision I took was to make the question of specialist schools less competitive and to start down a path of making all schools specialist schools. I still think it's sad they were was chopped out by the Tories in 2010, and I still think the idea of having language specialist schools, sports specialist schools had quite a lot going for it, in terms of that work/school relationship that we were talking about. CPD as well.

Anyway, I decided that my number one priority at that point was to deal with tuition fees, and university funding, and so I did what I've always done in these things, as I did later in the Home Office on immigration, which is to try and immerse myself in the policy with a group of officials and to go right through it and think through what we should be doing and I did that over a very quick period – I was appointed in late November or something like that and we got the White Paper out in January.

My first question to Tony [Blair] was look, I don't know what I'm gonna come up with, whether it should be a graduate tax, so what constraints are you placing on me in this? And he said, as he always said, contrary to what people thought, that he'd got no constraints, and that I must come up with what I thought was the best system. He predicted I would decide that a graduate tax was not a good idea when I started looking at the merits of the case, but said that if I came back to him having concluded that this was the route to go down then he'd be happy to go with that and put it through.

So, I went right through it in detail, came up with the proposals that said my view was we shouldn't look at funding on its own, and so we published a White Paper which dealt with the role of universities in modern life which included, obviously, funding as a core element. And the question was if you wanted universities to play a dynamic role in society how should they be funded in a resilient way?

Anyway, we went right through all that and we published it and we talked to a lot of organisations, funnily enough including Martin Wolf from the FT, and we had some quite interesting conversations about that.

And anyway, I did things which people like Alison Wolf [HE and FE adviser in today's Downing Street] wouldn't have agreed with about extending university status to a load of institutions which were providing university level undergraduate education but weren't able to compete for students because they couldn't call themselves universities. We started it late: the story of a five-year Parliament is that if you've got controversial reforms it's much better to do them very early on so you've got time for them to settle.

We did that with politics carrying on through it all, with the entertaining Gordon Brown interventions at various points. He was very clear he wasn't going to allow any new tax so a graduate tax wasn't a possibility. He was very clear thar Labour was not going to be a tax increasing party, Labour is against new taxations, and that he was only prepared to sanction one new tax in each parliament and that had already gone, the raising of National Insurance paid to the NHS. So a graduate tax was a non-starter anyway.

But you did you come down with Gordon Brown against the idea of a graduate tax?

Yes, comprehensively I was completely against it and I am even more strongly against it now.

There are a lot of people who possibly understand this less well than you, who argue that this is essentially just a branding exercise.

People have sought to brand the fees as a graduate tax because they think a graduate tax is more acceptable to people. But the fact is it's not actually a tax. The key difference, which is essential, is where do the resources collected by either a fee or a graduate tax go. So if you have a graduate tax you're giving the money to the Treasury and then you're relying on the Treasury then to hand it back out to the universities at the discretion of the Chancellor at any given time according to the overall economic situation. That's an entirely different state of affairs from a university collecting the revenue from a fee and using it for its own purposes. And that's also relevant in terms of the future because if a university can predict an income stream of X, Y or Z on fees over the next three or four years, it can generate money on the back of that to invest in its buildings, support and so on, but if it can't predict that because it's dependent on the Chancellor saying what they will get, they can't. So, they are actually quite fundamentally different in nature.

There were a number of things in this area that I hoped to be able to achieve and wasn't able to achieve; I would have liked to see employers contributing by paying more NI if they employed a graduate. I think that would have made a big difference, the biggest argument against it which is a genuine argument is does that disincentivise employers from employing graduates. But I think in the case of many organisations it wouldn't affect them because they'll say we'll still have to recruit on this basis. It might not be in the case of bar staff in a hotel. It would change the dynamic.

There are three beneficiaries from university education: obviously the individual learner and the employers, who should pay, but the Tories undermined that by tipping the balance entirely towards the graduates themselves by increasing the fee to £9,000. Then there's society, who should pay because we need educated people. And then lastly, the employer. In my time the individual and the State were contributing but not the employer and we should revisit that.

Looking back with hindsight to when Labour 'forced through' top up fees, if you had known then what you know now about how that winds up as £9,000, with all the controversy that surrounds it, would you have still have pressed on?

Yes, because I think the principle was entirely correct and the argument that you should never do any reform because a successive Government might take that reform in a different direction, I've never accepted that as an argument, I think it's a really bad argument and I couldn't accept it.

So, there are those that would say the same about specialist schools and academisation, that you started the conversation about differentiating between comprehensive schools, that this was the start of the narrative that leads us to where we are now.

Well there are a number of things about this, actually. Firstly, Labour was completely asleep on the job in 2010 to 2015, and Michael Gove ran a very, very successful operation to claim that his academy programme was the same as Labour's, that it was the lineal successor of Labour's academy programme. He was allowed to get away with that and he shouldn't have been allowed to get away with it because it wasn't true.

Our academies programme, which was about 200 out of 25,000 schools, was about reversing education disadvantage in very well identified areas. You can have an argument about whether it was a good policy or not, but that's what it was about. Michael's approach was nearer the foundation schools approach that Ruth Kelly tried to get through and then Tony dropped because of opposition from Labour's back benches, which was about giving more independence for State schools from their local education authority.

I thought Michael's policy was madness, and I still think it today. It's madness to have primary schools as part of the academy programme because I think all primary schools in Britain should be Local Authority schools, and I don't see any merit of the academies there. I think very few primary schools have got capacity to run themselves in this way, though it's true that in academy chains that some of them have been run quite well but not many.

Michael Gove's academies were different to the academies that we had in a significant way. But in linguistic communication terms Michael was successful and people like me were failures in allowing him to take credit for that approach and

make it seem like it's a simple extension. And Labour were asleep on the job after 2010 and didn't challenge that narrative.

And yet you still say you reject the idea that when you're in government you shouldn't make any change for fear of what an incoming opposition would do with it.

Well the question for me is, as a former Secretary of State for Education, should I try to get involved in discussions about what happens after my term.

Now you can have an interesting discussion about what's happened under academisation, and I've thought about trying to write what I think a Labour education policy ought to be if we were in Government, and the question of where should the school improvement function lie in this current system is not at all easy to see. Is it the right idea to roll back all primaries under LA control? I don't really see the case for that kind of structural change.

So do you set up a new school improvement function, a new quango? Doesn't sound right, does it? I don't know what I think the answer is but …

Nicky Morgan was the last person to have a coherent solution when she suggested the wholesale academisation of the entire system which was obviously widely rejected and, because of Brexit, never got to Parliament…

But even with that I don't think there was an obvious school improvement function in that idea. If you asked just about anybody in the educational world today what they expect the status of schools across England to be in 10 years, people would have real difficulty answering your question and I don't think they'd say we expect all schools to be academies. I'd also say the local role is quite important.

Anyway, back to your time in office. What were your regrets?

I think the biggest failure of the Labour Government over the whole of my time in education was the failure to implement the Tomlinson Report and that was immediately after my time. My department, with David Milliband who had done the

work as Minister of State, had done a lot working on the policy and in building consensus. But then there were changes in the cabinet.

I remember it so very, very well: I had been at an Education Ministers' meeting somewhere in Europe, Maastricht or somewhere, and I was coming back on the train and I was being told that Tony was going to ask me move to the Home Office and I was thinking what the hell should I do. And I got off the train at Waterloo and went straight to Downing Street and he asked me to be Home Secretary and I said no, I want to carry through the education reforms, I was enjoying education. But eventually he said to me – and it was my vanity which killed me – "are you telling me you're not going to accept one of the great offices of State?" And so I said well OK then.

And I don't regret it, I loved being Home Secretary and I think I did some good things as Home Secretary, but the immediate consequence of that was in the run up to the June 2005 election, the plans for the diploma were dropped.

Ruth Kelly became Secretary of State which was of itself a very surprising appointment. I fully expected David Miliband to be appointed because he was my Minister of State, or if not, that Patricia Hewitt could have done it very well, there were a number of top politicians who could have gone into that role. Ruth is a highly intelligent and effective person, but she wasn't a political heavyweight and she came under pressure from Tony and Andrew Adonis in particular not to proceed with Tomlinson because of our vulnerability to the charge that we were proposing getting rid of A-levels from the Daily Mail etc. in a pre-election year.

I think that was terrible, I absolutely know if I'd still been there I would have won that argument and we would have been able to do it. If David Miliband had been there he would have won that argument and carried it through. I don't know what Ruth's own real view of it was, but the fact was the political argument was don't do anything controversial or difficult directly before a General Election particularly which affects the education of every child in the country. So, we didn't do Tomlinson, I don't know why we didn't do Tomlinson immediately after the 2005 General Election which we could have done.

I think it was probably killed off so that the Tories couldn't say well if Labour are elected they will abolish A-levels. But that was the biggest failure. It would have brought together education and work, it had a range of different types of qualifications, it was baccalaureate-style and most importantly it got some consensus and agreement from the universities and employers that this was the way to go. I'm not clear myself why we don't simply return to that now, almost pick it off the shelf.

In general, I think the relationship between education and the world of work at all levels is completely insufficiently thought through and it needs to be much more integrated. That was one of the reasons for our specialist schools.

We set up the Sector Skills Councils to cover the whole economy, and I still believe the concept of bringing together the educational world, the employers, the employees and the Government to say on a sectoral basis such as IT skills, hospitality skills, whatever, to try and sort out the right approach to education, what skills were needed, the kind of curriculum required, what skills from what institutions etc.

It always happened in construction and engineering, and it was beginning to happen in IT, but the big important sectors of the economy, like hospitality, were never ready and the employers were never ready to engage in the process. I am worried the government's current vision for universities is far too limited in scope.

One thing we haven't really spoken about is that relationship between the political office in the DFE and the civil service.

Well, a) I'm prejudiced and b) it's because it's true. I'm prejudiced because my father was a Permanent Secretary. So I was brought up in a culture of respecting the civil service. He was a Deputy Secretary in the Treasury and the first of Tony Benn's Permanent Secretaries at the Ministry of Technology.

And my mother, as far as I know, has the unique distinction of having been married to two Permanent Secretaries. Her first husband was Bill Tile, who was the Permanent Secretary of DFE at some point.

I never found, I think there are plenty of issues to talk about the competence of the civil service, but I've never believed what I'll call for now the Barbara Castle/Tony Benn thesis of the civil service as betrayers of what politicians are trying to do. I think they have played the role they ought to play of questioning you and interrogating what you're really trying to achieve and also pointing out the difficulties and issues that there are. David Normington was an excellent Permanent Secretary that I had, Michael Bichard, David Blunkett's Permanent Secretary was excellent. I think to describe either Michael Bichard or David Normington as brakes on reform would be completely wrong and I would say they were utterly driven by loyalty to try to achieve what the Government of the day was trying to achieve. And the idea they were standing in the way of things is quite wrong. In that sense I think that Dominic Cummings' general thesis is fundamentally wrong, I don't think it's true.

Now you then have a question of competence and that's a difficult question because these jobs as Permanent Secretaries and so on are very tough jobs and there were different types of Permanent Secretary. There were *éminence grise* type Permanent Secretaries who would dare to give policy advice to the Minister and there were implementer type Permanent Secretaries, which David Normington was a very good example of, who looked very carefully at how you should actually implement policies and would look at a whole string of issues about the relationship between local

education authorities, the Government and quangos like OFSTED and OFQUAL – how do you do that, how do you align them in different ways, which are very difficult problematic questions.

I certainly don't think as a general statement that the civil service ever tries to frustrate reform or undermine ministers. What I would say, and this is partisan, is that many of the reforms which have been under discussion since 2010 have simply not been thought through, are saloon bar policies, and if the saloon bar policy comes up against an effective civil servant, asking how do you want to do this, then it will be a difficult relationship.

Do you think there would be any truth in the criticism that that is because institutionally the civil service is more sympathetic to a Labour Government than a Conservative one?

I just don't think that's true. Ask Ken Baker the question about the civil service when he was putting through his fundamental reforms in 1988. I'd be very surprised if he said they were a block. But I would expect him to say that they challenged his way of thinking in a way that helped it to evolve and be more successful and I think that's what should be.

But I certainly don't think the civil service is intrinsically opposed to change, it intrinsically challenges change and says what's the case for change compared to the status quo but that's what they should do.

Relatedly, what was your relationship like with evidence and research?

There isn't a good relationship between Government policy-making and research, it's almost a complete dialogue of death about that and I think that's a problem. But I blame research and I also think the timescales simply are completely out of sync for what you have to do as a politician. For example, if you ask the question, which was one I was asking when I was Secretary of State, do smaller class sizes improve education performance, all the great research would produce no answers.

I think generally it concludes no.

There's a funny bit of research in Missouri which suggests no, but intrinsically nobody believes it.

If you had £100 million to spend on health everybody would say that's fine you'd have some confidence that at the end of the day health would be improved, people would live longer, the NHS would be better at dealing with diseases. There's a lot of evidence out there and there's a close relationship between the health research world and health implementation. If you said I've got £100 million to spend on education you'd need some convincing it would make any different at all to the educational outcomes and quality of what's happening in classrooms.

There was, and is, a concerted effort in the EEF, the Education Endowment Foundation, to try and do something about that.

I'd say up to a point. I think Michael Gove did a good thing when he allocated a chunk of money to it and in general the whole 'what works' movement is one that I support. And they're almost unique at the EEF in trying to measure educational improvement as a result of particular projects or interventions.

But I wouldn't say it's widely applied or thought about, I wouldn't say it had much impact.

What do you think about the structure of the Department – is it well suited to making good policy?

The biggest change that was made, well there are two big ones, firstly where is higher education located, I had higher education, when I finished it was moved to the DTI or whatever it's called.

And you can make perfectly intelligent arguments about both set ups: you can also make perfectly intelligent arguments about skills where that should be located too. As it happens, I was actually Secretary of State for Education and Skills. But there's serious instability in the changing of those things around again and again and it's not always clear what the rationality is behind it.

I can see an argument, though I don't agree with it, that says the DfE [with early years, schools, skills and HE] is too big, and you should make it smaller, but then the question of how to make it smaller is a very tricky one. You could, for example, talk about relationships between the Secretary of State and the Ministers of State: there was an era in the Wilson Labour Government when the idea of Super Ministries of just five or six across the whole of government with sub-Ministries dealing with different areas was promoted a lot, and I think there's a serious, serious question about that.

There was one big change when we were in government, which I strongly supported, and which was backed by Tony, but I wonder whether if it was wise in retrospect, was moving children's social services into education. I was for it because I thought it brought a lot of coherence. Firstly, I thought, and think, that the greatest scandal of education in Britain over my time has been the education of looked-after children, which is disastrous for the individuals in question and of course has implications for crime – and I believe that in the Department of Health, children in social services care was simply left out of the whole system.

And I thought if they'd brought it within education we could get a better framework that would mean every Local Authority in the country was free to get education and children's social services right – and to get the two working together.

However, that led to serious bureaucratic issues that originated in where the leader of education and social services locally came from: was it the social services tradition or the education tradition? This led to lots of issues which I think probably were a consequence of what we did, which led to a further weakening of local education authorities. Although I still think the concept was right, I've got a big doubt about that.

Ed Balls (28 June 2007 – 11 May 2010)

Looking back, what are your main thoughts on your time in office?

The big reflection I have is that on the one hand you can decide to just be very focused, choose one or two things as a secretary of state and you can particularly drive that issue with that policy lever or another. And that's not necessarily a bad thing to do. And if you take the earliest phase of David Blunkett's tenure, I think he did that around testing. But by time I arrived we were thinking about the culture of the whole school and children's world – and the Children's Plan we produced. And in a way, trying to find lots of different ways to bring those things together was what we were about. And there's times when I think to myself, you know, probably we tried to do too much and maybe it was too broad. But you never know which of the ones are going to land and which are not.

The other very striking thing about the Department for Education is that, even if the government changes policy, you find out afterwards that schools are still carrying on with the previous regime because they liked it. And therefore, if you do things which people find attractive and engage with them, then those cultural things can have kind of lasting impact if you persuade people.

I'm not sure: I think that at the margin, I would say that we try to do too many things, we're in too much of a hurry, but there was a reason for trying to be broad, which is we were trying to make people think in a different way.

That was a whole child approach, which at a practical level involved overseeing merging the children services department and education departments in local authorities.

Yeah, that had already happened officially. But I don't think that happened in practice, and it wasn't yet in any way embedded, not within local authorities, it wasn't embedded because they didn't have a common management leadership development track, which I think there would be much more of now. But you know, one of the things that we did after Baby P was to start to get people thinking about how children's services and education came together, because there was a problem which was that people tended to either come up the education world and became

Director of Children's Services, or they'd come up in the social care world. And you didn't yet have people who had spent periods of their career in both.

Another area that we really focused on was how could you address every barrier to a child's learning, progress and wellbeing? And lots of those happened outside of school. How much could we include the school in thinking about those wider issues? And how much of other agencies' thinking about addressing those could contribute to children's learning? This was about wellbeing and happiness as well as their health, and it all came back to asking how we could get every child to make the most of their potential.

A lot of the things that happen in the classroom and in the exam hall are because of what is happening outside the classroom. And the world seemed to me to be divided into those teachers who actually saw that and wanted to get involved, and those schools who just thought, that isn't really part of our job and let's keep our focus on a narrower focus.

You know, I've never really thought about this before, but it's the way you're talking. It's almost like you were trying to bring down a bit more of Callaghan's famous 'Secret Garden' Ruskin speech. Callaghan was talking about curriculum and teaching approaches, but in a way you're talking about kind of integrating schools into the wider ecosystem, and that's another part of that story.

Exactly. This gets to part of the tension. John Dunford [former General Secretary, ASCL] always said to me that the trouble with the children's plan is you guys are trying to do too much; you go too broad; you should really focus on the learning of children who are disadvantaged. That's what you should focus on, really focus on that. But in my first week in the job, I said to John, I want to go and see the head teacher who you think faces the biggest challenges and in a school where our department could make the biggest difference. And he sent me to this school in Banbury.

I spent the whole day in the school, a lot of time with the head, but also going into different classes and talking about the things which made things harder for her and for the school. Many of the things which we did around trying to support teaching in the classroom and parental responsibility, which was quite tough stuff, was influenced by that. But also things like the role of primary schools in identifying learning difficulties in eight, nine, 10, 11 year old boys, one of the biggest problems they had. Children would arrive with behavioral problems, and it was only after a year, they would unearth some of the learning issues, which had never been properly identified and spotted and were instead identified as disruption. And so she desperately needed primary schools to work better with health services around learning barriers.

At the time this kind of sharing of information across children services didn't happen. So for the Banbury head, this was all about learning, but it starts with this broader agenda of the health service and criminal justice system, or the police – and of course primaries. So by the time the kids arrived at 11, she knew what was needed and all of them could learn. But, you know, there's lots of head teachers who didn't have that view. They tended to be heads in schools that had less disadvantage. The only disadvantage they had they could hide in the median. One of the very striking things to me was that a high proportion of children on free school meals went to schools where less than 30% of the kids were on free school meals. If you are like that school in Banbury, which had closer to 50%, those kids directly affect your results. And if you are a school where it's a small minority, you can just not worry about that too much, because the average is still going to be driven by less complex kids.

If you're at 20% FSM and getting above average results there was no pressure from up state. It's obvious it's not doing its job properly, I would say, but no pressure was exerted from performance tables, but these kids has been just sort of drifted off everybody's radar. But if you believe every child matters, then this is the stuff you need to be looking at.

Let me take you back further. Tell me how you came to have the job?

Gordon Brown had asked me to be Chancellor the weekend before, and then changed his mind on the Monday or Tuesday, which was fine. So we looked at all the reshuffle boards of all the departments in his office and he said, which do you want to do? And I'd been working with the Treasury and others on this idea of establishing a children's department rather than simply the schools department. So that's the one. So that was how it happened.

So, you had, if not formally, had some run in? One of the lessons that is emerging in this project is that the Secretaries of State who were more confident about what they did and the legacy they'll have are those who had had time in opposition before taking the job to formulate essentially a policy slate. Did you feel that in a weird way, because of the change of prime minister, you had a bit of that?

Well I hadn't been in a position to get into the weeds of education nor had I been thinking about schools policy like I was shadow Education Secretary, but I'd been at the Treasury from 1997 to 2004 where we had done all of the spending reviews and

the kind of conversations we had with number 10 about education spending, the allocations, and the output targets and the kind of policy expectations we had. But I hadn't been involved in policies around testing or literacy or numeracy hours because that wasn't something where there was a Treasury angle. But then the thing was in the year before Gordon became Prime Minister, we knew Tony Blair was standing aside, and it was going to be Gordon and there were certain lines of policy that we worked on preparing for that transition.

So you walked in on day one and what were your first priorities?

Well, my first priority on the day was wanting the department and the school's stakeholders to be excited about the opportunity that would come from thinking about children's policy and the child as a whole, rather than separating schools and children's services. And what Every Child Matters meant as an agenda through education, and was something which we could all work on together. And to me, I think that the reality was that the department was a bit siloed in the schools side and 16 plus, and had kind forgotten children's social care. And the two needed to be brought together. There was a danger that the individual teachers' unions and professional bodies might have thought that this could be diluting their influence. And so on that first day, I spoke to all the unions in the social partnership and NUT about whether or not it was possible to kind of yield the end of the issue.

We also decided that we would have a six-month children's plan and that would be launched in a few weeks. And what we should try to get a sort of commonality and momentum behind a broadening of the agenda.

Finally, I was also keen to see how we could avoid academies being an open sore.

So how did you do that? They were a Blair initiative weren't they? What did Brown's No 10 think about them?

There were two phases. Phase one was "this is really quite expensive - prove that it's really value for money". Then the second phase, which I think had really happened a couple of years before I became Secretary of State, was that the evidence began to come together that where you use the academy change and leadership change and injection of resources and ethos to break a bad cycle, the impact on the results could be very powerful. And that was why I was in favour of them. But there was a worry that

this was just causing a big political, ideological, rhetorical divide within the school's world.

And so what I wanted was academies to be empowered as part of the school system, as a way of telling you about underperformance and tackling those schools where the school was failing children, without undermining the ethos of state education.

And so, I think in those first couple of weeks we did some easy things that made them less divisive. We dropped the entry fee for sponsors and said that we would encourage sponsors who were in the public sector. So if a university or further education college wants to sponsor an academy in their area, that was something we were totally in favor of. And the sponsor didn't have to be a private business or a philanthropist with £2million pounds. A second one was we said that it was a requirement on all academies that they teach the national curriculum on Maths, English, science, and IT.

Outwood Grange was a high-performing school, actually in my constituency, which was taking on all of these different school improvement roles, and yet it wasn't allowed to be an Academy because it was already a school that was succeeding. So we changed the rules to allow schools to become an academy and sponsor other schools.

I said to Andrew Adonis this issue about only philanthropists running schools is the problem. Why can't we have universities? He said, well, that'd be great. So we did that. I said, this thing about the curriculum, it's a real open sore, but are there any academies that don't teach the national curriculum? He said, none. I said, well, in that case, what's it about? And he said, it's freedom. I said, I don't mind them being innovative around things that aren't in the core.

The other thing which we dropped, which they didn't like was this language about them being independent state schools. I mean they're financed by the taxpayer, and actually in every area where we needed academies it is the Local Authority which is triggering bringing them in. We actually wanted the local authorities to improve, not do away with them.

Which brings us to the National Challenge?

We said to every Local Authority in the country, if you've got schools below 30% (getting 5 good GCSE, including English and Maths), we need to know the plan. It could be to academise, it could be for the school to join an academy chain, but you can't have no plan. The point is that the idea that simultaneously the Local Authority has got to turn around underperforming schools but also make them "independent" by turning them into academies is ridiculous. And actually the "independence" thing

was just a piece of rhetoric. And let's be honest it fed into the philosophy that Michael Gove picked up and ran with later. But that wasn't part of our view.

But the point is, if you always made those things look like they were an external, private takeover, it destabilised the schools' sector and the wider community of services.

My point is that we were trying to bring together all the services across a given area that had an impact upon the wellbeing and progress of children. You needed the schools, you needed the health service and the police and children's services. But what you couldn't do is expect all the other schools to work together, to try to make sure that you managed exclusions and had capacity to deal with the hardest end of where exclusions have to be done, but allow one school to opt out of that because they were supposedly an "independent" academy and can therefore just expel. That's why we insisted that all schools, including academies, were in a behaviour partnership.

Did Michael Gove hijack the Academies policy? Do you feel that it's something where you could have done more to the negate this?

One of the lessons I kind of learned from being in government and then kind of studying these things is that the more you can embed something as part of the consensus of the age, the more chance you've got of it lasting. I wish that we had found ways to embed more of what we were doing into the consensus of the time. I don't think Michael was in a mood to embrace our agenda, however. I think he certainly wanted to the break the consensus.

But there is a big difference worth noting at this point – that the education sector is very different to other branches of government. The school's world is a very decentralized system in which you have more than 20,000 relatively independently minded headteachers with governing bodies, in the end do what they think is right. And so when I was Secretary of State, I went to all of the teacher's conferences every year and spoke to all of them. The thing I worked out pretty quickly was if you couldn't persuade them, they weren't going to do it. Whether you told them to do it or not. Actually less important than the instruction email was the school leaders themselves saying, this is the right thing to do.

That's why the social partnership was such a powerful driver for us. Because if you want hearts and minds, amongst head teachers, teachers, and their peers, that's how you change things.

Many talk about there only being really two policy levers in the department. One is accountability and one's money. If you attach money to something, you can make something happen. And if you make an accountability measure, you can make something happen. But apart from that, it's very hard to bring about change.

Well, I would say there is a third thing, which is hearts and minds. The people go into this because they have a moral passion. And if you can find a way to connect their sense of purpose to your agenda, then the accountability is really important and money is really important, but I think you can also kind of, you can make people feel they're a part of something bigger, you connect to something in them which motivates their view. And I think if you take the Michael Gove era, Michael did not manage with most schools and teachers to find that moral connection.

In the last 10 years, I've met heads in the street who tell me that they're still implementing our various reviews of the curriculum or Every Child Matters is still used at their school. People want to tell me how much they're still doing the stuff they decided was important for them at the time, independent of whether or not that was the judgement of the subsequent Secretary of State.

The thing Michael did was he took away the Local Authority involvement in school improvement. One of the problems with schools nowadays is the question of who's responsible for action on school improvement? Is it the Secretary of State? Is it the Local Authority?

Tell me about the formation of the department and whether you as Secretary of State had enough support in terms of policy. One of the things that's come up in these interviews is that the Secretary of State has a small office with, what, four or five, six people in it. And then there's an army of civil servants, and it's quite a significant divide and getting stuff done is hard.

I think I was quite unusual because I had been on the inside of the centre for a long time. And I wasn't worried about having a relationship with the Prime Minister – for some in the role, the job is to fight off the Prime Minister. And David Bell was from the beginning a very supportive Permanent Secretary. He was really good. We had really good ministers. They knew what they were doing, had been around for a while. I brought in and was able to bring in good policy and media people.

And then I had Joanne Daniels who had been the head of the Treasury team on education. So I think we were good at connecting up between the centre and the Treasury and the department. And I think in general, the civil servants were all quite approachable. One of the big challenges I had when I came in was the department had become used to either being told what to do by the Treasury, or often being told what to do by number 10. And I arrived and I didn't really want to be told by the Treasury or number 10 what to do.

I wanted us to work out what we should do, and so the first month or couple of months, it was a struggle. And me and David Bell used to talk about how we do more to improve this. You'd get people around the table. And I would say, "we've got this problem. What are we going to do?" And the senior civil servants will say, "well, what do you want us to do?" And I would say what I want to know is what you think we should do. And they would say, "what do number 10 think we should do?" And I'd say, "forget Number 10, that's not the issue. What do you think we should do?"

To get people to have the confidence to say what they thought and talk about it openly, and then have an open conversation about how we were going to persuade the Treasury or number 10, was a real challenge. And I think that took me a bit of time because I don't think that's the way it had been run before.

The Children's Plan gave the department an opportunity to ask big questions about what it was for, and also to build an internal ethos, and also with the stakeholders where it was okay to discuss and debate and look at evidence and look at facts and say, well, could we do this better?

Different Secretaries of State are different, and some are much more defensive or much more private, or want to keep things much closer or never want to be seen to be overruled from the outside. Whereas I think it just wasn't how I wanted to do things, I carried on the way I'd been in the Treasury for the previous eight years, which is, I always wanted to have the most open conversation you could have. I think it was quite empowering for the senior people in the department, you felt as though you had a real say over what we were going to do.

Was that a good way of reducing the likelihood of the law of unintended consequences – policies not fulfilling their original vision? And can you think of any examples where you tried to do something which didn't turn out how you wanted it?

If you take something like the National Challenge, we had lots of conversations about it in advance, and we decided this is what we're going to do. And the way it worked out was how we thought it would go. Senior leaders in the school sector said, there's pluses and minuses to this, and this will be the collateral damage, and we debated

whether it was the right thing to do, and what we could do to mitigate. But everybody went into that with completely open eyes. And I think that was a good example of, you know, of good policy discussion in the department. There were lots of consequences – but we knew what they were going to be. But we decided it was the right thing to do to help those schools that were struggling the most.

I remember that much. I mean, lots of people were very worried about it on the outside.

That's true. But I think we felt we'd been in government for 10 years and reduced the number of schools who were doing not as well as they should by a lot. And we'd also shown how lots of schools in the greatest disadvantage could really turn things around and we had a range of different levers and, you know, I think we just didn't really want people to make excuses.

People would say, you know, we can debate whether the National Challenge worked, and I don't feel defensive but I'm sure there'll be people who would say we could have done things better. My point is that we all went into that with open eyes. We all knew what we were doing, and everybody was kind of on board with how we went about things.

Do you think the turnover of Secretaries of State is a challenge in terms of kind of getting consensus or genuine policy narrative that allows time for policies to bed in?

When I was finished, I was the second longest serving since Keith Joseph. David Blunkett the longest after Keith Joseph. You would never do the same thing with the Chancellor.

Why is it a bad thing?

It's all about persuasion and about relationships and because to do it well you have to persuade partners. There is kind of your common agenda, hence my calls to all of the stakeholders the first day. If you are continually having to rebuild those relations

again and again, and again, it makes it much harder to persuade people to enact lasting change. So I think there was too much turnover.

But on the other hand, if you see the Secretary of State, not as the person who is really shaping that agenda, then you might not worry. But David Blunkett clearly did, Michael Gove clearly did. And ours was a new agenda. So that was what we had to do – we had to shape the agenda. But if you don't see the Secretary of State as doing that, and instead see the Secretary of State as someone who is sort of enacting the number 10 view, then it is less of a worry. You can change it regularly because you know, the continuity is elsewhere. Before us, I think maybe Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis thought they were the continuity, but I'm not sure that's wise because you ended up with too much turnover and not enough really embedded relationships.

A related question is about research and evaluation. An ongoing complaint of the teaching profession is the education policy is ill-informed at the start and no one really evaluates it afterwards. And then everybody wants the next things, and there aren't really lessons learned. Do you think that's fair?

If I think back to my time in government, we were, in 1997, very empirical-evaluation-based. When we set up the new deal in 1997 in the beginning, there was a big evaluation of the new deal, of everyone who was involved in. It was actually the chief of the Institute of Fiscal Studies who did it. Things such as the educational maintenance allowance and all the things we did around child poverty, we were very evaluation driven. I don't remember the same kind of evaluation culture being at the Department for Education by the time I arrived.

The department was data driven, lots of looking at the progress of children in year seven and looking at what the accountability data was telling us. And in a decentralized system the accountability system becomes vital. But that isn't the same as evaluation. I'm not sure if the evaluation culture was the same and maybe that's my fault.

The other thing which I think was reported in that period but we need to think about was how accountability drove policy. Accountability can drive really bad outcomes if you get the accountability wrong, but the need to be accountable can sometimes really focus your policy intervention in a good way.

Thank you so much for your time.

There's just one thing I'd like to add from this period.

I think that the Social Partnership as a way of getting buy-in for decisions was very important. If you think hard about policy, and you believe in government, then you want to be good at it. But you always have to think about government failure too, and so you should always be worried about vested interests. But in my experience this wasn't true of the social partnership, indeed the opposite. There were many who thought it would be an obstacle to reform, progress and risk-taking but I think it was the opposite. This kind of stakeholder engagement can really work.

Michael Gove (12 May 2010 – 15 July 2014)

What did you first think when you arrived in the Department for Education?

We wanted to move fast, and there were several things to our advantage.

Firstly, I'd been lucky in that we spent the best part of three years preparing. It's not often that you get someone who's been a Shadow Minister moving into the department with an agenda. In subsequent ministerial jobs I've had, it's taken some time to work out what it was that we should and shouldn't be doing. Here we had a plan. Obviously, it was a coalition government, so there was an initial – not concern – but there was initial uncertainty about whether or not I would do the job and who the Lib Dem in the team would be. But it became relatively clear early on that the Lib Dems would be supportive of our agenda. I developed quite a good relationship with David Laws when we were in opposition together and it got better, for the most part, when we were in government.

Then there was the fact that the day I was appointed the PM made clear that Dom [Dominic Cummings] wasn't going to come to the department with me and he wasn't going to be in government. We'd worked out our plans with him – and a variety of others, including Rachel Wolf – at the heart of it so that was disconcerting. But it was still exciting to arrive.

I remember that in preparation for our arrival they [the civil service] did away with all of Ed Balls' Department for Children School and Families (DCSF) rainbows and they put up this sort of stark blue Department for Education branding everywhere. I remember this feeling of disorientation. I remember the suavity of [then permanent secretary Sir] David Bell as he introduced me to the team and I remember him introducing me to my private office. They were incredibly friendly, but I was conscious that all of them had just a few days before been working for Ed. And I'd been the person who at various different times had been asking awkward questions - criticising their handling of the recent Sats scandal, for example - or that Ed had wanted to get some policy and legislation through in the parliamentary wash-up before the election and we'd been bloody-minded and difficult about it.

But we wanted to crack on and we persuaded David Cameron and the rest of the Coalition government leadership that we should have one of the government's earliest bills. The Academies Bill was designed as an echo of the original Blair Bill in 1997 that abolished assisted places and created a limit on class sizes. And the idea was that our bill would be both a signal of intent but also important in itself, so that

you could have new converter academies that autumn – we already knew that there were a number of schools that were keen on the idea.

The other issues [we needed to address] included the department's funding. On the one hand, we had a good story on the revenue, and Nick Clegg and David Laws were helpful initially making sure that we did, but we had a difficult position on capital. And that, of course, led to the Building Schools for the Future fiasco.

There were a combination of factors in this story. I got carried away with myself because I thought – when David Laws and others had made their statement on reducing expenditure – "yes, this is necessary". I thought it was wasteful; I thought that the BSF money wasn't being used particularly well.

It was a complete fiasco principally because we should have taken more time to get it right. I was concentrating on why the programme was a mistake, and how much money was going to be saved. I was completely tone deaf to the fact that individuals, MPs, teachers and others were expecting their school to be refurbished – and then suddenly that hope was taken away and that was going to be painful. I remember for weeks after we were dealing with the reverberations, trying to calm councils, dealing with a judicial review, dealing with a variety of academy trusts that had been disappointed.

In some respects the BSF story perhaps proved a useful corrective. It didn't blunt my desire to crack on, but it also meant that we had to operate with a far greater degree of care. By the autumn [of 2010], we had the first convertor academies, we were finding the first free school sponsors, but it was also the case that some other things went wrong too – partly as a result of the spending review – including when we had the problem with the Booktrust's funding being withdrawn.

I think it was that Christmas, after the problem with Booktrust, that I persuaded David Cameron that the political climate and the political environment was such that to bring Dom back would be in all our interests.

Going back to that first piece of legislation, how dependent on the civil service were you for that? Or was it already very much ready?

We'd done quite a lot of work beforehand. Lord Lingfield [a schools policy adviser under the Thatcher administration] had had a team of lawyers and various kinds of education people in working with us, with Dom [Cummings] and Rachel [Wolf] and so on, to get an effective draft bill together. Also, I'd had several meetings with David Bell in advance, so he had a pretty good idea of what it was that we wanted to do.

Of course, it had to be adjusted once we were there, but in my recollection, it was more or less ready to go.

That agenda that you arrived with in 2010, and then through to 2014, how much was it your agenda? Or how much was coming out of Number 10?

We got solid support throughout from Number 10. And there were some very broad directional things David Cameron wanted to do. In broad terms, he said, what we did need to do was to make sure that the very best headteachers had the greatest degree of autonomy. We backed Blair's academies measures, so how can we build on it? And the idea of bringing in new providers in the free schools system had been around, but David didn't say that was a priority. We developed that as a complement to the academies programme.

But David was also very keen on using every means possible to get a message out about rigour and other standard Tory things – discipline and so on – which he emphasised that we should be on the front-foot on.

Nick Gibb was in the team and had been in David Cameron's – because of course David was shadow Education Secretary and Nick was his lieutenant – and David had alighted on systematic synthetic phonics, and had even mentioned it in his leadership speech in 2007 at Conservative Party Conference.

People would say that there was a lot of logical inconsistency with advocating for a greater degree of school autonomy, and then prescribing, or similar, exactly how people at Key Stage 1 should learn reading, but overall, David saw it as two different parts of the same equation, and so we filled in the rest.

But the particular things that were in my mind were that we developed our plans for in opposition were, what's the justification for all this? Why were we going around saying the education system needs to improve? The two things that became consistent themes were 1) we are falling behind internationally; and 2) if you look at us internationally, the gap between the educational attainment of the poorest and the wealthiest is huge. And even if you're not fixated on socio economic factors, the gap between the highest performing and the lowest performing schools and pupils is big too. Hence “raising the bar” and "closing the gap", which is the name of the document that we produce in opposition.

Then in government we had a civil service in the DFE – or at least the lead figures in the civil service at the DFE – who had been invested in certain things for a long time, which was difficult to change. When we arrived Jon Coles was the Director General (DG) in charge of schools; he'd been the successful overseer of the London challenge. As he helped us to write the Importance of Teaching, which was the white paper that we brought out that autumn, there was a slight default to what had worked in the London Challenge. Similarly, the DCSF had been bringing together youth policy and education and that took a little bit of time to move away from. But we reconstructed, or David Bell reconstructed, things, so that there was, essentially, a DG in charge of school structural reform, and a DG in charge of school standards.

How quickly did you get the civil service to a point where you were happy with their contribution to policymaking?

I don't think we were really completely happy until a year in. Once we'd launched the review of the national curriculum, more or less at that point, things were in a better place. Getting people – hiring people – to run the curriculum team; getting some of the people to run the free school programme, was critical.

There were various other issues along the way. One of the areas funnily enough where we had the biggest difficulty was in children's services. And that's partly because I never really got on with Tim Loughton [Conservative children's minister]. And also we wanted to tread carefully in this area because we wanted to make sure that [Liberal Democrat minister] Sarah Teather felt that we were sensitive to her concerns and her agenda She was not a natural ideological ally, but she was incredibly kind and supportive. We just wanted to make sure that we didn't rock the boat there. So that meant some of the changes that we might have made, we didn't.

Do you think Children's Services is a fit for the department?

I think it's perfectly logical for it to be there. But it's theoretically possible that it could be in MHCLG [now Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities], or in DHSC. But it's just as logical that it's in DFE and it had occupied a fair amount of Ed's [Balls] thinking because of the Baby P case.

How important was education research and evidence in your time formulating policy at the DfE? You've already mentioned Pisa...

For me, the critical thing was trying (a) to establish objective evidence in order to challenge some things that we felt were wrong, (b) to establish data points so that we could say this is working and (c) to try to move the debate within education.

One of the things that I argued against is when people – maybe the teaching union leaders – said the "profession says x", my argument was, well, but that's not the view of every teacher. And so during the time that we were there, almost in parallel, you had emerging through social media a sort of network of, what you might call "traditionalists", professionals who were often not even sympathetic to the Conservative party, but who were sympathetic to some of things that we were trying to do.

The second thing was not just leaning on the OECD but also looking at other research. People like Ed Hirsch and Dan Willingham, who Nick [Gibb] introduced me to, became very, very useful. This was part of our slight push against what we might call Ken Robinson-ism. Obviously, it's a romantic and attractive way of looking at education. But we felt – for a variety of reasons – it wasn't soundly based.

And we also wanted to make sure that we had people who cared about education, who could contribute but who didn't have to be in the department. That was everyone from Amanda Spielman and Daisy Christodoulou at Ark through to Jonathan Simons and Tom Shinner, who of course, came in. And we wanted to build that up.

The other thing also was leaning on proven school leaders. Michael Wilshaw at Mosbourne was manifestly a great headteachers but also other motivated individuals who were leading multi academy trusts and who could act as advocates for what we're doing. Some of them were people who were, prudently perhaps, a little less keen on the spotlight, like Ian Bauckham.

On that note, how important in the act of making policy do you think teachers/school leaders should be?

It was absolutely critical. We developed the idea of a teacher-in-residence [at the DfE] and the idea of having our advisor on discipline and behaviour being someone who had been a teacher themselves. That was absolutely central.

We always wanted to have teachers making the case for us. And there were a couple of sort of marquee moments, including - I do love her - when we had Katherine

Birbalsingh at party conference and so on. We wanted to signal that the argument that we were making overall was that we were moving towards – and I know phrases like this sound terrible – a self-improving school system. That we were moving to a system where it was professionals – teachers – who were leading the change. It was teachers who were leading it.

Some of those MATs and their leaders have recently, suddenly become quite critical of government.

There should always be a proper conversation between government and sector leaders. For example [super head Dame] Sally Coates, who I still see and admire, was critical of some of the stuff we did at certain points. And I wanted to hear her point of view, however critical.

For example, Sally thought we were on the wrong side of the [2012] GCSE English marking controversy because of the impact that it was having on her students. But I thought we had to stand by Amanda Spielman and Glenys Stacey [who together ran the regulator Ofqual] if we were going to break the back of grade inflation once and for all. But the thing is that I always wanted that kind of pushback from Sally, because a) I thought she's a great person b) she's done an incredibly impressive job and c) she's broadly aligned with what we want to do. When we were not aligned, I had enough respect for her to believe that actually she could be right and I might be wrong; it's just about making sure that you have the right conversation.

Conversely, I remember [former Labour schools minister] Andrew Adonis saying that when you visit schools a key sign that something is wrong is when you spend most of the time in the head's office and you don't get to spend time with the students. And the head spends most of the time talking about how they need more money for building x or whatever.

Having professionals who, while conscious of resourcing issues, want to talk about teaching, want to talk about the progress that students are making, want to show off the teachers and students – that's a sign that something good is happening.

Do you think it would ever be possible to take some the politics out of education policymaking?

I remember saying one of the differences with the new history curriculum is that it'll be fought over because people will have all sorts of views. They won't necessarily think of

themselves as ideological, but they will be ideological. I said that I don't necessarily think that there's necessarily a Lib Dem view of physics, but there is certainly a Lib Dem view, or liberal view, of history. And what applies to history, most saliently, applies to education overall. It's different in medicine, where you can generally arrive at a consensus about what a good outcome is, even now with anti vaxxers, it is still generally true.

But it's much more difficult in education to try to build consensus around the criteria by which you would consider an education system to be successful.

Even though you'll never achieve that goal of consensus, the idea of saying, let's try to look objectively at this, and if it's possible that there might be agreement over a specific outcome, how might it be best be achieved? I think it's a good idea. David Laws and the Education Policy Institute do very good work in this area.

Overall while we were in the DfE, we got to a point where there was more agreement than disagreement. But my worry now is that some of the, for want of a better word, anti-rigour arguments that had been in abundance have come back as a result of the pandemic. For example, some of the arguments being put forward, such as suggesting an inadequacy of GCSEs, reflect a misunderstanding of the value of independent assessment.

To what extent do you see your time at the DFE as part of that kind of arc? Perhaps one that starts with Ken Baker?

Yes, I think that's completely right. You could theoretically argue that it begins with [Jim Callaghan's] Ruskin speech in 1976, actually. Basically, up until '76, education was a "Secret Garden", and it only had two really contested political arguments: funding (i.e. politicians need to give us more money), and selection vs comprehensive education. There then followed the early Tory period, and a recognition that something needed to change and we were moving towards GCSEs. Then [Ken] Baker comes in, makes his reforms and puts the critical elements in place: increased school autonomy, and better accountability through national curriculum, inspection, appropriate assessment. Then we have the trajectory through the 90s.

Blair arrives in 1997 with his slightly performative rejection of autonomy, but with an emphasis on standards that one could recognise as required. And then at the beginning of the second Blair term you have a recognition that you need to have both [autonomy and accountability] to really push forward. And so we have the first academies.

Blair's educational reforms become associated in the Labour Party with Blairite overreach, and there was pushback from the unions and others, and when Ed Balls became education secretary [under Gordon Brown], there was a deceleration.

Then we pick it all up again. We injected more energy, but broadly it was that same programme.

With that in mind, to what extent does the education system now reflect what you hoped it would become as a result of your work?

It's very, very difficult to make that definitive judgement – because we're still in government, it's all evolving all the time. Also, the pandemic has created all sorts of challenges. But I think that there are lots of things that I'm very pleased that we did. I think that even though it was already being discussed, we made even more of an issue of the attainment gap and, as a result, the pupil premium is there, and will be a constant reminder of its importance.

And while the academies programme could be rolled back or eroded or morphed or whatever, the idea of encouraging autonomy as a way of getting good operational leaders to lead groups of schools is, I think, very much there.

Baroness Nicky Morgan (15 July 2014 – 14 July 2016)

What did you think when David Cameron said, "Would you be Education Secretary please, Nicky?"

Well, I had about a day's notice, in the sense that murmuring had started in Westminster, but basically it was a huge surprise because I was a relatively junior Minister in the Treasury.

I was very aware as a constituency MP of all the reforms that Michael Gove had been pursuing but I hadn't studied the detail and had never worked in education. The big thing in my constituency was that they had been trying to move from a middle school system, and that was very much a local issue – that was probably my only big exposure to education.

But it [becoming Education Secretary] was terrifically exciting because it's one of those jobs that everybody has a view on, and one that also provides some very real challenges.

Did you have an inkling of what other issues you might have to be prepared to deal with? I remember at the time it was very much your commission from Downing Street to make nice with the teaching profession.

I was told by David Cameron to carry on with the Gove reforms but just do it in a quieter way. It wasn't that the government didn't want to pursue the reforms, it was just that unfortunately there had been so much noise around Michael that it was getting in the way of successfully implementing and embedding the reforms, which is why I think it was felt that Michael should move to a new position.

You must have had your own issues though you wanted to tackle?

Well, you say that, but the honest truth is in politics, there are some people who sit there and say I'm going to go all out to be, you know, x or y or whatever. But for most people it's a question of are you in the right place at the right time.

Literally, you're brought into Number 10, you sit down in front of the Prime Minister, and he says, I want you to be Education Secretary. And you say yes. And then within 10 minutes you are arriving at the Department to be greeted by the Permanent Secretary and your new Principal Private Secretary: in my case, both of whom were in a slight state of shock, because they didn't realise that Michael was moving on. And then you're suddenly dealing with the fallout with his Special Advisors, two out of three of whom also did not know that he was moving on either.

There is a big difference to becoming Education Secretary when you have been the shadow opposition spokesman, and then you win an election and go into government. In a reshuffle situation, you've got less than half an hour to prepare for this moment and I think it's impossible to turn up to the Department and say, "this is the agenda, this is what I want to work on", unless you've also been a junior Minister there.

The only thing I suppose I knew pretty swiftly was about the character agenda.

But for me the biggest priority was a question of getting on top of the reforms and really understanding the detail.

Did you look at the character education policy area and think, here is something coherent in terms of using the Department's levers of power, and it will be a change I can look back on?

I started from a point of asking, what is the need here? But obviously there was the need to carry on with the wider reforms of school structure, curriculum, teacher training and qualifications. But to an extent you have to differentiate yourself as a new Secretary of State, particularly when you're following somebody with as much impact as Michael.

And I felt very strongly – as someone who used to recruit a lot of people in my non-political life – that there was something that many of our independent schools did, that was an added extra for their pupils, which because of its absence in other schools was setting back their students or not putting them in the right position for

future employment, future success in life. I thought here is something that I can do that many people will agree with, including parents.

So how do you go about introducing a new policy agenda like that into the Department?

The first thing to do really was to get the Department to help me to gather the experts and evidence to really work it out. It's not enough to say, I want a character education agenda: you have to ask what does that look like? Who contributes to it? You then try to bring it all together into coherent whole, while also recognising that as a Conservative government who believed in devolving power to schools, heads and teachers that we are not going to tell schools that we are imposing a whole new curriculum area.

Did the Department have the levers of power or indeed the people to deliver that agenda at the pace that you needed it to be delivered?

Probably not initially. The challenge for any Departments and particularly when you have a very sudden, and almost unexpected change in leadership, is that, in this case, you might have people who are very interested in the character agenda, but they are just not in the right places to lead the organisation.

The other thing I did quite a lot on, which was a great interest of mine, was around mental health. And we found that there was a team looking at school mental health, who already had good contacts with the Department of Health, but they were very much in a backwater. And then when I arrived they suddenly found themselves thrust into the spotlight in a way that they hadn't expected. They went from tootling along in the background doing good work to standing in front of the Secretary of State who is asking what they want to do and getting her support.

So it's about winkling out good people in the Department who want to do things you want to do and perhaps have not been able to under previous incumbents.

When I look at the DfE it's striking that the number of people who are working directly for the SoS, as opposed to for the Department, are very small in number. And somehow you are going to try winkle out those people who are going to be your stormtroopers in this area? How on earth do you go about finding them? And bringing them to the fore?

It is a huge challenge. One of the great weaknesses of our government system is you often have Ministers and Secretaries of State who aren't there for very long. That's where people get resentful about chop and change, which I totally understand.

But conversely it's very easy for Secretaries of State – and this is perhaps where Michael was different – to delegate an awful lot to officials and wait for your ideas to be presented back to you on the seventh floor.

It's only with a bit of time in the Department that comes a confidence to go and walk the corridors yourself and find people and listen to them and meet people in meetings, And to say, I don't want to have just the senior people come to this meeting, I want to have the people who're actually working on the policy. I want them to come in to explain what is going on. Achieving that, depends on the culture of the Department.

I should say that I was very lucky in having Chris Wormald as Permanent Secretary – he got this.

Chris is intellectually confident, and he was quite happy for me to say, I want this to be a priority. And I had two very good private secretaries as well. They are essential people as well because they know the Department and they know the people.

The extraordinary thing with being Secretary of State is, although you are in charge of the Department, you're really only in charge of sort of the political, public facing bits of the Department. You're not in charge of Departmental structures, employment practices, the culture. It's not like a normal CEO relationship with an organisation.

So in terms of policy development, you were focused on mental health and character, and then there was the development of your own White Paper, which introduced the idea of universal academisation.

Yes. Character and mental health were easy to pick up because they were things that the system, if I can put it like that, schools, teachers, parents, and civil servants, all realised had not had the attention that they needed. And they desperately needed to

be looked at. And they were a way of not unpicking Michael's reforms, but enhancing what we were saying to schools

Like a layer of humanity on top?

Yes, yes. Michael and I were on platform together in 2018 after we'd both been fired and he said, "You know I didn't do the character thing, but I think it was right that Nicky picked it up." I think what happened over the period of time [I was in office] was that we began to realise what was and wasn't working about our reforms.

And what we tried to do in the 2016 White Paper was to think really, really hard about looking at the system as a whole because inevitably reform is always piecemeal. And there are bits that are left undone. For example, what do you do with schools that are not academising and what do you do with teacher qualifications: that sort of thing.

That white paper was one of my great frustrations. It had lots of good stuff in it, and we just got blown out of the water by wider politics [the Brexit referendum and the end of the Cameron administration].

I think had we academised more, or started to work out what we were doing with small schools not being academised, I think potentially some of the issues you saw earlier on this year [surrounding the lockdown and the absence of home learning] would have actually been a very different conversation.

So you were trying to return a coherency to an education system that had been pulled apart?

It needed to be pulled apart. But ultimately, when you are about two-thirds of the way through a reform process, you're able to work out, or begin to work out, what's working and what's not, but also, what do you do with the bits that remained unreformed? One of the best examples is that we were double paying for both local educational authority structures, but also multi academy trust structures.

And that was ultimately untidy, and was eventually going be picked apart by the Treasury who were going to ask why are we funding both? Which one do we want?

And you wanted to get ahead of that?

Yes, exactly. And I think that's probably me being me as well. We'd been through the spending review process in November 2015, and I could see where some of this was headed and I thought to myself, you're either a Secretary of State who tries to get ahead of things, or you wait to be caught up in it. And my view in life is, it's always better to take control as much as you can.

But because of Brexit, that White Paper never made it to statute. And system change still hasn't been completed. Is that your biggest disappointment?

Yes, I think it is. As I say, every now and again, something will happen like, as I say, the objections raised this year about getting schools open again and you could just see the difference in attitude [between academies and LA schools]. There were local councils and educational authorities kicking off on one hand, and yet the Multi-Academy Trusts saying, we're just going to go on with this on the other. And then you've got MPs complaining about all these little schools struggling to put in place the Covid measures. But if they had been part of Multi-Academy Trusts, they'd be able to share the load with other schools in the system. And things like putting in place an online learning experience: for a very small primary school in a rural area, that's a big, big ask, whereas if that school was part of a trust, they would get that support and resources in a way that I think local educational authorities, because they were so focused on other Covid responses, probably struggled to help them with.

But there was a legacy in the form of the Opportunity Areas?

We cannot lose Opportunity Areas.

How was this policy formulated?

We knew there were some areas – Knowsley, Somerset, Blackpool – where we thought that if we could really get a whole system response, different people working together, people from outside included, pushing in the same direction, we might make a real difference. We needed to answer questions such as, how can you attract teachers to

these difficult areas that otherwise struggled to recruit? There are some great teachers who really like a challenge and you know, if you reflected that in their compensation or their career path or whatever, it might make a real difference.

And actually Justine [Greening] picked it up and ran with it. And, you know what, it's happening. This is because you've had a few sustained years of people working together. But I think that consistency is also really important. This is where officials, if they are very committed, and if you can keep them in the same job, can really make a difference.

It's always initiative after initiative and change after change. We never get a chance to really try things out in the long-term. I think these Opportunity Areas are working, and I'd hope that governments of all hues could just leave Opportunity Areas alone and let them do their thing.

Do you believe your mental health and character education policies are having a lasting legacy too?

I think that the first thing that's important is that [the mental health agenda] has been accepted, and actually, this is often one of the big things in politics, government, Whitehall. It's not so much the detail, it is just the acceptance, in the same way as Blair accepted Conservative trade union reforms, that schools should have a voice and responsibility to look after their students' mental health and wellbeing. Not exclusively, of course, because they can't take it away from families, but they absolutely have a role, and that can be both positive and negative.

Would you say the same about character? Because I think that is probably a more disputed area still?

I think that it is accepted. And I think that one of the big things that has now crystallised that is the new Ofsted framework.

Are there things you did when you were in the DfE that you think perhaps didn't play out as you'd hoped they would, and you would have done differently?

The EBacc is a good example. I think the subjects included are completely right. But what it meant was that I was characterised as thinking that arts education was less important, which is extraordinary given that I am an arts person. I thought I'm much more an arts person than a science person.

So I think sometimes it's the way that you say something. And I think you also learn through experience and through getting it wrong, that the way you say something, the tone can often be as important. And there are always people looking to be outraged by what the Secretary of State says, who then are able to characterise, oh, that's it, you know, deeply critical of arts and everything else.

The way the Ebacc was perceived did blur some of the things that we were trying to do. It was perceived that we were trying to narrow down the curriculum, or that we'd decided certain subjects were not as important. I think we could have been better at communicating why we wanted certain subjects to be offered – they are the ones that really, really do enhance young people's future prospects.

Do you think you underestimated your power in the school system? That once the Ebacc filtered down through the system, people would read it as you only believe in those core subjects?

Yes. Trying to communicate that just because you're for something doesn't mean you're anti everything else is hard. If I can put it like that.

I was always quite amazed by how rigourous schools were at following directives from the DfE. Much more so than, for example, businesses following directives in the BEIS Department. So with EBacc or something like that, schools and teachers grumbled but actually they followed through and did do it. When you're Secretary of State, you don't get lots of pushback. I think partly, perhaps, it is the accountability mechanisms. Because schools ultimately know that they're going to have Ofsted visiting them once every couple of years in a way that businesses don't have that. It's a different kind of accountability.

Do you wish you'd asked for a longer run of being education secretary? I mean, one of the things that people often talk about is that the planning and implementation cycle of policy is too short and too short-termist? Michael Gove, for example, had a huge impact but he also had a run in advance of becoming education secretary. And then four years to actually do it.

I think it's a difficult question. No Prime Minister is going to give you a guarantee of a job. And of course, I think it depends on the quality of the Education Secretary too. And how you respond to a crisis.

But I do think that length of time is really, really important. And if I was doing the shadow education job now for Labour, if I were her, I would be trying to saying to Kier, please, can I stay in this job for a long time and if we win the next election, please, can I go into DfE. I mean, Michael is the most recent, long-serving education secretary, and I'm next. I did two years - Michael did four. I did two years and then Justine and Damien did 18 months each. Two years was not very much. And I had a general election, and I was trying to do the Minister for Women and Equalities job as well. But I mean, 18 months is really I suspect, you know, very disappointing for those incumbents because it is a fantastic role.

Which sort of takes us back to the functioning of the Department and its effectiveness. Do you feel like there was a sufficient research function and evaluation of reforms or policy making? Was it too ad hoc?

I think people who are experts in their field get frustrated with Ministers coming in and overturning things because there's often not the evidence to support the move. Often there are people who come in and just sort of say, my hunch is x and y is really important.

And people say, "well, we've been looking at it for years, and we don't think it's important, or we don't think it should work like that."

I think there's always going to be a call for more evidence-based policymaking. And I don't think there would be a pushback on that. But we did have good research people, but the honest truth again is, it's one of those parts of Department that the Secretary of State doesn't really have very much to do with.

One of the things that got immediately dismantled once I had gone was something that David Cameron had been very keen on, the idea of an Extended Ministerial Office. And that brought people who had that time and space to be more expert in the Secretary of State's office. So we had a couple of really good guys who were looking both at the character agenda for me, but also looking at school funding.

They pored over the numbers but in a way that Luke [Tryl] and my Special Advisors wouldn't have had the time or brain space to, because they are constantly firefighting and everything else.

You do need somebody in the Ministerial office working with the civil servants on something as complicated as school funding.

Yes, it is a hugely intractable problem that you really took on.

We did make giant strides, although I am frustrated that we didn't get to bed it. We haven't gone far enough. There is still too much funding in cities and not enough in other areas of the country. It's the kind of problem for which, if you're Secretary of State, you do need somebody who has got an eye on the politics and an eye on the Department and an eye on the evidence. They're not Special Advisors but they are not civil servants, and if you get the right person who has the confidence of officials, the political people and Number 10, that's when you can really hit the sweet spot and make change.

That's interesting. Tell me more.

Well, David Cameron was really keen on it. And actually to be fair, I said pretty early on, let's try this. With Luke's help we found people who were going to challenge, but also were people that officials could work with.

There are a lot of people in education who say that we should take education policy out of the political space. Do you have any sympathy with that line of argument?

I think this is about longevity of vision. I think what they really mean is, what we don't want every five years is the curriculum to be changed and things to be reinvented, which I completely understand. But I do think ultimately, under our system, Ministers are accountable. They are answerable in Parliament regarding what's going on in public services, and that includes education. So by its very nature that inserts politics straight back into the education system

What people mean is, they don't want something like the curriculum to be just subject to the whims of the Minister. And I have some sympathy with that. I think it is right that you have expert advisory groups.

But equally on an issue, like, for example, religious studies, you do need to have people who are aware of the wider politics. And I think sometimes we haven't really got that

right in Westminster. Ministers need to understand the context in which young people are being taught about religion, and the wider context of our society and what's happening in terms of community cohesion or that sort of thing.

There are many brilliant people in the education system but all they know is the education system, their institution, their subject. Education has to be broader than that. And that's what the politicians have to bring to the table. But they do have to be careful to avoid saying they know all the answers even before they have listened to anybody else.

Damian Hinds (8 January 2018 – 24 July 2019)

Looking back on your time in office, what springs to mind?

I'd have preferred it to be longer. It was the greatest job of my life. There were amazing people to work with in the DfE but especially the wonderful people working in schools and colleges, universities, nurseries, children's social care. I enjoyed it every day.

But there were big political challenges?

We didn't have a huge majority and we had the backdrop of Brexit and all the machinations going around that. Brexit tended to drown out a lot of other things. Not just in education but right across government.

We were also in a time of very tight fiscal constraints. And I was dealing with a sector that had been used to year-on-year funding increases over the Blair/Brown years. We were working in a period of fiscal retrenchment – it wasn't actually as severe in education as in other areas – but it did cause strain. When I was in post we also had big growth in student numbers to add to that, which made it even more challenging.

In terms of education reform, what did you inherit?

The Gove years had been the major reset and change in orientation. But we shouldn't exaggerate that. Interestingly, I came to the conclusion that the vast majority of things don't change for schools, whoever is in government and whatever they do. This is particularly true with an organism as complex as education: there are many, many things that ministers and civil servants don't have control over anyway.

So it's hard to accomplish meaningful change?

People don't often appreciate how devolved our education system is compared to other countries. You meet education ministers from around the world and they tell you that they've just changed the text book in a subject and you go "great, right, ha!" A lot of people think that if you're Education Secretary you're in charge of the curriculum – and that is not a stupid assumption to make but of course it's not true. Similarly, you're not in charge of the teacher training colleges, the length of the school day, even the content of the school day, and these are things that are obviously core to the delivery of education.

Quite often you find that the levers of power are actually rather minimal and indirect.

Do you think your policies had significant impact? And did they play out in practice as you had intended?

When you take over any government department there are some things that you inherit and see through and some things you are even lucky enough to see through to the point of delivery. There are other things that you kick off, but you don't get to see through to final fruition, and that you hope will maintain momentum after you've gone. There are very few things that you both initiate and that you're there for the final outcome.

Even for Michael Gove there were many things that he initiated that reached maturity when I was in post.

You oversaw the final roll-out of the new GCSEs – that would have been under your watch I think?

Yes indeed. And the whole free school and academies conversion programme was still developing when I was there too. For example, only now are we beginning to see the idea of free schools and autonomy beginning to have an impact in Alternative Provision, which will be interesting as it develops.

The things I look back on with pride include overseeing things that were going on already and then adding to them, shaping them. I was the third SoS to state that our top priority was teacher workload and it was gratifying to see that after years of seeing in the workforce survey that reported ours was going up and up and up, they have finally come down in quite a dramatic fashion. So dramatic has been the fall

that you wonder if you can trust the numbers. It was frustrating that that data only came out after I had left office.

There's always work to be done on workload. The big pressure that was growing when I was in post was parent contact – emails for example when parents expect an answer by the next morning – and then there is the WhatsApp culture. It means everybody's got a view – and that has a knock on effect on workload.

What about other policies you initiated?

Another milestone that happened while I was Education Secretary, that I initiated, was the RSHE curriculum coming in as a compulsory subject. Obviously a lot of schools had done relationships and sex education, but I added health to that – particularly both mental and physical health.

One completely new thing that I brought in, that hardly got noticed at all, was something that we called the teaching of "online safety", but actually it's much broader than that and takes in media literacy, cyber bullying and the way that kids lives are being changed at a huge pace and largely for the worse. This was a change that was implemented after I left office but I hope that will go on being built on over time. I must check up on that, actually.

I was also able to emphasise ed tech in a way that hadn't happened before.

What do you think of the way the Department is set up? Did you think it was an effective organisation?

It is a really weird set up. You are apparently running this huge department but you only have two people report to you, the special advisers. It is strange, but it is also at the core of the way that we do public administration and actually the overwhelming majority of the time, we make it work. Ultimately the Perm Sec and the directors know that it is you who is responsible to Parliament and they really should make things happen for you.

Sometimes the things you want to get done don't happen, and you're left wondering what you have to do to make someone act on what seemed like a very clear instruction. Big organisations can be sclerotic.

But this isn't just true of the DfE or indeed the public sector. I spent 20 years working in the private sector and in big organisations there it is very hard to make things happen too. They very rarely operate on a command and control system – it's just as much about hearts and minds and making common cause. But in a 24-hour-news-cycle you don't have that luxury in a government department.

Would you recognise the characterisation of the civil service as a brake on reform?

The DfE like all big organisations has organisational objectives and those are difficult to dislodge, but once you have changed them to a new set of objectives, then it becomes very difficult to change them to a new set again. In the DfE, the best example is school autonomy and academies – I'm sure there was a time when academisation was anathema to people in Sanctuary Buildings, but by the time I arrived, the Department was very, very committed to school autonomy and sees great benefit from it. To make changes on this scale is not a trivial ask – it takes time and it takes constant hounding.

Do you feel like there's sufficient policy support in tasks like this? You only had two Spads working for you…?

It's certainly an imbalance. Obviously the vast bulk of the organisation is going to be civil servants – people who are administering the Teacher Pension Scheme, dolling out the money, of course they are all going to be officials – but, no, I don't think the balance is right.

If nothing else, this system puts an enormous stress on the Spads. As a minister, you expect to have an enormous workload landed on you but it would be good if not everyone else is as crazily overworked as you are – in order to get things done, formulate good policy and to keep a clear perspective.

Particularly pertinent to you is a question about whether the turn-over of Secretaries of State is too regular? Does it lead to inconsistency in the formation of policy?

I'm not sure if that is a problem, to be honest. If you look at most of the things that me, Nicky [Morgan], Justine [Greening], Michael [Gove] and now Gavin [Williamson] have

worked on, they have been mostly consistent, such as school autonomy and more rigorous standards. There are some exceptions but mostly they fit into one narrative.

At the margin, I wish we had government with a bit less turn-over, but I also don't think we should lose the notion that to be in government you don't have to be an expert or a specialist in that area and in many ways it's a handicap if you are. So let's say, imagine if you arrived at the DfE with 20 years' experience as a secondary teacher, then you would have some expertise about secondary education, or at least the schools that you worked with or the particular kids you taught, but it doesn't mean you know a lot about adult education or about nurseries or about taking children into care. And in this situation you would also have built up your own prejudices about "how it didn't work like that in my day…etc"

Funnily enough this is exactly what Estelle Morris said about joining the Department for Education after a long career in secondary schools – that it was actually a destabilising mindset…

People tend to forget what a broad remit these jobs are. You only tend to realise it at 8am in the morning or 9pm at night when a civil servant comes sheepishly into the room and says "minister I need to have a word" and it's about something that as gone wrong in some far-flung corner of the empire and you think to yourself, "jeez, I didn't know I was responsible for *that!*"

On a similar note, do you feel like there is enough interface between teachers and the politicians and the upper echelons of the civil service when it comes to high level policy-making?

There are quite a lot of teachers in the DfE – and generally we tried to make good use of the primary teacher reference group and the secondary teacher reference group. And of course good officials are constantly out and about in the operation. So, actually, yes, I do think there's a lot of interaction in this.

But it's important to remember that there is a flipside to this as well, that at the Department for Education you are thinking about balancing out the producer side and a consumer side. Yes, you are there to support the profession and the school system but you have to remember that you are also there to support and represent parents and you have to be listening to them as well. These interests don't always

completely overlap. And of course we try represent kids, although there is a limit to that.

Is there enough research and evaluation of policy in the way that it actually plays out in the classroom?

I'm struggling to think of something we did – in my time, Nicky's, or Justine's – that has a direct read across to something that actually happened in classrooms... I mean of course everything has got something to do with the learning of stuff. But let's take the RSHE material, or T-levels, ultimately the politicians make policy but then there is a whole load of design work as to what will happen in classrooms.

As Education Secretary, I don't get to decide what kids get taught about sex education. We get to say that kids should know about respecting one another, understanding boundaries and so on, but someone else is working out what that is actually going to look like in the classroom, and although there are occasions I can think of when I would have liked the ability to write the textbook, overall that's a better system.

If you could change one thing about the way the DfE functions, or the relationship between the education secretary and the profession, what would it be?

The one change I would make is having more ministerial appointees at the top of the Department for Education so the Education Secretary gets support. But I don't have a structural change that I would want to make. I've worked in big organisations in the private and public sector and I know that big reorganisation is not normally the way to go. It's better to concentrate on the fundamentals.