

Chapter 23

The Home Secretary and I were always supportive of each other in public while I was a minister. Apart from anything else, that was just good manners. This included when she gave evidence to the Home Affairs select committee – which, with Keith Vaz as chairman, was always keen on mischief-making – for which I thanked her. I reciprocated by stoutly defending her from an unfair attack on *The World at One* that questioned her commitment to violence against women issues, where she had actually been very sound.

After that appearance, I bumped into Jeremy Browne, who clearly thought I had gone native, with the implication that if so, there had not been much point in replacing him. I should record that Jeremy and I always got along fine, and I sought his advice on matters occasionally, especially on drugs.

By his own admission, however, Jeremy had not enjoyed the Home Office, much preferring his previous posting in the grand surroundings of the Foreign Office. They used to run India from his magnificent room there. The qualities he required there were not the same as required at the Home Office. And Theresa May was not William Hague.

Some people assumed everything had settled down after the initial furore between myself and the Home Secretary. Others who

were more in the know assumed that there was a deep antagonism being played out beneath the surface.

Actually, both groups were wrong. I never felt any animosity towards Theresa May. Indeed, I respected and even admired her. She was clearly competent and it is no mean feat to survive so many years as Home Secretary. She was brave, for example in taking on the Police Federation, and also principled in her beliefs, even if I did not always agree with her principles. You do not have to agree with someone, or even like them, to acknowledge their strengths.

The problem was that I did not like the way she ran the department. She would argue that without this vice-like grip at the centre, she would not have lasted so many years in post, and perhaps that is true. But the price of that was a climate of fear in officials, a gloomy air of drudgery around the department, and the stifling of ideas and innovation. We could all see the stick, but where was the carrot?

From my point of view, this approach was compounded by her insistence on running the Home Office as a Tory department rather than a coalition one. The fact that this tendency was so pronounced was a primary reason I had been sent in by Nick Clegg, to reassert the Lib Dem part of the coalition.

In another department, where there were fewer differences between the parties, this might not have mattered so much, but it did in the Home Office.

It did not help either that she was generally reluctant to delegate very far to her ministers, Tory or Lib Dem, and would intervene in really quite small matters. I regularly sought to raise this general issue with her, but somehow there was never time in our bilaterals to get round to it, even after I had discussed it with Mark Sedwill.

In the end, her helpful private secretary produced her a note to aid a discussion, but that did not happen either, and I was forced

to write to her formally on the matter. Her secretary meantime just disappeared one day. The rumour was that he had been sent to the civil service equivalent of Siberia for not being sufficiently on-message.

There were areas in my portfolio where we did agree, such as on alcohol, domestic violence and child sexual exploitation, and we worked well together. We did not do so on drugs. Overall, the only latitude she would give me was the latitude to agree with her.

Outside my portfolio, the flashpoints across the coalition were immigration, Europe and what we termed the ‘snoopers’ charter’.

I found her reluctance to embrace the coalition frustrating and it limited the opportunity to build bridges.

It may be that a particular issue in government divided the parties neatly and cleanly on different sides, but it was actually much more common for the division to be between the Tories and Lib Dems in one department and the Tories and Lib Dems in another, or between one department and No. 10 or No. 11.

I would regularly make this point to Theresa, but to no avail. One such trigger generated a note from me to her on 27 October 2014:

I also learnt from the weekend papers of your challenges with the European Arrest Warrant. As you know, I share your view on this matter, so it is a pity you have not asked me to use my influence with my Lib Dem colleagues at No. 10 and elsewhere.

In the end, the extent to which you involve me is I suppose a matter for you to decide. I would however reiterate that by seeking to exclude me, you are missing the opportunity to pull all the levers available...

Occasionally there were issues where my party was uninterested and where I would find myself working with a like-minded Tory to

get what I thought was the right result, such as on animal testing, where I worked with Oliver Letwin. Equally, I would sometimes be asked by a Tory colleague to help influence one of his or her Tory colleagues on an issue.

So, across government the Tories and Lib Dems did work in this integrated fashion, while of course retaining individual party loyalty. It is this mature approach that meant the coalition worked well and lasted the full five years.

The Home Secretary was different. For her, acknowledgement of the coalition was predominantly through the regular bilaterals with Nick Clegg that were established before I arrived in the department. No other Tory Cabinet minister had such bilaterals, instead largely sorting matters out with their Lib Dem minister at departmental level.

So there were issues where the Home Secretary and I were in agreement, but the blockage to progress was at No. 10. I thought we should have worked together more closely in these situations, as I would have done at the DfT with my Secretary of State, to try a pincer movement on No. 10, through both Tory and Lib Dem channels.

This was in fact more necessary at the Home Office than it might have been elsewhere. For one thing, No. 10 was always wary of the Home Secretary, who it was assumed was interested in the top job. For another, her spads were not well liked at No. 10 and so did not have the influence they might have had.

But the Home Secretary was not keen on the pincer idea. Perhaps she did not trust me.

One such area was alcohol. By Home Office figures, alcohol abuse cost society around £21 billion a year, an enormous figure. This broke down into £11 billion in antisocial behaviour, £4 billion to the NHS and the rest in lost productivity. The total figure dwarfed income to the Treasury from alcohol duty.