

In office and in power?

A Minister is appointed to office. He or she has to work out how to exercise the powers available in that position. Some fail to do so, just signing the documents and attending the meetings their officials place before them. It takes energy, persistence and understanding for a Minister to impose a new agenda, change things or improve the ways government works.

In a democracy Ministers are rightly circumscribed to prevent potential power going to their head and to avoid abuses. There are three main controls on Ministerial actions. Firstly, they must not break UK law. Secondly they have to stick by collective responsibility, requiring other Ministers support within a department or the wider government to pursue the path they wish. Thirdly, everything they do is subject to the court of public opinion. If they and their policies become too unpopular they may be changed.

Ministers nonetheless can exercise considerable power for the good. They have powers by virtue of collective control of the massive public sector purse, calling up resources and investments nationally. They have stated powers in extensive Statutes requiring or enabling Ministers to do things, regulate things and supervise the public sector. They appoint a large number of people to run vast areas of the public services.

All too often Ministers who lack clarity and understanding about what would be a good direction for the department they are in are buffeted by events and dependent on inconsistent or unreliable civil service advice. From day one the new Minister is held responsible for everything that goes wrong in their department or section of a department, though often the first they knew of the problem was when it was reported to them as a problem. It is often not the result of their actions and may be a case of officials not carrying out the general aim of their stated policy or even worse breaking the clearly stated intention of a Minister. There are also, of course, occasions where Ministers make poor choices or announce things that are not going to work, where they are rightly held to blame.

This government needs to review where it wishes to exercise powers and where it wants to make a difference. With a majority of 80 it can change the law where it thinks the law impedes progress. It needs to move on from policy dominated by responding to the pandemic, and being about decarbonisation alone. Levelling up, a faster and stronger recovery and making and growing more of what we need at home should be priorities that shape public policy in helpful ways.