The role of junior Ministers

Under Labour junior Ministers spent most of their time it seemed on local and regional media and trade press. They tended to define the Ministers role as communication. If you went to a meeting with one of them about a constituency issue or problem they usually left the substance to officials, whilst thumbing through files of press clippings to highlight items they disliked. To me it looked as if they were only doing part of the job . Before you can communicate as a Minister you need to have satisfied yourself about the policies, and played your part in ensuring good delivery of service. You have a media problem if the department is letting people down through poor policy or poor execution of policy. The fix for that is not to get better at media handling, but to engage with sorting out the underlying problem.

The ONS study of public sector productivity shows it fell most during the middle Labour years when they threw plenty of public money at their departments and programmes. Ministers did not supervise the way the money was spent properly, and did not supervise it to achieve better results. The new Conservative government needs to learn from this disappointing history, and put Ministers of State in charge of supervising budgets, achieving higher quality results, ensuring extra spending is matched by extra output. Taking an interest in what staff can achieve with the money, encouraging them and assisting in putting it in the right places should be an essential task of Ministerial leadership. Cabinet Ministers need to be strategic and to contribute to the wider government policy debate, so this is an ideal task to delegate to experienced Ministers of State.

I held two important Minister of State commands. One was in the business department in the days when that department was the financial and general business regulator for all firms apart from the banks. I needed to take an active part in ensuring quality and in targeting resources on the handful of cases where we needed to take action. The second was as Minister for local government, where I had a huge budget to allocate and supervise. In both departments various quangos reported to the Secretary of State. I took on the detailed tasks of setting and reviewing budgets, setting and reviewing performance targets, mentoring or replacing Directors and CEOs. It was interesting and worthwhile work. There was plenty of what business calls low hanging fruit or easy wins when it came to finding ways to do things cheaper, better, faster.

The new government needs to hone its skills and use its Ministers to raise the game of the bodies they supervise. The Chancellor is right to make higher productivity his main crusade. What better place to start than the public sector which he helps control. We already have the people in place to do the job. The Ministers need directing and energising to perform this role.