CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

TRAILBLAZING WOMEN

Interview with Helen Ghosh, January 2026

Career Overview

1979 - 1995: Ghosh joins the civil service a as an administrative trainee in the Department of the Environment, and works in a number of roles including spending two years as assistant private secretary to Michael Heseltine, and then as private secretary to the minister for environment and housing. By 1992 she was head of the housing policy and home ownership team.

1995 - 2001: Leaving the Department for the Environment, Ghosh took on a Cabinet Office role where she was on loan as deputy director for the Efficiency Unit. When the loan period ended, she became a director of East London housing regeneration programmes at the Government Office for London. From there she went to the Department for Work and Pensions, where she was director of the children's group.

2001 - 2005: Returning to the Cabinet Office, Ghosh spent two years as director general, machinery of government secretariat. She then moved to HM Revenue and Customs where as director general, corporate services.

2005 - 2010: Ghosh served as permanent secretary at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

2010 - 2012: Moved to become the first female permanent secretary at the Home Office.

2012 - present: Despite being tipped as the first female cabinet secretary, Ghosh chose to leave the civil service in 2012 to accept the post of director general at the National Trust. She was credited with modernising the trust's engagement strategy, seeing record numbers of people visiting its properties, and increased membership rates, under her tenure. From 2018 to 2026, Ghosh was master of Balliol college, Oxford – the first woman to hold the position in its 750-year history. In 2026 she accepted the position of chair at the Office for Environmental Protection.

Interview transcript

Susan Allott: What made you choose the civil service as a career. I think it was the late 70s. Was it a calling for you, or did you consider various options when you left university?

Helen Ghosh: Yeah, you're right. It was. I joined as an administration trainee in 1979. I came from a public sector background. My dad was a scientific civil servant in Farnborough. My mum had five children, and then did an Open University degree and was a librarian. And remember, this was pre-Thatcher. So I came to Oxford and did my degree, and I had a strong sense that, I suppose, well, this was long before everybody went off to the city or the private sector was the sexy thing to do, and I wanted to do a job that was intellectually challenging, where I felt I was doing something for the public good, because that was the background I came from, and where the people I worked with would be... I'm thinking of the right term... interesting, supportive, have hinterlands, all of those things.

And therefore, and the civil service then, as I think it still is now, when I think of our students at the moment, it still had lots of kudos, and I never really thought of anything else. The only thing I ever thought of, but I didn't seriously consider it, was being a barrister. But in those days, it was a very expensive thing to be, and my family were just the public sector middle classes, and so I didn't ever pursue that one. But occasionally I have thought being a barrister would have been fun, yeah.

SA: Okay, and you mentioned it was pre-Thatcher. Just pre-Thatcher, wasn't it?

HG: I mean, in fact, I did my first civil service exams in 1976, when I did finals, and then I actually joined. I then did some research, and then I actually joined in '79 so I was at the bridge, that's right.

SA: What was the gender balance like in those days?

HG: Well, and this is a thing that we'll probably come back to, in a department like the Department of the Environment, which was the one I joined, actually pretty good. There were, and the Department of Environment has come and gone and been broken up in various ways, but it was one of the mega-departments that was set up in the '70s. So it did housing, planning, sport, environment, rural affairs, urban regeneration. It did a very wide range of subjects, and it attracted me, actually. One thing it did that I never had anything to do with at all was listing historic buildings. I thought I might have enjoyed that – that's long gone to DCMS and its agencies. So it was a wonderfully big department, and when we went there, any graduate trainee was also a common citizen with transport, and so the range of jobs you could do was just extraordinarily wide.

SA: What was the ratio of women to men?

HG: Sorry, and there, and I think in in many of the Domestic Policy departments I subsequently worked in, I do not know exactly what was the ratio, but there were plenty of women in senior positions. There was a whole tranche of women under secretaries, as they were called then. Some of them had joined in the immediately post-war era, or even the post-war era. So although probably, statistically, we were widely nothing like, and I suspect we're still nothing like – in the senior civil service – 50:50, there were enough role models to think that the gender balance was reasonable.

Can I say perhaps now – because I'm sure it's a question you'll have later on – I think I've been very lucky overall in the departments and places I've chosen – domestic policy departments, health, DWP, environment in its various manifestations – have always had a better gender balance, but it has ever bothered me much, and I have some theories about that. It's never occurred to me to think… and it sounds terrible. It's not trying to sound arrogant. I went to a single sex school. I saw women being in charge. It was a convent, so there were female nuns in charge. As it happened, I was at the tail end of and went to a single sex college. I then joined departments on the whole where there were a good number of senior women. But I've never, I never think, "Oh, I'm a woman. I wonder how I will get on here," because I wasn't brought up from a child in a situation where being female was a disadvantage, where thinking about your gender, or sex rather, really mattered.

And therefore, when people say, "Oh, do you find it…" I remember somebody once saying, as I rose up through the civil service: "Oh, would you find it difficult to tell people what to do?" Sorry, why would I find…? You know, someone's made me a deputy secretary, or whatever it is – why would I find it difficult? So I'm very… if you asked me to describe myself, I would describe myself in all sorts of ways, in terms of my personality and inclinations and the way I think, but my gender would probably be the last thing I talk about. So I think that's self-conscious.

I once sat on… I think it was one of these excellent events that the civil service probably still holds on International Women's Day. And I was on a panel with some other permanent secretaries, and I said this, and it turned out that two of the other three female permanent secretaries there had had exactly the same experience, and therefore said that they felt the same. It never occurred to them to think that it would be a disadvantage to be a woman. It would be very interesting to look and see… of course, nowadays, I think it would be different just because of the greater diversity of education and experience among people who get, I'm happy to say, to the top of the civil service. But I think this issue of your young experience is very formative.

SA: So as you moved through departments, what were the variations between… because I know you moved departments, you were promoted and went up and up. What were the differences between departments that you noticed?

HG: Well, I think there are inevitably cultural differences between departments. If you take the department I was in for longest when I was first there, the Department of the Environment, because it was a new department – it wasn't weighed down by centuries of history, and I think in terms of its management approach and the kind of things it worked in on, you know, local government, lots of connections with local government, lots of interesting things like urban regeneration, lots of, obviously, interest in the environment and such things – it was quite outward looking. And the culture was quite sort of, you know, open. It was very good on things like part time working, and as the whole civil service was right from, I think, probably in advance of the the private sector. And as I say, it felt quite diverse. Of course, it was not diverse in a way that we would look for now, particularly from an ethnic background, or probably in terms of disability, but in gender terms, it felt quite egalitarian.

I think there is a big difference between the departments that fundamentally think about policy – I've never worked in the Treasury, but you know, the Cabinet Office, or a lot of the central departments – and those who have to engage with practical issues. One of the reasons I chose to go to DWP – DSS when it first was – and indeed later, really enjoyed, I should say, leaving the Cabinet Office and going to Inland Revenue – later HMRC – was that you had in those places… yes, you had the sort of super-

taxation brains, but you had lots of people who were really practical and knew how to run a local job centre, or whatever it was called then; I really liked departments like that.

I think the people who understand the sort of practicalities of services to the public, they have a different kind of, you know, the discourse is different. I remember, for example, when I first arrived at DWP, it was fascinating talk, and it was just in the early days of tax credits, and I was the under secretary who was talking to Nick MacPherson, who was later permanent secretary but then my equivalent, who was putting through tax credits. And I mean, tax credits is a wonderful example of – it was a very clever system, but it had no connection the way it was initially set up with any reality of people's lives. You know, it assumed that it would be like a tax system, and at the end of the year people would say, "Well, you know, in fact, I had this much income and this and then I owe you, or you owe me." Whereas those of us in DSS, or particularly, many of my colleagues, really understood that many of the people who most needed this money would have, you know, two partners, three jobs fall out of this, the household would change. It was not a population that could get to the end of the year and then say, "Well, now let's settle up" like a PAYE person. And equally and this – both of these things, in fact – had to be radically rethought. There was the question about, "Well, what would happen when payments didn't come through?" "Oh, well, you know," said the Treasury, "but people can just go to their local DSS office, can't they?" Well, yes, they can! I remember arriving somewhere quite soon after the system had been implemented – Nottingham, a rainy Monday in Nottingham – and turning the corner, there was a queue of mums with buggies. And so I think culturally, that thing about, do you have practical hands-on experience of people out there, or are you sitting mainly facing ministers, is the big problem.

SA: When you started out, and I'm wondering if this changed at all over the years, what do you think the civil service valued in in leaders? What kind of behaviours were rewarded?

HG: I do think about this a lot. When I started, I remember hearing people, my seniors, say, "Oh, so-and-so, they're a wonderful drafter," you know? So those sorts of things appeared, I thought, as a new entrant, to be highly valued, you know, that you could write a really good thing. And I don't think the L-word, the leadership word, was really much spoken. I mean, you could tell that people would praise – in fact, you know, the jungle drums would say, "Oh, it's great working for so-and-so, because they really help you, or protect you if you make a mistake," or people implicitly understood the importance of working for someone who was, we would now say, a good leader. But apparently the technical skills or knowledge of the bit of legislation, or being able to draft a good submission, seemed more important.

Of course, I was very junior, and it was only really when I got to being in the senior civil service that one ever had any leadership training. For some reason, I completely missed the bit where there was training for AT. There used to be very elaborate AT training schemes, and I never went on one, because they were changing the rules or something, or changing the operation.

I give enormous credit to Gus O'Donnell for being probably the first cabinet secretary who really started talking about leadership and promoted people for being good leaders as well as great policy people. I do think it was – this is absolutely no criticism, because he was a brilliant person in all sorts of ways, and sadly lost – in the Jeremy Heywood period, it was much more about, are you a good policy person. In that sense, being a technocrat was more rewarded. But of course, it's a very tricky issue to deal with because – and again, this is something I have said, if I'm talking to people about leadership, it is absolutely true that some secretaries of state want their permanent secretary to be their number

one policy advisor, and therefore it's perfectly sensible to make top civil servants be essentially policy advisors. But then there are others, and I've worked for both kinds, who want you to be the person who makes sure that the organisation as a whole can deliver the things... that basically you're there to make the organisation fit for the purpose of serving the political masters and getting the outcomes that they want. And that kind of facilitative role versus a policy-making role, perhaps expectations of ministers change, but every minister is very individual, so it's very difficult for the organisation as a whole to predict how many you want of each.

SA: So were there any – I think I read that you got on very well with Heseltine, and that you considered him the best...

HG: Oh, I'm not sure that I got on well with him. Yes, when people say, "Who is the best in an all-round sense, who was the most enjoyable minister to work for?" I've worked for lovely, lovely, lovely people. And it was very formative. So I was in his private office. I was the most junior HEO, or whatever they call them. No, it's because he was very good to work for, you knew exactly what his principles were, you know, in terms of involvement of private sector and finding as much private sector as public sector solutions to things. He worked with civil servants as though they were a team. He'd actually run something himself. You know, he'd set up his own company, ran his own company himself, and that meant he understood that going from "here's the idea, and now put it into action," there are things you need to do in between. And you also knew, I mean, this sounds like a selfish thing, that when he went down to Cabinet, he could probably get it through. I mean, obviously he had various set-to's in his later cabinet. But, you know, in that sense, he was rounded and he had hinterland.

I mean, again, one doesn't want to sound like a, you know, grumpy old, "they were golden days," but I think there is a difference now. I mean, when I was sitting in the civil service box – you know, the box in the House of Commons in 1980 or whatever, whenever I was in Heseltine's office, and you looked around and you saw miners and lecturers and union officials and barristers. You know, you saw people who had done something else, who understood the world, and the difficulties of doing things. And now politics seems to be a profession in itself, and I think that is very different. And you can see why fewer people, fewer politicians, resign on point of principle, because many of them have nowhere else to go.

SA: I'm researching all the female perm secs as part of this project. And I read that Dame Mavis McDonald*, I think it was, said that she was thoroughly fed up of being referred to as formidable, because people don't say that about men, and I know you've said that you weren't necessarily aware of yourself as a woman. You know you felt aware of yourself as a person, yes, which I understand. But did you notice any kind of gendered language? Or what kind of language did you notice about your peers? Or perhaps sometimes women are referred to as being not assertive enough. And, you know, those kind of behaviours aren't rewarded in the same way. Did you ever notice that?

HG: Well, of course, a lot of these things are probably said behind your back. Oh, I should say the phenomenon bothers me a lot, and particularly when you're sitting on a selection panel, you know: "Do they have gravitas?" That one really bugs me. Do they have gravitas? Actually, they mean they want someone who's like a man. It crops up in other worlds that I've worked in since.

I suspect. And sorry, this is not quite off the record, but I suspect that you would find if you're talking to Ursula Brennan, for example. I mean, someone who's worked in MoD or actually Customs and Excise,

I imagine that they would feel much more that sense of "they're not taking me seriously because I'm a woman," than I ever did. But perhaps I was too unself-conscious. Perhaps I should have been more conscious about it. I think the lessons I learned were more about other elements of effective leadership behaviour than they were in terms of language.

SA: Could you say what some of them were?

HG: Well, and again, it's something that if people ask, I talk about. Leadership issues became much more talked about in the civil service, rightly so. But there was a great vogue for you authentic, be an authentic leader, behave authentically, and it was a real eye opener for me. I think it was training that I did as a deputy secretary. Certainly, it was something that I particularly remember focusing on when I was at HMRC, partly because the first time I had a coach, leadership coaching and personality analysis kind of thing that, in fact, you should be capable of acting different parts. And being authentic was not in every situation – always being me, always being, you know, slightly thinking aloud – that isn't always the effective thing to do, or indeed the right thing to do.

There was a wonderful training course that the generation that was, I'm trying to think – people like Nick McPherson, if I think myself as being in that distinguished category. Well, I don't. We did a training course about Henry the Fifth. Has anybody ever told you about this? No, it was wonderful. It was somebody from the RSC, and they were talking about leadership. And they said, of course, effective leaders are not always the same person. And they used Henry the Fifth as the example – the Shakespeare play, you know, they said: "Look, you know, sometimes he's, once more under the breach, and we've got to all do X, Y and Z together." And then, there's that wonderful scene the night before Agincourt, where he's walking around anonymously and listening to the soldiers who are all very worried, and he's trying to cheer them up. A little touch of Harry in the night. And then he's courting the French princess. You have to, in fact, behave in the most effective way for that situation. Sometimes, in a meeting, it will be being more or less completely quiet. If it's a meeting where you know there's a particular culture, then you need to say: "And I'm going to make following three points," and I will make them. So thinking very carefully about what kind of leader do I need to be right now? And it will be different in some situations, in many situations.

SA: That's called reading the room.

HG: It's like reading the room, but I think of it as Henry the Fifth. And to be honest, never forget that they're watching you. When you are in any way a visible leader, your expression, even how you appear when you're just coming out of a room. You should always be conscious of what people will read into it.

SA: So my colleague mentioned to me this morning that she had just interviewed Sue Street. She mentioned you, and she said that you had an agreement that you should try and look happy.

HG: My husband had lunch with Sue and Eliza Manningham Buller. It was such good fun. Yes, I remember Alice Perkins, the lovely Alice Perkins, when she was at the Cabinet Office did some – sorry, this is the serious side of the point that you made – did some research about why women did not put themselves forward as they should have done for the most the top place. And one of the findings was that women place a higher value than men on doing a job that makes them happy. They need to know that they will enjoy themselves. So role models have to look as though it's a thing worth doing. So that's Sue and I saying to each other, "you've got to look happy." It doesn't mean you've got to look... it means

you've got to think about how you look. Because particularly if you want women, or indeed anyone of talent, but particularly women, to do something, they've got to look at you and think it's worth doing – there is a person, a woman, who looks as though they're enjoying what they do, or thinks it's worth going through the tough times for what they do.

And of course, mostly one did think it was worth going through the tough times. I think the other thing I always made a point of doing, it's not quite the flip side of that, is that you shouldn't paint it as easy. I think in particular, on the question of the "having it all," you know, "Oh, look at you, you've got children, and you've got to the top of the civil service, and you seem to manage to do both." The answer is, I always have said, the answer is, you're always giving up something. You cannot have it all. You've just got to make sure in your heart, you know that this is a thing that's important to you and if you don't think it's as important as all that, if you come to that realisation or at a particular stage in your life, you know you want to be more at home with your children or whatever, be honest with yourself. But if you honestly think this is worth doing and worth doing well, no, you can't have it all. You do give up time with your family, you do give up hours of sleep, you do give up some element of personal privacy. Nobody – man or woman – gets to the top of any organisation without giving something up. And it's foolish to think that you will, but the important thing is to know what it is you want.

SA: Okay, so that's touched on so many things I wanted to ask you, but whilst I think of it, another thing that I think Sue Street said to my colleague was that she went to a meeting... I wrote it down, and somebody, a previous permanent secretary, said: "If you want a civil service career, you can't have kids." Do you remember that? And did you ever hear advice like that?

HG: No. I mean, the one thing I have heard people say – so this is hearsay evidence – is that I'm not sure that the people who had had children, and nonetheless still succeeded, talked about it. It was slightly kind of, you know, "let's not talk about it." There was a woman who was one of the under secretaries when I arrived at the old DoE; there were a number of women, particularly at under secretary level, who had – I'm going to use the word redoubtable – you know, old style, probably entrant during the war. And then there was a woman called June Bridgeman, and everybody said: "She's got five children." But she never... it was not the thing to say, "I've had five children." On an International Women's Day – well, we didn't have international women's days then, but you kind of knew that, but it wasn't something that she would talk about. Ditto, the excellent Rachel Lomax, who was the perm sec at DSS, DWP, when I got there. Again, one kind of knew and heard that she had children, but it wasn't the thing to talk about it. But then by the time I got to DSS, I wasn't that junior.

SA: And did you feel that you couldn't mention it?

HG: Not at all. I was going to say, I absolutely would mention it. I think I was again, lucky in the sense that... lucky in all sorts of ways; luck in a career, of course, is so valuable. So when I did have children in my early 30s, of course, there was a rule then that you couldn't be considered for the senior civil service till you were 32. And I remember going to see – indeed, probably in Lambeth Bridge House over the river – going to see my HR personnel establishment officer, something like that, and saying, "Well, you know, I'm getting recommendations that I could be promoted, but I'm only 30," and they did say, "Well, you're just going to have to hang around then." So I thought, well, so I'll have my children then. So I had my children when I was still a principal, and then got into the SCS after that.

SA: And did you ever think, "this is going to be really difficult," or did you just think I'll make it work?

HG: An odd thing happened when... I'll tell you this story, and then I'm not sure whether we would use it. Actually I'm not sure... there were some moments when I thought, is the effort worth it? I remember I learned, I discovered that I was expecting our daughter, just at the moment when Number 10 was writing around to permanent secretaries, saying, have you got anybody to nominate to come and be a PS in Number 10? And I was called into the permanent secretary's office, and he said, I've just had this letter from whoever was principal private secretary at Number 10 then. And they said, we thought we might nominate you. And you know, then, and even now, I think that would have been a great experience. And I said, "Oh, can I think about it?" But in fact, I had to go back in the end and say, "I'm expecting a baby, so please, you can't consider me."

And I did remember some dark nights when it was about three o'clock in the morning and it was the fifth time I'd fed the baby, I thought, "have I just destroyed my career?" You know, I don't know. I would never say this to my daughter, who was utterly wonderful. But in those circumstances, sometimes – because I was adding commuting, because I commuted from Oxford and, indeed, back to your question, you know, I didn't see many people who had done it, and people who had done it didn't talk about it much, or they had a house husband. Or, you know, their situation was different from mine. I think I did have some low moments of thinking, "Have I really got the energy to do this?" So I did feel that it's not really, you know, "I need to look happy." Part of my role was to say, "Look, if you really want this, and you're well organised and you have good support at home, you can do this." And I did feel one of my responsibilities was to do that really.

SA: And that was part of modelling for other women.

HG: And that was part of modelling for other women. I would always say, I think three things made it possible. You know, people say, "What got you to where you are today?" I'd say, well, I'd say it was three things. My children were basically healthy, and I hope happy. My partner completely supported the project. I remember mentoring some young female civil servants, and you could just tell that their other half, whoever their other half was, wasn't quite in the same place that they were. And I think that is very important. And thirdly I put an awful lot of effort and time, and money actually, into making sure I had good, reliable childcare. If any of those three things hadn't been true, I don't think it wouldn't have worked.

SA: Absolutely, that rings lots of bells with me. And were there female bosses who perhaps not, if they didn't talk about motherhood, then that's not part of the picture. But were they role models in other ways? Bosses, or just other women who were significant?

HG: It's interesting again, when people ask, you know, who is your model? Do you have a leadership model? I have good and bad models. I mean, some, you know, I don't think this is anything to do with gender. Is to do with personality. You know, I've had some bits of lots of leaders amount to a wonderful leader. In fact, the person I always, in fact, cite, is the female head of our children's primary school who, in fact, I knew anyway, a wonderfully optimistic, inclusive American, as it happens, wife of an Oxford academic who is, just there are many people in Oxford who would Say, Sue Matthew, what a wonderful person.

But it links in again, to something that I've always thought about leadership, and I've heard, actually, it was Richard Wilson I heard say it: leaders need stamina and optimism. And I think that thing about optimism is fantastically important to this woman I cite. It's the optimism that children can fulfil their potential. And you know, we can turn this community into a wonderful community. So the answer actually is, no, I don't have a single person I think of as a model, really, in that sense. I see bits. I should say, I think when I got to being a permanent secretary, and there were people like Sue and Eliza in particular, and you saw those people... Ursula Brennan, again, I did find them inspiring. I mean, I like to listen to how they did things, but again, you take bits of people, because you're not identical in any other respect. I did find that group very supportive.

SA: And when you became perm sec at Defra, I think Sue Street then was perm sec at DCMS, if I'm right, yes, but the two of you, I think, were the only perm secs.

HG: People always say that, and I think there was a moment, and perhaps that's when Sue left DCMS, when I was the only departmental permanent secretary. People say, "Oh, there was a time when you were the only female permanent secretary." I said, that was never true. I mean, so, for example, there was Juliet, the Treasury solicitor, was a woman and was the head of MI5 a woman? There was a point where, as it happened, the numbers fell, but then they picked up again, with Manouche and Una and...

SA: I guess what I'm getting at, and I think your answer is no, that it didn't really feel like a hugely male world to you?

HG: Not particularly. Can I tell you one thing that did, and I met it again in Oxford, and this is one of these cultural signals. Wednesday morning permanent secretaries, which I always really enjoyed, partly because it was just great to be able to share more stories with people who understood your position and so on. And somebody had said something that deserved congratulations, and everybody started banging on the table. That's how they expressed congratulations. They do it in my college as well. Whereas it's not something a woman ever does. We wouldn't think of doing that. And they could come to the college where banging the table is the thing that people do instead of clapping. I think there were little signals, yeah, "Oh, this is a male world after all."

SA: And so by the time you became perm sec at the Home Office, had that changed.

HG: I think it changed... whether or not we all banged the table.

SA: There must have been less of that. Gus O'Donnell brought in so many more women.

HG: There were so many more women, and we weren't quite half the number. I think there was a moment, wasn't there? And they made something of that, when my successor at... anyway, there was a moment shortly after I went to the Home Office from Defra, where almost half of the departmental permanent secretaries were women. There was a high point. Manoush was there, and I can visualise her, the person who succeeded me at Defra was there. Anyway, there was some newspaper coverage of that, because it was a high point.

SA: I wondered if that changed things other than the banging the table. Did it change things in practice, having a higher proportion of women?

HG: I don't think so really. I mean they were all individuals and individual personalities

SA: Were you tempted to take the cabinet secretary role?

HG: I was never offered it.

SA: Was it in your sights?

HG: I mean, lots of people would know this. I did go in for the head of the civil service role, and had been encouraged to do so by some others, but it was when I was at the Home Office. It would, looking back on it, have been quite hard to combine and the excellent Bob Kerslake had lots of practical experience and so on, he got the head of the civil service.

SA: Did you feel ever that that was where you wanted to go?

HG: I suspect, and this is something I've always said to my children, don't apply for jobs that you don't actually want to do. And I think being the first female cabinet secretary would be a wonderful kind of feather in your cap. You'd look at the headlines and think, isn't that great? But would I really have enjoyed doing the job? It's an incredibly difficult job. So I went in for it thinking, you know, the leadership aspects of being the head of the civil service would have been something I found very rewarding, but the cut and thrust and the micro-climate there is in the Cabinet Office, I would not have enjoyed.

SA: I read that somebody asked you if you would write an article criticising the government once you'd left, and you said, "I can't wait."

HG: No, no, no. That's misinformation. That is a quote, in fact, from Simon Jenkins. And there was that Radio Four program called Profile. It's a quarter of an hour on Saturday evenings, and it's someone who's in the news. And when I got the National Trust job, they did a little one of those, and they spoke to Simon Jenkins, who was then the chair of the National Trust. And the question to him must have been, do you think will she just want to toe the government line, and honestly, I cannot remember actually ever saying this. I'll come on to the question in a minute. He said, "Oh no, she said, 'I can't wait'." So he was quoting or misquoting something that must have been said in the interviews. I have never... I mean, I am religious in the fact that I never comment on – I'm approached by Radio Four to say, come in and talk about the Home Office, you know, when something happens in the civil service, particularly in the Home Office. I'm regularly approached by the World at One or the Today Programme or whatever, to comment. And I make an absolute point of never doing it, because I don't think it's appropriate. I mean, I do have general views, which I express about you know, good policy making, and what civil service reform might look like, but you will not find a trace of me in any public media, because I just don't think it's right.

SA: And do you think that – because I did a spell in the civil service, and the thing that was very stamped on me was the importance of discretion, and that stays with you.

HG: Exactly. That stayed with me, and I also think it lets down your successors. Because the moment politicians think, in fact, we'll run off to the papers the moment we retire – it just destroys trust. So it's not good for the institution which I love.

SA: So I've just got a couple more questions for you. I don't want to keep you too much longer, but I wondered if you had any advice for women entering government today? What would your

words of wisdom be?

HG: Do you mean in terms of the entering government bit? Well, what I say to students who are interested in joining the civil service is – and back to your first question, which is, why did you join? I have never, ever been disappointed; all the reasons I joined were amply fulfilled, sometimes to a fault in terms of intellectual challenge and so on. I would say it is an absolutely wonderful career or experience to have. I mean, of course, young people today don't think of it as something that they'll do forever. Absolutely wonderful career. I know things. I've been to places. I know people, partly because I've chosen to have quite a varied career in varied places. Absolutely wonderful career, I would say, and indeed, in terms of flexibility and so on in life in general, still, I think it ranks very highly.

I think by the time you get more senior, in a sense, emotional intelligence is almost more important than intellect in that – this point I made earlier about understanding what motivates politicians and why they react in a particular way and how to best advise-stroke get a point across. You know, retain your own resilience, frankly. And actually, when I look back, various people's careers prove not to be something the pure intellect is going to… so it can, by the time you're very senior, be very emotionally draining. You need lots of resilience and emotional intelligence becomes more and more important the more senior you become. Thinking about how to encourage and warn people who are thinking of a public sector career or civil service career, I think I would make those two points.

SA: And then finally, I've got a choice. I'll give you a choice of which one you want to answer, if you like. One is, is there anything that you wish you'd known earlier in your career that might have helped you back when you were starting out, that you'd give to your younger self? Or perhaps, whether there are any key moments that shaped your career?

HG: Key moment, I'm thinking of the key moments, I think that's a good one. Yes, something that shaped my career was – so by the mid' 90s I had spent all my career in the same department, in the Department for the Environment – wide though its range of subjects was. And first of all, with the excellent Mavis McDonald – she was then my establishments officer – I said in about 1995, I really do need to get out of it. You know, I've only been in this department and I need to get broader experience. And I went to the Cabinet Office. Not sure whether that's broader experience, but it's experience where I did machinery of government and helped with preps for the '97 election. Again, you know, fascinating. I think being in the Cabinet Office has its challenges, and when I emerged from that, I was rung up, perhaps again, by Mavis or someone, and they said, "Oh, would you like to come back here to work on local government finance," which I had done before, but at a more junior level. And I think this was a turning point. I said, "No, I don't want to do any more central policy. I want to do something more practical and outward-looking."

And I went to the Government Office for London, which was then just by Vauxhall Bridge. And I was the director for regeneration for East London. Having been the bright policy wonk for 16 years, I was suddenly on the Docklands Light Railway. Or had that been built? I was in Newham. I was talking to local authority leaders, local regeneration. I was talking to local tenants' groups and single mums at the top of tower blocks. That was absolutely wonderful for me. It was fascinating. It was fresh air. It was extremely challenging, because I'm an INTJ, you know, so talking to large groups of people in tenants' associations in East London, seeing East London. That thing about: take a chance. Don't keep going. Don't go back, and take a chance on things you haven't done before, like that.

And that led me into really thinking about, how do decisions you make in government really affect individual people in local places? So I did things after that, like leading the New Deal for Communities, which was a national programme. It kind of led me to DWP, and it led me to the Inland Revenue. And, you know, in some ways, it led me in the end to the National Trust. And that was the key moment. Don't go back, and do something completely different. And it did. That was, I always say that was transformational.

SA: fantastic, which is great advice for others, too. Thank you so much.

*In fact it was Dame Valerie Strachan who said this, not Dame Mavis McDonald.

Dame Helen Ghosh: x