CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

TRAILBLAZING WOMEN

Interview with Sue Street, January 2026

Career overview

1974–1991: Street joined the civil service as an administrative trainee in the Home Office and worked on a number of policy and legislative roles before moving to the Cabinet Office to run the Top Management Programme in 1989. In this period she also took a career break to live abroad for five years, during which time she had two children.

1991-1994: After being approached by one of the partners at Price Waterhouse (now PwC), Street spent three years as a management consultant there

1994-2001: Street returned to the civil service to lead work in the Privy Council Office, before moving to back to the Home Office where she was the SRO for the Fire Service in England and Wales, and then director general with responsibility for sentencing, probation and prisons.

2001-2006: Appointed as permanent secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Street was also part of the Civil Service Management group in this period, chairing sub-groups on behalf of the cabinet secretary, including recommending the creation of the 'Top 200' cadre of leadership

2006 - present After leaving the civil service Street has held a number of non-executive and advisory roles in the public and private sector. She also coaches and mentors senior women across the civil service and public sector.

Interview Transcript

Suzannah Brecknell (SB): So you joined the civil service in 1974. And I guess the first questions are why you decided to go for a career in government, and what your expectations were, if you had any, at the start of your career?

Sue Street (SB): So, pretty naive, I would say. I'd read moral philosophy at St Andrews, which I loved, and majored in political philosophy. And that is a thread, right through from about age 19 or 20, I was thinking: good government is just so important and – without strong party political alliance – something I would always be interested in. But I first joined the British Council because I was very interested in the arts and international affairs. Actually, coming full circle back to DCMS at the end, the arts have always been a very strong interest for me.

And I was under-stretched, is the truth. It was all right, but I was a bit… I just felt that I had more to give. The three people I shared an office with had all failed the civil service exams, and they all said: "Well, give them a go." So I went in thinking: this just might be more interesting, it might be more stretching. Also, by that time, I was married and couldn't follow the British Council all over the world or felt I couldn't then. Rather amazingly, I got through all the exams and was assigned to the Home Office. I'd always been interested in criminal law, so I was excited, but I didn't have any firm expectations.

The first job was working on the bail bill, which became the Bail Act of 1976. I mention it because it was a very traditional Home Office first administration trainee job: helping to draft a bill and helping to draft speeches. I found the first much easier than the second, because I had no concept of political speech making or how to sort of trim it and spin it. But it was all about trying to reduce the prison population. It was exactly the same issues that we have faced on and off for so many years, because the prisons were overcrowded, and if magistrates didn't grant bail, then the remand population just sort of swelled the permanent custodial sentences.

So that was very interesting, quite intricate, quite exacting. Drew more on my metaphysics and logic studies than on the more airy-fairy moral philosophy, but I enjoyed it. After a year I moved to a really significant job: helping to administer the Prevention of Terrorism Act. And I mention that because, I was 25, 26 years old, and one of the people whom I advised had to be returned to Northern Ireland, was assassinated the next day. I went to my boss and said: "I can't do this job. I'm responsible for this."

It was very heavy, very heavy, life and death work, one year in [to government]. But if we talk about leadership or mentoring: he sat me down and said: "Go back over all the evidence you had. Tell me if you missed something. Tell me if there was something you did wrong. But if not, then that's the job. You take difficult decisions on the evidence that you have."

So that was kind of a baptism of fire into counter-terrorism, where I stayed for quite a long time. I took a significant career break following my husband to South America. We lived in Bogota for six years, had two children, came back to the exact same job, Suzannah, the exact same: administering the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Which is either weird or just… I don't know where the Home Office had been in the meantime, but they just put me straight back in.

It was very hard to get back in. There was absolutely no possibility of going back. The people that I rang to ask about reinstatement said: "Don't even waste the money on a stamp." I remember the words, and I thought: "Well, I will write in." And one individual whom I'd worked for gave me a chance to come back, and so I just went straight back in. I continued with that job, and there are stories about how difficult that is as a mum. For example one day in 1982, when I was back, two bombs went off in [Regents and Hyde] Parks. I had a really difficult day of briefing on body parts and facts and figures about terrible violence in London. When I got home my children's goldfish had died, and they were absolutely devastated. And I had to sort of somehow realise that for them that was… I couldn't just sort of go and have a bath and cry. I had to deal with this thing that was very important for them. That was kind of a moment of working motherhood, I suppose.

SB: So there are a few moments to pick up on in that early part of your career – up to the career break. What was the gender balance around you like in those early years? Were you one of just a few women

in that sphere, and did do you recall that having an impact at the time, or is it something you just got on with?

SS: I think it's – as I'm sure most of my cohort would say – yes and no. So yes, there was a gender imbalance. And no, I didn't notice it. I didn't question it. It didn't bother me, one way or the other. I made friends of both genders at my own level. All my bosses were men, right until very late in my career, all the way up. Didn't faze me at all.

SB: Yes a lot of women have told me they had a similar experience in that they had no female bosses until quite late in their career. Were there even any senior women that you were aware of in the management structure or elsewhere in the civil service? The Home Office, I think, didn't have many senior women then.

SS: I didn't, I wasn't aware of it, but I wasn't hunting for it or looking for it. I did early on go to a talk called Women in the civil service, given by a former woman permanent secretary. I think it's interesting that the acronym for Women in the civil service was "Witches", which tells you... but basically her message, very powerfully delivered, was: you could not have a family, a happy family life, and a successful career. It was so brutal. It was very negative and very forceful, and I just decided... I just went into denial. I just thought: "Stuff that... I am going to live my life." But it was a very negative, and that came from a woman, which was a pity, really.

SB: The other question we had was about language that was used about women: I wondered whether there was anything you recall about the way that senior women were spoken about, or if you had any kind of experiences yourself about that side of things?

SS: It's not in the early stages of my career, but there is, there is a quote which I won't attribute in one of my appraisals when I was already a permanent secretary. The first question – I've written it down, but I'll never forget it – was: how does it feel to be a petite woman with a soft voice around the permanent secretaries' table? So yes, you know, patronising, yes, but I don't think I ever had that battle-axe, headmistress, bossy label. It was more kind of: "Is she strong enough? Can she do this? Is she confident enough?"

Certainly, when I was working with the senior judiciary, they definitely started with a sort of assumption that I didn't understand. But I very quickly... as long as you've got the intellect and you've done the work, I don't think you have to fight a battle over these things. When I was asked that question about being little and quiet, I gave the individual the benefit of the doubt, which was right. It was about them trying to demonstrate emotional intelligence. They were literally asking: "How does it feel?" Not putting me down. And I said: "Well, I never seem to be forgotten. People always remember me. So that's how I make my mark. I don't have to shout or be tall. There are a lot of them around."

So I think you have to navigate without being immediately upset or over-sensitive or even sensitive; to be quite matter-of-fact, thick-skinned. Get on. Do the job. Be prepared. Be as good as you can be.

SB: If we look back on the significant moment you mentioned where you were returning to the civil service. You'd been away, you'd had two children, you'd been living abroad, you were moving back and

looking to resume your career. What was the resistance to you re-joining? Was it because you had a family, for example, or because you'd been away too long?

SS: It was somebody who answered the telephone at the bit of the civil service that did the rules, and they just said: "You've been away six years. There's no right of return. We're not recruiting. So go away." I don't think it was particularly about a family. They weren't interested in anything except the fact that they weren't recruiting. So it was just kind of jobsworth administration, regulations.

SB: I suppose, early '80s, it was probably a time where there was quite a bit of change and reduction in the civil service. But you obviously you persisted through, and thought okay, well, I've still got a connection with this person I used to work with, let me contact them?

SS: Not even that. I just wrote a letter. I knew my record was good, my appraisals were good. I knew I'd been in a very sensitive post. I just wrote and said: could somebody consider this in writing, rather than just on the phone. And so a senior official looked at my record. He didn't know me then, but he just said, "I'm going to give her a chance. We'll have her back." That was transformative.

Once I was back, there was no quarter. Nobody was interested in the family. I never spoke about the dishwasher breaking down, or the kids having measles. I never ever mentioned family life. But I was just expected to do the job, and I did the job.

SB: And did you ever work condensed hours, or part time?

SS: It never occurred to me. I mean, I'd had six years being a wife and mum, I was ready to come back full time. It was definitely a struggle in terms of physical energy, but mentally it was wonderful. I was very happy to be back.

SB: From there, what were the next big milestones for you?

SS: The next few years were really classic Home Office policy and legislation, quite detailed work. So from the Prevention of Terrorism Act, I went on to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, which was very technical, very detailed, but, looking back, quite interesting. I remember saying we need to make allowances for photocopying, and evidence that could be taken [by photocopier]. There was a lot of resistance to moving into that century, not even the 21st Century. So that was really hard graft, but I loved, absolutely loved bill work. I loved being in Parliament. I loved doing the briefing for ministers.

Then we set up the Serious Fraud Office, that was another Criminal Justice Act. So that was a whole section of 'keep your head down, be totally anonymous, get it right, and earn the confidence of ministers and get the policy right'. And then to actually get the Serious Fraud Office up and running was more implementation.

Then there was the Security Service Bill, which was the first time MI5 had been put on a statutory footing. There were only a few of us in the Bill: me, the head of the Bill team and the prime minister. It was very short lines, very interesting, very secret work.

And from there I went to run the Top Management Program, which was very different. Lots of private sector people, lots of new management thinking, lots of different organisations, different cultures.

So I think that was quite a moment [for me]. Part of designing [the TMP] was bringing in leaders from different sectors, listening to how they interpreted their role. I learned a huge amount, and it was a lesson in perhaps being a more visible leader, rather than being the backroom kind of number-or-legislation-crunching person behind the scenes. From there – and I'm going to stop at this, because this was definitely significant – I was recruited by… one of the partners on the Top Management Program was Price Waterhouse, now PWC, and he persuaded me to join them. The civil service were not happy: they wouldn't let me go on secondment. I had to actually go [leave the civil service], so I actually went, and spent two or three years being a sort of jobbing consultant, and then a management consultant on all kinds of different jobs – so I can reflect on what that taught me – but interestingly I then got a letter specifically from someone who'd known me before and was by then in the prime minister's unit, saying: "Can you come back to lead the drug strategy work, can you put your name forward?" But I think I was the only name. And in between we'd had the whole Margaret Thatcher [saying]: "We must learn from the private sector." So there I was: I'd run the Top Management Programme, I was in the private sector… it was right place, right time.

SB: As you say, we can reflect on what you learned through those different experiences, but, before that, one thing I'm interested in is that period where you were working full time, managing your family and progressing upwards. Obviously you were talking to the mothers of other children, your children's friends. Did you feel the civil service was a good place to be a working mother, and was it unusual for you to be able to manage that progression?

SS:I think it was quite binary. Most of the parents of my children's school friends, the mothers didn't work. The mothers were at the school. So there was a lot of guilt. I think there's a line in [TV show] Motherland where Amanda says: "Oh no, I don't work because I love my children…" Most of the other mothers were asking: "How do you do it?" But more: "Why? How could you?"

It's important to say I had help. Not a nanny, not fancy help, but we were lucky to have a house with a self-contained flat, so we had a live-in mother's help for years and years, and that was really important, so the kids were picked up and dropped off, and my mother was on standby. You won't find a working mother of that era who didn't have support. But there was no feeling that the civil service was better than anywhere else, and it wasn't, or at least I didn't test it. I was expected to be there. And there were lots of late nights. You're doing Bills; there are a lot of late nights in Parliament. There's a lot of on-call and press office and private office calls. So you just had to, you had to manage, and you manage with a very good husband, very good help.

SB: So then what drew you to the Top Management Program? Did you consciously think that you wanted to do something different?

SS: I think I felt that I've been grafting away really hard, serious, life and death, Home Office, fine print stuff for years and years. And actually, my husband worked in the private sector and there was, as I say, this whole Thatcher-era thing about we should learn from the private sector. The Top Management Program was exactly that: you were refreshing your own skills and learning. I found it really quite easy compared to other jobs, even though it was a promotion, because you were basically convening, designing, helping things run well, dealing with all sorts of interesting, intelligent people. And it was great, it was a very good moment.

SB: When you moved out to spend time as a consultant, what was your observation at that point about

the difference between government and working in the private sector?

SS: So that was huge, and it's remained a bit of an obsession with me: that I felt that the civil service needed to work more like the professional services firms. I found it a huge culture shock, because we were filling in six-minute time units – six minutes! You were judged at the end of the week on what fees you'd brought in, or what jobs you won. It was very competitive, very demanding. Some of the work, intellectually, was highly demanding, but some wasn't. So because you're a jobbing consultant, you take the job, you do the work, and we worked extremely hard. I learned a lot about IT and a lot about financial management. And I learned most of all about project management: time, quality, cost, the balance... we didn't do anything without a Gantt chart. They had wonderful IT, which showed who had what skills, who was available, who had what time. It took me a while to adjust, but I suddenly thought: this is so productive. There's a reason these people are making money from the civil service. It's because we don't know how to do this.

SB: Was the gender balance different, compared to government?

SS: I noticed that – it's a terrible thing to say – there were lots of broken marriages. There were women at my level. So that was consultant, managing consultant – but there were no women partners, or maybe one or two, very few, so not that different [in terms of numbers]. Generally it was a more masculine environment. I mean, if I'd been sensitive to sexual harassment or the sort of talk that goes on, it was far more male, as a culture, and very "winner takes all."

SB: You mentioned how the tide that was moving towards copying the private sector, new types of management techniques and new public management... that tide was beneficial for you, because you happened to get on it at the right point and move with it. Were there any other things that you look back and think, this change was helpful for you? Perhaps the change towards a more open style of leadership, or more emphasis on leadership skills that came about in the noughties?

SS: I think almost the opposite. I've come back to the civil service twice... when I came back after Colombia, and it was so exactly the same that I slotted straight back into the same job. Six years later, I came back after what, for me, had been a pretty transformative period with a high-powered professional services firm, and it was exactly the same. Well, I changed, and I think observing leaders in the Top Management Program and then Price Waterhouse, I had changed to think of leadership as having to be kind of more holistic. You need to look at your stakeholders, your bosses, and the people who work for you, and the people who work for all the stakeholders. That's what consultancy does – a stakeholder map. It does it all in a very formulaic way, but it teaches you that you can't just live in a hierarchy and tell someone what to do, and they tell someone else, and then you tell your boss. To me, it transformed my idea of how to lead. My career accelerated massively when I came back. I never expected, really, to get much past the beginning of the SCS, because I'd had all these years out. And it just suddenly... I remember the Lord President [of the Privy Council] saying, "I've never seen a Gantt chart before. What is this?" We were doing the drug strategy – Tackling Drugs Together, which I was brought back to do from the Privy Council Office. It's still said to be a landmark of working with four or five departments, lots of local authorities... It wasn't that I was clever, I just learned that that's how you lead. And of course, I benefited. I gave a presentation to John Major, and he said: "I've never heard anything that began with so many stats. I've never seen delivery dates and costs." And I was like: "Well, this is how a lot of the rest of the world does stuff."

SB: Before we move into the third stage of your career I want to ask about who supported you – this could be at any point in your career. Did you have mentors, sponsors, or even just a support group, informally because, as you say, you had some very emotionally exacting roles.

SS: There wasn't a network but, on the whole, all my line managers, or bosses or their line managers were excellent. I mean, not excellent in terms of caring about whether I was a woman or having children, but excellent because they didn't care about that. They just wanted me to succeed professionally, and so did I, and I found that extremely inspiring. People had different leadership styles of their own. Some were very quiet, but extremely effective. Some were a bit more authoritarian, a bit noisier, but everybody had integrity. I just respected my bosses, and they respected me, but there wasn't a network. I mean, I think when I was invited back specifically to the Privy Council Office, that was probably the only point where I had a female boss – two, in fact – and they really believed in me and helped me. But there wasn't a network. I didn't really look for it. I was just very fortunate, to have excellent line managers and their bosses.

SB: So that point at which you come back from Price Waterhouse, is that the point where you're moving into the SCS? I haven't got sort of grades here I'm not sure where you are, as it were, at this point, but I know it was about a decade more before you became perm sec.

SS: So actually the Top Management Program was a promotion to Grade 5, then I went out and came back as a Grade 5, and if we sort of parcel together the three jobs after that, although one was a promotion. So there was the drug strategy, which I've mentioned, where we had to harness and persuade and deliver. After that, I had to lead the delivery of the 1997 [New Labour manifesto] pledge to halve the time between the arrest and trial of persistent young offenders. That was a similar sort of thing: get everyone around the table. To do this you have to have the police, you have to have the prison service, you have to have the courts. You have to have everyone. Louise Casey was then one of the team and even then she was a great ally in delivery. Michael Barber's delivery unit was like: "Are you going to get this pledge done? Are you going to get it done?" We got it done about two months late, but we got it done. I learned a lot. Jack Straw was so supportive and involved. He would come with me on visits to Manchester to persuade the police to use the right files. It was a big, complicated leadership issue. The job after that was fire and emergency planning, when we halved the deaths. And the reason I mention these all in one is suddenly I'd sort of come out of being a quill pen and head down to: I have to make this happen because, not because I'm cleverer or better, but just because I'm the convener and it's on me to do this. And I really liked it. I really like delivery focus.

SB: I re-read our lunch interview from 2018 and recalled that you spoke about being quite intentional in the fire service, around becoming more visible and deciding: I need to earn their respect and become known, and that's the only way that I will be able to influence them to change. To show them that I can be respected and trusted. So it definitely felt like that was a point where you were thinking quite clearly about how, as an individual, you could help to drive that delivery.

SS: That's right. And probably, as I mentioned not about the gender thing, because it has never really obsessed me, but that clearly those operational services have got a reputation for maybe not advancing women, and I knew I would never get what I wanted by barking orders louder or standing up straighter. So I decided to be out and about and show how much I respected them, and go through the hot fire training, put on the boots and climb the ladders. It could have looked like a stunt, but they kind of liked it. They liked that I was showing how much I respected their operations, and in return, they needed

to respect that I was trying to get them the money and the strategy to move to more prevention than response, and it just worked, and that's huge credit to them.

SB: I suppose also it comes back to your point about demonstrating actual ability and results, because you also mentioned you were able to get them resources from the Treasury, and able to demonstrate your knowledge of how government works and of negotiating with the Treasury. So it wasn't just showing "I understand you" but also "I can help you to deliver".

SS: Yes, and not forgetting the role of the home secretary, Michael Howard, at the time. Some people said he's not the easiest to work with, but I always found, as long as you got your arguments and had done the work… why wouldn't people try to reduce fire deaths in the home? The policy wasn't party political. So look, I'm making it sound all easy, but on the whole, I've found most people helpful throughout my career – constructive and decent – politicians as well as civil servants.

SB: We do have a question as well about reflecting that interface, because I'm interested in the fact that as leaders in the civil service, that is part of the unique context you work in – the need to work with political leaders as well. At our launch reception Cat Little mentioned how the Cabinet table is more diverse than the perm sec table, and that's a sort of call to action for the perm secs. Was that ever something that you were aware of, a difference in gender balance or different…

SS: I mean, I am a feminist. I'm very strongly of a favour [of gender equality]. But I wasn't thinking about it very much. When I went to work for Tessa Jowell, everyone was saying, "Oh, a female perm sec and a female secretary of state," but it just didn't seem to be a thing for me. You work for people, regardless of any of those protected characteristics, as we now call them. You have to just deal with individuals. So we definitely had some powerful women in Cabinet, but I didn't interact with them directly.

SB: By the time you got to the perm sec table, you were the only woman, though there had been women perm secs before you, they had left and Helen Ghosh was not yet appointed. Was it something you thought about?

SS: I mean, for the very first meeting, I felt like a child going to nursery school, to the point where I said to one very debonair person: "Well, where should I sit?" And he said: "Oh, it all depends," which I found very unhelpful. Then another, who subsequently became a good friend, said: "Come and sit next to me." That was just… you kind of need… it sounds terribly childish, but you just needed to know the form. And I certainly didn't speak for one or two meetings, so I was a bit infantilised, maybe, but maybe as a new boy, I would have felt the same.

SB: Yes, I think that the politics of where people sit around the table is universal, isn't it, in terms of which are the big departments and which are the big hitters and all of that.

SS: I definitely was feeling a bit overwhelmed. But I'm not sure whether it was to do with being a woman or not.

SB: You must have been used at that point to going into rooms and meetings where it was mainly men. So, actually, perhaps there's just something quite daunting about stepping up into that perm sec level.

SS: I think that was it actually.

SB: I was going to ask about cultures of leadership. You have sort of spoken about this, but I wonder if we might make it a bit more explicit. What did you feel was valued in the leaders in the civil service when you started out, and how did that change over the course of your career?

SS: So I think that the golden thread that sadly may have changed a bit now as we've had some real bumps in the road... integrity was the golden thread. You always felt that people were being honorable, honest, impartial, objective. All of those things, and intelligent as well. Not to keep harping on, but not as much changed as it should have done, in terms of delivery, financial and technical ability, and kind of rating the experts. That generalist, Mandarin arrogance, I think, persisted throughout and didn't change. I wish I could say it changed significantly, but I don't think it did.

What else... I mean, certainly now I'm an executive coach for senior civil servants, so I'm very much in touch. And now I see a much more family-friendly [environment] but the negative is a much more entitled cohort of civil servants. It's a very different balance from the period you're asking about. By the time I was a permanent secretary, I mean, I hope it was just kind of Tessa and me, but it might have been the fact that we both had children... we were a family-friendly department. We absolutely cared about people's health and wellbeing. And it was quite a kind, but... but again, you know, you had to be delivery-focused. You're going to rebuild Wembley Stadium and win the Olympic bid...do all the stuff. I'm not saying it was like the Home Office, life and death, but it was still quite big delivery projects. But you can be nice.

SB: I think you reflected on this before as well, and you touched on it with your recollection of the former permanent secretary who was basically like, you can't have a family. That by the time you were in that position of leadership, were you conscious of the kind of story you were telling to women in your organisation, or the perceptions they might have of your work ethic, your career enjoyment, your story...

SS: Absolutely, and I don't know if you're interviewing Helen Ghosh as part of this, but she joined the permanent secretaries cadre a little bit after me, but not very much. We used to say to each other: you have to look happy as a senior woman. Of course, we know there are strains, of course they're tired. But we don't encourage other women by being a battle-axe, or saying 'I am an exceptionally brilliant or outstanding individual'. You just....look like it's a privilege and you're enjoying it, which it is. So we kind of set about giving that aura, I certainly did, which was sometimes artificial, because horrible things happen. You have caring responsibilities but men do as well. I think it's part of the role of the leader to say: I can keep calm, carry on and actually love it. Maybe that was the six years off that made me feel I had some more battery left in me.

SB: Obviously you had enjoyed it so much, even in that first third of your civil service career that you wanted to come back after six years and you didn't take the first no as an answer, so clearly it was something that was very important to you or enjoyable.

SS: Yes, it definitely was the right profession for me, which is another great thing to be able to say.

SB:I've heard from you through this conversation that your attitude was, well, you just work hard. If you work hard and do the preparation and demonstrate you can do things, that goes a long way in obviously helping you succeed. Did you ever feel as people often say, as a woman, you have to work twice as hard, you have to really demonstrate more capability than male peers at your level, was that

something you were conscious of?

SS: That's a bit victimhood. I mean, how would you know? So I don't really like that approach, and I don't see any evidence for it. I think people look at... so it's partly hard work. It's partly, if you've got some natural ability, that probably helps. But I think it's relationships, working with people, giving other people some of the wins. Not kind of hiding under a bushel, but I think if you work well with others, they won't put you down for being a woman or, you know, race, religion, creed... It should, and I think in the civil service it usually does, speak for itself.

SB: I've got a couple of final questions I'd like to ask but before I do is there anything you have reflected on or a question we haven't covered that you want to make sure we do?

SS: No, I think, I think what, what drives me still, because I want to see the civil service back where it should be in terms of its own merit and being recognised for having that merit, I strongly feel it needs kind of revolution, not evolution. It needs to be much more up there with the time, cost, quality, project management and visible leadership approach, without losing the integrity and impartiality. So I'm just a bit frustrated at the moment at how it comports itself, it's an odd thing to say about half a million people, or however many it is, but I think the right leadership and some very strong demands... I'm into tough love - really easy for me to say now I'm not there, but that's what I'd like to see.

SB: That sort of echoes with – you mentioned her earlier – Louise Casey was speaking last week at the Institute for Government, and her main message seemed to be a frustration with the sense in the civil service that they can't make change, that they can't achieve things, or they can't improve things. She was saying we need to stop that attitude of "throw your hands up in the air. It's all so difficult".

SS: I mean, I nearly wrote to her because I think her two words were grip and fix it. I am absolutely with that. And it doesn't have to be brutal, but it does have to be grip. Take... the whole civil service has to be gripped and fixed and...

SB: Ah yes that's one thing... grip and fix makes me think of Jeremy Heywood and that reminds me of what happened when Richard Wilson told you that you had the perm sec role... could you reflect on that, that sort of moment of, that's obviously quite a pivotal point...

SS: So he was such a brilliant manager and leader himself... and when he said, "You have been appointed permanent secretary," I must have looked absolutely dumbstruck. He just looked at me and said, "Are you questioning my judgment?" It was just so neat. It was him saying: "We think you can do this. So go do it." That kind of thing, I suppose it's a very nice little example of a lot of the seriously good line managers and leaders that I came across in my career. That kind of Obama-esque inspiration of "yes you can" was quite important for me. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have... I wasn't naturally confident, and I wasn't really aspiring to go to the top, until suddenly I was.

SB: Is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

SS: I wish I'd known how rewarding it would be and how worthwhile. I'm kind of glad I didn't know how absolutely exhausting, physically exhausting... that was the price. I was very, very physically tired for a lot of my career. And like at nine o'clock or 10 o'clock at night it was like all the strings had been cut. I couldn't really function. But that was all. I didn't pay a psychological price. Just as an aside, it's not a big

point, but for the first four years, or possibly five after I went back to work, I didn't make any money out of it. When people say "I can't afford to work, I can't afford not to work"... all my money went on child care, but that was fine, because that was an investment, and obviously later your career, your sort of remuneration, overtakes some other helping support roles. But it was never about the money. It was always about the satisfaction.

For further reading, see Civil Service World's 2018 interview with Street: https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/winning-the-2012-olympics-being-a-female-leader-in-government-and-working-with-tessa-jowell-lunch-with-dame-sue-street