

What Would You Say to the Prime Minister?

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Saw Churchill, heard Macmillan, spoke with Douglas-Home, constituency neighbour to Heath, polite with Wilson and Callaghan, campaigned with Thatcher, friend of Major, polite with Blair and Brown, supported May and now talking to Johnson: between saying hullo and in time goodbye, I have not made public or private comment on any.

John Bercow was at times controversial as Speaker. I withheld comment, disappointing many who wrote declaring it was my duty to evict him from the chair.

Four times in seven days, BBC Newsnight asked me to be a talking head on stories about gatherings at Downing Street. I declined.

As this newspaper is printed, I expect to have talked in private with the Prime Minister. He may have asked me for suggestions on what should now be done. If over 300 MPs in our party make four points and if all those in opposition contribute two, he will have about 2,000 to consider.

Were I at No 10, I would not need reminding that it is best to do things right first, that everyone should be able to speak without fear if they think something wrong is being done or that something possible and right is not being done.

To my surprise and to the amusement of friends, Margaret Thatcher had me as a junior minister for six years. We got along well on the occasions when we were together, She ended one argument: 'You can have what you want now; I will have what I want later.'

At ministries in Employment, Roads, and Agriculture with Environment in Northern Ireland, I asked my private staff to tell colleagues: spend nothing on my office; if walls needed painting or carpet replacing, do it after my term.

If I said something wrong or unnecessarily ambiguous, please tell me. If it happened twice, tell the permanent secretary; only the third time was it appropriate to tell The Guardian.

Tom King, my first secretary of state, gave me specific responsibilities, with this advice: 'Make decisions when they come to you. When you make a mistake, be the first person to tell me. If you think you are about to make a mistake, come to talk with me so we might do it together.'

I was possibly one of the more decisive junior ministers. All but one of my six bosses trusted me, hoping that I would not knowingly do anything they would seriously think wrong or embarrassing.

An alternative question is what would I do as prime minister, assuming I could be a suitable candidate.

It helps to have a stable household and at least in private to live simply. Health and capacity for hard work should be matched by not taking too much too personally.

Have a resilient spouse or partner if possible. I offer others virtual membership of my Denis Thatcher Society for those like me married to women more important than themselves. Denis and Philip were loyal husbands.

One of Dominic Cummings's recommendations has stuck. He admired US Colonel John Boyd who knew Washington DC during Watergate. Boyd: 'If they ask for loyalty, give them integrity; if they ask for integrity, then give loyalty.'

Some write with advice on letters to the 1922, some say what their voting history has been and what might happen in future: that is part of practical politics. At times, I think of my opportunity to be a human lighthouse. There are nights and days of storms as well as sunshine, there are rocks to avoid and there are responsibilities every day.