

Ministerial leadership during crises



About this report

Crises are among the greatest challenges a minister will face while in office. Ministers are only one part of the government's response to any crisis, but as leaders they make high stakes decisions and set the tone and expectations for everyone else's actions.

Drawing on studies of successful crisis response, and interviews with former ministers and officials, this report looks at how ministers can lead effective responses to crises as part of the wider system. It sets out the key leadership roles ministers play during a crisis, and what they can do to prepare for, and learn from, crises.

This paper is part of a package of IfG Academy resources designed to support ministers and their teams in responding to crises effectively, including a short 'how to' guide and a practical crisis response workshop.

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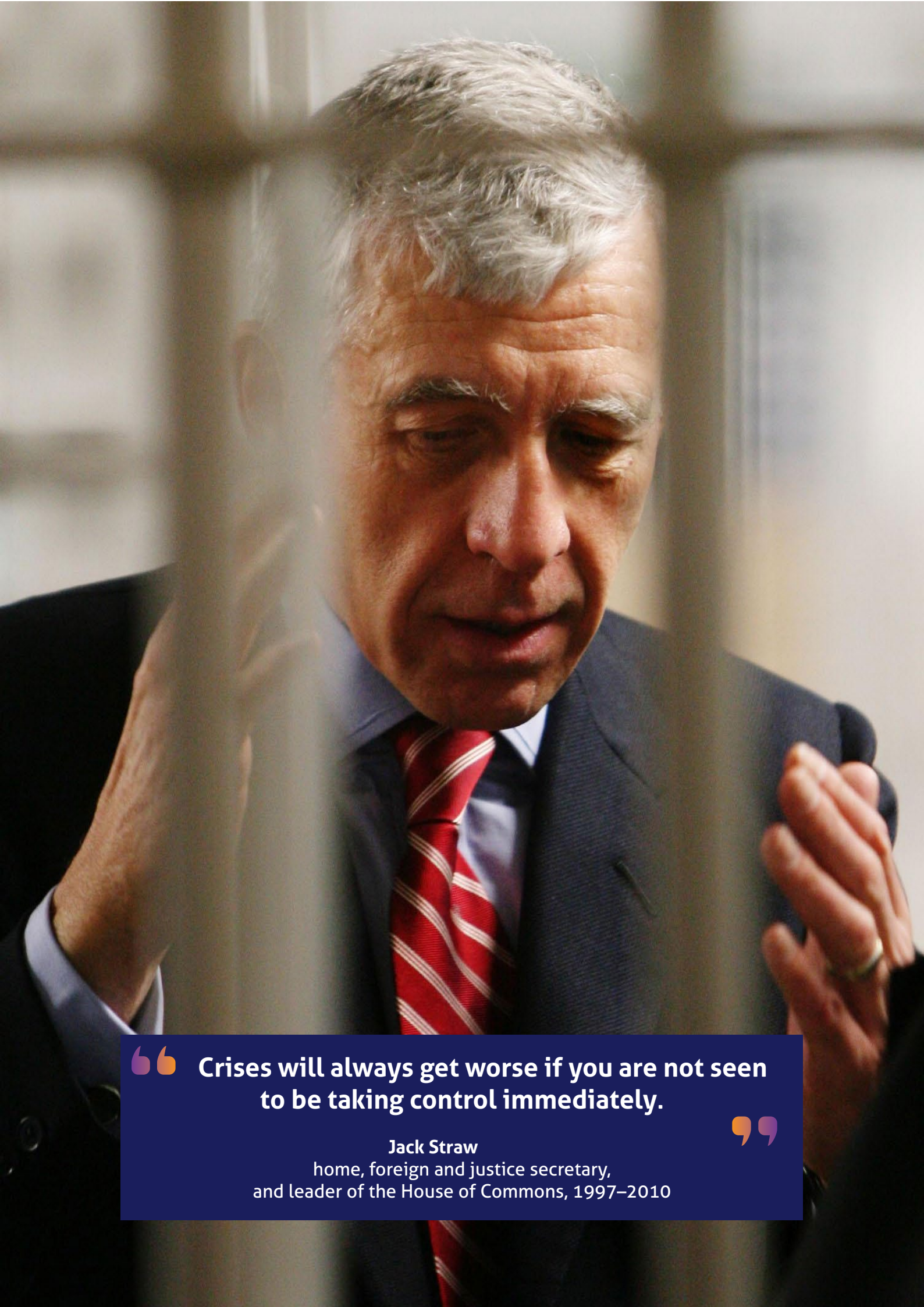
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“ Crises will always get worse if you are not seen to be taking control immediately. ”

Jack Straw
home, foreign and justice secretary,
and leader of the House of Commons, 1997–2010



Summary

Crises are among the greatest challenges a minister will face while in office. The minister in charge of the response will have to get to grips with a complex and rapidly developing situation, make high-stakes decisions about the government's response, and communicate these decisions confidently to the public and other key audiences.

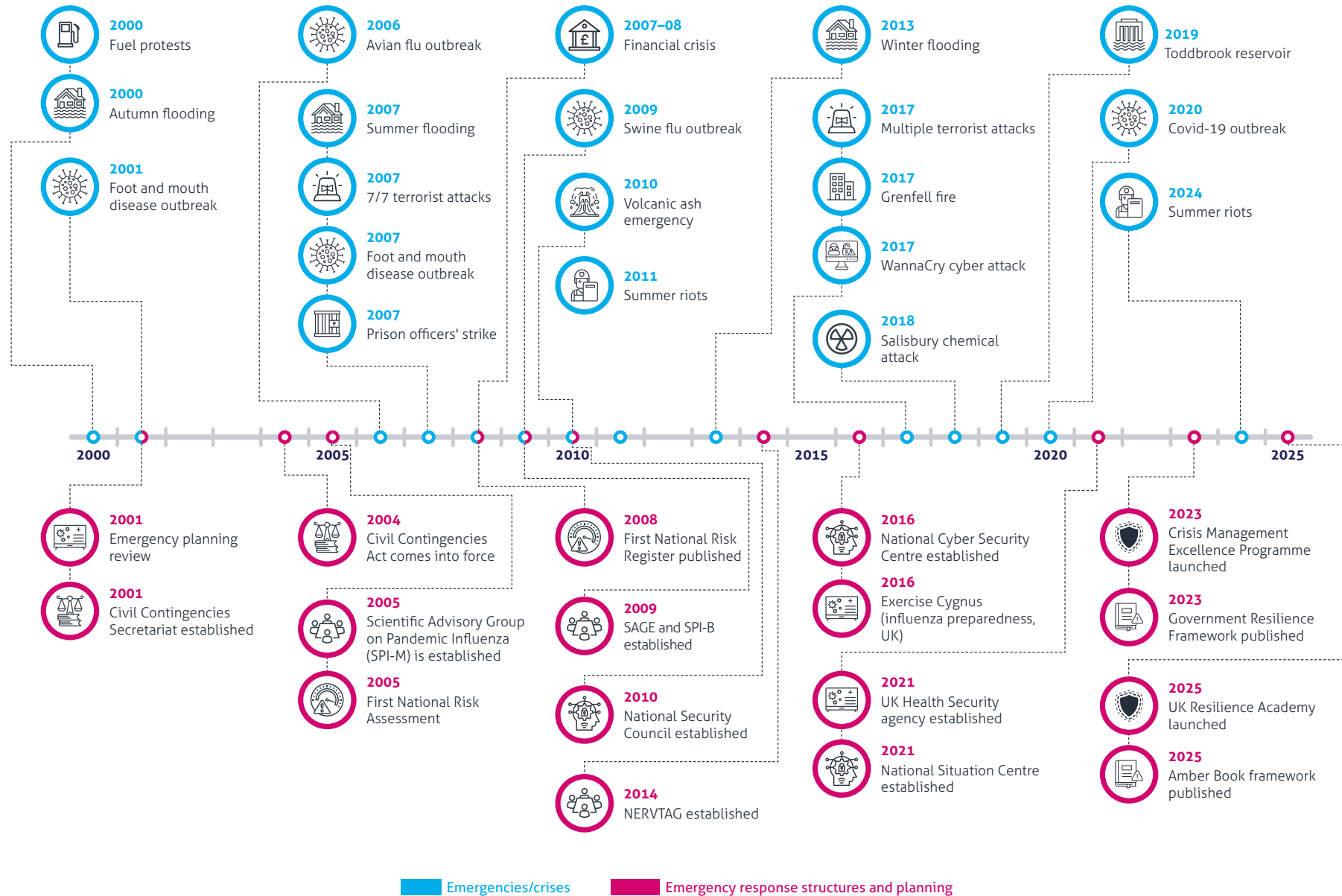
But despite the importance of crises in ministerial life, ministers often struggle to find the time to reflect on how they can prepare for, respond to and recover from them effectively. In 'peacetime', they need to familiarise themselves with the possible crises they may face, and the skills, mechanisms and relationships they will rely on as part of the response. In the aftermath of a crisis, they can maintain focus on recovery efforts and ensure the government learns and implements lessons to address the causes.

This insight paper sets out the key leadership roles ministers play during a crisis:

- **Decision maker:** ministers need to make quick decisions about what to do, often in the face of incomplete information
- **Problem solver:** ministers can create space for responding agencies to get on with their job, while resolving blockages in the system
- **Convenor:** ministers need to bring together the right people at the right time, and may have to build new relationships at speed
- **Team leader:** ministers need to delegate effectively to the immediate team of officials and political figures around them
- **Cross-government leader:** ministers need to drive action across government with a strong mandate from the prime minister
- **Communicator:** ministers need to explain what is happening and what the government is doing about it, to a range of different (often critical) audiences.

This paper is part of a package of resources designed to support government ministers and their teams in responding to crises effectively, including a short 'how-to' guide and a practical crisis response workshop.

Timeline Emergencies/crises and UK government response structures 2000–2025





Introduction

All governments will face crises while in power. These can range from protracted, all-encompassing events like the Covid-19 pandemic and the global financial crisis of 2008, to spontaneous events like the riots in the summers of 2011 and 2024, to events that are expected but the exact impact of which is unknown, like flooding. Crises can pose real and complex challenges for the state, particularly those organisations in charge of maintaining the safety of the public.

The Cabinet Office produces an annual National Risk Register – compiling, in 2025, some 89 acute and chronic risks across nine risk themes that include terrorism, cyber, systems failures, natural disasters and disease outbreaks.¹ As well as the pressures of the crisis response, such events can also throw the normal business of government off course and mean that a minister loses the trust of their colleagues – or that an entire government loses the confidence of the public.

So a government getting its response to a crisis right is part of its 'licence to operate' – if it cannot do this, voters may well not trust it to get on with day-to-day delivery. As David Omand, former head of GCHQ and former intelligence and security co-ordinator in the Cabinet Office, has noted, governments have long been voted out of office after having been seen to have failed to manage a crisis.² He gave the examples of Edward Heath and the three-day week, and James Callaghan and the 'winter of discontent'. More recently, many incumbent governments around the world lost elections after the pandemic.

These are extreme examples – overwhelming crises can hasten the end of a government that is already unpopular and other factors will, of course, play a part in elections. Crises can also bog down ministers and stop them working on the issues they want to focus on and which they were elected to deal with. So, it is crucial that ministers have a plan about how they will deal with crises in their patch, and think about what they will do during any such event. This report is designed to help them in such preparations.

What do we mean by crisis?

Every government faces unexpected events and shocks that can cause problems for ministers and their teams. In less than a year in office the Starmer government has dealt with major riots, a political scandal around the amount of gifts accepted by new ministers shortly after the election (dubbed 'freebiegate')³ and a serious incident with the Heathrow substation fire.⁴ It has also had to respond to rapidly changing situations, such as those that led it to step in and take over British Steel.⁵ But while these may have felt overwhelming in the moment, they did not all become 'crises'.

Here we consider a crisis as something that risks overwhelming a system to the extent that business-as-usual work is knocked off course.⁶ This can mean that normal service delivery cannot continue or, in extreme cases, that businesses and homes, or even lives, are at risk. An emergency is different to a crisis in that the former is a one-off, unexpected event that can cause damage or poses a risk to life, and requires immediate action, but does not become an all-encompassing problem that means other work must stop. The oil tanker crash in the North Sea in March 2025 is an example of an emergency that did not become a crisis.

Crises can also have implications for the reputation of those responding to them. But in the government context, there is an important difference between crises that affect the workings of the state, and scandals that affect the reputation of specific individuals or departments. In this paper, we focus on crises that affect the workings of government, and/or where government has to get involved to respond to situations, rather than scandals that can end the career of a particular individual.

What are the different types of crisis?

There are different types of crisis that ministers face during their time in office – and understanding what type of situation they find themselves in allows a minister to work out how best to focus their energies. David Omand categorises crises into two main groups: sudden impact and slow burn.⁷ The former are things that happen without warning. They may be over within a matter of hours, or they may last for weeks (and in either case the work to support those affected can last for much longer). Crises in this category include things like the Grenfell Tower disaster, terrorist attacks, human or animal disease outbreaks and the prison officers' strike in 2007.

Slow burn crises can build up over many months or years and sometimes erupt after a particular tipping point: while the Grenfell Tower fire itself was a sudden impact, its aftermath exposed failures in the regulation of building cladding that affect buildings across the country and have meant costly repairs for owners and government. Similarly, the global financial crisis was the result of many factors, including deregulation of the financial sector in the preceding years, and one that continued evolving over months and years.

As well as the type of crisis, the ability of ministers to affect the outcome also varies, which can help distinguish between crisis situations. In some cases, ministers will have little to no ability to influence what happens in the first instance because the response will be led by other organisations, particularly the emergency services. In a flood, for example, the local authority, police, fire and rescue, and Environment Agency teams will direct any evacuation and manage support to those affected, as well as lead the clean-up afterwards. The role of ministers here is more focused on setting the strategic direction for the response, ensuring those on the front line have the resources they need and communicating with the public, parliament and others about what is being done to manage the impact.

In the longer term, ministers have more direct influence over what the government chooses to learn from the crisis – changing building regulations after the Grenfell fire, for example.⁸

At the other end of the scale is a crisis where ministers have many choices about how to respond – and in doing so affect the outcome. These tend to be more chronic situations, rather than something that is quickly over. For example, during the pandemic ministers were regularly confronted with the choices about the level of restrictions on everyday life to help slow the spread of the virus. During the global financial crisis, Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown’s decision to recapitalise the Royal Bank of Scotland and other UK banks was instrumental in bringing that phase of the crisis to an end. It is not just chronic situations where ministers have a high influence over the outcome: Jack Straw’s decision in 2007 to secure a legal injunction against the Prison Officers’ Association, after it launched a surprise strike, resolved the crisis quickly.

When deciding on a response to a crisis, understanding exactly what influence a minister has to shape the outcome means they can choose where to best focus their energy. The **COBR** committee, so named because it meets in the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms, is “the key mechanism through which the UK government responds quickly to emergencies that require decisions urgently”.⁹ COBR allows ministers to meet representatives from other levels of government, the agencies responding to a crisis and private sector organisations affected. COBR is supported by a small group of officials and is used to keep ministers up to date on the situation at hand, co-ordinate the government’s response and provide information for key decisions.

Before, during and after: how ministers should approach crises

This paper looks at how government ministers can respond to crises. Ministers are only one part of the government’s response to any crisis, but as leaders they set the tone and expectations for everyone else’s actions. They also bear the brunt of the public and media scrutiny of the crisis response efforts.

We spoke to former ministers, special advisers, civil servants, public servants and others, and looked into wider studies of successful crisis response. Drawing on examples including the severe flooding and the prison officers’ strike in 2007, the financial crisis the following year and the WannaCry ransomware attack of 2017, we consider how ministers can prepare for crises, what roles they can most effectively play during one, and how they can ensure that they and the wider system learn from a crisis after the event.

This paper is part of a package of resources from the Institute for Government that is designed to support ministers and their teams to think about how they can prepare for and respond to crises effectively. For more information, see www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/ministerial-leadership-crises



“

I had to reassure the National Cyber Security Centre that they were doing the right thing and make sure that they had the confidence to deliver the right message, a reassuring message.

”

Amber Rudd
Home secretary (2016–18)

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IN PRACTICE

Preparing for a crisis

This paper focuses on how ministers can lead an effective response to a crisis, but much of this is dependent on the groundwork they do before crises hit. Ministers face many demands on their time and it can be difficult to think about longer term risks, but it is crucial that they do so: their agenda could be thrown off course by a crisis. There are certain things a minister can do to help prepare for when something goes wrong.

Ministers should identify the possible crises they may face and the key mechanisms for crisis response

Ministers should identify the possible crises they may encounter in their role. Each department will have officials who consider the likelihood of a risk occurring, the scale of the potential impact and any mitigating actions the department can or should take. There will also be cross-cutting risks that do not sit within one department – these will be included in the Cabinet Office’s annual National Risk Register.

While officials will lead this risk-assessment process, there is also an important political dimension – ministers need to make decisions about the trade-offs involved in managing and responding to risks, such as how to prioritise limited resources in line with the government’s strategic objectives.¹ The Cabinet Office can support ministers in developing the expertise needed to monitor their department’s resilience planning – it has previously explored integrating these skills into a series of ministerial classes.²

When crises occur, ministers might find themselves directing the crisis response for the first time in a COBR meeting. To be able to utilise crisis-response systems effectively, ministers can consult official guidance, such as the Cabinet Office’s *Amber Book*, on how they work ahead of time.³ Ministers can also think about the kinds of skills – such as chairing a meeting – that they may require to use structures like COBR effectively.

Ministers can cultivate an open culture in the department that helps raise problems before they develop into full-blown crises

In many cases, the impact of a crisis can be mitigated if the department is aware of risks or shortcomings in the response system before an event begins. Ministers play a key role in ensuring that civil servants offer honest and challenging advice that can expose and help deal with these potential risks.⁴

By issuing clear internal communication that they welcome and expect officials to raise concerns about barriers to implementation or unintended consequences, ministers can build an open culture in their departments. For example, a number of former ministers established regular 'open door' slots for civil servants to drop in and raise concerns outside of formal meetings.⁵ Ministers can also specifically encourage constructive challenge from their officials, as Hilary Benn did at Defra:

"I knew that most of the civil servants in the team fundamentally disagreed with me. But I said to them: 'It's really important that you put all the arguments to me as to why I'm wrong because, when I go out there, I am going to get them in spade loads from people.'"⁶

This is particularly important for operational staff, who may have poor feedback loops with policy teams in Whitehall – ministers can use front-line visits to understand the potential risks that staff on the ground may face and any gaps in their ability to respond to crises.⁷

Minister should invest in relationships that will be valuable in a crisis

Relationships are indispensable in a crisis. Ministers cannot be everywhere at once, but the scale of the situation and the urgency of the response means they will need to quickly draw on a range of sources of advice to make decisions and work with a range of people to ensure they are delivered. In 'peacetime', they should identify who they will rely on in the crises they are likely to face: the operational leads, policy officials, sources of expertise (including scientific advisers), relevant ministers in other departments and any outside groups with key interests.

To develop a strong working relationship, ministers should identify the value each can provide in a crisis, whether that involves offering a unique perspective on the situation or bringing a certain set of skills. For arm's length bodies that provide useful delivery functions, ministers can work with their department's sponsorship teams to better understand the organisation's expertise and how that could be beneficial in a crisis.⁸ This can also help ensure that ministers and public body leaders are aligned in their views of what public bodies should be doing to prepare for and respond to crises.

Once ministers have mapped out these key relationships, they can benefit from establishing a regular cycle of meetings. Before the WannaCry crisis, a global cyberattack that encrypted data for ransom and was particularly disruptive for the NHS, Amber Rudd met fortnightly with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) – this meant she was able to understand the role and value of the agency in responding to the virus, but also that she had developed trust and a productive working relationship with the centre's leaders. These relationships mean that ministers can get the right people in the room when a crisis hits.

Rehearsals and drills can give ministers and their teams an insight into what dealing with a crisis can be like

One way ministers can prepare themselves and their teams for a crisis is through rehearsal and drills. Simulated scenarios can range from internal team exercises to larger 'war games' involving different operational agencies and departmental teams. These provide an opportunity for ministers to bring together and establish key relationships with the range of individuals who would lead a crisis response, as well as to gain greater insight into how they may react when a crisis occurs. Crises can often develop in unexpected ways and simulated exercises provide ministers with an opportunity to experience what this uncertainty is like in practice.

These exercises also allow ministers to get useful experience running crisis response systems. Ed Balls recalls how he participated in a "purely theoretical banking crisis" as economic secretary to the Treasury.⁹ For Balls, the war game was an opportunity to "[push] against, to understand how the system worked rather than accepting it".¹⁰ He found it useful that officials had worked through the simulation, but the experience also highlighted the importance of procedure and getting the right people in the room to make key decisions.¹¹ Nonetheless, despite the similarities between the simulation exercise – where a northern building society collapsed – and events that would unfold in 2007, Balls reflects that the government was still taken by surprise when the situation deteriorated at Northern Rock.¹² Rehearsals and drills can be useful opportunities for ministers and their teams to scope out potential crises and consider who they need to involve in the response. But to make the most of them ministers need to ensure they follow up on what they learn during the exercise.¹³

Ministers should build a strong working relationship with their immediate team

Ministers should also consider the capability of their team to respond to crises – while private office staff act as ministers' first port of call even in normal times, the function they play directing ministers to the policy experts or operational leaders is essential during a crisis. But generally private offices are set up to handle business as usual, so ministers may need to assess with their private secretary whether the team could benefit from specific knowledge or relationships that would enable an effective crisis response.

Jack Straw's private office included a governor-grade officer seconded from the prison service before the crisis erupted, meaning he could draw on this first-hand operational insight when responding to the prison officers' strike. During the financial crisis, Alistair Darling appointed a special adviser with significant experience in financial services with whom he could sound out proposals informally.¹⁴

Beyond these specific skills or functions, ministers need to be able to trust their team in times of crisis, so that they can be confident in the advice they receive and comfortable delegating decisions where appropriate. Interviewees reflected that Darling particularly invested in his immediate team, which meant they worked together well during the financial crisis. When things were at their busiest, Darling would invite his team to his Downing Street flat for informal gatherings, and while they worked

closely together, he was also very clear about the distinct roles played by his special advisers, his private office and the policy team: “They worked as a team, recognised that they all had a part to contribute, and they got on well with the civil servants managing the detail. They understood each other’s roles.”¹⁵

Ministers should ensure they are personally well-placed to respond to a crisis

Lastly, ministers should assess their individual ability to respond to a crisis. They might need to enhance certain skills, such as their ability to interpret complex data or models, or think about how they would behave in a particularly uncertain, high-pressure environment.

In the midst of a crisis, being able to process information and make rapid and robust decisions is essential, so it is crucial that ministers develop their capacities in advance. Patrick Vallance, the former government chief scientific adviser and current minister for science, has argued that ministers need to develop a “scientific mindset” – to understand the implications of, and interrogate, the advice they receive.¹⁶ Ministers can do this through discussions with senior officials, such as their department’s chief scientific adviser, or external experts and advisers.

There are also more bespoke routes for ministers to invest in their own development: the Cabinet Office has developed ministerial masterclasses on working with data and science in government and planning and crisis response.¹⁷

Ministers have crowded diaries and may struggle to carve out opportunities to reflect on their development needs, but it is vital that they take the time and put themselves in as strong a position as possible to respond to crises.



“ Within any crisis – whether it’s a banking crash, or the trains not running on time – there’s big things you need to sort... you learn to focus on the things that matter and then let the other things look after themselves. ”

Alistair Darling
Chancellor of the exchequer (2007–10)

During a crisis

Once a minister receives news that something has gone wrong, there are various roles they may need to play. Different types of crises – rapid impact or slow burn – will require different types of responses from different organisations. Ministers' ability to directly influence the response will also vary: in some cases they may be making decisions that directly lead to specific outcomes; in others they may play more of an oversight role, supporting and holding to account those actually responding to the crisis.

A minister is, of course, only one actor among many involved in the response. But there are certain things that only ministers can do. Ministers will play one or more roles at different times and in different ways, depending on the situation they are in, their personal strengths and preferences, and the reaction of the public, parliamentarians and the rest of government. This section sets out six roles we identify that ministers may play during a crisis:

- Decision maker
- Problem solver
- Convenor
- Team leader
- Cross-government leader
- Communicator.

These are all part of the ministerial role in normal times but are even more important during a crisis.

Decision maker

Crises require quick responses, which means ministers and others need to make quick decisions about what to do, often in the face of incomplete information. Ministers' roles in decision making will differ depending on the specific situation – they are unlikely to be taking operational decisions about on-the-ground responses, for instance – but they will play an active role in decisions about what different actors should do, how resources should be allocated or how to grapple with trade-offs.

Ministers can make better decisions by requesting and interrogating a range of advice

Ministers and officials need a strong foundation for the decisions they make. Crises often involve technical intricacies and complex developing risks – ministers need to be across this detail to be able to make robust decisions and later explain these decisions to the public and parliament. In many crises, officials will bring together different sources of information to produce a Common Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) – a document to establish a shared understanding of the situation and risks at hand.¹

In uncertain situations, it may be helpful for ministers to work with experts from inside or outside government to probe any assumptions that underlie the CRIP and consider a wider range of options.² COBR is one useful forum for this as it can draw on a number of standing sources of expertise to do so, such as the department's chief scientific adviser, operational delivery leaders, or advisory groups and committees. For some crises – like the pandemic or the 2009 swine flu outbreak – COBR may activate the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) to co-ordinate scientific and technical advice from across government, academia and industry.

COBR is designed to facilitate quick decision making in a crisis but this does limit opportunities for more thorough discussions. Ministers can play an important role in encouraging officials to develop policy in a more open way. By inviting input from groups and interests beyond the department early in the process, they can better understand potential implementation challenges and build relationships with the agencies delivering the operational response to a crisis.

Current Institute for Government research into rapid policy making has found that civil servants will not assume they have the cover to conduct an open policy process unless they receive clear authorisation from ministers, so it is key that ministers signal they value this approach. Having received the advice, ministers need to interrogate it and consider how it tallies with their wider political understanding.

"[the COBR briefing] is only as good as the sources of information that come from those who are providing it up to the COBR team. ... but there are other sources of information about how disasters are unfolding and what the needs are: the TV, MP colleagues and others." – Hilary Benn³

For chronic crises, ministers may need to strengthen in-house sources of advice about the topic. During the run on Northern Rock in 2007, in the lead-up to the financial crisis, the Treasury had very few staff working on financial stability – but in the days after, Darling agreed with the permanent secretary, Nick Macpherson, to reassign senior staff within the department⁴ and to bring in outside expertise from investment banks.⁵

Where ministers feel the department needs to bolster its capability on a topic, they should work with the permanent secretary and other senior officials – for example, the chief scientific adviser – to build this capacity.

Even where the evidence is uncertain, decisions need to be made

Crises are fast-moving, complex situations. The evidence base will have (even) more shortcomings and caveats than that for other decisions ministers make. There is a risk that this leads to paralysis – ministers may feel tempted to ask for ever more information, or reassurances about the strength of the evidence base. But they must be comfortable taking leadership and making effective decisions in the face of uncertainty.

Ministers should resist the urge to be over-briefed – it is impossible to be across all of the detail when a crisis is constantly evolving and involves many interdependent elements. By identifying what core information they need to take a decision they can also free up other crisis responders. Amber Rudd recognised the limits to what she needed to know about the details of the developing WannaCry situation, which meant that the NCSC could direct its efforts towards its operational activities rather than briefing the home secretary.

It is unlikely that the immediate response to a crisis will be perfect, so ministers need to be prepared to iterate and revise the policy response as the situation develops. Changing direction does not necessarily mean that ministers are caught on the back foot – they can approach this in a more deliberate way by remaining aware of what they do *not* know when they make a decision. Initial assumptions may be disproven as more information comes to light – ministers should closely monitor these risks and encourage those advising them to bring forward evidence or analysis, even where it may come into conflict with the government’s prevailing approach to the crisis.

Ministers can use the evidence base to set priorities and parameters for action

Ministers play a valuable leadership role in setting strategic direction for the decisions made during crises. They need to sift through the evidence available to them to identify the priorities for action. [Alistair Darling](#) told the Institute how he understood during the financial crisis that the Treasury needed to focus on recapitalising the banks – once that was delivered, “the rest of it would just fall away”.

“Within any crisis – whether it’s a banking crash, or the trains not running on time – there’s big things you need to sort ... you learn to focus on the things that matter and then let the other things look after themselves.” – *Alistair Darling*⁶

Ministers are also well placed to establish the bounds of what is politically acceptable. While Northern Rock was eventually brought into public ownership, Darling and Gordon Brown first sought a private buyer after weighing up a range of political and relational considerations: the potential criticism they would face as a Labour government nationalising a bank; the responsibility they would assume due to nationalisation; and the need to maintain the confidence of Northern Rock shareholders.⁷ Treasury officials could then explore policy options within this remit, with a clear idea of the strategy established by ministers and the rationale behind it.

The financial crisis

In September 2007, Northern Rock faced a liquidity shortage and was forced to ask the Bank of England (BoE) for support. This resulted in a 'run on the bank', with queues of customers trying to withdraw their savings due to a lack of confidence. As chancellor of the exchequer, Alistair Darling agreed that the government and BoE would guarantee all deposits held in the bank. The government then attempted to find a private buyer for the bank, but failed to do so and nationalised it in February the following year. Concerns about the stability of the global financial system continued over the following months.

In September 2008, Darling put together a team of officials from the Treasury, BoE and Financial Services Authority to produce a rescue plan for the banks. He was strongly focused on his aim to recapitalise the banks, and the need to "execute the plan in terms of the announcement and appearing confident, and so on". The following month, the share price of RBS – one of the world's largest banks – collapsed and Darling received a call from the chair of the bank saying it was in danger of running out of money in only a few hours. Darling finalised a capitalisation deal with the CEOs and chairs of the major banks (including those that had no obvious need for more capital, as the government aimed to stabilise the entire financial sector) that night and announced it the following morning.

But in many crises, ministers will not be identifying the immediate operational priorities – they need to rely on front-line responders like the police, security services or government agencies. [Jack Straw](#) recalled how "the prison service knows what to do in a situation like [the 2007 prison officers' strike] and they are very well skilled, they are well exercised, they got a gold command set up straight away."⁸

Rather than trying to intervene in operational decisions, which could potentially slow down the system's response, ministers can set the parameters for action. They can think about how the different possible responses align with the government's wider priorities and relationships, and how they might be received by the public. Prison governors and Straw were concerned with the immediate need to ensure the safety of prisoners. While the governors put in measures to maintain order in severely understaffed prisons, Straw focused on resolving the dispute at a broader level, ultimately instructing lawyers to take out a legal injunction against the prison officers' union so that the strike was ultimately called off.

Regardless of whether ministers take a decision themselves or delegate it to operational leaders, they need to be clear about what action will be taken, and by whom. This allows them to better hold to account the different actors involved in responding to the crisis, in line with the strategic direction they have set.

Problem solver

In crises, different organisations have different priorities and responsibilities. Ministers play an essential role in getting different actors to work together and ensuring that officials are implementing their decisions. Sometimes this means creating space for responding agencies to get on with their jobs, and sometimes it means confronting, challenging and pushing the system to do more.

Ministers provide cover to responding agencies so that they can do their job

Operational leaders agreed that having – and being seen to have – the confidence of ministers strengthens their ability to act. When the WannaCry cyberattack hit the UK in 2017, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) was barely a year old. In what was something of a baptism of fire, having the home secretary's explicit support, both in private and public, helped embolden NCSC's response.

"I had to reassure the National Cyber Security Centre that they were doing the right thing and make sure that they had the confidence to deliver the right message, a reassuring message" – Amber Rudd⁹

Ministers can also empower responding agencies by stopping interference from other parts of government. Interviewees described how different agencies will seek to take leadership when responding to a crisis. This can create confusion about who is actually leading the response – which runs the risk, as one interviewee explained, that "no one owns anything".

The WannaCry ransomware crisis

On 12 May 2017, in the middle of a general election campaign, the WannaCry computer virus hit the UK. WannaCry was a global cyberattack that encrypted data and demanded payment of a ransom in Bitcoin for access. The virus had a particular impact on the NHS, where it was able to exploit outdated operating software – at least 80 of 236 trusts in England were either directly affected or deactivated their equipment as a precaution.¹⁰ The crisis severely disrupted the routine running of the NHS, with affected hospitals seeing a 6% decrease in total admissions per affected hospital per day.¹¹ But, in the moment, as the virus propagated itself, there was no clear indication of whether it could be stopped or how affected systems could be brought back online.

The new National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), founded only a year earlier, was the key agency responding to the cyberattack, with Amber Rudd, then home secretary, taking charge of responding to the crisis. The virus was actually shut down relatively quickly, thanks to the actions of an independent hacker.¹² But in the confusion about what exactly was happening, Rudd was clear about her role understanding the source and scale of the problem: "There was very little decision making for me. What I had to do was convene COBR and find out what was going on."¹³

Sometimes it falls to ministers to ensure different organisations are working well together. Hilary Benn was singled out by one interviewee as a “fixer” for his approach to getting organisations to work together to deal with the summer 2007 floods. His own constituency had been badly affected and after the peak of the crisis, Benn brought the local authority and the Environment Agency together to agree on a common approach to better prepare for potential future floods in the area.

Ministers can hone the response effort by providing useful challenge

“...because mostly you’re absorbing the experts’ advice and agreeing to it or challenging it” – *Amber Rudd*¹⁴

While front-line responders carry out the operational response to a crisis, ministers are able to take a more strategic view of the situation. This distance provides an advantage as ministers can bring a different perspective, which allows them to challenge officials about their advice and decisions. As Jack Straw put it: “You couldn’t just leave it to officials.”

Ministers will be in close contact with operational leaders and can use private conversations to set expectations directly. One operational leader told the Institute that they appreciated open and straight-talking ministers and reflected that it was useful when ministers held private conversations where they could express reservations or concerns about their approach.

Ministers can take the opportunity of being briefed by staff from the responding agencies to challenge information and decisions, demand status updates and request relevant data. During the WannaCry crisis Amber Rudd challenged her officials by asking them “tell me what you do and what you do not know” so that they could plan a realistic response. One interviewee told us that the machine is “geared to obfuscate”, so by challenging officials to be clear about the state of play, ministers can push the system through paralysis to respond to events as they unfold in real time.

As large queues built up outside passport offices in 1999 amid severe backlogs, Jack Straw, then home secretary, recalls how the Passport Agency had “frozen in the headlights”.¹⁵ With parents waiting with their children for hours in the pouring rain, Straw challenged officials with questions on common sense problems – why are vulnerable people not being prioritised; where are the umbrellas, chairs and water? Having solved these immediate issues, Straw then identified and empowered those officials within the agency who *did* have ideas to solve the underlying problems – such as using the Post Office to extend the validity of passports, which helped relieve pressure on passport offices.

Ministers can push through blockages in the system to get things done

During crises, ministers can play an important role in pushing through inertia and removing blockages. This is particularly important when – as is often the case in a crisis – time is limited. Different parts of the system can have different priorities, which can create delays to implementation. But ministers can use their authority to focus attention and apply pressure to make sure that key priorities are met.

During the pandemic, normal court proceedings were disrupted due to the lack of physical capacity to safely run jury trials. While HM Courts and Tribunals Service was initially focused on adapting the existing court estate,¹⁶ Robert Buckland, the then justice secretary, told the Institute how he introduced some urgency to the situation:

“And it sometimes did take me metaphorically banging my fists and saying, ‘No, no, we’ve got to do this,’ particularly with Nightingale courts. I was determined that we were going to get them open soon” – Robert Buckland¹⁷

‘Nightingale courts’ involved sourcing venues to function as temporary courts – Buckland said he was “all ears” for politicians to propose local responses to the challenges of court capacity.¹⁸ Ministers can draw on relationships with other elected representatives to bring together different sources of intelligence – Buckland told the Institute how he encouraged Alun Michael, the South Wales police and crime commissioner, to work with the local court service and the bar to test out a possible idea, and the Cardiff crown court was one of the first in the UK to reopen with jury trials. But, crucially, ministers can also provide the political cover to trial innovative solutions to the problem at hand. Due to the high degree of risk involved in crises, civil servants may not feel empowered to make novel suggestions, so ministers need to communicate clearly that they are willing to hear a range of policy options and test them out.

Convenor

Assembling the right people – and getting them to work together – is key in a crisis. Part of this is having established relationships before a crisis breaks out, but ministers will not always have this luxury and will need to be able to build new relationships at speed – they need to know *who* to bring into the room and *when*.

Ministers need to be able to build relationships quickly

But sometimes ministers have to build relationships as a crisis is unfolding. John Healey was designated minister for flood recovery in response to the 2007 floods, meaning that there was no opportunity to build relationships beforehand. When newly appointed ministers find themselves in a crisis they need to work out the different interests inside and outside of government that will play a role in the crisis response. With the floods causing widespread damage to property, Healey quickly identified the insurance industry as a key interest. Accordingly, he met with the Association of British Insurers,¹⁹ which became a key relationship as he sought to address insurance concerns held by households and businesses.²⁰

Even when a minister has been in post for a longer period, they may need to establish relationships quickly in crises. Reflecting on his experience during the 2000 fuel protest crisis – which saw some petrol stations run out of fuel – Jack Straw remembers the role that his permanent secretary, David Omand, played in bringing together representatives from the relevant government departments and key responding agencies.

Straw was also able to work with No.10 to bring executives from oil companies into the conversation, including facilitating the attendance of a representative from the British oil industry at COBR. For Straw, the value of Omand was that he had the knowledge and

the connections to identify and gather the right people from across government. But ministers also have the gravitas to bring people from beyond government to them.

Ministers can use their position to convene the right people, at the right time

Ministers can mobilise people: when the minister calls, people answer. Alistair Darling convened a number of CEOs and chairs as the financial crisis was deepening – this meeting was a crucial step in Darling’s strategy of recapitalising the banks.

But ministers do need to deploy their political instincts to make sure that the right people are in the room at the right time – they can choose to limit the cast list to exclude voices or interests that may impede the resolution of a crisis. In response to the 2007 prison officers’ strike Jack Straw decided *not* to negotiate with the POA or other unions before seeking a legal injunction to end the strike as he feared that they would push for a settlement and delay the resolution of the crisis.

Straw planned out which stakeholders he would approach and thought about when they should be brought into conversations. It was only after the immediate resolution to the crisis that Straw spoke to the TUC, which acted as an important interlocutor with the POA as it was convinced to back down.²¹ In the aftermath, Straw was able to work with the TUC to explore options for replacing the voluntary agreement that the POA had breached by initiating the strike.²²

The Prison Officers’ Association strike

On 29 August 2007, around 20,000 members of the Prison Officers’ Association (POA), despite having in place a no-strike agreement, launched a surprise strike affecting 129 prisons.²³ The prison population in England and Wales was nearly at capacity with around 80,000 prisoners – as a result of the strike, prisoners had to be confined to their cells.²⁴ The then justice secretary, Jack Straw, recalls: “I was asleep. I got phoned by the private office at about 6.30am to say that the Prison Officers’ Association had just embarked on a one-day strike.”²⁵ The strike was described as “potentially explosive” and created intense strain on the system.²⁶ With a large prison population being supervised by a skeleton staff, there was an apparent risk that the disruption that broke out at individual prisons could quickly escalate and overwhelm the wider system.

As a Labour minister, Straw faced competing pressures in his response to the union’s strike. But his experience of government, including as a former home secretary, helped him take swift and decisive action. “By that stage I had been 10 years a minister and knew what to do. I made some phone calls straight away to [permanent secretary] Alex Allan, to the private office and to the head of the prison service, making sure they were on top of it.”²⁷ Recognising the importance of getting prison officers back to work quickly, he “got to the office and went into overdrive”, ultimately deciding to secure a legal injunction before reaching out to other unions to engage with the POA.²⁸

Team leader

Ministers can be pulled in different directions by competing demands in a crisis – they need to delegate effectively. To do this, ministers need to trust the immediate team around them. Where ministers build a unified team, all pulling in the same direction, they can quickly get the information they need and make decisions effectively with the confidence that they will be delivered. It is best if ministers lay this foundation before a crisis breaks out (see 'Preparing for a crisis' above), but they can send clear signals as part of the crisis response to make the most of their team's energy and resources.

Ministers should lead by example to ensure the personal resilience of their team

Maintaining morale in the ministers' immediate team also involves ensuring their personal resilience. Officials generally take the lead from their ministers about what behaviour to adopt, and during a protracted crisis there is a significant risk of collective burnout. Douglas Alexander told the Institute how the permanent secretary in the Department for Transport, David Rowlands, was particularly conscious of this role during the response to the 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot, where terrorists planned to detonate liquid bombs on flights travelling from the UK to Canada and the US. He told Alexander that they should both head home in the evening because:

"this crisis is going to last several days, and we are not going to make better decisions if we are exhausted. You and I need to model to the department that, actually, it's OK to have appropriate levels of cover but to look after the team. Because, otherwise, everybody is going to stay, because I am staying and you are staying."²⁹

The wider ministerial team should complement each other's roles

The wider ministerial team might also have a role in supporting their senior colleagues in government. In particular, secretaries of state have a wide portfolio that might mean they lack the deep technical knowledge or relationships that can be valuable in a crisis. Other ministers in government should actively identify how they can complement the work of the ministerial lead. Alistair Darling trusted his City minister, Lord Myners, when negotiating with the banks – Myners' extensive experience working in finance meant he was "able to speak with the bankers eye-to-eye and not to be intimidated by them, and not to be drowned in data and industry terminology".

Secretaries of state will be time-stretched in a crisis and should reflect on which tasks they can delegate to other ministers in the department. This could include communicating with the public, media or parliament. As part of Hilary Benn's ministerial team in Defra, Jonathan Shaw was praised by opposition MPs for his efforts to brief them about the foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2007.³⁰ It could also involve following up on decisions taken by ministers, to ensure that the system responds effectively.

Cross-government leader

Crises will often have knock-on consequences across departments, especially beyond the initial phase. It is therefore essential for one minister to act as a clear point-person for the government. With a constantly evolving situation, there needs to be a strong mandate and clear lines of accountability for those responding to the crisis.

The Cabinet Office's *Amber Book* on crisis management explains that the prime minister will decide who should take on the role of the lead minister and be given overall responsibility for leading the response to the crisis.³¹ The minister in charge will often be the secretary of state with the most obvious stake in the crisis – the prison officers' strike clearly fell within Jack Straw's remit as justice secretary – but can sometimes reflect the government's focus in its response. During the 2007 floods, for instance, John Healey led cross-departmental efforts as local government minister because of the importance of supporting affected communities after the Environment Agency's initial work.

The 2007 floods

The summer of 2007 was the UK's wettest to date with an intense level of rainfall falling in a short period of time. The resulting flooding had a widespread geographical impact, with areas like south and east Yorkshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Worcestershire suffering the most extensive flooding. Over the course of the floods, as many as 55,000 properties were flooded, 7,000 people had to be rescued from the flood waters and 13 people lost their lives.³² The impact of the flooding was felt across transport, electricity and water networks, with the overall damages estimated at £3.2 billion.³³

Gordon Brown took over as prime minister from Tony Blair in the midst of the crisis and appointed Hilary Benn as environment secretary and John Healey as a minister of state in the Department for Communities and Local Government, where he was tasked with co-ordinating the recovery from the flooding. Healey found that he had "the imperative to act that meant the system reacted quickly" and enabled him to work effectively with ministers in other departments. After the immediate crisis had passed, Healey maintained a longer term focus on the recovery while Benn made sure that lessons were learned through the Pitt review.

Convening COBR can drive action across government

The lead minister can draw on cross-government crisis machinery to galvanise efforts. Charing COBR is one obvious way to do so, by bringing together relevant ministers and officials involved in the response and agreeing commitments with them. The independent review into the summer 2007 floods found that activating COBR to align the work of multiple agencies meant the response in July was "better co-ordinated and more focused" than in the previous month.³⁴

COBR not only means that ministers and officials across government are on the same page, but it also allows the lead minister to follow up on actions and hold others accountable in a way that is often not possible outside of a crisis.

"COBR is designed to try and, you know, give everybody a kind of proverbial kick up the backside and get things moving. So, when you had DCLG ministers who were being harangued by the prime minister to sort this out, you soon found that some of the DCLG weren't just saying: 'Oh, it's just the local authorities' [problem]', they were actually getting involved and really pushing things forward." – George Eustice³⁵

Ministers should remember, however, that convening COBR uses up resources from key operational staff and there are other ways to drive action across government – including drawing on the backing of the centre.

Ministers should ensure they keep the prime minister on side, and make the most of this support

Keeping No.10 on side is important for a minister whatever the situation, but is particularly important given the high stakes of a crisis. In some cases, the prime minister may be relatively distant and just require regular updates about the situation from their ministers. Ministers may need to reassure the prime minister that they have the situation under control, to prevent No.10 from becoming unnecessarily involved, as Jack Straw told the Institute about the prison officers' walkout: "I had to go and talk to [Gordon Brown] for 10 minutes and tell him that it was all OK, I was handling it."

Securing the more active backing of No.10 can bring benefits to ministers' crisis response. Healey told the Institute that "the prime minister's personal commitment" gave him the authority to co-ordinate key operational delivery ministers as part of a longer term inter-ministerial flood recovery group. Brown's support also meant Healey was able to secure flexible funding for local authorities from the Treasury, "bypassing the usual Whitehall constraints" to give councils the discretion to spend as they needed.³⁶

Ministers in general, but particularly those leading the response to a crisis, benefit from being clear about what the prime minister wants to achieve. In some cases, ministers can benefit from the close involvement of the prime minister. Theresa May drew on her experience as home secretary when overseeing the response to a series of terrorist attacks in 2017. Likewise, Brown's relationships with world leaders and finance ministers, developed during his long stint as chancellor, meant he played a key role during the financial crisis, encouraging other countries' governments to pursue recapitalisation as a way to prop up the global financial system. Ministers need to clarify No.10's expectations so that they can maintain the confidence of the prime minister to handle the situation – in the 2001 food and mouth disease outbreak, Tony Blair felt compelled to intervene as the crisis was seen to be out of control.³⁷

Communicator

"Northern Rock taught me lots of things. One is media management; just how, if you let things get out of control, you're ruined." – Alistair Darling³⁸

Ministers play a central role in communicating about crises, explaining both what is happening and what the government is doing about it. Different audiences, including individuals and organisations directly impacted, the public at large and political audiences, will require tailored communication to maintain confidence in the response.

By reaching out to those affected, ministers can better understand their needs

"...with floods and domestic disasters, I think people want to see ministers, because very quickly the question comes: 'Why haven't you been?'" – Hilary Benn³⁹

A key role ministers can play is reaching out to individuals, communities and businesses at the centre of crises – to listen, empathise and report back to colleagues. While there are cases where a minister's presence at the site of a crisis may not be appropriate – if there are lingering safety concerns or if their presence could disrupt response efforts – they can use their experience as public communicators to build an insight into the issues faced by people on the ground.

During the 2007 floods, various ministers visited badly hit areas. One of the most prolific was John Healey – appointed as minister for flood recovery – who made 10 separate visits. This meant Healey could see first-hand what people were struggling with and he was able to relay this perspective to ministerial colleagues. Operational leaders explained to the Institute how it was useful for ministers to see the reality of the effects of flooding, in the presence of informed responders. As well as forming an important part of crisis communications, ministers take perspectives gained at the scene back to the centre where it helps inform the response.

By meeting with those affected, ministers can also give the government a human face and show the public it is taking the situation seriously. This is particularly important in a sudden impact crisis such as a flood or a terrorist attack, where there is pressure that the minister should 'do something' but where overt ministerial involvement in the immediate operational response would be unwarranted.

"[Visits] brought benefits in purely, we underline and continue to underline the fact that national government wasn't walking away from these areas or moving on and turning our attention to other things, because they were still struggling."
– John Healey⁴⁰

Ministers take a leading role in communicating with the general public

Ministers need to be clear about the key messages they are projecting to the general public and the best way to relay these messages. The Government Communication Service's Krebs framework^{41,*} sets out these principles for effective communications:

- How to communicate: Communicate consistently and frequently; use trusted sources and messengers; set expectations on information quality.
- What to communicate: Explain what is/is not known; what actions the government is taking (and why this is important); what actions the public should take; when the public can expect further updates.

By misjudging the communications or failing to be clear, ministers can jeopardise the public's confidence in the government's response. As the situation at Northern Rock destabilised in 2007, and the queues at branches formed, Alistair Darling sought to calm the situation by announcing that the Bank of England would secure deposits – which in fact had the opposite effect:

"Because what I found difficult to understand with Northern Rock is that when you said 'The Bank of England is standing behind this bank', in the olden days people would say 'Well, that's good, we're happy now' – in fact, it created a panic. And combined with that was 24-hour television, means you get the same picture being shown over and over again, which gives the impression that things are getting worse." – Alistair Darling

Darling learned from the communications mistakes around Northern Rock. He brought his media special adviser and the Treasury's director of communications into the room where policy in response to the financial crisis was being created. This meant that they could help shape the media response and speak to the press with authority.

It is important that ministers and their teams plan and co-ordinate with agencies involved in the crisis response to make sure that everyone is aligned on the key messages. Operational leaders told us how helpful it was to have a minister who could "amplify messages".

In any crisis, the government may need to explain complex and technical information or instructions for public audiences in an accessible way. Operational personnel and experts can be particularly useful in, for example, media briefings to explain the rationale and evidence behind the government's decisions. This was a prominent feature of the response to the Covid pandemic, where the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser were regular features of the government's media strategy. Similarly, Amber Rudd explained how, at the Home Office, technical or operational experts spoke before politicians in media briefings to help establish the facts and reassure audiences.⁴²

* Developed based on the experience of John Krebs, former chair of the Food Standards Agency.

One of the most common barriers to effective communication during a crisis is uncertainty – ministers will often have to communicate without all the facts or all of the answers. Amber Rudd’s approach during the WannaCry crisis is a useful example of how to convey uncertainty. She was conscious not to stray into things she did not know and risk losing her credibility, but she also did not give an impression of ignorance, which could have undermined public faith that the government had gripped the crisis. When asked on live TV about whether NHS patient data had been backed up, she said:

“I don’t have all that information. What I can say is that all NHS trusts have been asked to review their data overnight; the secretary of state [for health] Jeremy Hunt is in touch with them; they’re working with the National Cyber Security Centre. There may be lessons to learn from this, but the most important thing now is to disrupt the attack.” – Amber Rudd⁴³

MPs and other politicians are a key audience for crisis communications

Engaging with other politicians, whether from the same party or others, is an essential part of a minister’s job at any time, but particularly during a crisis. All crises that require government involvement have political aspects, whether that’s criticism from the opposition or supporting local politicians also dealing with the crisis.

MPs whose constituencies have been hit by crises require ministerial attention. As minister for flood recovery in 2007, John Healey wrote to MPs to keep them updated on recovery efforts and held telephone conferences with MPs in flood-hit areas as a way of identifying local issues and concerns.⁴⁴ Similarly, Hilary Benn explained how he tried to be available to all affected MPs:

“When I dealt with the floods [as environment secretary] in 2007, an MP complained I hadn’t been to visit his constituency. I rang him up and said: ‘I’ll come on Saturday.’ He said: ‘I’m going to a wedding.’ I said: ‘What time’s the wedding?’ He said: ‘11 o’clock.’ I said: ‘I’ll be there at nine.’ And I went to visit his constituency. He didn’t complain after that.” – Hilary Benn⁴⁵

During crises, ministers will need to also work with politicians from other political parties whether at a national, devolved or local level, or with committees that scrutinise their work. When the WannaCry cyberattack struck, Amber Rudd identified the need to communicate with the SNP government, responsible for the NHS in Scotland, about the Home Office’s response. Alistair Darling made a deliberate effort to keep John McFall (Labour chair of the Treasury select committee) and George Osborne (his shadow) informed as the government was working towards recapitalisation of the banks during the financial crisis.⁴⁶ Engaging others in this way can help to lessen partisan opposition to the government’s response – Osborne described the recapitalisation plan as the “right thing” and committed that the Conservatives would be “as constructive as possible”.⁴⁷

Of course, a key platform for keeping MPs up to date and demonstrating leadership is parliament. Statements to the Commons are an opportunity to directly address political audiences and be transparent about what ministers know about the situation and what they are doing about it. Going beyond formal statements can help to head off potential opposition: during the 2007 floods, Hilary Benn held briefing sessions in parliament for MPs whose constituencies had been impacted. They had an opportunity to raise questions with relevant officials, such as those from the Environment Agency.⁴⁸

By taking charge of political communications, ministers play an important role in preventing the crisis from becoming overtly politicised in a way that could distract from the response effort and weaken confidence in the government's response.




The National
Covid Memorial
Wall

After the immediate crisis has passed

With the demands upon a minister's time, it is easy for a crisis to slip from view once the immediate risks have been dealt with. But the end of the initial response to a crisis does not mean that the impacts or underlying causes go away. Ensuring that recovery efforts continue and that there is time for reflection is also part of a minister's role.

Ministers can maintain a longer term focus on crisis recovery

Crisis response systems like COBR are useful for forcing decisions in the midst of a crisis. But as an immediate crisis is resolved and forums like COBR are wound down it is not always clear what follows – ministers can help sustain a longer term response by making sure that focus remains.

This may require that ministers set up processes to check that interventions are being carried out and monitored and that causes of the crisis are properly addressed. John Healey's appointment as minister for flood recovery was intended to maintain a longer term focus and to hold officials and local authorities working on the response to account. He continued to make visits to the worst flood-affected areas in the months that followed the event:¹

"It wasn't just what we did in Westminster. I had those ministers and did a great deal myself out visiting flood-hit areas well after the floods had gone, because it takes months for those areas and those houses to get back on their feet." – John Healey²

Healey was also able to ensure that exceptions around local authority performance were made for those areas that were dealing with the aftermath of flooding so that they would not be unfairly penalised and could devote their energies to the recovery effort.³ In the aftermath, he also pushed local authorities to improve their data collection about displaced households, which helped inform post-floods recovery efforts.⁴

Ministers can ensure that lessons are learned after a crisis

Even where a crisis has been handled effectively, there will be outstanding questions about its causes and the system's response. By evaluating the crisis response and learning lessons, ministers embed best practice and reduce the chances of similar crises from happening in the future.

Jack Straw was clear about how to prevent another debilitating strike occurring in the prison service. After obtaining a legal injunction against the POA's strike, he decided that there could be no return to a voluntary no-strike agreement and he made the politically contentious decision to enact a ban on industrial activity by prison officers.

But there are other ways that ministers can learn lessons and embed change that range from smaller scale evidence gathering to more substantial reviews. After the 2007 floods Hilary Benn commissioned Sir Michael Pitt to lead a comprehensive review. The independence of the Pitt review meant it could act as an honest assessment of the system's response and provide useful lessons for the government. The review was conducted in two stages with an interim report published in December 2007, followed by the full report in June 2008 – this model allowed the government to make both short-term and long-term improvements.

Not all crises will require an independent review and ministers should think about the most appropriate way to identify potential lessons taking into consideration timescales, resources and objectives.⁵ But once lessons have been identified, ministers need to work to embed these for future crises. Hilary Benn accepted all 92 recommendations made by the Pitt review – one of the most substantial recommendations was to combine Met Office and Environment Agency expertise into a Flood Forecasting Centre, which was duly established in 2009. Its value was proven almost immediately when it correctly predicted heavy flooding in Cumbria.⁶

“One of the reasons we knew that was coming [in 2009] was from learning the lessons. After the floods of 2007, we set up the Pitt review. Now, ministers of governments are always nervous about setting up a review because they think, well, they might decide to criticise us all and say we are hopeless. But you need to do that.” – Hilary Benn⁷

As well as reviews, 'war gaming' of crisis scenarios can help test how ministers and the government respond to crisis situations. The WannaCry virus was a relatively novel crisis experience for ministers and officials. Amber Rudd remembered how terrorist attacks were routinely rehearsed, "but a cyberattack we hadn't [rehearsed] so much".⁸ In the aftermath of the crisis, Rudd announced a live cybersecurity war game, which would provide a safe environment to test and analyse key intelligence agencies' and responders' reactions to a large-scale cyberattack.⁹

Ministers and their teams can use lessons learning exercises to make sure that they, and the system as a whole, are better prepared for crises. Ministerial teams can consult the Cabinet Office's Lesson Management Best Practice Guidance, which sets out how to identify and prioritise lessons before implementing and finally embedding them in practice.¹⁰

Ministers should reflect on their own performance in a crisis

"I think the reality is you learn to handle external crises by handling external crises." – *Ed Balls*¹¹

While review processes can help capture and embed larger lessons that can improve the system response, ministers also need to think about their own role during a crisis. By reflecting on their own performance – what they found personally difficult, what was their role as a minister in the crisis and how could this change depending on context, or how key relationships and procedures functioned in a crisis – ministers can evaluate their response and look ahead to how they may respond in a future crisis. Alistair Darling reflected on how the Northern Rock episode in 2007 was "an extremely well disguised blessing" as it equipped him and his team for when the financial crisis deepened in 2008.¹²

The aftermath of a crisis provides a useful opportunity for ministers to reflect on the different roles that they can play to most helpfully contribute to crisis situations. The day after Jacqui Smith was appointed home secretary in 2007 a major terrorist incident was thwarted in London and then, the following day, a terrorist attack was carried out on Glasgow airport. Smith recalls how these events served as an important introduction to ministerial crisis response:

"I got a feel for what happens when there actually is a live terror attack. I got a feel for what does COBR do and why is that significant, what role does a minister play at a time like this, what value can you add actually? All of those things were actually very helpful." – *Jacqui Smith*¹³

All governments face crises – ministers need to be ready

The current government has already dealt with one major crisis – the summer 2024 riots – and several smaller serious incidents. As the world becomes less stable and the UK faces ever-growing economic, security and social challenges, ministers and their teams need to be ready to respond. The actions and roles outlined in this paper will help ministers think about how they can prepare. The Institute for Government has more detailed resources available, including a practical 'how to' guide on questions to work through and a workshop for political teams, to support ministers and their advisers in their preparations.

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