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THE HOUSE



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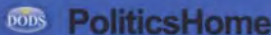
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The Commons returned this week to hear the sad news of Sir Stuart Bell's death as well as that of Malcolm Wicks. There is now the potential of five by elections. The PM and the Scottish Government have agreed on terms for a referendum on independence as the pressure for a similar commitment on the EU mounts. Exciting for politicians but maybe not the electorate? Without much fanfare the powers of the Tsars have increased (page 40). Maybe MPs should demand that their appointments are announced to Parliament, so that we know who they are and what they do. **GISELA STUART MP EDITOR**

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The specialist adviser

George Freeman found inspiration in his political ancestors - and is determined to inspire the Government to unlock the country's potential

Words: Sam Macrory
Photos: Paul Hearfield



When is a government minister not really a minister? Take a scan through the list of MPs assigned to the Department for Business, and you find George Freeman listed as an adviser to David Willetts on the life sciences agenda. It's an odd-sounding role. Advisers are usually of the 'special' backroom variety, or eye-catching appointments who are crowned as 'tsars' or maybe 'champions.'

But to find an MP quietly serving as an adviser is rare. Freeman, pausing for breath in a packed schedule at the Conservative Party conference in Birmingham, admits that it is a role to be handled with care.

"The sensitivity which I am aware of is really with officials, who rightly want to maintain a distinction between ministers and advisers" he admits, adding: "But I think I am able to play an important role, deputising for David [Willetts], facilitating discussions with industry in support of officials, and to bring an experience of commercial strategy in science and technology. My role is absolutely not competing with the PPS role. My role is outward facing, industry facing, dealing with officials in other departments."

He was offered his unpaid position at the start of 2011, following the news that Pfizer had closed its UK R&D facility. Having spent the bulk of his career working in the sector, Freeman was asked by the Prime Minister and David Willetts "to help the Government put together a long term strategy for tackling the pressure which the pharmaceutical industry is facing and... to take advantage of what it sees is a huge opportunity for Britain to provide the ecosystem for innovation."

Freeman "leapt at the opportunity", and worked closely with Number 10, Number 11 and Whitehall to research how the NHS could link up with university research departments. He is now in the second phase of the life science strategy: agriculture and food.

George Freeman's journey to the heart of Government is a fascinating one. Politics runs through his family: a number of ancestors were National Liberal Conservatives, while

"Would I like to be able to have a go at making decisions as well as advising? In due course yes"

William Gladstone can be found in the family tree. "My grandmother was a great niece of Gladstone and I grew up in a house with photos of National Liberal and then Conservative MPs in the late 19th and early 20th century from the north east", he explains.

However, his own family life was far from easy. "I was born into an unhappy home. When I was aged two, my parents went through a difficult and painful divorce and custody battle. I was made a ward of court and stopped from seeing my father until I was 18. My parents remarried and for five years I spent a happy childhood on my stepfather's farm. That was shattered by another divorce and five years living with and trying to support my very unhappy mother."

Recalling a childhood spent "growing up surrounded by pictures and stories of our great Uncle Gladstone", the young George found encouragement in both his ancestors and his absent father. "I remember being inspired by the redemptive possibilities of a happier inheritance. Combined with the inspiration of an absent sporting hero father, it was a powerful cocktail."

Supported by friends and family, Freeman began to develop "a belief in the redemptive power of personal responsibility – given and taken, the importance of family and school as the formative institutions for shaping values, [and] a belief that no-one should be held back by where they've come from." Perhaps unknowingly, a young Conservative was born, but it took a school trip at the age of 12 to Parliament to bring the possibilities of politics into sharp focus.

"Struggling to cope with events at home,

I remember entering the Chamber and being blown away by the idea that whoever and wherever you are there is a place, here, where the nation takes responsibility for its affairs. The idea that there is a pyramid of responsibility which we all belong to was electrifying."

However, after a gap year spent hitchhiking around Africa and America, Freeman was turned off by the "insular tribalism and careerism of University politics" at Cambridge. This detachment turned to anger, following the death of his father. "My father, who I had just started to get to know and who had never recovered from the loss of his wife, children and business 18 years earlier, died suddenly. I became increasingly impatient and intolerant of complacent privilege. Reading widely in the search for a framework to make sense of the world, and drawn to an Orwellite critique of institutional hypocrisy, I was put off all mainstream politics."

But the political spark which his 12 year old self had felt, was not quite extinguished. Having grown up on a farm, Freeman found work with the National Farmers Union and returned to Westminster to work for its political director Barney Holbeche. However, while being in Parliament fulfilled his youthful passion, politics – and the infighting of the Conservative Party – was off-putting.

He formed Mind the Gap!, a small localist think tank designed to address the "causes of public disengagement with mainstream politics." Freeman then experienced the "baptism of fire" of working for a technology start-up, before taking on a job with a venture capital firm. "We were starting

companies from scratch – and I was given the chance to be the hands-on CEO of the nascent companies. We started nine companies in three years and raised £250 million. It was a wonderful time.”

However, he began to look wistfully at Westminster. “There were times working in business where I wondered if it would be possible to come back. We have made politics very professional and quite hard to come into mid-career but if you’ve got the political bug you can’t deny it.”

Despite family members reminding him of his Liberal forefathers, Freeman was convinced of his Conservatism. “Starting my own business and a career in the high growth start-up sector confirmed my profound belief in, and love of, enterprise and innovation, and frustration at the way Big Government so often gets in the way. And seeing the world through the eyes of my children reinforced my belief in the importance of family, values in the classroom and intolerance at collapsing civic standards and public order.”

After standing in Stevenage in 2005, Freeman was elected in Mid Norfolk five years later. Brimming with enthusiasm, he saw the positives in the

economic challenges facing the Government.

“Crises demand radical responses. I think that’s what’s exciting in some ways about this crisis. It is an opportunity to really radically look at how government works and operates, and this Government has grabbed that opportunity with both hands. In happier times governments don’t need to think that radically,” Freeman argues – and he is putting his beliefs into practice. He is a founder of the 2020 Group of Tory MPs, working “to pull together people from this new parliamentary generation with a diverse set of backgrounds and histories and perspectives, and to create a forum in which we could explore the common values that make us progressive Conservatives and look ahead at the horizon ten years from now and anticipate the changes that are coming in the economy and our society.”

Freeman’s group wants to “change the assumptions on which policy is built”, not working “in the traditional dining clubs and orientation of left and right”, but engaging in some “really deep thinking about where the progressive centre ground of Conservative policies needs to be over the next decade.”

George Freeman

DoB: 12 July 1967

Education: Radley College; Girton College, Cambridge (BA, Geography)

Pre-parliamentary career: CEO, Amedis Pharmaceuticals 2001-03; Director, 4D Biomedical 2003-11; Adviser to Norwich Research Park Venture Fund 2007-10

Parliamentary career: Elected as Conservative MP for Mid Norfolk, 6 May 2010; Adviser on Life Sciences to David Willetts at BIS, 2011



“We have made politics very professional and quite hard to come into mid-career”

He also makes the case for a “more business-like Government”, and calls for the Government to “combine a clarity of goal with a pragmatism of mechanism – good companies are always looking at their business plan and business model. Obviously we need to cut spending but ultimately when a business struggles you have to ask the bigger questions: What’s wrong with our product? Why aren’t our customers buying it? What are our assets? How can we work them better?”

And the 2020, he insists, will “help ministers in departments who have been clear [that] they are looking for new ideas to unlock sustainable growth.”

But perhaps the adviser might like the chance to put his ideas into practice? “I’m definitely not a minister”, he reiterates. “But

would I like to be able to have a go at making decisions as well as advising? In due course yes, but I think I’m very lucky to be given the chance to directly contribute to the Government’s reform mission and draw on expertise from my previous career”.

A day after the interview, David Cameron’s leader’s speech to the conference contained a section which overlapped with Freeman’s explanation of what the life sciences are, namely “the chance to drive a sustainable model of growth, drive huge global inwards investment, and build trade investments beyond the sclerotic eurozone.”

Evidence perhaps, that the Prime Minister listens when his life science adviser advises – and a sign that George Freeman will be a real minister long before 2020. 🇬🇧