



Private office: preparing for a general election



“ I pretty much assumed it would be the end for me, and actually used the final six weeks to just get as many final decisions over the line as I could. ”

George Eustice
Secretary of state for environment,
food and rural affairs (2020–22)

Approaching a general election can be a tricky period to navigate for ministers, for the officials who work most closely with them and for the wider department. For private office teams, while the priority will always be to fully support your minister and the department, there's still a need for sufficient preparation to enable as smooth a transition as possible if the election results in a new minister or a whole new government.

There are some important ways that private office teams can approach that preparation to make sure you – and to an extent officials elsewhere in the department – are ready to handle the range of potential election outcomes.

1. Be prepared for shifts in ministerial focus – both towards and away from the department

Of course, the main concern of the private office team needs to remain supporting your minister in progressing their priorities. This means business as usual – make sure that you're clear on your minister's current priorities so that you can organise their paperwork and meetings accordingly and communicate them to the rest of the department.

In the run-up to a general election (or even to an anticipated reshuffle or dismissal), some ministers may want to use their remaining time in office to make as much progress on as many of their priorities as possible. This might mean additional pressure from them on the department to deliver faster. By contrast, other ministers' focus could shift to their constituencies, especially if they are in a marginal seat – they may want to spend more time and energy on their role as an MP, leaving less for the work of the department.

Be alive to these possible changes, and use your role as translator between your minister and the wider department to help them understand these shifts and what it means for their own work.

2. Take time to think through the practicalities of a change of government

If a general election brings about a change in governing party, lots of administrative and logistical changes will need to be made immediately – from website copy and email signatures to signage and security arrangements – so that when new ministers arrive, there is no trace of the previous administration. Getting these sorts of details right can make a big difference to how well ministers feel a transition into office has gone, and give them the sense that officials are ready and willing to work for them, as well as giving a good impression of the civil service generally.

Not all of these changes will be your team's direct responsibility to make, but you are likely to be among the first to notice – or to hear about it from your minister – if something hasn't been adjusted. Make sure that your team has thought through which changes will need to be made most urgently, and come up with a plan of who will be responsible for what on the day – including co-ordinating with others across the department where that's relevant.



We spoke to the permanent secretary who said: 'Well essentially, of course we know you're ministers but we've got to have the fax from the Cabinet Office to say that you are.' And that took us 24 hours before Greg [Clark] and I could actually get into the building, which we all saw the funny side of, and sat there drinking endless cups of coffee until about seven o'clock when we went and had a drink because we thought that was the easiest thing to do and we would turn up the next morning.



Robert Neill

Parliamentary under-secretary of state for London, local government and planning (2014–16)

3. Make a plan for what briefing a new minister would need, and who they will need to meet

Liaise with the department, including the permanent secretary's office, to plan the key policy briefings that a new minister will need. Regardless of whether there is a wholesale change of government or not, many new ministers will arrive in office with their own views on what they want to prioritise, which policy areas they want to focus on and which relationships will be most important for them to start building. But it's still useful for their private office team to have a suggested order of priority ready.

4. Be aware that a change of government could bring about more fundamental changes – plan for this where you can, and be flexible

When a new minister is appointed as a result of a reshuffle, private office teams will often have to make changes to ways of working and adjust to their new minister's preferences and priorities. But a change of government can result in more wholesale, fundamental shifts in the way particular issues and stakeholders are handled – which is likely to have a big impact on both your and the wider department's work.

There are limits to what a private office team could or should do about this in advance of an election, particularly as access talks will be limited to a close circle at the top of the department. But talk to the permanent secretary and team about how you can start thinking about potential changes so that you aren't operating from a standing start once the results are in.

This could include thinking about the language the opposition uses, and what that could mean for how briefings or correspondence would need to be framed. Or it could be getting a sense of which policy areas within your department a new government is likely to want to prioritise and how their approach would differ from the current set-up – and as a result, what that might mean for how you plan a new minister's first days and weeks in the job. Might they want to meet a different set of stakeholders than those currently prioritised? Might they want to explore changing the way something is regulated, or the way a public body is run – and what implications does that have for the questions they, and therefore you, will be asking of the department?

More broadly, remember that flexibility will need to be built into any planning that you do, and you'll need to be prepared to make significant changes at short notice if required.



You've got to remember that we came in after having had a very long Labour government, so perhaps that generation of civil servants was simply not used to change and the idea of a change in government. But certainly, that caused quite a few problems to start with, that this incoming secretary of state wanted to do things differently.



Maria Miller

Secretary of state for culture, media and sport (2012–14)

Questions to ask yourself

- Have the minister's priorities shifted in response to an approaching election? If so, have we as a private office team responded to this change? Does the wider department have a sense of that change, and are they responding?
- Is there a plan of action for how the logistics of a change of minister/government will be handled, and by who?
- Do you have a sense of the priority briefings and meetings a new minister would need?
- Are there things the office and/or department will need to stop or start doing as soon as a new minister arrives?

Find out more

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

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