



Top 10 areas to watch out for in an election year when working in a ministerial office

This information sheet outlines the top 10 areas for public servants working in a ministerial office to watch out for in an election year.

We recognise that people working in ministerial offices hold a range of different roles. Some are on formal secondments from public sector agencies. In this information sheet we refer to such people as “agency secondees” and they are the focus of most of the scenarios we discuss. Agency secondees are obliged to maintain the political neutrality required to enable them and their agencies to work with current and future governments. Others working in ministerial offices do not have this obligation, as the nature of their roles is different.

This distinction is important, particularly in the pre-election period (the 3 months prior to the general election), which is a time of heightened sensitivity around political neutrality and of high pressure in ministerial offices. It can be easy to lose sight of the differing roles of staff within the same office, and to inadvertently ask for or give support that is not appropriate. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide greater clarity for everyone working in a ministerial office on how to successfully navigate the pre-election period.

This document should be read in conjunction with the Commission’s [Election Guidance](#) for all public servants.



1 Requests for advice and information

The nature of the work that agency secondees do in ministers' offices drives them to be accommodating and helpful. In addition, every office operates slightly differently, with different boundaries between roles and responsibilities. In the pre-election period, it is necessary to apply an additional layer of judgement over the various requests that are made, to ensure political neutrality is maintained. It is not appropriate for a secondee to be undertaking party political work. This may be easy to spot if, for example, the request is made from an electorate office or a political party's campaign team. However, the appropriateness of a request may not always be immediately clear. When commissioning work on behalf of the Minister, secondees should be particularly mindful of any concerns raised by their agency. Where an agency is concerned that a request could undermine their political neutrality, secondees should seek clarification from the Minister's office (often this will be from either the ministerial advisor or senior private secretary).

Secondees should ensure they have a management relationship with a senior leader in their agency they can contact for support, advice and where needed to make a final call on a contentious issue. A regular catch-up with the senior leader would be useful to keep communication open. If there is no obvious management relationship with a senior leader, over the election period it is essential to establish a support arrangement that can be called upon at any time. If secondees feel disconnected from their agency, they may also contact their ministerial services portfolio manager to help ensure appropriate agency support arrangements are in place.

Agency secondees from public service departments should have a direct way to contact their agency's integrity champion. The integrity champion is a senior leader within an agency, appointed on behalf of the chief executive to provide support to staff on any election related matters. Some Crown entities have integrity champions too, so it is best for secondees to check in with their agency to find out.

Look out for

- Feeling unsupported or disconnected from the agency. It is essential to have senior-level agency support and oversight during the election period.



2 Speechwriting

The Government continues to have the full power to govern right up until election day. Ministers will continue to perform normal public-facing activities in their ministerial capacity, such as attending events and giving speeches relevant to their portfolio. However, it is likely that the focus of their interactions with the public will include an element of political campaigning, especially once Parliament adjourns. Agency secondees, as subject matter experts, may be commissioned to draft content for speeches in this period. Secondees can provide material relating to existing government policy or policy going through the usual policy-making cycle where it will be used in a ministerial capacity. However, secondees should not provide material for party political purposes, even where the information is factual. Content on proposed policy or election commitments of either the Government or other parties should be drafted by campaign staff rather than staff in the Minister's office.

Look out for

- Speechwriting requests that ask for comparisons with, or comment on, the performance and policy of previous governments or of other political party proposals for the election.
- Speechwriting requests that ask for content on proposed party policy (manifesto commitments) that will feature in the election campaign, instead of current government policy.

3 Public events

During the election period, ministers will continue to travel around the country and are likely to attend events in their ministerial capacity as well as election campaign events. Agency secondees accompanying a minister on travel, or attending public events with their minister, should ensure they understand the programme. Identifying what 'hat' the Minister is wearing for each event will enable the secondee to determine whether it's appropriate for them to attend each event with the Minister. Secondees should not attend campaign or political events. If a travel day includes a range of events, some of which are in a ministerial capacity and others that not, secondees, wherever possible, should not be present during the political events. For example, secondees may stay in the car, in the hallway outside or meet the Minister after the event, or, if all else fails, keep a low profile by taking steps to limit perception risks, like avoiding being photographed at event, not sitting with the Minister and political staff etc.



Look out for

- Attendance at events: check whether other agency officials will be present and who else from the Minister’s office will be in attendance.
- Taking instruction from anyone on issues that are related to campaign related activities.
- Presence: avoid attending campaign or election related events wherever possible. If your attendance is unavoidable, avoid standing alongside or behind the Minister.
- The programme: some events may have a blend of ministerial business and campaigning. If in doubt, consider whether a political staff member or press secretary should attend instead. If the event is part of a travel day with both ministerial and political events, avoid attending the political events wherever possible.

4 Social media use

Agency secondees’ social media accounts may be of particular interest to the public and journalists during the election period. While social media use by public servants should always be carefully considered to avoid activity that may compromise their ability to do their job, breach their code of conduct, or undermine their agency’s political neutrality, the sensitivity around the time of an election is greatly increased. Many secondees follow their Minister on social media to support them in their work. Thought should be given to how their interactions with the Minister and other social media accounts could be perceived. ‘Liking’ or reposting content from the Minister or linking to content from the Minister is very likely to be perceived as an endorsement. For more guidance see [Guidance for Public Servants’ Official Use of Social Media](#).

Look out for

- Social media accounts that are held in dual capacities, for instance as a Minister and as an election candidate. Agency secondees should avoid sharing posts made by Ministers or tagging Ministers in posts if doing so would direct traffic to party political or election material.
- The comments section: even an innocuous post or comment by a secondee could provide a platform for commentary that brings into question their neutrality.



5 Being a subject matter expert: policies / manifestos / media lines

Developing and costing government policy as part of the normal policy-making process is normal work for secondees and their agencies. A “government policy” should generally be confirmed through the Cabinet and Cabinet committee decision-making process and then announced by the Minister in their official capacity. Policy work carried out by secondees for a Minister should not be used to develop party political material or be labelled as party policy.

Political party staff are responsible for the analysis of party manifestos and the development of material to critique other parties or promote their own. Occasionally, a secondee, as a subject matter expert, may be asked for their help where it is unclear if the analysis or advice is relevant to the Minister’s portfolio and current policy. The secondee should clarify the request and seek more details to understand whether the information is being requested to support the Minister in their functions. The Election Guidance has some relevant examples, such as scenario 3. Secondees should not provide analysis connected to party manifestos or other political purposes.

Look out for

- Requests for analysis on manifesto commitments including media talking points or brief drafting.
- Requests for information and analysis from political staff and media advisors on policies and proposals that have not gone through the normal policy making process.

6 Organisations relevant to portfolios

Through their work in ministerial offices, agency secondees may come across and have working relationships with a range of organisations, including non-government organisations and private businesses who have an interest in the policies of the Government. While the primary relationships should be with political staff and Ministers, agency secondees may at times engage with these organisations on outreach, legislative requirements and policy development in their normal duties. Over the election period the interests and focus of some organisations may change. It is advisable to direct organisations to office political staff if approached about election policies or to your agency if related to government policy development.



Look out for

- Requests for information on policies that are not part of the normal policy making process. It is advisable to channel communication through the Senior Private Secretary or a political advisor if the Senior Private Secretary or Minister has indicated that is appropriate.
- Invites to events, including informal meetings, that may be political or involve campaigning.
- Events or meetings where other agency officials are not present and do not have a direct focus on a policy issue.

7 Social events in and around Parliament

As part of the office team, agency secondees will often be invited by their office colleagues to social events in and around Parliament. During the normal course of events, secondees will accept these invitations based on their personal circumstances and preferences and where such an invitation will not create perceived or actual issues related to impartiality or conduct. During the election period, care needs to be taken to understand the nature of any event a secondee may receive an invitation to, as well as who the other attendees are. There is a possibility that social events may double as party electioneering events, where the presence of an agency secondee could call into question their neutrality. There is also a possibility that a seemingly innocuous event or invite, while not political by nature, could be perceived as political if the attendance is overwhelmingly weighted toward political staff members. It is not possible to vet every invite, especially the less formal and more impromptu events like drinks. If the event feels overly political, secondees should use their judgement, make a polite exit and be careful not to make any comment that could be perceived as biased or political.

Look out for

- Invites to more formal events that are political by nature and likely to involve electioneering.
- Informal invites on work matters that involve political staffers from several ministerial offices – avoid situations which may compromise your agency's political neutrality.
- Social catchups with friends with political connections – be careful what you say and make sure it is clear when you are, and are not, speaking on behalf of your agency.



- Conversations regarding opposition policies and activities, election strategy and or political ramifications of policy.

8 Information management over the pre-election period

Care with information is always important. Over the pre-election period, an additional level of sensitivity attaches to information management, given the impact it can have on the democratic process and the outcome of an election. Official Information Act requests continue to be made and must be responded to as soon as reasonably practicable and within the statutory requirements. Secondees should avoid taking hard copies of papers home or displaying them in public. Care should be taken on public transport and in public places to avoid opening sensitive messages on phones or laptops where the screen can be seen or taking calls on sensitive subjects where they can be overheard. Agency secondees should ensure they are properly using the Ministerial Information Management System to store relevant information, and they can contact Ministerial Services if they need training or additional support.

Look out for

- Enquiries from journalists, friends, family members, and acquaintances who may be aligned with a political party.
- Enquiries from agency colleagues on issues that are not directly related to the normal conduct of secondee duties.
- Enquiries from anyone who has no association with business-as-usual policy work, or who has no clear policy reason to making a request.
- Sensitive political information. If received by email (for example in an “all Minister’s office” distribution list) delete the email, remind the sender to amend the distribution in future, and notify a senior agency manager.

9 Using agency resources for advertising or promotion

Agencies regularly use their communications resources to publicise and raise awareness on government policy to ensure the public is informed. Resources may include staff time to commission or create awareness campaigns and agency budget to fund advertising. Over the election period, an agency secondee may be asked to task their agency to develop and run advertising activities. Secondees should ensure the activity is directly connected to agency policy and functions and is otherwise consistent with the [guidance on government advertising](#).

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Look out for

- Requests to speed up the normal timing of any agency funded public awareness campaign.
- Requests to alter the messaging or focus of any campaigns in flight.

10 Electorate office matters

Unless a Minister is list-only, they will have an electorate office and staff who have regular contact with the ministerial office. There is normally a separation between the work of the electorate office, which focuses on issues and concerns relating to the electorate, and the ministerial office, which focuses on issues relating to the Minister's portfolio. However, from time-to-time members of the public may seek information or seek to express opinions to their electorate MP. In these cases, electorate office staff, either from the Minister's electorate or from other electorate MP's offices, may contact agency secondees directly as subject matter experts on a complaint, information request, or issue. This should be treated as a political matter and channelled through the senior private secretary in the first instance. From there, the agency secondee may be tasked with commissioning an agency response where it relates to a ministerial matter.

Look out for

- Direct requests from electorate offices on policies where a subject matter expert is required.
- Complaints or comments on the minister's portfolio. These should be treated as a ministerial through the usual process.



The Caretaker Period

It is worth briefly touching on what will happen after the election.

The caretaker period after an election can last from a few days to several weeks, depending on what level of party negotiations are required to form a government. During this period, ministers hold their warrants, and the business of government continues. There are some unique characteristics to this period that agency secondees should bear in mind.

It can be quiet...

While the business of government continues, this period may be relatively quiet, especially when there are protracted negotiations. Agency secondees are not involved in negotiations and any requests for information from negotiating parties to the public sector must be made to the Public Service Commissioner.

In some cases, agency secondees temporarily return to their agencies or take on other policy work, such as contributing to the development of the Briefing to the Incoming Minister, to remain occupied. If a secondee is not staying in their role, this is also a good time to update desk files/operating manuals for the next secondee and ensuring that relevant information has been correctly filed in the Ministerial Information Management System.

The transition to a new government can be a time of significant change

After an election there can be a period of significant change, as offices move location, political staff are identified and appointed, and agencies begin engaging with their new Minister. New appointees, including the new Ministers, must quickly upskill on the IT systems used and other processes that underpin the business of government. Processes are in place to ease the transition including a roving team of private secretaries. Be aware that:

- Political staff may change, and a number of ministerial office colleagues may lose their jobs. Transitional Ministerial Office staff will support establishment of the office.
- Agency secondees should discuss with their agency the transition process, including who will communicate with the new Minister when.
- Sometimes the agency secondee may be permanently returned to the agency. This can occur for a few reasons: a new minister may want a secondee at a different

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level of seniority or may require a different subject matter expertise. The agency may want to change their secondee for similar reasons.

- If the secondee returns to the Minister's office, they may be the source of substantial institutional knowledge, though are unlikely to be the only one, with some existing political staff or transitional Ministerial Office staff also providing support to new offices.

Other relevant guidance

- [General Election Guidance 2026 - Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#)
- [Cabinet Office Circular CO \(26\) 1 - Government Decisions and Actions in the Pre-election Period](#)
- [Social media - Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#)
- [Guidance: Interpreting and applying the guidelines for government advertising - Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#)