

Lessons for the civil service in making minority government work

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by Professor Robert Hazell

The UK civil service has virtually no recent experience of minority or coalition government. The last occasion was the last few months of the Major government in 1997; before that was the Callaghan government of the late 1970s. Neither experience was edifying: there was little by way of clear or strong policy, and both governments were forced into short term expedients to survive.

Canada (see below) may suggest that minority government is bound to be like this; but Scotland and New Zealand show this is not necessarily so. Minority governments there have been reasonably stable, capable of developing clear strategies, and effective in delivering their programme.

There is therefore plenty of recent experience for the UK civil service to draw upon. The general lesson is that to ensure a smooth transition, to support the process of government formation, and then to provide an effective service to a new minority or coalition government the civil service needs to plan carefully for each stage of the process.

Pre-election planning needs to prepare for different election outcomes, and not just single party majority administrations.

Whitehall needs to monitor the policy proposals of all the parties, including the minor parties, to prepare for various scenarios. These should include ones in which one or more of the minor parties are involved in negotiations to support one of the major parties.

Scotland and Wales have recent experience: in Wales before 2007 senior officials used "awaydays" to plan for every eventuality. These should also include what might appear to be politically unfeasible administrations - the Welsh "grand coalition" deal of 2007, like that of Germany in 2005, showed that even the unlikeliest of allies may find a way to share power in certain circumstances.

Negotiations may start immediately after the election, and Whitehall needs to be prepared. The preparations need to include planning for a prolonged period of government formation. In Wales in 2007 the prolonged negotiations between the different parties mean that two months elapsed between the Assembly elections and formation of the eventual Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition government.

The civil service must continue to serve the incumbent government, while facilitating the formation of a new government. This gave rise to difficulties in Scotland in 1999, when the Liberal Democrats felt the service did not distinguish adequately between facilitating the Labour/LibDem negotiations and serving the Labour secretary of state. In 2003 the procedures were changed. In New Zealand, rules have been formulated to guide the role of civil services in supporting negotiations between the political parties.

Minority government can be debilitating, for officials as well as ministers. In Canada, the Harper government conducts all its business with an eye to the next elections, which might be any time soon. There is less scope for the civil service to advise, adjust and improve on the government's policy proposals because of the imperative for speedy

delivery. But minority government need not necessarily be unstable, short term and opportunistic.

One common theme reported by the civil service is the need for officials for become more "politically attuned". Another theme is greater centralisation. Because the budget is a matter of confidence, budgeting under minority government is more centralised and controlled. The final lesson from all our case studies is the importance of having a clear set of rules to guide the behaviour of ministers and officials. It matters less precisely what the rules are, but it is very important to have the rules written down and clearly understood by all the key players.

This is an extract from Making Minority Government Work, published today by the Institute for Government and the constitution unit at University College London

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