

Election 2020: So, you've got a new Minister again, and there are other changes...

We produced a Masterclass around the time of the last election.¹ At that time there was a significant change in the make up of government, and just about all Ministers were new.

The way it's looking now, means you still might be up for changes in Ministers. So, it's still worth thinking about how you and your policy teams will adjust to having a new government, and/or a new Minister.

Having a new Minister is a possibility under any government scenario

You could well be up for a new Minister in the next few of weeks.

If there is a Labour-led government there won't be wholesale change, but there is still likely to be change. A number of key Ministers are standing down and there are currently a number of Ministers holding temporary portfolio responsibilities.

Given how the polls look at the moment, there may well be a change in coalition, and/or supply and confidence arrangements.

But, if there is a National-led government in the driving seat there will be wholesale changes in Ministerial portfolios. Many Ministers will be brand new – given the number of retirements during the 2017-20 term.

COVID-19 and its flow-on effects will continue to change the policy agenda

Of course, given COVID-19, and the current economic and fiscal situation² – there will no doubt be changes in government policy priorities, e.g. we've already seen the extension of the tertiary education fees free policy, a corner stone of the last election policy, cancelled and funding channelled into apprenticeships and trades training.

Different things will become a priority, both across government and within your own policy ambit.

The style and logic of your advice will almost certainly need to change too, so you need to be flexible and open-minded to meet the new challenges.

It's worth remembering the basic lessons of 'communicating with aliens'³

New Zealand Ministers inhabit the political sphere⁴ where voters and their perceptions matter a lot; where different – often conflicting – interest groups are part of the landscape; and where the consistency of stories and keeping of promises are checked by an ever-present media (and social media).

1

https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_21_getting_a_new_minister.pdf

2 <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/publications/budgets/forecasts>

3 See Masterclass No 1 (2016) https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_1_communication_with_alien.pdf

4 In New Zealand, Ministers are required to be elected members of Parliament. In comparison, in the US the Cabinet is a separate arm of the government and anyone appointed to a Cabinet role cannot be a member of congress or the senate. Even the UK, Ministers can be members of the House of Lords, but are more usually MPs.

Their immediate interest thus looks to the next election, the prestige of office and the exercise of power.

To achieve and sustain this they must have available the tools of their trade: snappy soundbites, quick responses, and sensible reasons for the choices they make.

Advisors though, are public servants, working for other public servants. They inhabit a different environment, albeit it one which overlaps with that of Ministers at times.

Their background, role and behaviour – even where they live – vary considerably. Advisors care more about being the experts Ministers expect, supporting their bosses, ticking off to-do lists and avoiding unmanageable risks to themselves.⁵

This means there are limited common reference points between Ministers and advisors.

Fundamentally, it is the job of the policy shop to adjust to new Ministers rather than the other way around. You've been put together – now you must work hard to build a relationship based on trust and focused on a potentially new set of priorities.

A successful long-term shop/Minister relationship is vital for your advice to be effective. And, while face-to-face contact at senior levels helps, the core of the bond rests on the quality and robustness of the stream of work from the shop. Also, the closer it matches the Minister's style preferences the better.

And getting it right cannot be delayed, so understanding who you are dealing with is vital.

Do your homework – understand your Minister's background and interests

As well as getting a grip on new policy priorities, your Minister's level of understanding on an issue should be a major factor in how you pitch your briefing papers to him or her.

It's important to get it right for a new Minister. Without knowing where he or she is coming from, you'll end up telling them too much and it won't be appreciated; or not including enough for them to make an informed decision and take it through the government processes.

⁵ We exaggerate and simplify here for the sake of exposition. We know advisors are driven by many things, including a genuine desire to make New Zealand a better place and to influence the direction of policy – as are Ministers of course.

A good place to start is to understand your Minister's:

- **Level of knowledge about a particular portfolio or issue** – have they been a Minister in an associated portfolio? Or a Minister responsible for the portfolio before? Have they been an opposition spokesperson on the issue? Have they worked in the sector before entering Parliament? What is their professional background?

The new Minister's professional background can not only tell you about what they know, it can also influence the way they think about an issue. Or more particularly, the way they are used to absorbing information.⁶ The examples we often hear are that lawyers tend to prefer written briefs, rather than relying on diagrams, tables and infographics; and that accountants like numbers, variances and graphs.

- **Experience in the Government and Cabinet process** (and perhaps in Parliamentary processes) – new Ministers typically won't be used to dealing with their departments, managing the policy advice process, taking things through Cabinet, or even shepherding legislation through the Cabinet and then Parliamentary processes. They'll need more advice on the rules of the game (e.g. the Cabinet Manual⁷ and perhaps Standing Orders) and how to manage the processes effectively. It's very different being a backbencher than it is a Minister.

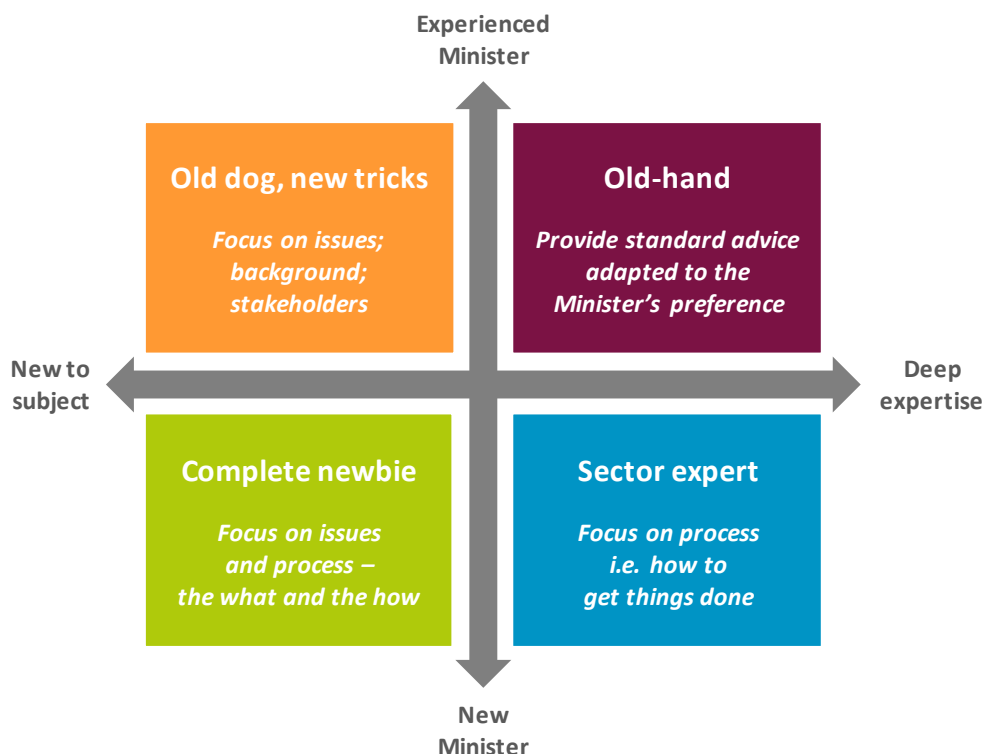
Figure 1 outlines where to focus your efforts depending on the type of Minister you get.

⁶ Masterclass No 2 (2016) had some advice on how various professions approach problems. https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_2_learning_from_other_professions.pdf

⁷ <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-business-units/cabinet-office/supporting-work-cabinet/cabinet-manual>

Figure 1 Defining new Ministers’ needs

Background and experience are key



Source: NZIER

What does it imply?

Old dog, new tricks

Needs subject knowledge. Focus on: issues, background and stakeholders. Limited process advice, except where there are portfolio specific processes, e.g. those required under the legislation you administer, as they may well be a bit different to those your Minister is used to.

Old-hand

Only needs standard briefings, tailored to specific preferences and manifesto/coalition agreements as these emerge. Limited process advice.

Complete newbie

Needs it all! Focus on issues in context, with plenty of process advice. What and how.

Lower ranking new Ministers are also very conscious about how their advice will play with senior Ministers.

After all, they want to be seen to do well, and get promoted eventually. Your job as policy advisor includes providing tactical advice to support your Minister. For example, information on the likely perspectives of senior Ministers (and their departments), strong sets of talking points to guide your Minister in formal and informal discussions with colleagues.

Sector expert

Needs process advice. Focus on making things happen and being clear about what the Minister has to do themselves. While perhaps needing limited subject matter advice – remember the new Minister may have a different perspective. So, don't forget to adjust your language to what they are comfortable with, and back up arguments with data and evidence.

Remember coalition politics will also be at play

Under the last Labour-led government, New Zealand First and Green's Ministers each had a different status.

New Zealand First Ministers were typically inside Cabinet – and therefore had an important role in decision-making at the heart of government. They were bound by the Cabinet conventions of collective responsibility, and Ministerial responsibility. Although the former broke down a little in the run up to the election.

Green's Ministers were Ministers outside of Cabinet. This meant that while they had portfolio responsibilities, and attended Cabinet Committees, they weren't formally part of Cabinet. This allowed them to support policies at odds with the Government's policy (except in the portfolio areas). It also meant that their influence on other policy areas often came down to personal relationships, or political processes (e.g. Ministerial consultation on papers before going through Cabinet).

Start at the beginning – get a good understanding of any coalition, or confidence and supply, commitments

While political parties will have made election promises – some of these will get carried forward and others not in negotiations with coalition partners. So, while it's handy to understand the policies that successful parties campaigned on, the agreements made about forming government will be most important.

It's hard to know whether any new government will have a 100-day plan this time around (as they have had for the last few changes of government). We imagine any incoming government will largely be focused on the continued management of COVID-19; and its economic consequences – rather than the usual full sweep of policy dynamics.

Fiscal concerns will also be paramount. Some things that will have been priorities, are likely to be put on the backburner.

This will mean that elements of your policy work programmes will require some further updating and reprioritisation.

There are a few rules about getting started

There is strict guidance about when Chief Executives can start briefing new Ministers in the Cabinet Manual and the PSC Guidance. These are both referenced below.

The first cab off the rank for a new Minister is a call from the Chief Executive, followed by an initial meeting and the presentation of the Briefing for the Incoming Minister (BIM). No doubt you will have contributed to this over the few past weeks!

The BIM is an introduction to the portfolio. Generally, there will be a further series of in-depth briefings in the run up to Christmas (for Ministers, the holiday season is not only time for a much-needed break after an exhausting election campaign, but a chance for some catch up reading and planning their next steps).

The first few meetings with the Minister are generally led off by the Chief Executive and senior managers. But, you'll soon be exposed to the new arrangements.

And remember, changes can go beyond just new faces. Whatever happens to the government we expect to see new priorities, and possible organisational changes to administer the ongoing challenges associated with COVID-19 on a longer term basis.

Machinery of government may change

Possible structural changes in the operational setting could include:

- **Different Cabinet Committees** covering different groupings of portfolios. These decisions are for the incoming Prime Minister, and the shape of Cabinet Committees may change to take account of priorities and major areas of focus for an incoming government.
- **New sets of Ministerial working groups** – again, driven by the priorities of the incoming government.
- **Different rules for support party Ministers** can make the Cabinet process more complicated – coalition agreements often set the rules for dealing with support party Ministers, for example – are they in or out of Cabinet? Are there certain issues on which they must be consulted?

- **Different Select Committees** – the terms of reference and membership proportions are determined by the House Business Committee. This is particularly important if you have legislation in progress.
- **All business before Parliament lapses** on the dissolution of Parliament – this means work on Bills in their various stages, petitions, Select Committee inquiries, etc. stops. Parliament must explicitly decide if any of the lapsed items will be picked up again or not. So again, there may be changes in priorities, or policy work to do on Bills already in process.

The language of policy advice may change

A new government, or even a new Minister (particularly from a coalition partner), will seek to change some the language and terms used. This is all about branding of new, and existing policies. For example, the incoming Labour-led Government in 1999 changed terminology in health from purchasing to funding.

There will be ‘in words’ and ‘out words’ – but symbolism matters. You need to be alert and adopt the fresh language. It shows new Ministers that you are conscious of their new priorities.⁸

You can get a good idea about what some of these new words might be from party policy documents on their websites and coalition agreements. In time they will become built into new policies and new legislation.

New Ministers do get some support

Of course, new Ministers will get support on these things through training (e.g. the Cabinet Office usually runs courses for new Ministers). They will also get support in their office through Ministerial Services appointments to their offices (Principal Private Secretaries are often career Ministerial Services staff who move between offices), political advisors, and the private secretaries that departments appoint to their offices.

⁸ Language is an important signal of identification. Changing terms to line up with those favoured by the new government is the quickest way the policy shop can show it is on board and recognises there is a new regime. See Morris (2001).

They’ll also have plenty of stakeholders lining up to see them, inform them, and influence them!

And you will have done your BIM, followed by a series of specific issues papers.

Keep working on the relationship

Working out the type of Minister you’re assisting, as well as sussing the new environment are both just early steps in building the relationship. You then have a key role in consolidating it by supporting your new Minister through your advice papers. You will need to develop an understanding by the whole shop on what works best for your Ministers and their key advisors/office staff.

If your new Minister has been a Minister before, find out from the Ministerial team in those departments where they worked earlier about their style preferences. Those teams will be a mine of useful advice on the main style and presentation dos and don’ts.

Seek feedback early, and often

But the best source of advice about the new Minister’s current preferences is the new Minister and their new staff.

Make sure you seek feedback from the Minister and the office staff about whether papers are hitting the mark or not.

This has the added benefit of sending a very positive signal to your new “boss” – that you want to provide advice in a style and format which meets their needs.

The more experienced Ministers will have a clear idea of what works and what doesn’t for them.

Whichever they are, the more that can be learnt early, the easier it is to get the relationship off on the right foot (and stay there). Senior management’s sessions with the new Minister can be golden, but their insights must spread through the shop quickly and consistently to be useful.

The standard surveys of Ministerial satisfaction are important. But they may come a bit late in the piece and are often guarded.

Some agencies have regular ‘whole of shop’ feedback sessions in the first months of a new Minister. Even if you think that’s a bit too much, a regular session to debrief the departmental representative in the Ministerial office is always valuable.

New Ministers will be learning as they go. So, try some different things in format and presentation – and make sure get the associated detailed feedback to embed the right practices as you go.

So, early and often is the right approach for experimenting with them.

Customer focus should be even more of a priority than usual early in the relationship.

Annex: BIM rules

According to the Cabinet Manual, a BIM is expected to cover:

- **A description** of the organisation and responsibilities of the department or agency, as well as any Crown entities or other state sector agencies within the portfolio.
- The terms of reference, membership, and terms of office for **all boards, commissions, tribunals, and so on**, for which the Minister has responsibility.
- **Major outstanding policy issues** and the implementation of current programmes.
- Details of **pending decisions** or actions that will be required of the Minister, including recommendations for draft legislation (taking into account any coalition or support agreements, or pre-election undertakings).

References

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