

Tactical advice: supporting Ministers to settle into their jobs

Late last year we sent out a Masterclass on things to think about in working with a new Minister.¹ This piece follows up the concepts we introduced then.

You will be still building your relationship with new Ministers. But by now you'll have some idea about what they like and don't like in the style of advice, direct from their feedback, or indirect from their office staff. So, it's a good time to re-group as the year's work starts in earnest.

Most Ministers are still pretty green – but getting less so now

Now your new Ministers have got their feet under the table, they'll know a bit more about:

- What it means to be a Minister – although they'll still be pretty new to Cabinet Committees (as the full range of Committees are just getting going), and Parliamentary processes from the perspective of the Government i.e. shepherding Government Bills through the house.
- Their portfolios – even for those who had previous experience, actually being responsible is always sobering.
- Being part of a multi-party government – getting the hang of operating in the complex arrangements of a coalition plus a support party.

But they still won't be experts. You'll need to assist them – and to work out the best way of supporting them.

Tactical, but not political

Tactical advice requires an understanding of the environment in which decision-makers – Ministers – are operating.

It doesn't mean *political* advice – but it should show political savvy and equip the Minister to do their job effectively:

“Officials’ advice should avoid second-guessing the politics of the choices we face. As Bill English has on occasion remarked, leave the politics to the politicians – that’s our job. But I expect officials to understand the political context in which we are operating.”

Prime Minister John Key, 2016, at the launch of the Policy Project, Parliament Buildings, Wellington.

Ministers’ jobs are wider than just making decisions

There are two key elements to providing politically savvy tactical advice: firstly, what goes into the advice itself; and secondly, providing great customer service to the Minister to allow him or her to best do their job.

Remember, it's not just about decision-making: Ministers also have a role in persuading their colleagues and explaining their decisions to others.

While officials tend to see their Minister in the role of considering papers, making decisions and signing letters, they are also politicians, and part of a Cabinet team (like an executive leadership team).

As politicians, they will be interested in the views of stakeholders, media reporting, and ultimately the views of voters. So, impacts on different groups, as well as their opinions, matter. Plus, Ministers will also have a role in explaining policy and decisions to stakeholders and to the general public in both formal and informal settings.

The Cabinet decision-making process means that Ministers will have to explain their ideas to their colleagues, convince them to agree, and negotiate on points of disagreement.

Part of the job of officials is to help Ministers do all of their job. So, when you are providing advice, you

¹ Masterclass 21 *Quick Change: So you've got a new Minister.*

need to not only make a clear coherent argument, but also think about what the Minister has to do next. And then provide information and advice to support him or her to take the next steps.

In other words: put yourself in the Minister’s shoes.

Ministers are busy people, and are always fighting a paper war

So, make your advice easy to absorb, and easy to use.

Their days are packed, and time is scarce. Meetings will have been prioritised carefully by their office staff. Ministers will want to get good value from their meetings.

Being clear about what would be a good meeting outcome, and providing material designed to help them achieve that outcome, is useful.

Some practical examples

The table in Appendix A outlines some of the things we’d expect to see in different types of briefings.

We don’t expect that policy advisors provide all of this material. With items that involve more public engagement, obviously your Communications team will also be involved and will work closely with your Minister’s office about what is needed.

A little bit of research on stakeholder positions goes a long way

There are plenty of sources of information to enable you to provide a commentary on the views of other parties.

For other Ministers, a good starting point is the views of their agencies, and any concerns those Ministers have raised in earlier meetings on that topic (or associated ones), or in media releases.

While the government is new, the coalition agreement and party manifestos are also useful.

Agencies on top of their game will have good relationships with stakeholders and will understand their views and be able to reflect them in advice.

However, if you don’t know, and you aren’t able to consult with stakeholders (and sometimes this happens e.g. in Budget processes), then good sources of information are:

- Stakeholder websites
- Media search
- Earlier correspondence
- Information provided in previous engagements.

There are internal experts on Cabinet and Parliamentary processes around – seek their advice

These processes are bread and butter for policy analysts who have been around a while.

Failing that, the Cabinet Office Manual is a good place to start, as are the Departmental private secretaries in your Minister’s Office. Cabinet Committee Secretaries and Select Committee clerks can also be useful contacts.

Doing this well takes judgement and experience

Providing good support, but not overstepping the line into politics, can be a careful balancing act. No doubt your Minister will give you some feedback about the value of the advice you are providing – if not, then ask. The private secretaries will also be able to help you judge this correctly.

This paper was written at NZIER, February 2018.

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Appendix A Improving the level of support for your Minister: some practical suggestions

Type of paper	Good support includes...	In addition, great support includes...
Event and stakeholder meeting briefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practical information – time, place, what’s happening Basic biographical information Background to the event Talking points Media attendance? Risks identified Speech notes, if required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of the Minister’s attendance – what he/she wants to get out of it A Plan B if there is an element of negotiation or compromise required Bios which include other government Board appointments, wider interests, previous engagement with the Minister and his/her colleagues, and photos Talking points in spoken voice and in easy to use format (including questions to help any discussion flow) Defensive talking points and/or Q&As Information on tricky issues that may be raised – whether directly related or not
Ministerial meeting briefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary of the key issues on the agenda Advice on those issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear meeting objectives – what would a successful meeting look like Information on the views of other Ministers (and their agencies) An indication of what is most important – so time can be allocated to the most important issues What issues the Minister could move on if compromise was needed A Plan B, C, and perhaps D
Significant decision papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set of options with detailed analysis on benefits and risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options analysed against a set of criteria Trade-offs highlighted Implementation issues covered A recommended way forward
Cabinet and Parliamentary process papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key steps Deadlines Supporting material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking points – to introduce the paper; and then to deal with possible issues raised Risks and mitigation strategies Views of other Ministers Alternative pathways How to manage Cabinet and Parliamentary process rules (if needed)
Fast action papers on tricky controversial issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing information on the issue raised by the Minister 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear assessments of the benefits and risks Better alternative options Convincing arguments that the Minister can use to explain or persuade others
Briefing on release of a report, consultation document or strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key steps, deadlines A very tight summary of the report Draft media release Comms strategy Speech notes, if required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying any risks and how they will be managed Likely stakeholder views, and whether they are likely to comment publicly Talking points to explain the issues to other Ministers, and for them to use, or the process if others are asked about the issue Outlining other related media issues e.g. recent stories on the topic; related press releases from other Ministers Ready to use Q&As

Source: NZIER