

The official and the political government

One of the difficult things any Minister has to grasp and handle is the distinction between their government roles and their political roles.

In the UK if a Minister wishes to act as a Minister, changing policies, spending government money or leading the administration in their department, they need to do so working with the relevant officials, and keeping the department and the wider government informed of their actions. Cabinet members have various delegated powers to spend money and change policies, and in some cases Statutory powers to operate in a quasi judicial capacity without consulting other departments and colleagues. Any major decision or decision that has an impact on other departments needs to be cleared in correspondence or debated at Cabinet or Cabinet Committee unless it is a decision solely entrusted to a named Secretary of State.

If a Minister wishes to be involved in a local or national election, wants to change Manifesto policy for their party, wishes to attend a political function or otherwise act as a party politician they must not involve the civil service. They may not normally use a government car to get to the event unless there is a security need to do so. They have no duty to report the matter to the government machine, and will only tell the official government of decisions or problems that they come across at any such event that are relevant for the government to consider.

If a Minister travels abroad and wants to meet senior representatives of a foreign government it is normal to advise the Foreign Office and to study any brief they send so that the Minister sticks to the government view of the issues that relate to the UK's relationship with that country. If a Minister goes abroad for a holiday or to visit friends and family there is not usually any need to consult the Foreign Office or to understand the government line on all the issues, as the Minister is not speaking as a Minister or becoming involved in public policy. If a Minister goes to a foreign country to participate only in a conference or series of meetings that are clearly party political, again they cannot use government assistance and do not have to tell officials.

Various officials in Whitehall clearly do not like Priti Patel for whatever reason. They started briefing against her, claiming she had held meetings when on holiday in Israel that should have been reported to the Foreign Office, and cleared in advance of holding them. The Prime Minister was brought in to adjudicate. According to the press she asked for a full statement of what Priti Patel had done on holiday and told her she should not freelance in this way. When it subsequently emerged that the Minister had not made a full statement of what she had done, the Prime Minister clearly decided to take further action.

It is ultimately for the PM's judgement whether any given meeting or event

was a political or an official one, and whether any given Minister has stepped too far from government policy in what they have said and done. It is clearly best if Ministers can work well with their officials, or can at least trust the official machine with details of their activities. It can also be the case that sometimes officials have their own reasons for wanting to criticise their Minister through unofficial and anonymous briefings, or by report to the Prime Minister. Only the Prime Minister can ultimately decide the merit of these criticisms. Establishing control when something has gone wrong is not easy. Some say sacking the Minister gives the PM control, but it also gives a win to the officials who wanted the Minister out.