

The role of Ministers

There have been too many changes of Minister under Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments. If the civil service think someone may only be in post for a year or so they can delay or impede actions the Minister wishes to take that they do not favour. Frequent changes of Minister means frequent changes of attitude and decision making in ways which may be unhelpful. Ministers are often allocated to a department without proper consultation or discussion of their skills, knowledge and interests. From the moment they arrive in office they are expected to be able to answer a range of difficult questions and make well informed decisions with no training for that role.

Ministers have to perform a variety of tasks. They are there to represent their department in government and to the country. They need to argue its corner in government debate and policy formation. They need to approve necessary actions by civil servants to administer the body of inherited policy and to enforce the inherited law in their area. They need to be the complaints department, seeking improvement and redress where things have gone wrong. They need to make judgements in difficult cases and situations which are brought to their level for decision.

They also need to remember they are elected with others to carry through a vision and a set of promises from a Manifesto. They need to be the change makers in the department where change is needed and where the case for change has been accepted by the public in an election and or made and accepted by Parliament. They may need to reallocate resources, establish new programmes, put through new laws , address new issues.

Ministers will see when they arrive that the department has a culture and a set of defining attitudes towards policy and its tasks. Some of this will be well based and the Minister needs to learn and reinforce it. Some of it will be contrary to what the Minister and government are trying to do, where the Minister should make the case for change in the department and offer leadership to correct what he or she sees as wrong or misguided. It is no defence for bad policy or decisions to say the Minister followed the official advice. It is best where the Minister knows about the matters being discussed and has past qualifications and experience that are relevant as in most other jobs. Where this is not possible a Minister should be kept in post long enough to learn the job and do it well for a bit before being moved.