



## How to prepare for a new administration, with Lord Kerslake

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Institute for Government

A lengthy period of austerity, ongoing negotiations about how the UK will leave the European Union, and a minority government, has meant that the likelihood of a General Election does not feel impossible. Lord Kerslake began by recognising that whilst we do not know when a new administration may come to power, it is important to consider how this may best be managed. Drawing on previous changes in administration that had resulted in radical shifts of agenda – the Greater London Council in 1981 and the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 - Lord Kerslake gave sage advice about how leaders of public bodies can prepare their organisations to ensure continued effective delivery of services.

Lord Kerslake advised on managing radical change by ensuring one works with a new administration, understanding what they want to achieve, and how it can be done safely.



Whilst the innovators of a new administration are important, the “anchors” in support of them also have a role to play by providing a strong legal and financial footing underpinning the process. He went on to advise that it is important to be open if there appears to be a problem with a proposal, rather than covering it up, as one would only pay later as an unworkable policy unravels. Public bodies can be committed to delivering a radical programme, but it should be backed with credible advice, and this can help engender trust between the new administration and arm’s-length bodies (ALBs). These are always important principles to follow, but

particularly in times of great change.

Lord Kerslake spoke of the benefits of building excellent relationships with key stakeholders. Whilst Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities Agency, this included local authorities and house builders. They were convincing advocates on the benefits of the Agency, and it was better for the Minister to hear these externally, rather than advocating for one’s self and receiving a “Well you would say that wouldn’t you!” response. Demonstrating that the public body is delivering on its key indicators shows that it is doing its job, although this may not be enough if relationships with stakeholders are poor.

There is also benefit of undertaking role playing with one’s executive team. This could mean splitting into teams representing the key political parties (including those who may participate

in a coalition) and researching their starting position and ideology, plus studying relevant manifesto commitments. Lord Kerslake went on to speak about the crucial role civil servants can play. Whilst it can be frustrating for chairs to always have to broker with a minister via a civil servant, there can be benefits in a lower profile. Chairs may have to manage the board's feelings of frustration at being so far removed, in addition to that of the chief executive who may find it difficult to accept the minister's view.

The current system for helping those in opposition falls within the gift of the prime minister, including the scope and nature of advice, which can be limited. The civil service is not permitted to advise on policy, merely facts and process, and this is likely to be cautious and contained. If there is a snap election, there may be no opportunity for meetings with the civil service, so a new administration may be ill-equipped when they come to power.

There could also be benefit for an administration with a radical agenda to test and challenge their policies, with a powerful unit at the centre of government, which would help guide and steer legislative priorities. Each department would also need a team working through the logistics for each programme, based on the manifestos, which can help a new administration organise their priorities.

Following this, Lord Kerslake described the challenges the current Labour party may face in the event that they form the next government. The time since the last election will inevitably mean that those with experience of government are fewer. The party also has a radical agenda, proposing big changes. If and when they come to power, the country will be in a turbulent state, be that pre or post Brexit. Whilst they will hope to be able to form a majority government, a minority government is a distinct possibility.

New administrations may feel overwhelmed when they come to power by the decisions to be made - not only those relating to meeting their manifesto pledges, but also actions that would apply to whomever formed a government. If public bodies don't prepare for this, they may find that civil servants make the decisions for them.

For public bodies, it is worth considering the philosophical and political programme put forward by parties, and what this would mean for them. A Labour administration is more likely to reject the 'neo-Liberal consensus' of a market model of the economy, and consider carefully how services are delivered and by whom. They will be more discriminatory in the extent to which the private sector is involved, and who contracts are awarded to. There would also be an end to austerity. It would also be in their interest to discuss what they want to achieve and ALBs can help them formulate pragmatic policies.

There followed a Q and A session, during which the following points were raised:

- ALBs have greater freedom than departments when preparing for such events, and this can be done informally, in addition to having conversation with wider political think tanks and stakeholders.
- Whether the next general election is in the coming year, or we have a fixed term parliament, the UK's exit from the European Union will dominate the work of the administration. However, if Labour forms the next government, it is likely they will have been voted in on a radical agenda and therefore have to address more than Brexit.
- When considering current projects, ALBs should ask whether they fit with the wider political philosophy of the party in power, when deciding whether to continue with them.
- Relationships with special advisors and communication specialists are important as ministers' time is limited.

- A new administration may bring about greater devolution, unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. There may also be a move to 'localism' in order to bring government closer to communities.
- A renationalisation of services will require due diligence, including prioritisation and the tight management of contracts, including those formed for private finance initiatives.
- Trade unions can help broker conversations as a third party stakeholder during the pre-election period.