



Making a strong start to government

Why this issue is important

Whether or not any single party has a majority in the House of Commons after the May 7 general election, there are always big challenges in forming a new government – in organisation, in appointing ministers and advisers, in setting priorities for early action, and in agreeing a legislative programme for a Queen’s Speech within weeks of polling day.

Past [experience](#) shows that the early days and weeks of a new parliament are when governments set their tone and direction, and when serious mistakes are often made that can cause lasting damage to a government.

The dangers are even greater with a hung parliament, because of media and political pressures to secure an early agreement on either a formal coalition or support for a minority government. Decisions with lasting impact can be rushed. In 2010, this led to [loose ends](#) over support for coalition parties and a failure fully to consider proposed [NHS reorganisation](#).

Early challenges and how they can be addressed

- **Manage public expectations in the event of a hung parliament:** Despite the 2010 election the public and media remain unaccustomed to hung parliaments. Political and civil service leaders need to be clear on how the British constitution handles indecisive election results and help manage public expectations through consistent messaging. Key points for explaining how the process works include:
 - If no party wins an overall majority, the incumbent prime minister remains in office while negotiations take place between the parties. There always has to be a government, with responsibility for urgent business including emergencies.
 - Any party can talk to any other; it is by no means automatic that the leader of the largest party will become prime minister. It all depends on the political dynamics and the balance of the parties. The Queen plays no part in these discussions. There is no time limit to negotiations.
 - During this period it is expected that current ministers will not take [any actions that can be postponed](#), such as making appointments, awarding contracts, or launching new policy initiatives.
 - The incumbent prime minister is expected to stay until it is clear who can replace him or her – so talk in 2010 of Gordon Brown “[squatting in Number 10](#)” for five days while coalition negotiations took place was wide of the mark.
 - Whether the current prime minister or someone else can command the confidence of the House of Commons is ultimately only confirmed in the vote on the Queen’s Speech debate, possibly three weeks after the election. A complicating factor if a Queen’s Speech vote is lost is the existence of the Fixed-Term Parliament Act, which lays down specific wording for a confidence motion and a 14-day timetable for the formation and approval of an alternative government, or else there is another election.

- **Produce detailed agreements to help structure relations within multi-party governments:** Parties will want detailed agreements, whether in a formal coalition or supporting a minority government through mechanisms such as confidence and supply agreements. The [experience of 2010](#) shows that any coalition agreement should be clear on the role that ministers from each party play within departments; on dispute resolution; and on arrangements for later review and renewal of any policy programmes.
- **Consider appointments carefully:** Should there be a change in government in May, an incoming prime minister needs to decide whether to appoint shadow spokespersons to the same departmental posts in government. There are [advantages](#) in continuity, allowing new secretaries of state familiar with a brief to be effective. It pays for opposition leaders to take time to consider these [appointments](#) before elections so as to ensure the right ministers are appointed at all levels.
- **Ensure any structural reforms have a clear operational purpose:** New prime ministers should be wary of abolishing and creating new departments unless the proposals have been considered at length beforehand and a strong business case exists. Otherwise, they [risk](#) costly upheavals, and diversion of effort and resources. The ill-fated Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, for instance, lasted just two years (2007-2009) and incurred initial start-up costs of just over [£15 million](#).
- **Build capacity at the centre of Whitehall:** All prime ministers need [capacity at the centre](#) to help develop policies and ensure their priorities are implemented. They should resist abolishing or marginalising the machinery created by their predecessors. In 2010, No 10 downsized the Policy Unit and abolished the Strategy Unit and Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, only to have to reinvent this capacity a year or two later. Such units should instead be [adapted](#) and refashioned to suit the preferences of the new prime minister.
- **Don't succumb to the "first 100 days trap" of believing everything must be done at once:** New governments quite understandably want to signal a fresh approach with early, eye-catching initiatives, set out in a Queen's Speech within about three weeks of polling day and a Budget or Treasury statement within two months. This can work when measures have been considered fully before the election and the Civil Service has been alerted. By contrast, long-term reforms should not be hurried unnecessarily and should be founded upon a robust policymaking process that highlights any [implementation](#) issues. Parties need to take account of constraints, both in public spending and the number of bills in a first session: not every department can have a major bill.

Longer-term reform priorities

- **Conduct a post-election review of the government formation process:** After the election the Cabinet Manual should be reviewed to update guidance on pre-election contacts between parties and the Civil Service, and any post-election negotiations. The relevant select committees should be consulted. This review should consider whether the date for the start of [access talks](#) needs to be fixed and removed from prime ministerial discretion; the nature of contacts, not only between the Civil Service and opposition parties, but also with the separate parties within a coalition during the pre-election period; and whether the remit of the talks should be formally broadened to cover implementation. This post-election review should also look at proposals to allow the Office for Budget Responsibility to be involved in the costing of party policies before an election, as in [Australia and the Netherlands](#).