

General Elections

As noted in [Chapter 21 \(Political Impartiality etc.\)](#) civil servants are, in the run-up to General Elections, allowed to provide Ministers with facts which might be used in political speeches etc., and are allowed to check Ministers' political speeches for factual accuracy. You are also allowed to comment on the analysis, costings and proposals contained in documents produced by political organisations, including the Opposition, but **you must not draft Ministers' responses to such documents.**

Parliament is usually dissolved two or three days after the Prime Minister announces the date of the election. If the Opposition agree, this allows the completion of important legislation, such as Finance Bills.

MPs cease to be MPs when Parliament is dissolved. Strictly speaking, therefore, all candidates are thereafter on an equal footing. But it is regarded as courteous for Ministers themselves to reply to letters written by MPs before the dissolution, or by former MPs after the dissolution. Private Secretary replies are normally sent to candidates (Government or Opposition) who were not members before the dissolution.

Ministers retain their appointments, usually through to the day after the election when the Prime Minister is ready to begin to appoint the new Government.

During the General Election period, the Government retains its responsibility to govern and Ministers remain in charge of their departments. Essential business must be carried on, but it is customary for Ministers to observe discretion as to initiating any new action of a continuing or long-term nature. Ministers usually try to avoid official engagements because they want to devote the time to campaigning. But they are free to undertake engagements they regard as important, although they should seek to avoid giving the impression that they are using such occasions for party political purposes. Similarly, attendance at some international meetings remains necessary. However, before undertaking to fulfil international commitments, Ministers should consider whether the subject matter is such that they can speak with the

authority proper to a representative of Her Majesty's Government.

So far as the handling of correspondence is concerned, the general rule is that citizens' individual interests should not be prejudiced by the calling of an election. It follows that letters relating to them should be replied to, whether by Ministers or by officials on their behalf. But remember that correspondence may become public knowledge and might be used for political purposes. Replies to letters should therefore be as straightforward as possible, should avoid controversy, and, if to a candidate, should not distinguish between candidates of different parties.

All public appointments which might be regarded as politically sensitive should be frozen until after the election and, although routine information activities (i.e. the provision of factual information) continue during the election campaign, other information activities generally cease entirely.

Further detail is in the relevant chapter of the *Cabinet Office Manual* which was being drafted during 2010. The appropriate draft chapter was published in February 2010 in advance of the May 2010 general election. The chapter covers the dissolution and summoning of parliament, parliamentary general elections, how governments are formed and what to do in the case of hung parliaments. It also covers restrictions on government and other activity during the electoral period, and the appointment of Ministers.

It is also interesting (and entertaining) to read Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong's note of the events following the election of a hung parliament in March 1974. This is on the website of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation.