

## **ANNUAL PARTY CONFERENCE GUIDANCE 2021**

With party conferences imminent, you will wish to circulate within your departments the general principles for civil servants, including Special Advisers, which apply to such conferences.

The guidance also applies to those on secondment or loan to departments from external organisations, and to those working in non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), and other arm's length bodies (ALBs).

Please ensure that this guidance is drawn to the attention of staff within your department, including Special Advisers, and is also circulated to the NDPBs and other ALBs sponsored by your department.

### **1. Ministers**

- A. Ministers' meetings with external organisations during the party conference will generally be in a political capacity, so there is normally no need to declare these. However, in line with the Government's commitment to greater transparency in this area, all meetings with newspaper and other media proprietors, editors and senior executives should be declared and published.
- B. Where any discussions take place between ministers and external organisations which raise substantive issues relating to their department, ministers should inform their private office.
- C. Ministers can request and receive a factual brief explaining departmental policies or actions for the purposes of the party conference. Equally, if requested, civil servants may check ministers' conference speeches for factual accuracy in respect of departmental policies or actions. However, civil servants must not draft conference speeches.
- D. Official cars should not normally be used to transport ministers to the party conference unless security considerations apply (see Ministerial Code, section 10.15). Special arrangements will be in place for the transport of ministerial boxes.

### **2. Civil Servants**

- A. Permanent civil servants are prohibited from attending party conferences in an official capacity, except in very exceptional circumstances when their presence may be required to carry out essential departmental business unconnected with the conference. Any such attendance will be exceptional and must be approved in advance by the Permanent Secretary.
- B. Civil servants may be permitted to attend party conferences in a private capacity. However, all civil servants are bound by the rules on political activities set out in section 4.4 of the Civil Service Management Code.

- C. The nature of some Civil Service roles will make attendance at party conferences in a private capacity inappropriate. Any civil servant planning to attend a party conference in a private capacity should seek advice from their line manager and HR manager. Any cases of doubt should be referred to their Permanent Secretary, who may then consult the Propriety and Ethics Team in the Cabinet Office if required.

### **3. Special Advisers**

- A. Under the terms of their contracts, Special Advisers are able to attend the annual party conference. However, they should not speak publicly at the conference or do anything that might lead to their becoming embroiled in political controversy. They must avoid making any commitments on which ministers have yet to make decisions, and must not disclose privileged information.
- B. It is also essential that Special Advisers are careful not to use official resources for party political purposes. For example, the distribution of material for use at the party conference must be done by the party not by the department.
- C. All expenses associated with attendance at the party conference (travel, accommodation, meals etc) must be met personally by Special Advisers (or by the party).

### **4. Government Business During Party Conferences**

- A. This is not a pre-election period, and there are no restrictions on government business. Normal procedure, including collective agreement, the requirements of Managing Public Money and the Civil Service Code all apply. Care should be taken to ensure that all announcements have been through proper processes and are based on official advice, including regarding timing. Government announcements, as always, must not include party political content.

### **5. NDPB and ALB Board Members and Staff**

- A. The principles set out above also apply to the board members and staff of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and other arm's length bodies (ALBs). Such bodies must be, and be seen to be, politically impartial. As the rules make clear, it should be exceptional for board members or staff of NDPBs and other ALBs to attend party conferences in an official capacity. Any requests to attend must be approved by the sponsoring department, who may then consult the Propriety & Ethics Team in the Cabinet Office.
- B. NDPB and other ALB board members and staff attending party conferences in a personal capacity must act in accordance with their respective codes of conduct. At all times, they should remain conscious of their general public responsibilities and exercise proper discretion.

- C. In addition, NDPBs must not employ external firms or consultants to act on their behalf to influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties. This includes attendance at party conferences. Please see the separate guidance, Rules on Lobbying for Non Departmental Public Bodies.
- D. Further advice and guidance should be sought from Permanent Secretaries, who may then wish to consult the Propriety & Ethics Team in the Cabinet Office.

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