

Governing for Trust: Administrative Legitimacy Under Cabinet Government and Public- sector Reform in New Zealand

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Abstract

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Discussions of public trust tend to be in terms of an attitude, but administrative legitimacy will be the creation of repeated experiences with institutions. Confidence can be either

boosted or diminished by a benefit decision, permit or tax notice, an interaction with the hospital, schools, police or an information request. So assessments of public-sector reform in New Zealand in February 2026 should consider efficiency and costs. Cabinet government should also uphold fairness, skills, transparency and the public service values which underpin the legitimate running of government.

The Cabinet Manual is a particular guidebook for central government decision-making, with a focus on good practice, the rule of law and the conventions that form the core of the constitution. An Act of Parliament which strengthened the elements of political neutrality, free and frank advice, merit, open government and stewardship is the Public Service Act 2020. These principles are important because for trust to exist, it is essential that the administrative branch provide confidence that it is conducting lawful government without turning personal and partisan.

One important way of establishing legitimacy is through procedural fairness. Decisions that include elements (evaluative criteria, consideration of evidence, provision of rationale, provision of appeal) increase the likelihood of their acceptance despite their unfavorable outcome. Rigid processes and systems can neglect individual situations, although automated or standardised systems can help in achieving consistency, Human judgment and appeal must not be removed from in cases where there are serious consequences.

Competence also matters. Without the involvement of misconduct, long delays and repeated requests for documents, inaccurate documents and contradictory advice wreck trust. Reform should focus on capability of the workforce, service design and ensure that the entire system can be interoperable. Where there is a cost cutting process that strips away experienced workers, this will be seen as a failure later on. Efficiency must not be compromised on just transaction speed, must include accuracy and resolution.

The existence of political neutrality ensures an integrity of elected power and people's trust. Ministers determine the policies, officials give honest advice and put the legal decisions into practice. Pressure on adapting evidence, concealing risks, and bias towards political supporters decreases legitimacy. Advice, instructions or clear procedures and protected escalation procedures keep boundaries in place.

The most potent and useful advice is free and frank, and is most valuable when policy is hard. Consensus developing aspects of Cabinet processes can be encouraged by collaboration; but officials need to maintain analysis on uncertainty, alternatives and distributional effects. While it is not necessary to publish advice in its entirety every step of the way. However, the official documentation should enable it to be reviewed later and

further institutional learning to occur.

An open government is one where government is related to accountability. Suspicions are lessened by proactive published updates, readily available data and timely response to information requests and explanations. Whilst there need to be limits in regard to privacy and security, exemptions should be kept specific. Delay can be a way of hiding the information when decisions lapse and become irrelevant.

Competence and neutrality are being supported with merit based appointments. Transparent criteria should be used, and we should involve our peers and document our reasons, when approaching recruitment of seniors. Diversity and merit go together: Wide openings to a higher pool of talent and an institutional understanding. There is long-term damage when a patronage happens – entire expectations change during the service.

Stewardship puts responsibility in the wider perspective than just the current electoral cycle. It is essential that agencies have the capacity, records, infrastructure, data and the knowledge about the policy when future governments assume the role. If the objectives are short term, they can lead to postponing maintenance or a loss of skills. When institutions used anticipatory solutions to address risk, this fosters trust.

Where people are dealing with different agencies it may be possible to bring service effectiveness together. Joined up services minimise duplication and gaps between services. An important principle for integration is that it requires consent, responsibility, and a sense of privacy. It shouldn't prevent a citizen from being able to correct data simply because multiple agencies are using a single system. There is no excuse for lack of convenience.

Administrative legitimacy also is affected by Māori-Crown relationship. Consultation is not enough when it comes to Te Tiriti obligations, Māori authority and Māori-centred services. Designing for co-operation, empowering with long-term funding, common data governance, and shared decision making can strengthen outcomes and trust. There may be unequal access because of the unconscious and culturally limited nature of institutional assumptions in national standardized processes.

Complaint Systems are pertinent sources of information. Organizational Learning should be derived from Ombuds institutions, internal review and protected disclosures and service complaints. Complaints can be considered by agencies as a threat to reputation. Effective systems release concepts, response time, fixes and modifications and safeguard individual information.

It is through the explanation of Cabinet and Ministers that trust in those operates. Policy changes, weaknesses and compromises must be dealt with forthrightly. The legitimacy costs may be exacerbated by miscommunication before and after evidence shift when the communication is overconfident. This shows respect when you are not sure and correct yourself. Agencies (treators) should not be pressured to defend political messaging with lack of administrative support.

Trust needs to be broken out in measurement. Differences between age and ethnicity, income, region, having a disability and levels of service experience can be stark and not reflected in national averages. There must be a connection between surveys and available administrative information on delay, error, review and access. Qualitative research will be able to pinpoint the reasons for formally equal procedures to feel unfair.

Branding is no way to construct administrative validity. It flourishes where institutions are competent and provide people with reasons, correct mistakes, support integrity of professions and treat people with respect. Collective political direction is ensured by cabinet government and the quality of the implementation is ensured by public-service principles. Where as long benefits are provided by reforms that enable faster services while preserving the legal and reviewable aspects of systems and trust is built through political leadership being willing to provide transparent accountability.

Equality of treatment across channels also is important to establishing trust. Digital services will benefit access for many and may be inaccessible for those with low connectivity, language or disability or complex situations. There should be in person & assisted options available. The decision to choose a channel must not impact on the customer's legal rights, and must not affect the quality of the customer's service.

Guidance and review is needed for frontline discretion. Limits on scripts can lead to inequitable results and free hand can lead to inconstancy. An equal balance of flexibility and equality is achieved through training, supervision, case reviews and published criteria. Your staff should have the time for a proper explanation of what they're deciding, and not a big push to just close cases.

Influences of legitimacy of firms and communities are determined by means of regulatory enforcement. Trust is built in periods of predictable and proportionate inspection and clear priorities. Favoured enforcement or gratis exemptions for powerful ones have a lasting impact. Comparing data can be made if it's published at aggregate level.

A stress test is provided by crisis communication. Agencies need to make statements

about the Knowns, the Unknowns and the Changing Advice. Having mixed messages from the ministers and departments destabilises people. There needs to be a central coordination to enhance coherence, while maintaining an open position to expert dissent.

It takes to acknowledge and remedy in order to recover the trust after failure. Independent investigation, apology, compensation and procedural change cover different aspects. Messages protect against harm until it's reversed. Follow up reports should be filed and indicate if recommendations are done.

Trust needs to be sought in institutions not manipulated. It is possible to improve communication, but there are ethics issues attached to covert influences, in the form of behavioural insights, targeted messaging and service design. Public bodies should detail aim and be sensitive to the potential of adverse side effects.

Examples of leadership behavior are set throughout the system. Those who run the administrations with respect for lawful process, declare conflicts and take corrections, promote administrative culture. Frequent exemptions at the highest level send the wrong message to staff; that the principles are not mandatory.

Without well-being of members of the staff force, there can be loss of legitimacy as exhausted staff will make mistakes and communicate badly. These should be monitored as part of Reform: Workload, turnover, psychological safety, access to training. Support from staff member is not independent of the high-quality of services.

Special protection needs to be provided for official statistics. Public debate and policy evaluation is possible when reliable data to support it is available. Political input about definitions, timing or interpretation can negatively affect the opportunity for trust to develop in government. Professionalism, clarity of revision are key.

Procurement Integrity has a role in perception. Open competition, contract performance data, disclosure of conflict of interest and beneficial ownership helps to lessen suspicion. Exceptions must be addressed after the award, if they are of emergency nature.

Relationship with local governments also impacts on the level of trust since, services can also bridge local and central fronts. Financial investment should still, value stream, and communication should still go together. No multiple referrals between levels should be made for citizens.

Administrative language matters. Ensure forms, notices are clear, respectful and accessible. Legalese adds to the complexity of government, which lowers the chance for

what should be avoided – error.

Continuous structural rearrangements can lead to a loss of relationship and specialism despite capability spreading provided by public-service mobility. The workforce development plan needs to safeguard key vocations as well as skills and knowledge in the region. Transparent review should be monitored over time for delivery.

Ethics advice still should be available before decisions are made – as well as after complaints. Learning about conflicts of interest, gifts, procurement and use of information early avoids any damage to be done.

Trust builds as review bodies have the authority to ensure the records and to provide for practical solutions.