

Te Noho Taiapa | Political Neutrality

**Staying Politically Neutral:
The impact of your choices**

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What is Political Neutrality?

Political neutrality means staying impartial and not showing support in your official role for any political party or candidate.

This is crucial to maintain the trust and confidence of the current and future governments and the public that public servants will perform their role fairly and will not pursue their own interests.

Let's explore some political neutrality scenarios and see what possible options we might have in each case.

At the end of this guide, there are a few questions to revise what you will learn through the scenarios.

Scenario 1 – Posting on LinkedIn

While scrolling through LinkedIn during your lunch break, you see a post from one of the main political parties talking about public sector services.

Their position is slightly frustrating, as in your opinion it does not accurately reflect current practices.

You think that the information should be corrected. You write a brief response sharing your insights hoping to provide clarity.

What do you do next?

Here's one way the situation might play out.

You post the response that you have written.

After you post your insights, you get a message from your manager (you are connected on LinkedIn). They would like to have a chat with you.

You meet your manager. They are concerned about your post as your LinkedIn account shows your job and agency.

Your manager suggests you probably need to delete the post.



Now, you could take a different path here.

You have a chat with your manager in the first instance.

You ask their advice on whether you should post the response or not.

Your manager asks if your LinkedIn account shows your job or if the post is related to your work.

You tell him that your LinkedIn account does show your job and the post is not related to work.

You decide not to post the response.



There should be a clear separation between public servants' work role and their personal use of social media.

Scenario 2 – Taking up work with a political party

You are passionate about the environment, and this has led you to work in your agency and take on the role that you hold.

You've recently been talking to a friend and they suggested you become a member of a political party and take up a role as their environment representative, so that you can get really involved in influencing environmental issues.

What do you do next?

You initially think to take this approach.

You decide to take the role on. This will be in your own time, so it doesn't impact on working hours.

Now that you have contacted the party to say that you are interested in taking the role, you wonder if there is anything else that you need to do. It's an out of work activity so there's nothing else that you think you need to do.

However, as you haven't declared it, you could find yourself in a conflict of interest situation as your work and agency are related to environmental issues.



But then, imagine you choose another way to go about it.

You decide to have a chat with your manager.

Your manager works with you to do a management plan to mitigate the risk and update your conflict of interest information.

After that, you are more confident in going ahead and taking up the role.



Being politically neutral at work does not generally stop public servants from being politically active outside of work. Any conflict of interest should be identified and appropriately managed.

Scenario 3 – Chatting with friends and family about work

You are relaxing on Saturday night at a BBQ with some friends and family.

The chat amongst the group turns to work and people start talking about the latest headlines in the paper about the public service.

One of your friends says, “hey you work in the public service, you must know the full story behind what's going on in the news at the moment”.

You stand there for a moment thinking what to do.

What do you do next?

Consider for a moment what you think you might do.

You decide to reply, and give your opinion. After all it's just your friends and family so it's okay to share information.

However, the information you share with your friends was not in the public domain. It was confidential and learned during the course of your work. Even though it's a group of family and friends, you should not share information that isn't in the public domain.



Now, how about you explore the alternative.

You distract them by asking if they want another sausage. Or you politely decline to comment.

This is a good choice. Information that you have learned in the course of your work and is not in the public domain, should not be shared.



Information you have learned in the course of your work, and is not in the public domain, should not be shared.

Questions

Here are six questions. Some are multiple choice, and some are yes/no answers. Underneath each question-and-answer options, we have put the correct answer.

1. Why is political neutrality important? Political neutrality allows us as public servants to:
 - a. Preserve our ability to serve current and future governments, irrespective of their political composition.
 - b. Maintain the trust and confidence of ministers and the government and help them to develop and implement their policies.
 - c. Build and maintain the trust and confidence of the public.
 - d. All of the above.

Correct answer: d. All of the above

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2. Is it okay to have a political opinion?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Correct answer: a. Yes

Public servants have the same rights to freedom of speech and political activity in their private lives as other New Zealanders under the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990. Like other New Zealanders, public servants are strongly supportive of good government and care about the issues affecting New Zealand.

3. Can I be a member of a union whose views might be different to the government of the day?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Correct answer: a. Yes

Public servants have the right to join and be active in lawful organisations including trade unions. Political expression and participation should normally be undertaken in the individual's own time. To the extent that union activity leads to political expression within the workplace, this should be carried out in a reasonable way and respect normal business operations. These activities should not be visible to the general public.

4. As a public servant you can post your personal political views on social media:
 - a. Whenever you like and saying whatever you like
 - b. As long as there is a clear separation between your work role and your personal use.
 - c. Only if you don't use LinkedIn.

Correct answer: b. As long as there is a clear separation between their work role and their personal use

Public servants are free to use social media in their private lives.

5. What do you need to consider when you are making a decision that could impact your political neutrality?
 - a. The seniority of your role
 - b. The scope and scale of the political activity
 - c. The nature of your role
 - d. All of the above

Correct answer: d. All of the above

There are some things to think about in engaging in any political activity outside work that might impact your role as a public servant. Whether a particular political interest or activity might impact on a work role, and whether it can be managed, may depend on the seniority and nature of your role and the scope and scale of the political activity.

6. If you aren't sure about what to do you should:
 - a. Chat to your friends, they will probably have some advice
 - b. Talk to your manager
 - c. Just guess, it's probably going to be right
 - d. Any of the above

Correct answer: b. Talk to your manager

Talking to your manager or your agency integrity champion is a great first step in getting help and support.

Additional information

The scenarios that you viewed here are just some of the examples you could come across in real life and they could each vary in detail depending on your role, organisation, experience, and other factors. Always use your judgement and experience to evaluate the situation and decide on the right course of action.

Remember, a good rule of thumb is - Keep your politics out of your job and your job out of your politics.

If you are ever in doubt, reach out to your manager in the first instance, or to the integrity and ethics champion at your agency.

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