Summary: Election 2019: The Impact on Public Bodies

PCF and ACE were pleased to welcome a panel of speakers to discuss the potential impact of the upcoming general election for public bodies. The panel, chaired by **Dr Hannah White** of the Institute for Government, comprised **Joe Twyman**, Director at Deltapoll, **Gisela Stuart,** former Labour MP and current chair of Wilton Park and **Tera Allas CBE** from McKinsey Centre for Government. Here is a summary of the key points raised during the discussion.

Key messages

1. Trying to predict election outcomes is nearly impossible at this stage. Potential outcomes range from a majority government, through to a form of coalition, partnership or unity pact, through to a hung parliament.

2. Therefore, it is difficult to calculate which manifesto pledges will become policy, and what impact these may have on public bodies.

3. Use the pre-election period to reflect on how we are operating as individual bodies: be clear on your purpose in order to face the wider challenges of government transition.

Interpreting Current Opinion Polls

Opinion polls only offer a snapshot of public opinion at any given time. Noting this, it's clear that the current picture from opinion polls is positive for the Conservative Party. This is reflected in both the lead the Conservatives have over Labour, but also the share of the overall vote. If the current polls were reflected in the election, we might therefore expect to see a Conservative majority.

The underlying data seems to confirm this. Polls focused on leadership show Boris Johnson outperforming Jeremy Corbyn and other main UK-wide parties. On the issues considered most significant for voters: Brexit; health; and the economy, Conservatives currently poll more positively than Labour, although on health one could argue it is about level. It was noted that historically, parties have never come from behind on the perceived issues of leadership and economic competence to gain a majority.

However, there are three key factors that could yet have a significant impact on the upcoming election and could prove the current polls to be inaccurate measures of the final outcome:

Time	It is early in the election build-up. Manifestos signal the start of general election campaigns – but the final week of campaigning is often seen as the most critical.
Events	Key factors could yet influence voters e.g. Andrew Neil's interviews with leaders, the NATO summit when Donald Trump will visit the UK, and the final leader's debate.
Individual seats	Brexit is affecting traditional voting habits. The impact of remain voters in Conservative seats and leave voters in Labour seats, as well as individual's views of nationalism in Scotland, will differ by each constituency.

Turnout is another factor that could have a significant impact on the election outcome. The first December election in many years means there is little data to determine the influence on turnout of holding an election in the build up to Christmas. It was noted that a key shortcoming of polling is its ability to predict the impact of turnout on election outcomes.

Public Bodies

Most public bodies will likely include on their risk registers the potential impact of a change in government. However, this is a challenging task given the unpredictability and wide range of potential outcomes that could result from this election. With parties' manifestos proposing vastly different policies, it is difficult for public bodies to determine the impact on individual arm's length bodies.

However, while the focus of politicians is on the election, there is an opportunity for public bodies to reflect on their operations and consider key questions. It is important to reflect on the possibility that if one's organisation no longer existed: a) how long would it be before this was noticed? b) what things would no longer be done? and c) what harm would no longer be prevented? Of course, it is always vital to consider these questions. However, with a potential new Government and Ministers, one must prepare to answer these questions directly in the weeks following the election.

Potential Impact and Outcomes of the Election

This year's party manifestoes tend to have less focus on the outcomes they are seeking to achieve, with greater emphasis instead placed on proposed inputs such as spending or police numbers. It is therefore less clear what future policies might be and whether these prove to be suitably 'systemic, sustainable and at scale.' This prolongs our current period of uncertainty: it is unclear if the rifts we saw within and between parties during the last parliament will be resolved following the election, and Brexit uncertainties will continue to impact public bodies' operations.

Previous work by McKinsey has considered how to manage government transformations and has highlighted three key messages for public bodies:

Clarity of purpose	Ensure you are clear on your top line aims and messages. Subsequent discussions with future administrations can then focus on how these aims are achieved.
Communication	Communicate with staff continually in a two-way manner to support both yourself and your teams in managing the government transformation and uncertainty.
Opportunities	Opportunities will arise from these periods of uncertainty to improve the delivery and effectiveness of the services you provide. These may for example be in the area of digital development, and now may be a good time to support staff training to improve capability.

Public body leaders will be required to identify the requirements of a future government and the Minister with oversight for your area of work, therefore keeping your organisation close to the Minister remains important. However, this must not be at the expense of an organisation's effective delivery, in accordance with its key aims and values.

Surveys tend to reveal that there is increasing distrust of government institutions. However, the sense is that this does not in general extend to public bodies. There is an opportunity for public bodies to work with a future government and Parliament to help in the process of restoring trust.