

COMMENT

Veil of purdah keeps voters in the dark

The electorate is bombarded with information; hiding statistics and gagging scientists does not help



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Election purdah is more than a piece of quaint orientalism. There is good sense in a convention that protects civil servants from being drawn into the election campaign. Ministers, too, may need to avoid binding the hands of a future government during what Australia and Canada refer to as the caretaker period.

But during the current general election campaign, several high-profile applications of purdah have not so much protected civil servants from controversy as plunged them into it.

The High Court, in an application brought by ClientEarth, dismissed the argument that purdah required delay to the launch of an air quality consultation, citing the government's own guidance and the damaging effects of delay on public health.

The regulator NHS Improvement has described as “disappointing” the government's advice that it should wait until after the election to publish routine data on the scale of hospital deficits – data relevant to any voter concerned about the NHS.

Leading scientists have written to the head of the civil service complaining of “instruction from government” that their membership of independent scientific advisory committees made them subject to purdah. In no previous election, they say, has purdah extended so far into the daily work of research scientists.

More recently, senior Brussels figures, including Michel Barnier, the chief Brexit negotiator, have been described as “enraged” by the UK's purdah-based refusal to sign off on revisions to the latest EU budget plan. As pointed out by the purdah expert Catherine Haddon, of the Institute for Government, the 2010 election period

did not prevent the chancellor, Alistair Darling, from participating in EU decisions on a Greek bail out.

Does this amount to a sinister and self-serving government plot? Probably not. The likelier cause is a jumpy civil service, stung by allegations of excessive interference in recent referendum campaigns, and bounced into caution by an election for which there was little time to plan.

But the lessons of this campaign need to be reflected in revisions to the current purdah guidance. There should be explicit recognition that purdah does not extend to non-governmental experts, or bodies – such as the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme, currently silenced – whose activities have no foreseeable electoral significance. Statistical releases should be published in the normal course, and not, as at present, delayed until after the election unless a specific publication date has already been agreed.

It is also time to revisit the injunction that everything possible should be done to “avoid competition with parliamentary candidates for the attention of the public”. The modern electorate is bombarded with information, much of it inaccurate, slanted or even fake. The informed political debate on which a healthy democracy depends requires access to the best expertise, and up-to-date statistics published with the authority of bodies such as the Office for National Statistics and the Office for Budget Responsibility.

Both the democratic process and the aim of protecting the civil service from controversy are better served by publishing such material than by hiding it under the veil.