

Chapter 10: A profession comes of age *Robert Hazell*

Government is a machine, but it is a machine which needs driving. And it can only be driven by ministers and special advisers (directed by ministers). It needs and wants political direction (former head of No 10 Policy Unit).

This chapter begins by summarising some of our main findings in response to the questions we posed in Chapter 1. These were: Why do ministers appoint special advisers? What are their roles and functions? Who becomes a special adviser? And how can their role and effectiveness be improved? It does so by tracing the rise of special advisers, their main characteristics, the roles they perform, their successes and their failures. It then sets those findings in a broader context, by linking them to current debates about the support needed for ministers, and the Coalition Government's proposals for extended ministerial offices. If extended ministerial offices lead to a further increase in numbers of special advisers, then the political parties and Whitehall will need to grasp issues about their recruitment, support and management, career structure and professional development which have been ignored for too long.

The evolution of special advisers

It is forty years since special advisers started working as an identifiable cadre in Whitehall. Since then their numbers have more than doubled, and are still rising (see Figure 2.1). They have not mostly been as young as is popularly conceived, with the median age between 1979 and 2012 having been around 34 years on appointment. But they are growing younger, with the median starting age of the Coalition cohort being 31. They are mostly highly educated, coming from Russell Group universities, with a third having a postgraduate degree.

Conservative special advisers (1979-97) were fewer in number, slightly older on appointment, and tended to include more policy experts, remaining within the same department in spite of changes of minister. Under Mrs Thatcher they were more likely to be appointed from business, academia and the civil service. Under Major, and then Labour and the Coalition, special advisers were increasingly recruited from political party staffs, or the public relations industry, the media and think tanks. Policy experts were supplemented by people whose expertise lay primarily in media and communications. The doubling in the numbers of special advisers under Labour was primarily due to a big increase in media advisers. Under the Coalition the numbers have increased by a further 50 per cent, primarily because of the additional demands of coalition management.

Recruitment depends on when it takes place in the life cycle of a Government. At the start of a new Government, a whole tranche of advisers transfers across from Opposition into Government. But half of special advisers remain in post for three years or less, so as many new appointments are made during the life of a Government to replace those who have left. New appointments tend to be made via party political networks. As a Government

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enters its final years, it becomes increasingly difficult to find good quality candidates, and ministers are forced to seek alternative recruitment pools, and hold semi-open competitive interviews. This suggests that the personal nature of the appointment may sometimes be exaggerated. Special advisers in later waves of recruitment are not necessarily well known to their minister.

The benefits and achievements of special advisers

Despite their modest numbers, special advisers have had a big impact on Whitehall. Their biggest impact has been in media management, with the communications revolution ushered in by Alastair Campbell (see chapter 6). Government communications were raised to a completely different level. But special advisers have also had a big impact on policy. It is invidious to select only a few cases, and impossible to disentangle the respective contributions of special adviser and of minister. But just to highlight a few examples, these might include the 1970s legislation on sex and race discrimination (strongly influenced by Anthony Lester, special adviser to Roy Jenkins); the influence of Alan Walters on monetary policy under Mrs Thatcher; the contribution of Adam Ridley to Geoffrey Howe's tax reforms in the early 1980s; the changes to defence procurement introduced by Peter Levene under Michael Heseltine; the peace talks in Northern Ireland which led to the 1998 Belfast Agreement (in which a key role was played by Jonathan Powell under Tony Blair); Labour's industrial policy (Geoffrey Norris, working for Blair and Mandelson); the creation of academy schools (of which Andrew Adonis was the architect when he was in the Policy Unit); the radical welfare reforms of the Coalition Government (in which Philippa Stroud has played a major role under Iain Duncan Smith), and the contribution of Chris Nicholson to environmental policy (and of Tom Burke during earlier administrations).

Our interviewees were all agreed that special advisers had become indispensable to the working of modern government (the only dissenters being a couple of Conservative ministers from the 1980s). This was for many reasons, but the single most important one was ministerial overload. The demands on ministers are so great, they cannot be everywhere at once, and they need more people to whom they can delegate. These must be people whom they can trust to know their minds and represent them in their absence. Absences include the growing number of ministerial trips to Europe and further afield. The greatest value of special advisers is to be the minister's *alter ego*, giving a steer to officials in the Department, briefing the press, meeting with outside interest groups. Although these functions overlap with officials (see chapter 5), special advisers have a particular authority because they have been personally chosen, and through regular proximity have far more opportunity to get to know the minister's mind.

Under Labour some special advisers became particularly powerful, with Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell, Andrew Adonis and Ed Balls being prominent examples. They all worked in the centre. But even in departments, some of the secretaries of state whom we interviewed ranked special advisers as more important than their junior ministers when we asked about the circles of power and influence around them:

Special advisers very close to the centre of power, along with the permanent secretary. I would say most senior civil servants and special advisers are pretty equivalent. The permanent

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secretary is more important; junior ministers some way down the list (Labour Secretary of State)

Well, you see [special advisers] far more than you see your junior ministers... you see them on routine things and things that have to be done all the time. However, a wise Secretary of State will never exclude junior ministers from decision-making, and indeed will make that collaborative (another Labour Secretary of State)

This may be a startling finding for some readers. It can be explained by the fact that secretaries of state have chosen their special advisers, but not their junior Ministers, who may have been wished upon them.¹ A second factor is the one mentioned above: junior ministers may see the secretary of state fairly infrequently, and certainly much less than the special advisers.

A second surprising finding is how isolated ministers can feel:

Ministers can feel very isolated in their Private Offices. They need a friend whom they can trust, who will find out what is going on in the department (Conservative Special Adviser)

A lot of commentary on Spads seems to overlook how isolated the Secretary of State is. Whom can he really consult? It is not always the Permanent Secretary: in our case we were debating whether we wanted to get rid of him (Labour special adviser)

The civil service, looking up to politicians as their political masters, do not always appreciate how lonely and exposed they can feel. Ministers are only human, and need emotional as well as logistical support. Special advisers are better placed to provide that. At the end of a bad day, or in a media firestorm, special advisers stick with them and help them back onto their feet. It is not always so easy for the civil service to do so, while remaining suitably impartial: sometimes the ministerial setback has nothing to do with the department.²

Increasing numbers of special advisers

We saw in chapter eight how much greater are the numbers of political staff in Australia and Canada. Their total numbers increased in the late twentieth century to 600 in Canada and 450 in Australia, compared to around 100 in the UK. But with some of those being in administrative and support roles, the numbers of policy staff equivalent to special advisers may be 200 in Canada and 350 in Australia. These are still much larger figures than in the UK; so if the numbers of special advisers in Whitehall continue to increase, Australia and Canada offer one possible vision of our future.

On the whole it is not an encouraging picture. The overseas experience suggests that when the minister's office is staffed wholly or largely by political staff, there are greater barriers

¹ Chris Mullin's diaries depict vividly the lowly life of a Parliamentary Under-Secretary. Chris Mullin, *A View from the Foothills*, Profile Books 2009.

² Examples include ministers afflicted by personal scandals, such as Peter Mandelson, David Blunkett or Chris Huhne.

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between the ministerial office and the department, and concerns of undue politicisation. Both countries have seen a serious accountability gap, with worse scandals than in the UK, with ministers not accepting responsibility for their staff's behaviour when things go wrong. In Canada, many of the political staff are young and inexperienced. In Australia, despite their large numbers, the names and roles of individual advisers are not published.³ A 2009 review in Australia recommended a full time adviser who would be responsible for the supervision, training and support of political staff.⁴ In both countries there appears to be more central control by the Prime Minister's Office, with the PMO in Canada directly assigning some staff rather than leaving ministers to choose. In Australia the chief of staff to the new Prime Minister Tony Abbott is reported to have tightened the centre's grip, intervening in staff appointments to a third of the Cabinet.⁵

How far down this road is the UK likely to go? Most of our interviewees did not support a cap on the numbers of special advisers, and many supported an increase. These views were expressed not just by ministers and special advisers, but also by civil servants. They particularly emphasised the need for additional advisers under the Coalition, to help broker deals between the Coalition partners.

I think it's a shame that we had such a strict rule about how many special advisers we have, not least because we have this extra function, which is the cross-Coalition function (Conservative special adviser)

The Coalition has seen a big increase in special advisers in its first three years, with the total number rising from 63 in June 2010 to 98 in October 2013.⁶ Much of the increase has been in the Centre, with the Prime Minister's office increasing by seven (from 15 to 22), and the Deputy Prime Minister's by six.⁷ By 2013 four secretaries of state had gone up from two to three special advisers (Foreign Secretary; Home Secretary; Secretary of State for Education, Work and Pensions).

The cap of two advisers per Cabinet minister has also been avoided by the appointment of additional advisers as temporary civil servants. As noted in chapter 7, this happened under

³ But there is a detailed annual report about numbers and functions: see http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/mops_annual_reports/2011-2012/docs/MOPS_Annual_Report.pdf, 20.

⁴ Senate Committee on Finance and Public Administration, 'Review of Government Staffing' (Estimates Review of Government Staffing, 2009) http://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/senate/committee/fapa_ctte/estimates/bud_0910/finance/tailed_documents/review_govt_staffing.pdf page 25

⁵ 'At least a third of Tony Abbott's 19 member Cabinet have had senior staffing appointments either knocked back or imposed upon them by the Peta Credlin-led appointments panel, known as the "star chamber".'

'Control freak Peta Credlin accused of pulling coalition strings', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 December 2013.

⁶ Of the 66 special adviser posts listed by Cabinet Office in June 2010, five were recorded as vacancies.

⁷ The number of special advisers supporting the DPM rose from seven in June 2010 to 19 in October 2013. But six of those were recruited in late 2011 specifically to provide additional support for the dozen Lib Dem junior ministers scattered round Whitehall departments.

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the Labour Government, where there were reported to be as many as 20 temporary civil servants (usually called political advisers or pads) who acted like special advisers:

Generally they are policy advisers to the Secretary of State – largely because they have already reached their limit of political appointments. Occasionally they would be described as ‘secret spads’ because they didn’t formally count and weren’t on the radar, but worked in exactly the same way with the same level of ministerial patronage, trust etc. I would say there were at least 20 pads at any one time – probably more at some points. Most main departments had at least one ... (former Labour special adviser)

Similar appointments have happened under the coalition, where a minister like Michael Gove has recruited three or four policy advisers, in addition to his three special advisers. In July 2013 the coalition government proposed to formalise this kind of arrangement, by allowing all Cabinet ministers greatly expanded ministerial support, with the plans announced by Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude for extended ministerial offices, quickly known in Whitehall as EMOs.⁸

Extended Ministerial Offices

The proposal is not as novel as it might appear. It was first suggested in a report of the Treasury and Civil Service Committee back in 1986, when the committee proposed strengthened private offices with ministerial policy units analogous to *cabinets*.⁹ Suggestions for adoption of a *cabinet* system have surfaced frequently ever since Fulton (see chapter 8). EMOs are one more variant on this theme. They would have three categories of staff: civil servants in the traditional Private Office role, Special Advisers, and external appointees. The main expansion was likely to be in the third category, with the Civil Service Commission creating a new exception to allow recruitment without competition of chosen individuals as temporary civil servants for up to five years.¹⁰ The previous maximum was two years: the new exception would allow outsiders to be recruited for the whole of a Parliament.

Under Cabinet Office guidance issued in late 2013, Ministers would need first to agree the mix of staff and the budget with their Permanent Secretary, before seeking the approval of the Prime Minister. There were two twists in the tail for Ministers who wanted an EMO. The first was that at least one member of the EMO must focus on implementation, reporting to the Head of the Cabinet Office Implementation Unit. The second was that requests must include ‘specific proposals for strengthening the offices of junior Ministers ... of a different party’.¹¹ Where no EMO was planned, junior ministers could put forward their own

⁸ Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Reform Plan: One Year On*, July 2013. The proposals for extended ministerial offices are right at the end of the report. More detailed guidance about EMOs was published in December 2013: for the full text see *Civil Service World* 3 December 2013.

⁹ Treasury and Civil Service Committee, *Civil Servants and Ministers: Duties and Responsibilities* (1986). para 5.28.

¹⁰ Civil Service Commission, ‘A New Exception for Extended Ministerial Offices’ 15 October 2013.

¹¹ Cabinet Office, *Guidance on Extended Ministerial Offices*, December 2013.

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proposals. This was primarily to strengthen support for the dozen Lib Dem junior ministers scattered round Whitehall, who felt isolated and outgunned.¹²

In the remainder of the 2010 Parliament it seemed unlikely that many Ministers would want an EMO. Energetic Ministers like Gove had already found ways of recruiting additional advisers. And outside experts invited to join as temporary civil servants might be reluctant to risk the job insecurity, because they would be expected to leave when no longer required in the EMO. So the real test for EMOs would lie in the next Parliament.

EMOs will inevitably be compared to *cabinets*, which frequently comprise a mix of outsiders and officials. It is a loose comparison, because *cabinets* come in various different shapes and sizes (see chapter 8). The main risk is the distancing of the minister's office from the department, so that the ministerial team ends up fighting the department rather than working with it. Distancing has happened in Australia and in Canada, and in the European Commission, as our interviewees confirmed:

I have spent a lot of time in Brussels and have seen cases there where the *cabinet* and the Directorate become in effect two different organisations, and nothing the Directorate puts forward is trusted. So that would be the risk you run (former Permanent Secretary).

The Coalition was evidently aware of the risk, because the Cabinet Office guidance includes strong emphasis on integration of staff within the EMO, and with the department:

The success of the office will be dependent on all staff being fully integrated and working as one to deliver the Minister's priorities, as well as working closely with the rest of the department. Advice from officials in the Department must go to Ministers unaltered, although as now staff in the Minister's office will often comment on the advice.¹³

The key to the success of EMOs lies in the quality of the people who staff them. Integration with the Department will be greatly facilitated if the Principal Private Secretary is head of the EMO. As for other staff, Canada points to the risks of more advisers meaning less in terms of quality. The main quality control for EMOs is that ministers must first consult their permanent secretary, and then seek the approval of the Prime Minister. It could go one of two ways. No 10 could yield to the demands of the bigger beasts in Cabinet, exercise no effective quality control, and pass the buck back to the permanent secretary. Or the PM's chief of staff could use the opportunity to insist that there are proper job descriptions and person specifications for any additional posts, and perhaps competition for those posts, as we have proposed in chapter 9. The chief of staff might want to lay down further criteria by which proposals for EMOs will be judged, to ensure that quality thresholds are met.

¹² 'I think it's been a terrible mistake to send people on their own into a department behind enemy lines, as it were, with no support mechanism at all'. Liberal Democrat minister quoted in Hazell and Yong, *The Politics of Coalition: How the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Works*, Hart Publishing, 2012 at p 204.

¹³ Cabinet Office Guidance for departments on EMOs, November 2013.

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But there is only so much which can be achieved by central approval and exhortation. Ultimately the tone will be set by the minister and the head of the ministerial office:

So whether a *Cabinet* system would work would depend heavily on the personality of the [secretary of state], but you cannot legislate for that. If you have someone like Stephen Byers, for example, who was strongly inclined to shut himself off from official advice and the formal input of the Department, then a *Cabinet* system could be very dangerous (former Permanent Secretary).

Greater transparency about special advisers

The other mechanism which might help to ensure quality control is greater transparency. If ministers had to release details of each of their advisers, their role and their qualifications, they might pause before recruiting unsuitable people. In the lists of special advisers published by the government, there are no details about their individual roles. Parliament has started to demand details of their roles and qualifications, and if Cabinet Office were astute, they could use that as an additional lever to say to ministers, 'we cannot approve this EMO, or that adviser, because there will be trouble with your Select Committee'.

The UK has gradually published more about special advisers, and compares well with other countries in this respect (see chapter 9), more could be done. Pressure for greater transparency has come from the media, from Parliament, and from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. In their 2003 report *Defining the Boundaries* the CSPL recommended that:

An annual statement should be made to Parliament setting out: (i) the total number of paid special advisers employed in the year; (ii) their names; (iii) the Ministers for whom they work or have worked; (iv) their particular roles and areas of responsibility; (v) the total salary cost by department; (vi) comparison figures for earlier years.¹⁴

As we found when compiling our database (see Appendix 1) there has not been a wholly complete series of annual statements, and the lists have not been consistent in the information provided. There is now a statutory duty on the Minister for the Civil Service to publish an annual report about the number and cost of special advisers.¹⁵ The Coalition Government undertook to release quarterly lists of special advisers, and almost achieved this, with three lists published in 2011 and three in 2012. But such frequent publication was burdensome, and in 2013 they reverted to annual publication.

The Cabinet Office lists give no information about the roles of individual special advisers. This is something which has been picked up by the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, who recommended:

To aid transparency and accountability, information about ministers' special advisers should appear on departmental websites, including advisers' names and a description

¹⁴ Committee on Standards in Public Life (chair Sir Nigel Wicks), *Defining the Boundaries*, 2003, R21.

¹⁵ Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 s 16.

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of the policy areas in which they work and the types of tasks they undertake, alongside the equivalent information about ministerial portfolios ... this would help Parliament to hold ministers to account for the work of their special advisers.¹⁶

The Government did not agree, saying that 'It is for the appointing Minister to decide on what he or she wants special advisers to focus. This will typically be relatively fluid but should be assumed to match the Minister's own responsibilities and priorities'.¹⁷ This was a missed opportunity by Cabinet Office to raise the quality threshold. Given the importance of special advisers, it is perfectly reasonable to expect their details to be published on departmental websites, and their roles. It would help to clarify which special advisers focus on the media, which on policy, and their main priorities. The Government's reluctance may have been because it wanted special advisers to remain invisible; or it may be part of a wider reluctance to give them job descriptions, because of some ministers' inability to specify what they want their special advisers to do.

More transparency about roles, less about salaries

In one respect the Coalition Government has gone beyond the recommendations of CSPL and PASC, by publishing the individual salaries of special advisers. This has since given rise to tensions, with special advisers putting in claims to catch up with other more highly paid advisers. Disputes over pay have become a vexed issue. The pay of special advisers is fixed on their appointment, there are no annual increments, and no promotion. But over time people grow and develop, and take on more responsibility, even if the job title does not change. It is not surprising if they seek pay increases to reflect that; and publication of individual salaries has added fuel to the flames of their resentment.

Pay is set by the Special Advisers Remuneration Committee, whose role is to determine special advisers' salaries; decide the annual pay increase; consider appeals against pay decisions, and requests for individual pay increases; and act as guardian of the pay system.¹⁸ So a mechanism is in place to determine the pay of individual special advisers, and to hear claims for an increase. Although many special advisers do not have job descriptions, an assessment and job evaluation is carried out for anyone seeking a pay increase.

There is the basis here for a new deal which might be of benefit to all sides. First, to roll back transparency a bit, and put publication of the pay of special advisers on the same basis as their equivalents in the Senior Civil Service (SCS): namely to publish their Pay Bands (SCS1, 2 or 3), but no more than that. That would give sufficient indication of their level of seniority and experience. But second, and more important, to increase transparency by publishing details of special advisers' roles. That is what PASC has called for, and the Government has given no convincing reason why their roles should not be disclosed. Special advisers complained to us about some ministers' lack of clarity in what it was they wanted. Having job descriptions would help to sharpen up ministers' thinking, sharpen up

¹⁶ PASC, *Special Advisers in the thick of It*, HC 134, Oct 2012, para 75.

¹⁷ PASC Government Response to *Special Advisers in the thick of it*, HC 515 July 2013 para 8.

¹⁸ Its members in 2013 were Danny Alexander (Chief Secretary to the Treasury), Theresa May (Home Secretary), Francis Maude (Cabinet Office Minister) and Sir Bob Kerslake, Head of the Civil Service.

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their accountability, and demystify what special advisers do. It is another respect in which they are unnecessarily depicted as people who live in the dark. As a further response to PASC, the Government could agree to notify the appropriate departmental select committee whenever a new special adviser is appointed, with their job description and their qualifications for the appointment. PASC (rightly) rejected pre-appointment hearings, but recommended instead:

that ministers should notify the relevant departmental select committee whom they have appointed as a new special adviser ... They should include a proposed job description, setting out the policy areas and types of tasks the special adviser will be expected to carry out, and the special adviser's relevant qualifications for appointment, including why they believe him or her to be of suitable 'standing and experience'. This would enable select committees better to hold ministers to account for the quality and conduct of their special advisers, and would deter ministers from promoting less suitable candidates.¹⁹

The Cabinet Office should see this as in their long term interest as well. No 10 and Cabinet Office need not be the only judges of whether a minister has a suitable ministerial team; select committees could prove to be useful additional scrutineers.

Distribution of special advisers

One interesting innovation in the proposals for EMOs is the requirement that any bid for an EMO must include specific proposals for strengthening the offices of junior ministers who come from a different party from that of the Secretary of State. And even where the secretary of state does not plan an EMO, junior ministers of the other party may put forward proposals for extending their own offices. This raises the question of whether junior ministers in general should be allowed special advisers or additional policy advisers recruited as temporary civil servants. Some junior ministers already have special advisers: part of the additional status for 'Ministers attending Cabinet' is to have a special adviser.²⁰ In 2013 half a dozen Ministers in this category had a special adviser (in Cabinet Office, DCLG, FCO, DECC, and BIS, where two junior ministers had one each).

Our interviewees were divided about whether junior ministers needed special advisers. Some felt that this could cause difficulties within the department, with junior ministers developing alternative power centres, rather than loyally supporting the secretary of state.

Set against this, there is the experience in Australia, where all junior ministers have political staff (non Cabinet ministers have six, parliamentary secretaries two); and the fact that almost 20 junior ministers in the UK already have special advisers, without report of adverse

¹⁹ *Special Advisers in the thick of it*, Oct 2012, paras 82-3.

²⁰ Recent Prime Ministers have created a new top tier amongst Ministers of State, of Ministers not formally in the Cabinet but entitled to attend. They typically number up to six Ministers. They were first allocated special advisers under Blair.

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consequences.²¹ The Coalition was right to focus on the needs of junior ministers from the 'other' Coalition party, because Lib Dem junior ministers have felt particularly under resourced. But in the spirit of experimentation which lies behind EMOs, it is to be hoped that some bids will include proposals to strengthen the offices of junior ministers, whether or not they come from a different party. To a small extent that can happen now. In some departments the secretary of state has been willing to share his special advisers with his junior ministers, so that the special advisers supported the whole ministerial team. But that has not general practice. In most cases the special advisers acted as a communication channel between the secretary of state and junior ministers; but they were not available to provide additional support.

The No 10 Policy Unit

Of the 100 or so special advisers in 2013, there were around 40 special advisers in the Centre (defined narrowly as the PM and DPM), with 22 supporting the Prime Minister. There have been particular difficulties with the No 10 Policy Unit. Cameron started with a very small Policy Unit of just five advisers, partly because of his determination to have fewer special advisers than the outgoing Government. The previous Delivery Unit and Strategy Unit were both disbanded (see chapter 4). This soon led to criticisms of a weak centre. In February 2011 No 10 acknowledged:

There is a capacity issue. Under the Labour Government, there was a policy unit that shadowed departments. We did not continue with that because we did not have enough special advisers. We had used our numbers because of the Coalition. The policy unit was therefore very small ... This meant that the capacity to work with departments to make sure that everything was in good order was very limited.²²

People whom we interviewed in departments also complained that they did not always know whom to go to in No 10. So in spring 2011 a new Policy and Implementation Unit was formed, of 11 people. Six were outsiders from the private sector and five came from Whitehall, but they were all formally designated as civil servants.²³ But in time criticism was renewed that the Unit was too weak, this time because it was composed of civil servants.²⁴ So in spring 2013 a third shake-up took place, with Jo Johnson MP brought in to head a

²¹ The six Ministers attending Cabinet, who have one each; and the 12 Lib Dem junior ministers who share half a dozen special advisers between them.

²² Nicholas Watt, 'Cameron's new backroom team aims to move story on from U-turns and cuts' *Guardian* 18 February 2011.

²³ Because the new Unit worked jointly to the PM and DPM, it was thought unacceptable for it to be staffed with overtly political advisers. For a full list of its members and their backgrounds see Hazell and Yong, *The Politics of Coalition*, Hart Publishing 2012, Appendix 7.

²⁴ Criticism came mainly from the Tory press. Typical was Nick Wood, 'The nerve centre of No10 is pathetically weak: It's time to ditch the civil servants and bring back the political heavyweights' *Daily Mail* 2 April 2012.

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Policy Unit of eight advisers, with an advisory board of half a dozen MPs as a link to the Conservative back benches.

We asked our interviewees about the ideal model for the No 10 Policy Unit. Most agreed that the ideal model was a mix of special advisers and civil servants:

My strong view is that what you need at the centre is a mix of civil servants and political appointees; you need a good blend of both. John Major in his small way had a nice mix; it was political and civil servants, they worked well together (former Cabinet Secretary).

There was less agreement about the ideal size, with numbers ranging from eight to 20. To match every Whitehall department, the Policy Unit would need at least 15 people. But our interviewees were agreed that the quality of the people was far more important than the quantity, and that the Policy Unit did not need one person per department:

Prime Ministers should only have a few priorities if they want to achieve anything. So there should be really heavyweight figures for each of the four or five priorities that the Prime Minister has. Then you can have younger, less significant figures, or civil servants, covering three or four departments. So if the Prime Minister doesn't really care about DEFRA, energy, DfID or whatever, you can have people handling a number of those together. But if he's really interested in health reform, or education, then you need to have big figures doing just that (former senior adviser, No 10)

The other reason for keeping the Policy Unit small is so that its members can genuinely claim to speak with the voice of the Prime Minister:

Small size was, I think, crucial to effectiveness. The whole team had sufficient contact with the Prime Minister to give them credibility throughout Whitehall and to ensure they understood what was in his mind. There was no need for internal competition for access to him or for power struggles for leadership on particular issues (former member of John Major's Policy Unit)

But the advantage of [a small] policy unit is, when they call up a cabinet minister and say, 'Tony wants,' people have a pretty good idea whether they do represent what Tony wants ... when you have very junior people from the Policy Unit, who maybe meet the Prime Minister once a year or twice a year, saying, 'Tony wants,' the Cabinet ministers don't always know ... Then that leads to complaint that Number 10 speaks with many voices (former adviser, No 10). Another common complaint was that No 10 wanted to drive the detail of a policy without sufficient knowledge or understanding of the front line (see chapter 4). One solution might be to recruit into the Policy Unit more special advisers with prior experience of working in Whitehall departments. That is easier mid term than for a new Government entering office.

'Politicisation' and the civil service

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Implicit in some of the criticism of Cameron's Policy and Implementation Unit is the assumption that civil servants cannot perform 'political' roles. We also found some small evidence of this in our interviews, where a couple of ministers who had served in the last Conservative Government commented on the difference they found when they came back in 2010, with officials being unnecessarily fussy about touching anything which might be 'political'.

This is a category error which needs challenging. People forget how many civil service roles require day to day involvement in politics in many different forms. This is particularly the case for the officials who work in No 10 and the Whips' Office; for all the officials who work directly with ministers, especially their principal private secretaries; and for officials in particular departments, such as the officials in the Northern Ireland Office who negotiated with the political parties in the run up to the Belfast and St Andrew's Agreements. Part of the fascination of working in Whitehall is involvement in the political process, and part of the unique skill and experience of civil servants lies in their understanding of how Parliament and politics work.

One of the justifications for introducing special advisers into Whitehall is that they can perform the more political tasks, so freeing the civil service from any involvement in the political side, and from any taint of politicisation.²⁵ But there is a risk for the civil service of gradual de-skilling, of losing their close involvement in politics and their understanding of the political process. Civil servants in the past have not been so fearful of getting involved in the political side of their ministers' work. Robin Butler was working beside Mrs Thatcher at the Conservative Party conference in Brighton when it was bombed by the IRA;²⁶ and other principal private secretaries have found that serving their ministers efficiently inevitably brings them into contact with the party political side. That doesn't necessarily involve politicisation. The distinction was neatly put by one of our interviewees: 'Effective civil servants, particularly those who work close to the minister, have to be very politically attuned. That doesn't mean to say they have to be politically aligned'.

The fear of 'politicisation' lies in assuming that civil servants who so assiduously serve their ministers must also share their political beliefs. But those same officials go on to serve other ministers from other parties. Sir Robin Butler was a private secretary to Edward Heath and Harold Wilson; Principal Private Secretary to Margaret Thatcher; and went on to become Cabinet Secretary to John Major and then Tony Blair. The acid test of civil service

²⁵ The Special Advisers Code of Conduct opens 'The employment of special advisers adds a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the political impartiality of the Civil Service ... Special Advisers are employed to help Ministers where the work of Government and the Governing Party overlap and where it would be inappropriate for permanent civil servants to become involved' (paras 1 and 2).

²⁶ Illustrating the commitment of senior civil servants. 'By about 2.40am the [conference] speech was finished. Meanwhile, I got on with some Government business. At 2.50am Robin Butler asked me to look at one last official paper - it was about the Liverpool Garden Festival... At 2.54am a loud thud shook the room'. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (1993) p 379.

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impartiality is, would this behaviour impair an official's ability to serve ministers of a different party with equal commitment and equal impartiality?

The problem is one of perception: it is widely assumed, by politicians and by civil servants, that an individual cannot change behaviour when assuming different roles. But in other professions that happens all the time. Barristers can be defence counsel one day, and prosecuting the next, with different obligations in each role. So in the public service it should be possible for people to switch careers or change roles, so long as they assume the obligations that go with the new role. This does happen, and people have even switched from being a civil servant to being a special adviser, or *vice versa*. In the course of our research we have come across a dozen special advisers – both Conservative and Labour - who subsequently became civil servants.²⁷ But it is uncommon; and there is a worry about the negative impact on perceptions of civil service impartiality if it became more common. With more outsiders brought in to strengthen ministerial offices, such moves should be encouraged, not discouraged. It enables special advisers to go on working on government policy if that is what they are good at; and it brings additional talent into Whitehall.

Birth of a new Profession

Running through all the chapters in this book is the argument that special advisers matter. They matter for positive not negative reasons. Officials and ministers both recognise they are now indispensable to the way Whitehall works. But they are still treated as a transient phenomenon. The individuals may move on, but special advisers as a profession are here to stay. This final section starts by thinking through the consequences of treating them as a professional cadre which needs greater recognition and support, because of the importance of their potential contribution. It discusses the need for greater ownership of special advisers during their time in Whitehall, and the possibilities for greater career progression while still working as special advisers. It then sets out a summary of all our recommendations, before closing by linking the effectiveness of special advisers to wider debates about ministerial effectiveness.

Special advisers are a profession with high turnover. Half of all special advisers stay in Whitehall for three years or less. The role is very precarious. They have little job security, they work very long hours, and the job is a blind alley in terms of professional development, with little training and no promotion. That is one of the reasons for high turnover: with no possibilities for promotion, if special advisers want to progress in their careers they have to leave.

One way of improving the possibilities for promotion, and support and supervision for special advisers, would be to allow a bit more progression in this mini profession. It is a fiction that all special advisers are equal. Of the list published in October 2013, 23 special

²⁷ Examples include Peter Levene, Howell James, Michael Barber, Justin Russell, Will Cavendish.

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advisers – one quarter – were in the higher pay bands (PB3 and PB4), earning salaries between £70k and £140k.²⁸ They are senior in terms of pay, but only two – the Chiefs of Staff – are formally senior in terms of responsibilities. As we suggested in chapter 9, more could be done by other senior special advisers in looking after their fellow special advisers: in support and supervision, mentoring, training and appraisal. Having a recognised cadre of senior special advisers would help develop a bit more career progression for those willing to assume greater responsibilities. This need not undermine the flexibility and fluidity which is the great strength of special advisers: it would be for individual special advisers to decide if they wanted to progress in this way, with the support of the Deputy Chief of Staff (see below).

It would also help in developing a mini career structure if working at the centre was regarded as a step up from working as a special adviser in a Whitehall department. That might help to reduce complaints about ‘teenyboppers in No 10’ who don’t understand the realities of life in front line departments. It would also help to recognise the greater seniority of most special advisers working in the centre, where three quarters of the higher paid special advisers are concentrated. Such a career progression will always be hard for an incoming government, unless it can recruit a lot of former special advisers. It started to happen under Blair, where from 2001 to 2007 a dozen advisers had worked in departments and at the centre (see Appendix 2 Figure 1). They also had longer service, with an average tenure of six years.

The brief tenure of most special advisers may also be one of the reasons why no one takes care of them or ‘owns’ them. The civil service tend not to see them as theirs, and indeed positively avoid treading on what they see as ministers' political territory. Ministers are formally responsible, but as we noted in chapter 7, when under pressure they find it difficult to exercise that responsibility. The political parties don't see them as theirs either, because they are working in the civil service, paid out of public funds and seldom seen in party headquarters. Special advisers by their nature fall between the two worlds, but they shouldn't be allowed to fall down the gap between the two.

It is forty years since special advisers started working as an identifiable cadre in Whitehall. But in terms of support arrangements, special advisers are still treated as a temporary and transient phenomenon. The occasional scandals have exposed the fact that no one is willing to take responsibility when things go wrong. But more serious is the lack of anyone who takes positive responsibility to ensure that things go right, in terms of special advisers' recruitment, careers and professional development. We made recommendations in this and the previous chapter for some basic improvements in all three areas. Improvements

²⁸ Salaries generally reflect pay levels before becoming a special adviser, not higher levels of responsibility (for example, special advisers coming from the private sector will expect higher salaries than those coming from the voluntary sector).

are starting to happen. For convenience our recommendations are summarised in the box below.

Figure 10.1 Recognising Special Advisers as a new Profession

Greater professionalism

Special Advisers are a mini profession. They would be more effective if they were more professionally managed in terms of their selection, support and supervision, and development of their professional skills.

Recruitment

Special Adviser posts should be more open to competition. Ministers should remain free to choose whom they recruit; but they should be encouraged to interview more than one candidate. If they want to advertise, they should be allowed to do so, and supported by the civil service (in government) and by the party (in opposition) in short listing and interviewing.

All Special Adviser posts should have a job description setting out the main duties, and person specification identifying the skills and experience required.

The Chief of Staff should use the PM's veto to raise the quality threshold, and require details of the job description, person specification and degree of competition for each post before approving an appointment.

The Chief of Staff could maintain a register of people who are interested in being Special Advisers, and who had undergone an initial sift and interview to ensure their suitability.

Support and Supervision

Every new Special Adviser should be paired with a more experienced current or former Special Adviser as their mentor, to whom they could turn for help and advice.

There should be a Deputy Chief of Staff charged with the support, supervision and appraisal of all Special Advisers. In a coalition, there would be a Deputy Chief of Staff for each coalition party.

The Deputy Chief of Staff could nominate senior Special Advisers to conduct appraisals on their behalf.

Induction and Training

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Induction training should be mandatory for all new Special Advisers. It should cover how Whitehall works; how Special Advisers work within that structure; the Codes of Conduct; their obligations as temporary civil servants; where to seek advice and support. Within departments there needs to be separate induction training about the work of the Department.

Cabinet Office should make additional modular training available, where possible on line, so that Special Advisers recruited subsequently could access it as and when they want.

Transparency

Cabinet Office have a statutory duty to publish an annual report about the numbers and cost of Special Advisers. There is no need to publish individual salaries; pay bands would suffice.

Departments should publish on their websites advisers' names and brief descriptions of their functions. Ministers should notify the relevant Select Committee whenever a new Special Adviser is appointed, with their job description and qualifications. That would also help to ensure a minimum quality threshold.

The potential of this new profession

This book has been about the effectiveness of special advisers; but behind every page has been the wider debate about the effectiveness of ministers. Ministers (and Prime Ministers) often leave office wishing that they had made more of a difference. Some blame themselves; others lack of support from their colleagues, or from Parliament; others the inertia of the Whitehall machine. Many different solutions are propounded, including endless proposals for civil service reform. These range from the coalition government's specific proposals in their Civil Service Reform Plan, including extended ministerial offices, to wider proposals for a Parliamentary Commission or Royal Commission on the Future of the Civil Service.²⁹

Civil service reform is always on the agenda, but notoriously difficult, because of its size and complexity, all the different interests involved, and lack of agreement about how 'responsive' the civil service can be before it loses its core values of objectivity and

²⁹ The proposal for a Parliamentary Commission came from the Public Administration Select Committee (chair Bernard Jenkin MP): *Truth to Power – How Civil Service Reform can Succeed*, September 2013. Lord Browne, the government's lead non-executive director, suggested a Royal Commission: *Civil Service World Special Report – Civil Service Accountability* 2 December 2013.

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impartiality.³⁰ In this wider and increasingly polarised debate one smaller scale solution never considered is improving the quality and effectiveness of special advisers. It is only a partial solution; but unlike these wider reforms, it is a solution directly within the control of ministers, individually and collectively.

For ministers to be more effective, one of the simplest things that they could do is to recruit better quality special advisers. It is no coincidence that most of the special advisers we listed at the beginning of this chapter as having made a difference were high quality policy experts or people with a lot of experience. But the haphazard recruitment processes disclosed in chapter 9 suggest that individual ministers cannot always be relied upon to make good choices. If there is to be a sustained, across-the-board improvement, the Prime Minister, supported by his Chief of Staff, will need to give a lead in raising the overall quality threshold.

Through his power of approval and veto the PM could help to raise the overall quality standard. We do not pretend it is easy. Prime Ministers do not always have sufficient authority with their Cabinet colleagues to intervene in this way. But if they want to try to ensure greater ministerial effectiveness, then setting about improving the effectiveness of their special advisers is a very good place to start.

³⁰ The Civil Service Commission opposed Francis Maude's proposals to allow ministers greater choice in selecting their Permanent Secretary. Institute for Government: *Permanent Secretary Appointments and the Role of Ministers*, December 2012.