

In Defence of Special Advisers: Lessons from Personal Experience

Nick Hillman



***Inside*OUT**

*A series of personal perspectives
on government effectiveness*

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*This essay is dedicated to my children, Ben and Amity,
who were born while I was a special adviser.
I promise to repay the bedtime stories I missed.*

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Foreword

Nick Hillman's *InsideOUT* provides the most valuable recent insight into the work of that most misunderstood Whitehall species – the special adviser.

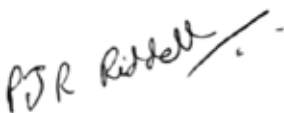
The value lies, first, in being up-to-date when much of the discussion of special advisers goes back to the scandals and battles of the Blair/Brown years; and, second, in being written from the perspective of a department rather than the centre. That is crucial in understanding how advisers operate, particularly in the age of coalition, and how they contribute to the work of their ministers, as opposed to the Prime Minister.

You would expect that someone who worked for David Willetts to operate in a less highly charged world than in some of the familiar stab-and-tell accounts of ex-advisers. That is an advantage and allows Hillman to concentrate on the key issues, not just, persuasively, in defence of spads but also in suggesting how the system can be improved.

Without repeating all his arguments, I would like to discuss one issue which he highlights – the lack of proper preparation and training. Working in Parliament as chief of staff to a member of the Shadow Cabinet, as Hillman did, can, as he says, feel more like a micro-business than part of a great ship of state. The roles differ from being in opposition, 'a vital party of the engine that keeps the politician on the road', to being, in government 'one small cog in a much bigger and more important engine that keeps the whole country chugging along'. He rightly urges training en masse when there is a change of government.

The Institute for Government did, he notes, hold some useful training sessions for new advisers of both coalition parties after the election in 2010 but these were not nearly enough to fill in the huge gaps in knowledge of incoming advisers about how the Civil Service works. There are two problems. First, before an election, senior leaders in opposition are reluctant to identify the advisers who may come into office with them, yet the pre-election period is when such training could be most useful and practicable. When the Institute offered to provide such help to Conservative advisers in 2009 – in addition to the work we were already doing with shadow ministers – the answer was a firm 'no'. Second, after an election, the hectic pressures of office all too easily crowd out time in diaries for advisers to attend induction sessions. Learning on the job takes over. It is in the interest of ministers and civil servants, as well as advisers, for this weakness to be addressed.

There are other questions on which Hillman touches – to whom are advisers accountable? In most cases, it is the minister who appoints them. But what happens when there are disputes over advisers' conduct or the dividing lines with the Civil Service. Permanent secretaries feel reluctant or unable to challenge a minister. This has become a more pressing question with the proposals for Extended Ministerial Offices and the appointment of non-political advisers on short-term contracts. Special advisers have proved to be an important addition to the range of advice available to senior ministers – though junior ministers tend to be left out of the discussion even though they are far numerous than in other countries. There needs to be a wider debate about the balance between the political and civil service roles.



The Rt Hon Peter Riddell
Director, Institute for Government

About the author

Nick Hillman is the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute. He was Special Adviser to David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science, from May 2010 to December 2013 and worked in Parliament beforehand. He stood in the 2010 general election in Cambridge. Previously, he was a History teacher and worked at the Association of British Insurers. He has written for a range of think-tanks and journals, including *History of Education* and *Contemporary British History*.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to David Willetts for giving me the opportunity to work for him, and to David Cameron and Vince Cable for letting me do so. For a special adviser to be effective, they need a strong bond of trust with their minister, which I enjoyed. You also need good relations with your fellow spads and I count all four special advisers with whom I worked closely – Emily Walch, Katie Waring, James Wild and Giles Wilkes – as good friends.

Special advisers have their own private secretaries and those who worked for me – Peter Batten, Jude de Souza, Ian Allison, Amrit Bangard, Fiona Morrison and Pete Bakewell – were excellent. Neelam Patel, who officially worked for my minister, went out of her way to help me.

I am also grateful to Peter Hennessy, who originally suggested that I should write about the special adviser role from the perspective of having done it, and to Andrew Blick, author of *People Who Live in the Dark: The History of the Special Adviser in British Politics* (2004), for his helpful comments.

Finally, I thank the Institute for Government for giving me such a good opportunity to contribute to the debate on how special advisers might be made more effective.

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1. Introduction

I am fortunate to have spent more than three-and-a-half years as a special adviser in the first Coalition Government for 65 years. What follows is an attempt to explain the job, based upon my experience in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. It tries to outline the life of a departmental special adviser, from appointment to exit, and to draw some specific lessons on how the role might be made more effective.

Special advisers, commonly known as 'spads', are temporary civil servants who report to an individual minister. Many work in Number 10 and the Deputy Prime Minister's Office and others are in Whitehall departments. In October 2013, they were 98 out of a total 447,000 civil servants.¹ The role is primarily defined by what it is not: special advisers are not subject to the general requirement for civil servants to be selected on merit via fair and open competition; neither are they subject to civil service requirements on impartiality and objectivity. They may not manage civil servants but they may and frequently do 'request officials to prepare and provide information and data, including internal analyses and papers'.²

Although the job has proved controversial, special advisers can strengthen democracy by supporting the government's mandate, contributing to policy formation and insulating the mainstream Civil Service from inappropriate political tasks.

Sober analyses of a special adviser's day-to-day role can leave an incomplete impression because they tend to downplay the single most important difference between regular civil servants and political ones: the bond of personal loyalty. Martin Stanley, the author of *How to be a Civil Servant* (2003), tells other civil servants they should 'give spads the clear impression that you believe that their minister walks on water. They will suspect that you are lying, but respect you for it'.³

No two special advisers have an identical experience and accounts of what they do tend to be rough approximations based on a variety of individuals. My own experience was different from the standard picture in two ways. First, the politician for whom I worked, David Willetts (Minister for Universities and Science), had one special adviser, whereas a secretary of state typically has one for media and another for policy. On paper I was a jack of all trades, although in practice I spent most time on policy work.

Secondly, for the first two years of the Coalition, I was the only Conservative special adviser working in a department headed by a Liberal Democrat (Vince Cable). This meant quite a bit of my time was absorbed on cross-party discussions in a way unknown to earlier special advisers. Once the Coalition ended the commitment to have fewer special advisers than the previous government, I became less anomalous. For example, Michael Fallon obtained his own special adviser and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills then had two Conservative special advisers along with the two Liberal Democrat ones.

Although this piece proposes ways to make special advisers more effective, it is not a whinge about the current system. Government is messy, its work is never completed and there are always new lessons to learn.

The overwhelming majority of special advisers act professionally and should not be tarred with the brush applied to those who err. As one former Labour special adviser put it:

You have not heard of most special advisers, and nor should you. They operate within the system. They have a pretty tightly defined role within the system and you would not know what they do.⁴

My respect for the permanent Civil Service grew during my time as a special adviser and, while many people condemn politicians as lazy and self-centred, I saw them up close behaving in exactly the opposite way. I hope it is not too Panglossian to say that anyone who finds criticisms of former colleagues in the pages that follow is misinterpreting me.

2. Appointment

Arrival

We approached the big black door of Number 10 Downing Street full of pride and a little trepidation. Someone pulled back the brass knocker and let it fall. Inside, the policeman opened it up and said, 'Yes?'

'We're here for the special advisers' meeting.'

'Bin door.'

'Sorry?'

'Bin door. Go round the side and you'll find another door. Someone will let you in.'

We wandered around and found a rarely used and heavily secured door with an iron grille, knocked repeatedly and waited. Eventually, we were let in. Someone barked at us to write our names on sticky notes and put them on our phones, which we deposited on two rickety tables just inside the door. Climbing the backstairs, we received our first experience of the labyrinthine world that is Number 10 and found ourselves in one of the grander rooms. It was a brutally effective way to bring the new crop of special advisers down to earth.

According to empirical work by University College London's (UCL) Constitution Unit:

Special advisers are mostly male and highly educated, usually in the humanities or social sciences, and have a strongly political background. Most are appointed in their early thirties, stay in post for three years or less, serving just one minister.⁵

I had exactly this sort of background. I had previously worked in the Houses of Parliament, as the chief of staff to a member of the shadow cabinet. That is actually poorer preparation than might be supposed. The House of Commons often resembles 650 small businesses that occupy the same buildings. Each MP has a small number of staff, some of whom might be based outside London, and their offices can feel more like micro-businesses than part of a great ship of state.

The roles are different too. As chief of staff to a shadow minister, you are a vital part of the engine that keeps that politician on the road, completing research, dealing with the media and liaising with the party. As a special adviser, you are just one small cog in a much bigger and more important engine that keeps the whole country chugging along. Paradoxically, although your job is more important, government would roll on with little short-term disruption if all special advisers disappeared overnight. But the absence would come to be felt in time. Without special advisers, there would be a slight rebalancing towards the permanent Civil Service and away from democratically elected politicians.

It is not just the relative size of a government department compared to an MP's office that means people are often ill-prepared when they move from opposition to government. Even apparently similar tasks look and feel different. For example, in opposition your aim when dealing with the press is invariably to be interesting in order to ensure helpful (or perhaps any) media coverage; in government, your aim is sometimes to be boring in order to deter unhelpful or unnecessary coverage. You have to learn to say 'no'.

The workload is also completely different. For example, as a chief of staff to a member of the shadow cabinet, I did not do much work at weekends. As a special adviser, my weekends would be partly used up reading and commenting on a couple of inches of paperwork, dealing with a stream of incoming emails and completing other work on top, such as speaking to the press or reshaping a document. When Mark Davies, a Special Adviser to Jack Straw, joined the charitable sector, he found: 'There are some things I really like about the change. I've got to know my family again, which is great, and my weekends are no longer interrupted with phone calls from journalists.'⁶

The size of the hurdles faced by incoming special advisers depends on their background. The list below runs from those facing the lowest hurdles to those facing the highest:

- people who have been special advisers before, who know the role already
- people who have been officials before, who understand the Civil Service
- people who have worked for the same politician on the same policy area before
- people who have worked for the same politician but on a different policy area or for a different politician on the same policy area
- people who have never worked for the same politician or on the same policy area.

Coalition special advisers met regularly in the early months – and we were even allowed through the Number 10 front door eventually. These meetings were useful at the start of the administration, when all were finding their feet. But their value, both to those at the centre and to those stationed out in departments, reduced over time. One problem was that, as the number of special advisers grew, the meetings became very large, which made it hard for them to be conversational rather than didactic. On the other hand, some departments did not send a single special adviser along so there was not comprehensive coverage, which limited the amount of business that could be conducted on the fringes. There were also concerns about leaks. Meetings continue but mainly along party lines, with the Liberal Democrat special advisers gathering more regularly than the Conservative ones, who typically only get together formally two or three times a year before big events like local elections and party conference.

Assimilation

When there is a change of government and a wholesale change of special advisers, there is a temptation to recalibrate the relationship between them and other civil servants in favour of the latter. This was certainly true in 2010. In my department, senior officials warned us not to throw our weight around (as – or so they implied – our predecessors had) on pain of being stamped on. This was unnecessary. A new cadre of special advisers with next to no experience of government cannot take control of Whitehall even if they want to. Indeed, the effort put

into recalibrating the relationship was counter-productive as it reduced the confidence of the new advisers. It was notably short-lived: senior officials were soon complaining that we were not throwing our weight around Whitehall sufficiently on behalf of the department.

In 2002, Sir Richard Wilson, the Cabinet Secretary, explained the special adviser role in the following way:

Ministers should be able to have special advisers to act as their political eyes and ears, help the department understand the mind of the minister, work alongside officials on the minister's behalf and handle party-political aspects of government business. They can help protect the Civil Service against politicisation.⁷

On becoming a special adviser, I racked my brains for the A-Level Politics syllabus I had completed 20 years before to help me understand the government machine, including the different grades in the Civil Service. After a while, however, I realised that it is better to ignore the seniority of civil servants and instead seek out the best official you can find on any particular issue, irrespective of their grade. This can mean the most effective officials have yet another job to do, but it is more efficient.

Everyone who has heard of special advisers knows they get a bad rap. Tony Wright, a Labour MP and former Chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee, suggested in 2002 that special advisers were 'ranked somewhere alongside paedophiles in the lexicon of media opprobrium'.⁸ Such abuse is understandable perhaps, given the enforced departure of special advisers like Charlie Whelan, Jo Moore, Damian McBride, Andy Coulson and Adam Smith, as well as the divisiveness surrounding the most famous special adviser of all: Alastair Campbell.

Yet part of the reason for the problems that have occurred is the loose oversight of special advisers which ensures they are not fully embedded in any part of the system: they are immune from the managerialism of the mainstream Civil Service; exempted from the parliamentary duties of ministers; and unaccountable to party headquarters. That has advantages and disadvantages. Much of the time, it offers a liberating freedom that enables each special adviser to focus on their minister's priorities. But, at other times, it can mean 'spadville' is a lonely place that lacks mentors.

Absorption

Even though special advisers are civil servants too, there is plenty of evidence suggesting a disconnect between the mainstream Civil Service and the political advisers. Here are three examples from my experience.

- Despite having six different people work for me during my time as a special adviser, I had no point of contact with the department's human resources section because I was not their manager.
- Special advisers never appeared on our department's 'all staff' email list.
- When the department revamped the template for submissions to ministers, the section for special advisers' views was abolished without consulting us – making it harder for

officials to reflect our views, indicate where our opinions differed from those of the department or identify where Liberal Democrat and Conservative special advisers differed.

Being a class apart from regular officials reduces the amount of internal bureaucracy that comes across your desk but few jobs of similar seniority in large organisations have no line management responsibilities whatsoever. This is odd, even if it is necessary. One problem is that the lack of accountability runs both ways: some special advisers are very young, and the absence of formal feedback mechanisms is a gap that can get filled with problems. Adam Smith, Jeremy Hunt's former Special Adviser, famously became embroiled in News Corp's bid for BSkyB. According to the Chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee, Bernard Jenkin, he was 'a clearly well-intentioned person who had just misunderstood the boundaries that he was meant to observe, either through lack of his own experience or because he had not been properly inducted'.⁹

The turnover of regular officials is so rapid that special advisers can become a source of institutional memory. As a Number 10 special adviser and the instigator of the Blair Government's school reform programme, Andrew Adonis found he was 'virtually the only point of continuity in the entire [academy] programme, and I became more so with each passing year'. He went on:

*The notion that Britain has a 'permanent' and 'expert' Civil Service is largely a misnomer. Most career civil servants change jobs every year or two, unrelated to the needs of the state. ... Just as an official was getting on top of an individual project or policy issue, they would suddenly disappear, often at a few weeks' notice.*¹⁰

After three-and-a-half years as a special adviser, I found myself working alongside a fifth set of ministerial private secretaries, a third permanent secretary and a radically different set of officials.

As well as providing institutional memory, special advisers can contribute intelligence on the past in other ways. They often bring knowledge of a party's past policies to the job. According to the former Labour Minister, Tony McNulty, some 'know how their party has discussed their policy area over the last thirty years with all the insight of the old Sovietologist who could tell you who was going to be the next General Secretary of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]'. Special advisers can also inject broader historical awareness into policymaking, which is sometimes lacking in the mainstream Civil Service. For instance, David Willetts was always keen to learn the lessons of history and I contributed to his pamphlet marking the 50th anniversary of the Robbins report on higher education, which was a catalyst for ending recruitment controls on universities.

It is sometimes suggested that a special adviser position should be subject to open competition. In 2001, the Public Administration Select Committee said, 'We recommend that special adviser posts should be publicly advertised and the minister given the final choice between suitably qualified candidates'.¹¹ There is a strong theoretical case for this, not least as a way to broaden the background of those in the role. But it would be a very

time-consuming process after a change of government or a big reshuffle. Moreover, special advisers spend much of their time second-guessing their minister and it is easier to do that if you already have a working relationship with the relevant politician than if you are an *ingénue*. That is why special advisers recruited from outside government mid-term often find it harder than those who have glided from opposition to government alongside their boss.

Open recruitment could sometimes work, especially for a patient minister willing to let their new appointee learn the ropes, and a process should perhaps be put in place to make this a clearer option for a minister looking for a new special adviser. But it is likely to cause as many problems as it solves and would not fundamentally alter what special advisers do.

3. Role

Wonks, spinners and bag carriers

Since it was first created, the special adviser role has grown incrementally at the behest of politicians in want of trusted allies who can range freely across their departments and who report to them alone.

The first episode of *Yes, Minister* covers an attempt by regular civil servants to put Jim Hacker's special adviser, Frank Weisel, in an office far away from Whitehall and to limit the papers that he could see. Early special advisers did face these sorts of obstacles.¹²

But, today, senior officials generally recognise that working with special advisers can facilitate dealings with their ministers. I found some junior officials resent the extra layer between them and their minister and sometimes attempt to circumvent it. Yet, in general, the machinery of government has proved as flexible in accommodating special advisers as it has to other changing circumstances.

The special adviser position is different in practice to theory. For instance, the 12 special adviser roles listed in the *Code of Conduct* give an incomplete flavour of the job.

1. Reviewing papers going to the minister
2. 'Devilling' for the minister
3. Preparing speculative policy papers
4. Contributing to policy planning
5. Liaising with the party
6. Helping to brief party MPs and officials
7. Liaising with outside interest groups
8. Speechwriting and related research
9. Representing the views of their minister to the media
10. Providing expert advice as a specialist
11. Attending party functions
12. Taking part in policy reviews organised by the party.¹³

Even after being a special adviser, I still haven't the foggiest what "devilling" is, although there are three more important limitations of the list.

- In their full form, rather than the abridged form provided here, all but one of the dozen roles refers explicitly to party politics. While special advisers will have regard to their minister's political party, this does not govern every hour of their day in the way that is often supposed. (On joining the department, I floated the idea of sitting alongside the two Liberal Democrat special advisers. It wasn't an absurd thought as so much of a special adviser's work is departmental rather than party political.)

- It is a very personal role, with the specific demands of the minister to whom the special adviser reports determining day-to-day activities, so no list can capture each special adviser's tasks.
- There are three types of special adviser, with different roles: policy wonks; spinners; and bag carriers. Although the second two have become more prominent in relation to the first over time, all three roles were evident even when Harold Wilson introduced special advisers in the mid-1960s: Andrew Blick has categorised the original special advisers as 'the policy expert', 'the presentational aide' and 'the political counsellor'.¹⁴

Policy wonks focus on ensuring the government is delivering workable initiatives that do not embarrass their minister because they are impossible to implement successfully or out of tune with the government's overall mission. However, as Sir George Young, then the Leader of the House of Commons, reminded MPs in 2011, ultimately 'It is ministers who make policy, not special advisers'.¹⁵ Spinners focus on getting helpful press coverage for their minister and attempting to neutralise unhelpful coverage. They are more likely than policy wonks to become the focus of media attention themselves, at which point their value can dissipate. Bag carriers tend to be concentrated in the centre of government, such as in Number 10 and the Treasury, and play a variety of roles that affect their ministers' standing, including organising gaffe-free ministerial visits and liaising with the wider party inside and outside Parliament.

All of these roles are equally important and, in reality, all special advisers will find themselves fulfilling all three to some degree. For example, although I focused primarily on policy, I worked closely with our press officers, wrote the odd article to go out in my minister's name and gave background briefings to education correspondents. Despite such blurred lines, it is nonetheless possible to assign nearly all special advisers to one of the three categories.

On becoming a special adviser, I asked one senior official with experience inside and outside Whitehall for tips on how I should approach the job. The list of guidance, which proved useful, included the following points.

1. Explain your role. Is your job to: provide expert advice; make the government machine work; act as a foot soldier of Number 10; or operate as a media manager?
2. Civil servants will want to use your influence over ministers and other parts of Whitehall. That can work to your advantage.
3. Never accept the first set of data.
4. If an official gives you a new proposal within a day, be aware that it was probably offered to the previous administration.
5. Look out for own goals – one bit of Whitehall undermining another.
6. Make sure you know what the department is up to.
7. Do make friends with Treasury spads. They normally end up ruling.
8. Determine on day one what your minister's legacy is. Do you want them to be known for creating free school meals or taking them away?
9. Cultivate a set of sector friends who can let you know what is happening.
10. Do not underestimate the Lords. They get your legislation through.

Greasing the wheels

Joined-up government is very hard to achieve but special advisers are an important lubricant that can get the cogs meshing again when they have become stuck, perhaps because other layers of government (such as ministerial private offices) have been unable to resolve a problem. This sometimes means special advisers have to lobby other departments on issues they know little about; on my penultimate day, I had conversations with other departments about quantum technologies, dementia and dental schools but knew little about any of them. That is not a problem if you are simply trying to clear a logjam but officials do sometimes come to special advisers asking them to resolve a cross-government issue when it is too late to do so, perhaps because a decision has already been made at ministerial level in another department.

Special advisers serve as a lubricant within their own department too, for example by getting information to their minister which might otherwise not make it. This might be articles or commentary that officials are likely to miss, or think-tank and party political material. While in the Civil Service, I learnt the term 'non-paper': a submission that has been blocked from reaching a minister during the regular civil service clearance process. I made sure my Minister saw non-papers that included interesting ideas.

A lot of focus has been put on whether special advisers are accountable to their ministers or to the government as a whole. On coming to office, the Coalition amended the *Code of Conduct for Special Advisers* to make it clear they 'are appointed to serve the government as a whole and not just their appointing minister'.¹⁶ Whenever the Prime Minister speaks to special advisers, he reminds them of this duty to the whole government.

But what the discussion on ministers versus government misses is that, as a departmental special adviser, you are pulled in three ways – not two. On every issue, you have to consider the needs of your minister, the needs of your department and the needs of the government as a whole. Often these forces are aligned. Yet when they are not, you have to make a careful decision which one to press for.

Wise departmental special advisers will generally go with their minister because:

- it is he or she to whom they owe their post and with whom they presumably think alike
- special advisers at Number 10 may not have such good information and may be persuadable
- entrenched positions within the Civil Service do occasionally need to be overcome.

Nonetheless, an effective special adviser will tell their minister when they think they are at risk of displaying poor judgement.

The private secretaries to the special advisers within my department were asked to explain the special adviser role to other civil servants. They came up with the following list of people special advisers have to try and satisfy.

1. The Prime Minister
2. The Deputy Prime Minister

3. Their own minister
4. Their own private secretaries
5. Other ministers' private offices
6. Policy officials
7. Press officers
8. Other special advisers
9. Members of Parliament
10. Their minister's political party
11. The media
12. External stakeholders

One reason why special advisers have to push their ministerial priorities so hard is that the structure, knowledge and whims of departments may not reflect them. In our case, despite my Minister's firm commitment to nurturing a more diverse higher education sector, alternative higher education providers were largely off the departmental radar to begin with. The regulatory system for them needed to be reconsidered but, when I invited officials to attend my meetings with alternative providers, I was initially told that there were insufficient resources to spare.

Special advisers need to be patient because apparent barriers in the way of certain policies can suddenly and unexpectedly vaporise. For example, I was repeatedly told there were huge obstacles to making the rich datasets for people choosing higher education courses appear in a mobile-friendly format for use on smart phones. I later discovered that this was about to be announced by an arms-length body. I rapidly ensured my minister was associated with an idea we had been pushing internally for over a year. Staff turnover or departmental restructuring can sometimes offer new opportunities for pushing an interesting idea that has floundered to date.

4. Tasks

One of the joys of being a special adviser is the sheer variety of things you are asked to do. It can be a stressful job but, as you rarely know precisely what the next day holds, you need to avoid becoming stressed out by potential eventualities. It is difficult to describe a standard day but, in addition to commenting on written submissions from officials to ministers, the working week typically involves:

- accompanying your minister to high-level meetings
- planning the future with the press office
- meeting policy officials to help them shape a new paper or project
- helping with a forthcoming speech or drafting a newspaper article
- preparing material for a parliamentary event
- visiting Number 10 to meet with your counterparts in the Policy Unit
- talking to other special advisers to resolve inter-departmental blockages
- working with party headquarters to craft lines-to-take
- suggesting ideas to the ministerial visits team
- going to events held by key stakeholder groups.

With hindsight, I probably chose to attend too many meetings alongside my minister, as it can be an effective tactic to split forces. To the frustration of my office, I also agreed perhaps too readily to meetings with outside organisations on the periphery of – or beyond – the policy area in which I worked, although I usually ensured these occurred on Fridays when ministers tended to be away. (I never practised the advice of the former Labour special adviser who recommended automatically refusing all meeting requests from outside bodies until the organisation had asked at least three times.)

As a policy adviser within a department, three important aspects of the job I did are not fully covered in the existing literature on special advisers, which often focuses on special advisers at the centre of government. These are: acting as the minister's eyes and ears; serving as a bridge between Westminster and Whitehall; and providing all-round support during the party conference.

Eyes and ears

A minister may typically be out of the office for two full days a week, one in their constituency and one on a visit around the country, with other time out of the office attending Cabinet or inter-ministerial committees, making speeches or conducting parliamentary business. Some ministers will travel abroad regularly, perhaps once or twice a month.

During these absences, special advisers become the voice, as well as the eyes and ears, of their minister at many internal government meetings. While ministers can stay in touch when away, they tend to have full schedules and might even be in a different time zone or there can be security issues that hinder communication. In such periods, special advisers

can also become the main (rather than the initial) point of call for clearing parliamentary questions, ministerial correspondence and comments for the press.

This eyes-and-ears role means special advisers are more sedentary than the politicians they work for. For example, I only visited around half a dozen higher education institutions each year, out of the hundreds that exist. Some of my minister's responsibilities were devolved, but I never visited Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Special advisers are meant to be a source of information but, over time, a gap in knowledge on live issues can open up between ministers, who are on the road visiting people every week, and special advisers back at their desks. This would matter less if other officials left Whitehall more often than they typically do. The deskbound nature of the job is a particular issue where a minister has only one special adviser – where there are two or more, they can split forces.

One important function for a regular departmental special adviser is to remain close to the special advisers in Number 10 and the Deputy Prime Minister's Office. A departmental special adviser needs to warn them of looming issues, explain their department's positions and then report back on the priorities of those at the centre of government. One mistake I made was not keeping Number 10 sufficiently well informed on the appointment of a new head for the Office for Fair Access. A political row ensued.

It is also particularly important for special advisers in spending departments to have good working relations with their Treasury counterparts. A department's success depends on two things: having sufficient resources and implementing successful policies. The Treasury is key to both, as it determines departmental spending and, in practice, can wield a veto over major policy shifts. Moreover, there are at least two fiscal events each year – the Budget and the Autumn Statement – on which deep conversations occur between the other government departments and the Treasury. Some years have a spending review as well. A wise special adviser will work strategically with their minister and department to secure the best possible outcomes. During the run-up to spending reviews, special advisers in our department would meet each Friday afternoon with officials from the spending and strategy teams to pool intelligence and plan the week ahead. The final details of fiscal events are typically nailed down only a few hours before they are published, so it is vital to keep discussions with the Treasury going for as long as possible.

One complexity under the Coalition is that there are both Conservative and Liberal Democrat special advisers in the Treasury, reporting to the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary respectively. This gives a relative advantage to those parts of the government, like the Department for Business and Innovation and Skills, that also have special advisers from both halves of the Coalition because they can man-mark their opposite numbers in the Treasury.

Although it does not on its own guarantee success, a combined approach to the Treasury by Number 10 and a spending department can also prove formidable. This is partly because, under the Coalition, there has been a desire to avoid the sort of splits between Number 10 and the Treasury that characterised Tony Blair's premiership. There is less temptation within departments to play Number 10 and the Treasury off against one another, which can sap

energy and make the government look divided. The trade-off is that less intra-government debate can also act as a force in favour of the status quo, which is already a perpetual risk within a coalition environment.

Individual special advisers within Number 10 with a background working in a government department, such as Rohan Silva, have tended to have the best record of getting things done. They know which buttons to press within departments, find it easier to discern when something is unachievable and know how to lobby the Treasury on a department's behalf. It is more challenging when political advisers at the centre do not have a background working within a government department, as they may not have a clear understanding of how departments work or what questions to ask.¹⁷ When that happens, it is doubly important for a departmental special adviser to remain in close contact with their opposite numbers in Downing Street.

Parliament

Another key task for departmental special advisers is liaising with Parliament. Outsiders often assume that there is a single Westminster village, encompassing parliamentarians and senior civil servants. That is not how it feels on the inside. Having spent six years working in an MP's office, I regularly over-estimated the knowledge of civil servants on how Parliament works. Indeed, there often seemed to be a Chinese wall between Westminster and Whitehall.

Some parliamentary business is even more important than usual in a coalition. For example, the monthly oral questions session in the House of Commons is currently the only regular occasion when all the ministers from both halves of the Coalition in a department perform together (with the exception of any peers). A show of unity is vital in displaying to the media and others that, whatever else may be happening, the ministerial team is working well together.

The value of oral questions was not widely understood in my department. One problem was a lack of understanding of the answers MPs hope for, such as references to their constituency that enable positive local media coverage. So, at my instigation, a regular briefing session for interested officials was instituted at which Parliamentary Private Secretaries, special advisers and ministerial private secretaries would explain the mechanics of oral questions, as well as its importance. A smooth parliamentary question session is forgotten within hours but a fraught one is perfect fodder for parliamentary sketchwriters and can leave a lasting impression of a struggling ministerial team.

Written questions matter too. They have a similar status to things that are said on the floor of the House of Commons or House of Lords and are recorded in *Hansard*. Special advisers often take as much care on their ministers' written answers as on their other statements to Parliament. At the start of the Coalition, officials still started many draft answers with the words 'Since 1997, we have...', even where the date was irrelevant to the question posed. This was simple to tackle but other problems remained, including an unfortunate tendency to interpret questions in an overly precise way that avoided the need to provide the information one suspected the MP was actually looking for. The caricature of a special adviser implies they amend things like written questions for partisan ends, erasing information that could be used against the government. In fact, I found it necessary to seek more detailed draft-

written answers for ministerial sign-off at least as often as I criticised them for including extraneous information – and irrespective of the questioner’s party.

It is not only special advisers who need to be embedded more firmly within the departmental machinery. Parliamentary private secretaries, who are meant to serve as a bridge between ministers and Parliament, are sometimes frustrated in their attempts to foster departmental business. The parliamentary private secretary role works best when it is treated as being within the ministerial tent looking out rather than outside the tent looking in. But when we emailed the parliamentary private secretaries the ‘Forward Look’ showing our ministers’ activities for the next two weeks, we were banned from doing so on grounds of confidentiality. Without this, it was hard for the parliamentary private secretaries to conduct their core business – such as talking to MPs about future ministerial visits to their areas. So in our department we instituted a weekly meeting between parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers, which took place at Parliament. The original purpose was to hand over a hard copy of the ‘Forward Look’ but it quickly became a more general catch-up meeting.

Given that Westminster and Whitehall are further apart in practice than in most people’s minds (and than they are geographically), there is a case for considering an exchange programme in which staff working for parliamentarians can obtain a greater understanding of the Civil Service through Whitehall placements and *vice versa*. There are already mechanisms for officials to spend time out of Whitehall working in the private sector; these could usefully be supplemented by mechanisms to let them spend time in Westminster.

Party conference

Much of what a special adviser does is political; little of it is party political. This is an important distinction, as it means a special adviser’s role is typically more similar to that of a career civil servant than is generally recognised. Popular representations of special advisers tend to imply they are deeply enmeshed in party politics, and the Damian McBride affair seems to support this.

Special advisers do interact with party headquarters in a way regular officials do not, and it is part of their job to work towards the re-election of their minister’s party. But the difference between work that is ‘political’ or ‘party political’ is widely understood in relation to ministers, who have limited time for party affairs on top of their departmental responsibilities. Moreover, the *Code of Conduct* explicitly bars special advisers from certain party political activities, such as talking to the media ‘on purely party political matters’, and from ‘national political activities’.¹⁸ That’s why, in practice, policy advisers – non-political temporary civil servants known as ‘pads’ – often end up being virtually indistinguishable from some spads. The additional things they are barred from doing are such a small part of a special adviser’s role that it makes little material difference. (Although, unlike special advisers, pads are generally limited to a two-year posting.)

There is one big exception to all this: the annual party conference, which for some special advisers is the busiest week of the year. In so far as attention has been paid to the role of a special adviser at party conference, it tends to have been focused on supporting their minister’s big platform speech. But there are also hundreds of fringe events: my minister typically spoke at around a dozen during each conference (around four a day). Special advisers

are also the main link back to the department for government business during a conference and they receive many demands for their own time – often from lobbying companies trying to put programmes together for their high-paying clients. For this week in particular, special advisers fulfil the role of private secretary, spin doctor and general factotum all in one.

Each year, I had to convince the official party machine that providing factual briefing for party conference purposes was an appropriate task, as outlined in the *Special Advisers' Code of Conduct* which states: 'Ministers can request and receive a factual brief explaining departmental policies or actions for the purposes of the party conference.'¹⁹ We set a progressively earlier deadline for the briefings, which were nearly always poor compared to officials' regular output. It seems the task is not taken as seriously as it could be.

5. Exit

Resignation

Special advisers are sometimes regarded as particularly susceptible to serious errors of judgement. But the reality is somewhat different, as suggested by the following exchange between Bernard Jenkin, the Chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee, and three former special advisers:

Bernard Jenkin: Special advisers do seem to be a bit accident-prone, don't they? Rather more accident-prone than ministers or civil servants?

Michael Jacobs: Really?

James O'Shaughnessy: Really?

Duncan Brack: I think more ministers have resigned than special advisers.

Michael Jacobs: Genuinely, I do not think that is true.²⁰

For many special advisers their position comes to a natural end when their minister leaves government (voluntarily or involuntarily). When ministers are reshuffled to a different post, the special adviser may or may not go with them: at the 2012 reshuffle, some ministers took at least one of their special advisers with them to their new posts.²¹

There have been instances of special advisers staying in their post for longer than their original sponsoring minister. But, although Jonathan Caine has served as special adviser to four different Conservative Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland during the 1990s and since 2010, this is probably even rarer than it used to be. Perhaps the personal bond between special adviser and minister is stronger than it used to be, or perhaps a shift towards generalist rather than specialist advisers has made them less tied to a specific policy area, or perhaps the relatively generous pay-off rules act as a deterrent.

Special advisers also leave for a variety of personal reasons – in my case, to take up a role leading a think-tank in the same policy area. When my exit was announced, one journalist suggested I was leaving because of reshuffle speculation. In fact, if I had believed the speculation I would have been financially better off staying in post with an eye on a generous redundancy payment worth six months' salary.

Restrictions

On exiting, special advisers 'are subject to the Rules on the Acceptance of Outside Appointments by Crown Servants (often known as the *Business Appointment Rules*)' that apply to other civil servants, as well as the Official Secrets Acts and the duty of confidentiality owed to the Crown.²² This means former special advisers 'are required' for two years after leaving office to secure 'prior approval to accept an outside appointment'.²³ They are also

typically subjected to a two-year lobbying ban, though for less senior roles this may be limited to one year. Special advisers see tens of thousands of pieces of paper and attend thousands of meetings each year, so there is a clear public interest in ensuring knowledge obtained in the role is not misused.

The current rules have emerged as part of an incremental process, reflecting public concern about special advisers and other senior civil servants who have walked into senior roles in the private sector. Important changes were made by Gordon Brown's government, when the *Civil Service Code* and the *Code of Conduct for Special Advisers* were given a statutory basis. The Coalition has acted too, by ensuring the *Business Appointment Rules* apply to all special advisers rather than only a small subset as in the past.

Despite such changes, there is an emerging consensus that the current rules are not fit for purpose. According to a BBC investigation, 'There is a growing body of opinion that a gentlemanly system of review and advice conceived 35 years ago may not fit modern needs.'²⁴

Legally, the independent Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOBA) cannot impose conditions, monitor compliance or punish transgressions. It can only proffer advice, as its name suggests. Former special advisers might be 'required' to get permission before accepting a new job, but there is no real force behind the requirement and some even believe it could be unlawful under restraint of trade rules (though any special adviser transgressing the terms risks exposure by the media).

Taken at face value, the standard advice has some bizarre effects. For example, a former special adviser chosen by voters to serve as a Member of Parliament within two years of leaving the Civil Service should in theory seek permission to take on the role from the permanent secretary of their old department. This could be someone they have never met, working for a government headed by a different political party. It is unclear if this has ever happened in practice.

Moreover, the rules on lobbying are imprecise:

*A lobbying ban means that the former civil servant or minister should not engage in communication with government (including ministers, special advisers and officials) with a view to influencing a government decision or policy in relation to their own interests, or the interests of the organisation by which they are employed or to which they are contracted.*²⁵

On leaving, I was concerned that I might be more constrained in speaking to the Government than to the Opposition, so I sought clarification on some specific points, including: whether I could meet ministers to explain research conducted by my new employer; share a platform with ministers; or meet policy advisers from Number 10. In reply, I was told, 'The Committee [ACOBA] cannot tailor its advice to the extent that it looks at each activity involved in a job and whether it does or does not constitute lobbying'. But the same email also begged

a question about the value of the whole process by stating, 'this lobbying ban should have little effect on you'.²⁶

As a result of the lack of clarity, some former special advisers effectively ignore the lobbying rules while others have been known to refuse all contact with government, including social contact with friends still on the inside. So there is a strong case for clarifying the legal status of the rules and explaining what behaviour they are designed to prevent, perhaps through publishing some detailed case studies.

Reform

Some have called for the exit rules to be made more restrictive, but not all of the arguments for a tougher system hold water. One recent report calling for a stricter system noted:

*Damage to the public interest can occur even if no actual distortion of public policy takes place, but simply if the appearance of impropriety exists. This can gravely undermine trust in government and make it more difficult for the government to perform its role. For this reason, it is of paramount importance not just that those wielding executive power are above reproach but also that they appear to be.*²⁷

There is a two-fold risk from tougher rules designed to tackle 'the appearance of impropriety' rather than actual impropriety. First, some people might be reluctant to take up public service roles if their motives are to be forever questioned afterwards. Second, it is not in the country's interest to bar people with a wealth of experience in certain sectors from applying their experience within the UK (but not competitor countries) simply because they have previously fulfilled a specific role.

There may indeed be a lack of understanding about where the risks lie, but the answer is to shine a spotlight on reality as part of a mature debate about good governance, not to impose additional and possibly unenforceable rules based on a known misunderstanding.

6. Lessons

There are plenty of ideas around for improving the contribution of special advisers. But many are so radical that they would, perhaps inadvertently, transform the job into something completely different.

For example, it has been suggested that special advisers should be paid by their political parties. Before the last election, a Liberal Democrat policy document promised: 'These are political jobs, and should, therefore, be funded by political parties. Special advisers will not be paid for by the taxpayer.'²⁸ There is a precedent for this, as at least one special adviser in Ted Heath's government was paid by the Conservative Party.²⁹ But the idea is long past its sell-by date.

- It would be hard to justify showing staff who were employed by political parties restricted government papers, and tougher to hold them to the *Code of Conduct*.
- It would not reflect special advisers' current balance of responsibilities, and it would provide a new incentive for regular officials to squeeze special advisers out of the decision-making process.
- It would encourage special advisers to be more party political rather than less.

It is also not clear why any of the usual donors to political parties – members, trades unions and businesses – should fund special advisers or whether it would be appropriate for them to do so.

Another idea is to create a new classification unique to special advisers. This was considered in some detail in the 1970s.³⁰ In 2000, Professor Anthony King told the Public Administration Select Committee:

At the top of government in this country we have always had either ministers or civil servants and, when special advisers first appeared on the scene, there seemed to be felt a need to assimilate them either to ministers or to civil servants. They clearly could not be assimilated to ministers because they were not ministers; they were therefore assimilated to civil servants and they were called 'temporary civil servants' and given civil service-like status although it was not the status of an ordinary career official. It does occur to me that your committee might at least want to consider whether there should not now be accepted as being in government three groups of people—ministers, career officials and special advisers...³¹

In 2001, the Committee itself floated the idea of a new fund from which both special advisers and the political researchers of opposition parties would be paid.³² This was aimed at fixing contemporary concerns, as New Labour were using special advisers for media management to a greater degree than in the past. Lord Butler of Brockwell, who was Cabinet Secretary

for Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair, recently proposed the same idea on the basis that: 'They [special advisers] should be treated as party staff like political advisers to opposition parties, which most of them have been.'³³

Such arguments are based on an accurate diagnosis of the hybrid position fulfilled by special advisers but prescribe the wrong medicine. It is difficult to see how any of the recent scandals concerning special advisers, such as those involving Jo Moore, Damian McBride and Adam Smith, would have been avoided if only they had been treated as a separate political class paid from a new political fund. None of the existing questions over special advisers' accountability would be answered by treating special advisers a little bit less like civil servants and a little bit more like parliamentary researchers.

The issues that the special adviser role flag up stem from the fact that it is insufficiently embedded within Whitehall. So the time has come to accept that temporary civil servant posts are not a temporary part of the system. Five evolutionary changes are proposed below to embed special advisers more securely into Whitehall and to improve how they work more generally.

It is not a complete list of all the reforms that could usefully be made, but the changes would go a long way to ensuring the special adviser role is as productive as possible in the interests of taxpayers and voters.

1. Introduce training

As the Public Administration Committee has been saying for many years, there is a strong case for training new special advisers *en masse*, especially when there is a change of government.³⁴ A new cadre of special advisers has next to no opportunities for engaging with their predecessors and, given the weight of departmental work, little opportunity to engage much with one another. Typically, they will have little understanding of the structure and hierarchy of the Civil Service or even of its day-to-day workings. I initially had no knowledge, for example, of the importance of Cabinet Committee 'write-arounds', when one minister writes to the other members of a Cabinet Committee seeking clearance for a policy.

In 2002, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Richard Wilson, said: 'I believe we can do more to help special advisers play their role effectively, for instance through proper induction training. We are now organising this.'³⁵ But little seems to have occurred. In 2010, the independent Institute for Government held some useful training sessions, which enabled those new special advisers who turned up to put questions to former special advisers. In addition, Number 10 organised for all special advisers to come together, including to hear from the Proprietary and Ethics Team in the Cabinet Office. But these events did little to fill in the huge gaps in knowledge of incoming special advisers and the evidence suggests that the new special advisers took time to find their feet.³⁶

If all special advisers had been whisked away to the School of Government at Sunningdale for the first weekend after entering government, the impact could have been profound. We would have broken the ice with one another – Conservative special advisers tended to know one another, as did Liberal Democrat special advisers, but each group did not know the other. It is much easier to conduct government business with another special adviser if you have

met them. We could have heard first-hand about administration from past special advisers, ministers and officials and been told what the rest of the Civil Service was expecting from us.

The School of Government no longer exists but the Institute for Government or a university department (such as the Constitution Unit of UCL) could be contracted to undertake induction for new special advisers on a change of government, a general election or a major reshuffle.

There is also a case for speaking to such bodies about the training needs of those special advisers who join in ones or twos during the period of a government as the cadre of special advisers expands or as natural turnover occurs, and even for annual in-service training for all special advisers to build camaraderie and learn from one another.

2. Provide a clearer salary scale

One stark difference between special advisers, who are temporary civil servants, and their permanent civil service colleagues is on pay. As the Government recently admitted, 'In many cases special advisers are paid less than their civil service equivalents.'³⁷ It is probably appropriate that new special advisers are typically paid less than regular civil servants working at a similar level. For example, it is difficult to hit the ground running as a new special adviser if you have no experience whatsoever of working inside government. But special advisers typically complete a few years in post and the same argument does not hold later on when they are much more productive yet on the same fixed salary.

Despite the pay freeze in the Civil Service, the take-home pay of permanent civil servants has increased since 2010 through increments and internal promotion and they have been eligible for bonuses, none of which is routinely on offer to special advisers. Being a special adviser is a fascinating job, but it is not clearly in the national interest to discourage long-term stints among temporary civil servants. Taxpayers can lose when experienced people who have built up considerable knowledge leave.

So, while there might be instances of special advisers having starting salaries that are lower than for people in similar roles, they should also receive a clearer expectation of a gradient in pay. The salary scale should reflect experience in the job as well as outside it. Any affordability questions could be tackled by looking again at special advisers' redundancy payments, which are generous for a job that no one expects to offer long-term security.

3. Clarify what special advisers may do beyond the edges of the role

There is a grey area at the edges of the special adviser role, which begs a number of questions. For example, may special advisers tweet? May they have a Facebook page? May they maintain blogs? I did all three, and was far from the only special adviser to use social media regularly. In addition, I wrote a number of journal and magazine articles and I spoke about my role to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, to the Whitehall and Industry Group and to *Politics Review* magazine.³⁸ I have no real idea if such things were permitted and worked on the basis that if I avoided negative press coverage, I should be okay: in general, special advisers can be useful or famous but it is not easy to be both. I was

also a platform speaker at events on the fringe of party conference, which may or may not go against the bar on special advisers speaking at party conferences.

Some special advisers have gone further. One Number 10 special adviser did a high-profile interview for the *Evening Standard*. In the absence of clear rules, it is easy to see how a controversial comment or article by a special adviser might lead to a general crackdown on such things. But that would be regrettable because we need special advisers with a hinterland of their own (and, given social media, few young people are anonymous).

Without the ability to publish in some form, it would be hard to recruit experts in a particular field or those with strong political ambitions of their own. But there are currently so few guidelines we are at risk of a scandal followed by a severe crackdown, which would leave an impoverished polity.

4. Avoid arbitrary number caps

There was a case for holding down the number of special advisers after the Coalition came to office in 2010, and the Coalition Programme promised to limit the number of special advisers.³⁹ The permanent Civil Service faced a large reduction in size, as well as a pay freeze, as part of the deficit reduction strategy and both parties in the Coalition had been elected with a commitment to tackle the costs of politics.

Despite this, the pressure for more special advisers was quickly felt, partly because two-party government brings extra work and more internal negotiations and partly because the Deputy Prime Minister understandably wanted more oversight, including over those departments with no Liberal Democrat ministers. Moreover, the Number 10 Policy Unit changed from being staffed by officials and reporting to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister jointly (an arrangement that did not seem to work very effectively) to being staffed by political appointees serving under a Conservative MP and reporting solely to the Conservative portion of the Coalition.

So even in an environment where there was a firm commitment to reduce the number of special advisers, it proved impossible to achieve: the political pain of breaking the commitment was deemed less than the benefits of having more of them. 'Depriving a cabinet minister of loyal, ideologically committed aides' can seem, according to *The Economist*, 'like forbidding a corporate executive to hire his own staff'.⁴⁰

Despite the increases, the UK continues to have relatively few special advisers, even compared to other Westminster systems such as Australia and Canada. Francis Maude's proposals for Extended Ministerial Offices with more political appointees could, in time, reduce this disparity, although there are other ways to do it too.

There could come a time when there is a case for a limit on the total number of special advisers, but we are some way from it. According to Professor Martin Smith, 'There needs to be a limit so that they are not creating a party civil service next to the traditional Civil Service. Again, we are a long way from that, so it would not be a concern for me.'⁴¹

When opposition parties, now or in the future, are tempted to commit to a reduction in the number of special advisers, they should recall the prosaic origins of the 40-year rule that fixes the usual number of special advisers at two for each secretary of state, which the Coalition has enshrined in the *Ministerial Code*. As the historian of special advisers, Andrew Blick, has recalled:

When Harold Wilson got back in, in 1974, and first expanded the use of special advisers, Tony Benn, who, as we know, Harold Wilson regarded as a left-wing troublemaker at the time, had already recruited two special advisers and wanted to recruit a third, who Harold Wilson did not like and did not want to be recruited as a special adviser. In order to block this, the two-per-minister rule was created and applied across the whole of government, so it did not just look like Harold Wilson was blocking one particular appointment by Tony Benn.⁴²

5. Establish a special adviser champion

It would be healthy for public debate on the quality of our democracy and administration if – formally or informally – the case for special advisers were made more often: ‘Special advisers do bring problems, but these have more to do with the opacity of their work than their sheer number.’⁴³ When special advisers are condemned as a breed rather than for individual indiscretions, there is no one on hand to explain their role in British politics. It is time to shine the spotlight on an important part of the way Britain is governed.

Having a special adviser champion, perhaps a former special adviser or a former minister (or someone who has been both), to put the case for the concept of a political adviser would fill this gap. This could be an informal and unpaid role but one that offered access to those at the top of Whitehall and Westminster, or it could be a more formal position with responsibility to make recommendations.

While there are plenty of ex-special advisers, the most prominent have an incentive to criticise the number, cost and role of special advisers (those such as Ed Miliband and David Cameron, at least while he was Leader of the Opposition). According to Michael Jacobs, a special adviser to Gordon Brown, there is a ‘vague air of distaste or impropriety’ over the position ‘which unfortunately some of the politicians have pandered to, by, for example, saying that we are going to have fewer of them, with no rationale for doing it’.⁴⁴ Opposition leaders make such criticisms even while doing all they can to secure support, including taxpayer-funded Short Money, for shadow ministers and while running a cadre of researchers as a shadow team of special advisers.

Conclusion

Taken together, the reforms proposed here would not tackle all the challenges of assimilating temporary civil servants in such a way that they can be properly digested and then regurgitated intact by the civil service machine when the time comes. But they would go a long way to grappling with the questions that have arisen as the special adviser role has grown and help ensure special advisers are rooted properly within the system.

One final complaint that needs addressing is the claim that a special adviser is nothing more than a minister's mini-me, who typically uses their position to roll into their own cushy career on the coat-tails of their patron. A number of former special advisers have become MPs – and ministers – themselves but often, it is alleged, mediocre ones lacking experience of 'a proper job'.

This argument lacks solid evidence, and there are strong counter-arguments.

- The concept of 'a proper job' is so slippery it disappears on close inspection.
- It is difficult to argue voters are wrong to elect some parliamentarians with first-hand knowledge of government.
- Many careers have become professionalised in recent decades.

If anything, politics maintains more room for outsiders than many other professions.

It is not just a coincidence that both major political parties have elected former Whitehall special advisers as their leaders, and the third has a former special adviser from Brussels. Many special advisers have no desire to enter Parliament, but being a special adviser is nonetheless a useful apprenticeship for ministerial office. Long may it remain so.

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³⁷ Public Administration Committee, *Special Advisers In The Thick Of It: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2012-13*, Parliament UK website, July 2013, p.5, retrieved 14 March 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpubadm/515/515.pdf>

³⁸ My articles included three pieces for peer-reviewed journals and a piece on songs about Margaret Thatcher for *Classic Pop*.

³⁹ Cabinet Office, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*, Gov.uk website, 2010, p.27, retrieved 10 March 2014 from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf

⁴⁰ The Economist, 'Loyalist forces: The government's promise to cull special advisers is worth breaking', *The Economist online*, July 2012, retrieved 10 March 2014 from <http://www.economist.com/node/21559378>

⁴¹ Public Administration Committee, *Oral Evidence*, 12 June 2012, Q69.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Q68.

⁴³ The Economist, 'Loyalist forces: The government's promise to cull special advisers is worth breaking', *The Economist online*, July 2012, retrieved 10 March 2014 from <http://www.economist.com/node/21559378>

⁴⁴ Public Administration Committee, *Oral Evidence*, 12 June 2012, Q46.

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2 Carlton Gardens
London
SW1Y 5AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

Email: enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

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