

## How to be a Government Adviser

### Tips for the new Labour intake

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A few years ago I wrote a post about my failings as a government adviser (in the Department for Education 2010-2013). (*Attached, below as an Annex to this paper.*) So it might seem a bit presumptuous to offer advice to the several hundred new ministerial advisers appointed since the election.

But, as that article hopefully showed, I've thought a lot since then about what I did wrong (and right) and observed dozens of others doing the job with varying degrees of success. I also interviewed many former advisers for my book. (*Failed State*)

Part of the problem with the role is that it is so unusual. Some prior professional experiences will be more useful than others, but nothing can prepare you for being thrust, usually at too young an age, into a position of extraordinary, but ambiguous, authority.

Unlike a minister you have no formal powers, either to make decisions or demands of civil servants. But depending on circumstances you usually have a great deal of de facto power to do these things, without much in the way of public accountability. As a result it's very easy to mess up.

Before getting into the advice it's worth setting out a bit of context for those who don't spend their time hanging around Westminster.

Every department in Whitehall has a team of between two and six advisers who work directly to the Secretary of State. Number 10 has around thirty political advisers working in teams that often include normal civil servants too.

Most advisers are SPADs (special advisers) who are political appointments and follow a different set of rules to other officials. They can, for instance, make party political statements, work with MPs on political campaigns, and attend party conferences.

Over the past few decades there has been growing use of a second group: senior policy advisers (I was one). They have to follow the standard civil service rules but are appointed outside normal processes, on request from ministers. If they stay longer than two years they have to go through a proper appointment process. It's a way of adding more support to ministers that's less transparent (and attackable) than hiring SPADs, whose salaries are published.

There are three main types of adviser role: comms, policy, and chief of staff.

Comms advisers are always SPADs because they have to be able to make party political arguments to journalists. This group spend their time trying to get good press for

announcements, high profile interviews for their boss, and shutting down negative stories. Of the three types it's the most straightforward conceptually, though exhausting as you're always on and have to be over everything that could turn into a story. A hack could call about anything at any time.

Policy advisers can be SPADs but are increasingly senior policy advisers. It is rarely necessary to be explicitly political in these jobs. It's a more variable role than the comms one as it can be done by fairly junior people who are really just monitoring what's going and making sure ministers are sighted on key decisions. But sometimes it will involve taking a major role in policy design, alongside civil servants.

I was more in the second category, as I did have an education policy background. I was also lucky in having a Secretary of State (Michael Gove) who wasn't at all directive, which meant I could choose what to work on. That would not have been true had I been working for, say, Dominic Raab.

Finally you have the "Chief of staff" types, who are somewhat rarer and are always SPADs. They won't always have that title but are identifiable as the most senior adviser and the one with the most access to the Secretary of State. They will typically lead a team of more junior advisers, co-ordinating across comms and policy. Not all cabinet ministers will employ this set-up: many don't have a "chief of staff". It usually happens when ministers have a long-term and close relationship with a particular adviser, who will follow them wherever they go.

The advice that follows covers the key relationships advisers need to build, and shortcuts to finding important information, as well as tips on how to deal with the press, No. 10 and the Treasury. It's mainly aimed at those doing policy jobs, because that's what I did, and it's the type of adviser I've tended to interact with since. But there will be read across to the media and chief of staff roles.

## **1. Prioritise ruthlessly**

Unless you have an unusually directive Secretary of State the adviser role is largely self-defining. Even the smallest departments produce a vast amount of paperwork, and at any time are developing dozens of policies, all of which you can choose to engage with.

Every member of the ministerial team will have many meetings and official engagements, all of which you can attend. Every lobbyist and "stakeholder" group will want to speak to you, or have you attend their receptions and conferences.

Being naturally curious I wanted to be involved in everything, and this made me much less effective. It meant I lost track of policy initiatives I cared about, which, as a result, ended up looking very different to the initial plan. All of the best advisers I've witnessed over the years focused on a few policies they really cared about, often, given the chaos of the last few years, keeping them afloat through repeated ministerial changes.

The really hard bit of doing this is tuning everything else out. If you're on social media (and who in Westminster isn't?) then you're constantly being made aware of attacks on

your department's policies, or your ministers. There are endless minor crises. Even if you're not the one expected to firefight there's always a sense that doing that is more important, urgent, even more interesting, than following up on a policy conversation. It takes a lot of discipline to leave this to others.

## **2. Get in with the private secretaries**

In every department all the ministers have a team of private secretaries, so do the most important officials and the advisers. These people are the nerve system of Whitehall. They're sharing information all the time both within the department and with their counterparts elsewhere. The principal private secretary to the secretary of state is the most important civil servant in any department, because they control access to the boss, oversee what goes into his or her red boxes, and manage all the other private secretaries.

You need to get on well with this person. Not just in the sense of being polite (if they take against you, then you're really going to be out of the loop) but becoming their ally. If they trust you then it will be much easier to follow what's going on, and also to have a say in the flow of information to ministers.

Also important, and often ignored because they tend to be much more junior, are the diary secretaries, who sit with the private secretaries. Ministers' diaries get rearranged constantly due to parliamentary votes and debates, as well as urgent issues arising. Getting on well with the diary secretaries can help you ensure meetings you want to happen don't get bumped, or get rearranged faster than others.

## **3. Spend time finding the best junior officials**

The civil service is very hierarchical. Secretaries of state will spend most time with officials at director level and above. Deputy directors will be brought in for meetings on their specific policy issue. If officials are below that level they won't get much access, and if they are in meetings will be expected to stay quiet unless specifically directed to answer a question.

But as with any large organisation, a lot of the most senior people are spending their time managing others, being in meetings, and reading over other peoples' work. The actual analysis is being done by more junior officials.

If, as an adviser, you're very focused on a particular policy area then it's a good idea to get to know the wider team working on it and figure out who the real experts are. This can give you a shortcut to the information you need rather than having to make requests that take days to make their way up and down the hierarchy.

Often there are experts in a topic who've been there for years but have never been promoted, either because they're happy where they are or (more often) are a bit eccentric or not presentable to ministers. These are very useful people, not just because they're knowledgeable, but also because they're not used to talking to

advisers/ministers and don't know what they're not supposed to tell you. (I can imagine all the senior officials reading this frowning at this point...)

#### **4. Talk to normal people in your sector**

I appreciate this sounds obvious but it's really difficult to do. By definition almost every "stakeholder" you meet as an adviser is not normal. They are either running an organisation/campaign or their performance has been extraordinary (or terrible) enough to justify a meeting at the department.

Going on ministerial visits won't help you much either as these are carefully stage managed. And, in any case, ministers will be taken only to the best schools / hospitals / job centres etc. To meet normal people you need to actively work at it, perhaps by organising your own, much lower key, visits. Or getting sector organisations to put together focus groups for you.

Here is an example of why this matters. When we were doing GCSE reform, which included getting rid of a lot of controlled assessments (coursework in a classroom) in favour of linear exams, we were attacked by most big education organisations for being horrible and Gradgrindian. It was only by talking to normal teachers, who were often under pressure to fiddle controlled assessment in subtle ways, that I realised we needed to stick to the plan. (We also had data analysis showing it wouldn't harm lower income students – data matters too).

#### **5. Be very careful about talking to journalists**

Obviously this one doesn't apply to comms SPADs: this is your job. But if you're not supposed to be talking to journalists then it's rarely a good idea to do so. Even if you don't intend to tell them anything it's easy to trip up.

Hacks, particularly lobby hacks, are expert at wheedling information out of people. Common tricks include confidently asserting something based on a hunch, or a titbit of info they picked up elsewhere, and getting you to confirm it. Or implying that if you were to know something it would signify how important and significant a player you were.

There are exceptions. I mainly talked to specialist journalists who were useful because they were also speaking to lots of other people in my sector. Over time you can figure out who you can trust and will share information rather than just exploit you for what you know.

But even here you need to be careful. Early on, when I was working in opposition, I had a long and open chat with a sector journalist about a particular policy, thinking I was safe because we'd agreed it was "off the record". I didn't realise that just meant they wouldn't quote me by name so the next day an article appeared with many quotes attributed to "an adviser to Gove". As I was the only adviser who knew about the issue I was immediately identifiable. Embarrassing.

Always be clear you're speaking "on background" (which means no quotes at all) and if you are willing to give an off the record quote, agree how it will be phrased (though I'd generally advise against this).

## **6. Know your department's budget inside out**

So much of what happens in Whitehall is about money. You want to do a new policy? You have to find the money for it. You want to expand something that's working well? Likewise.

It's much easier to do this if you know exactly what's being spent on everything – so make sure you've asked for the full budget. Not a high level table but the detail, including how funding formulas for distributing money to institutions are calculated. Senior officials are very good at stashing away little bits of extra cash in various places so they can magically make it appear when ministers (or the Treasury) demand it. Knowing where these hideaways are will help you make arguments for the policies you want.

It's also important for the spending review – which has already started and looks like it will be going on for much of the next year. Treasury officials will go through your budget line-by-line. If you want to argue against cuts you need to be confident in arguing what each line is for and why it's important, as well as being clear what can be sacrificed.

(Side point: when writing spending review submissions never say "we can't cut X it would be a disaster" say "we will happily cut X and it will mean this". Example: we were once asked to model an enormous cut to school spending and wrote back blithely saying that of course we could do this as long as pupils only attended school either in the morning or afternoon. Also be wary of Treasury "deals" to settle early. It's often worth waiting until the end game when No. 10 get involved and may help you negotiate compromises on politically sensitive cuts.)

## **7. Learn how to game the Grid**

If you've read my book you will know that I came to despise the Grid, as many advisers do. It is the mechanism by which Number 10 manage communications across Whitehall and is a problem for two reasons.

First you will be asked for announcements to fill the Grid. (Unless Labour take a different approach, which I fervently hope they do). Sometimes this will work fine because you'll have a worked up policy ready to go. But often you won't.

So it's a good idea to have a stash of "fake" policies that either already exist, have already been announced, or are meaningless but won't do any harm. This is necessary to avoid being rushed into coming up with a real policy that may do damage or cost money that you'd rather was spent elsewhere. (If you've ever wondered why the papers are full of these kinds of reannouncements and made-up nonsense, this is why).

The second, and arguably more tricky, problem is that it's increasingly hard to get clearance, even for small announcements, that you do need to make (usually because you need to get relevant information out to your sector in a timely manner). There are not many ways round this beyond having a good relationship with whoever manages the Grid. You can leak stuff of course but that needs to be done with great care (and only with the active support of your comms SPAD).

A better option is to tell a senior stakeholder meeting whatever it is that you're not allowed to say publicly and subtly make it clear that you're quite happy for them to leak it in a non-attributable way.

My final bit of advice is to start thinking, even quite early on, about what you want to do next. Adviser jobs can end very abruptly if your minister resigns or is moved to a department where you have no relevant policy knowledge.

Have a plan B in mind otherwise you risk end up drifting into a job you don't want to pay the rent. Unless you want to be an adviser for the rest of your career (some do but few manage that without burning out) it's best to get out on your own terms, to a job that really excites you.

END

## **ANNEX**

### Confessions of a former Government adviser

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AUG 06, 2022

These days I spend most of my time being critical of politicians and their advisers. It's easy to find things to criticise, especially when the Tory leadership candidates are dredging up an apparently endless series of terrible ideas.

But at the back of my mind there's always a voice reminding me how hard government jobs are. I know because I used to do one. From 2010-2013 I was a policy adviser to Michael Gove when he was Secretary of State for Education. This was a civil service role. I wasn't a political SPAD (special adviser) but I had worked with Michael's team before the election and he requested my appointment. I shared an office with the SPADs.

I much preferred being a civil servant as I wasn't then, and am not now, a member of any political party. Indeed I had, until 2007, been a member of the Labour party. Gove gets a lot of criticism but I've always thought the fact he was prepared to appoint someone to this role who he knew wasn't a Conservative reflects well on him. He was a good boss too: open to advice, and often listening to it, letting me range widely, work on what I wanted for the most part, and never raising his voice to me. He's much more right

wing than me on many issues but I enjoyed working with him. I wrote separately about my experiences working with Dom Cummings, who was a SPAD for most of the time I was there, but generally got on fine with him too.

Nevertheless I ended up leaving in February 2013. It was partly because I was fed up of politics. I deeply disliked the constant need to make up nonsense for the No 10 media grid; the hyperbolic language used to denigrate people who disagreed (“the blob” etc...); and increasingly found it hard to work with Dominic. I felt we could have achieved all our policy objectives – indeed done them a lot better – had we not constantly turned everything into a shouty fight.

I also left because I didn’t think I was doing the job very well. The longer I did it the more I doubted the policies I was working on and the more I realised the confidence I’d had at the start of our time in Government wasn’t merited. In the decade that has passed since I’ve realised, with increasing horror, just how many traps I fell into. This was largely due to my lack of experience – I was 28 in 2010 and had had a few researcher jobs. What the hell did I know about anything? But it was also because, at the time, I hadn’t thought much about my own decision making or psychology.

So this is a post of what, in retrospect, I did wrong. I’m writing it as a reminder to myself not to get too smug about other peoples’ policy screw-ups – given how many I made – but also in the hope that people who are now doing similar jobs, or will do so in the future, can learn from my mistakes. Especially as we’re about to get a new Prime Minister who will bring in a whole new team of advisers. The post is split into cognitive errors – misplaced biases or assumptions that led me astray – and practical errors, the ways I went about the job that I’d do differently if I ever did it again.

## **Cognitive errors:**

### *1. Chesterton’s fence*

Governments always look incompetent from the outside. The machinery is clunky and dysfunctional for all the reasons Cummings and others have pointed out. If you’re working for the opposition it’s easy to let this drift into confirmation bias. All these stories about how the Government are messing up \*must\* mean that everything they’re doing is wrong and all of our ideas would be better. As a team, in 2010, we had a strong belief that the Department for Education (DfE or DCSF as it was then) had gone way off course and Ed Balls had wrought a bureaucratic mess upon the sensible Blairite reform agenda.

It was easy to feed this confirmation bias – plenty of schools were frustrated with, for instance, the “Building Schools for the Future” programme, under which an extremely complex process had been developed to replace the secondary school estate. And many were also irritated by the “Every Child Matters” agenda under which local authorities were given a load of new powers to drive the integration of children’s services. For lots of headteachers this felt like a departure from their educational purpose and that they were wasting a lot of time in lengthy meetings.

This was all grist to our mill and gave us the confidence to take a wrecking ball to these and other programmes the moment we got through the door. But we forgot to ask G. K. Chesterton's famous question:

“There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, “I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away.” To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: “If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.”

We cleared many things away without asking what the use of them was. With Building Schools for the Future the mistake was immediately apparent. Cancelling the project led to a firestorm of criticism and a poor attempt to replace it. I realised quickly that what we should have done was slow the construction schedule down, so we could make the savings the Treasury required, and simplified things, without scrapping the whole programme.

It took me longer to realise we'd made a similar mistake with Every Child Matters. Again it wasn't working right but integration of services does matter. Throwing it all away without thinking about what needed saving has meant that years later a new approach is being developed piecemeal (family hubs, the social care review, etc...) with even less local authority capacity left to enact it.

**Key lesson:** don't just focus on what's going wrong, even if that fits your biases about the incompetence of the people you're hoping to replace. Ask what the point of the policy was and talk to the people who think it's a good idea.

## *2. Optimism bias and cognitive dissonance*

I was fascinated to find, when I got hold of the DfE budgets, that there's a line for “optimism bias” around construction projects. Essentially the expected completion date for almost every new school building turns out to be wrong, so they adjust for that in budgets (or at least they did when I was there).

It turned out the same applied to a lot of our policies. In politics the cost of admitting you're wrong or off course is unusually, and unhelpfully, high. Politicians can get away with an occasional u-turn but build up a collection of them and your chances of advancement are limited. As an adviser you want to make things work for your Ministers so it's tempting to dismiss signs that things might not be going to plan. Which might be because the idea wasn't all that good in the first place, or because circumstances have changed.

A good example of this was the expansion of the academies programme. We wanted to move quickly because, at that time, no one thought the coalition would last a full five years. That meant encouraging as many schools as possible to leave their local authority and “academise” as soon as possible, with weaker schools joining trusts run

by stronger ones. Fairly early on there were signs that we'd overestimated the ability of highly rated schools to absorb additional schools into their academy trusts, and a lot of them were growing too fast and in unsustainable ways. But we wanted the success story that big numbers seemed to show. Ministers didn't want to hear about slowing things down - quite the opposite. So I tried to ignore my doubts and pretend to myself it was a few badly run trusts and not a systemic issue. Eventually it became so obvious that more process and regulation was put in place. But I should have acknowledged the problem earlier.

**Key lesson:** do not ignore the small voice in the back of your mind however inconvenient – embrace the doubts and use them as a basis to explore the concern and see if the problem is a real one.

### 3. *Capital hoarding and conflict avoidance*

When I left I was pretty disillusioned. I no longer believed in some of the policies being pursued and I really disliked the approach being taken in the media. But I don't think I ever told Michael Gove that or any of the other Ministers or advisers.

I was way too selective in the battles I picked. This is where I should have learnt from Dom Cummings who never had any compunction about raising his concerns loudly and regularly. Like most people I'm naturally conflict averse and much prefer to work collaboratively, but that meant I passively let arguments go past when I knew I should be having them. I told myself it was to preserve my capital with colleagues for more important battles; that it wasn't my job to raise concerns about the way we disparaged the sector in the media; and that if I was too difficult I'd get shut out of the decision making process. But if I'd been honest with myself it was because I didn't want to have the fight. It made me uncomfortable.

I suspect that unless one is naturally Cummings-like (and very few of us are) that this is something that can only be learnt through experience. I'm still conflict adverse but now I know enough to realise that not having the difficult conversation now means having a worse one later, or being left with regrets. Age also gives some authority which makes it easier to raise concerns.

**Key lesson:** have the difficult conversation, speak up. If you lose the argument at least you know you tried. If you end up getting punished for raising honest concerns then it's probably not the right job for you anyway.

## **Practical Errors**

### 1. *Prioritisation*

My first piece of advice to any new adviser who asks is "prioritise". I was terrible at it. I have a poor attention span and am interested in almost everything, so having access to all meetings in Ministers' diaries and every submission that went into their red boxes was far too much temptation. I tried to read everything; go to every meeting; speak to

everyone who wanted to talk to me. I got drawn into firefighting every negative press story that popped up, and the petty battles the SPADs were having with various journalists. As a result I didn't give enough time to anything. I often completely lost track of policies I'd worked on in their early stages and then only realised there was a problem with them when it was too late.

For instance I was very keen on a policy whereby we'd recruit teachers through regional gateways and then place them at schools for training, much like Teach First does but on a national basis. But somewhere along the way, and I still don't know when, this became "Schools Direct" through which schools had to recruit trainees individually. Forcing schools to do all the recruitment was clearly a bad idea but I didn't notice the change happening because I was too distracted.

The most effective advisers I've seen since I left have all prioritised a few things and largely ignored the chaos around them. I'd like to believe if I did it again I'd do this. But I'm not sure I have the discipline. I'd certainly try.

## *2. Ignoring the middle*

Many of the meetings I had were with (dread word) "stakeholders". These people, from outside Government, either tended to love what we were doing – or at least pretend to in order to get whatever it was they wanted – or hated what we were doing and wanted to let off steam. Essentially everyone I spoke to had very strong opinions about our policies. But of course most people working in education, like most people in the country, spend little time thinking about politics and policies, and what they are worried about is often very different to that which occupies the professional work world.

I didn't spend nearly enough time speaking to these people – almost no one in Whitehall does – because they weren't asking for time in my diary. I joined some ministerial visits to schools, but they are hopeless because everyone is on their best behaviour, and there's no time to talk to anyone. I had a regular group of Teach First teachers to talk to, but they were atypical too. I should have done more lowkey visits to schools and talked to more normal heads and teachers. Had I done so I would have, I think, picked up on things like the growing mental health challenge which has now become a full blown crisis. And I would have realised quicker how compliant most people in education are, and the dangers of setting metrics that you think are nudges but are interpreted as rigid targets.

## *3. Stopping writing*

Being so busy and being bombarded with official submissions, papers and proposals, I spent all my time commenting on other peoples' work, often in person, because I didn't want to stop to write it down. But, as I've realised too late in life, I think things through by writing them out. One reason I love twitter so much is by writing out points, even in short form, I see the flaws in them. The less I wrote, the less I thought, and the less I

forced myself to properly work through arguments. Somewhat remarkably I tweeted from an unlocked account the entire time I was in the DfE – I think I’m the only adviser before or since to do that – and did have some quite long debates about policy which changed my mind. That should have made me realise I needed to write long form a lot more than I did.

### **What I did right**

As you can tell from the above I have a lot of regrets about my time in Government. I was naïve, inexperienced, flying blind. I worked on policies that now make me wince. But there are some things I’m proud of – helping set up the Education Endowment Foundation, which has significantly increased the evidence we have about educational interventions; the design of the pupil premium, even if we never had the money to fulfil the policy intentions; the National Reference Test which gives us the first proper year-to-year measure of secondary school standards over time; defending most of the schools budget and getting a better settlement than any department bar Health. There are other things I wish we’d done differently, like academisation, but where I still think the core idea was the right one and will ultimately end up making a positive difference.

I also think I was more open minded and open to challenge than most advisers, probably because I wasn’t attached to any party. Ultimately that led to me becoming disillusioned, as my mind was changed on various policies, but along the way I think I stopped some bad things happening that a more tribally-oriented person would have encouraged. I’m also good at absorbing a lot of detail quickly and so was probably better than most at supporting the civil service to explain complex and fiddly issues, like school funding reform, to Ministers and other advisers. I’m glad I had the experience but I really wish I’d done it later in my career. It would be a generally good thing if advisers – including SPADs – were selected more for experience and knowledge and less for loyalty or, as was the case for me, just being in the right place at the right time.