

New Life at the Top: Special Advisers in British Government

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While the position of special advisers (SpAds) in British government has become routinised, above all since 1997, we still know little about how they affect everyday life at the top of Whitehall departments. This paper, based on the first ever survey of SpAds, explores what they do and how they interact with policy-makers. SpAds fill a mix of 'commissar' and 'fixer' roles, and there is no evidence of a sharp division of labour between different types of SpAds. The commissar role they fill might be expected to bring SpAds into conflict with civil servants, yet there is surprisingly little evidence of conflict or rivalry. A variety of features of the special adviser's job appear to create incentives among both SpAds and civil servants to avoid conflict with each other. Since the influence of SpAds appears to depend on their relationship with the minister, claims that SpAds are a new, powerful group that shapes policy, are likely to be highly misleading.

1. Here to stay

Special advisers (SpAds) have long been a feature of British government. Precisely how long depends on whether one is referring to the formal position, in which case one would date the institution back to the 1960s or 1970s, or to the practice of outsiders giving advice to office holders, in which case one could go back in history as far as one liked, certainly as far back as the sixteenth century (Gay, 2000, 2011; Blick, 2004, chapter 2). Either way, the election of the Blair administration in 1997 is likely to be considered a significant turning point in the career

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of the institution of the special adviser. Most obviously, the number of SpAdS nearly doubled from 38 under John Major to 72 under Blair and has remained high since. Yet the most important change under the Labour government after 1997 was the *routinisation* of the position in British politics: a range of characteristics associated with the institution, many of which had been noticeable before 1997, became established as enduring, or at least longer-lasting, features of British political life and were brought to greater public attention than before.

SpAd contracts were regularised and standardised. Service as a SpAd became an important mainstream path to senior political office. The influence of SpAdS was not limited to whispering in the ears of ministers but having a direct role in policy-making and implementation in government. Two advisers were even given powers to issue direct commands to civil servants. Advisers could be public figures in their own right and they weathered some very severe controversies that damaged the careers of several advisers, ministers and civil servants but left the institution of SpAd itself largely unscathed (see, for example, [Select Committee on Public Administration, 2002](#)). The Conservative–Liberal coalition had, as of December 2011, more advisers in place (79) than the outgoing Labour government (78), despite David Cameron's declaration that he would end the 'control freakery' of the SpAdS system as it had developed under New Labour, and despite an initial reduction in numbers when the coalition took office. Such popularity suggests that SpAdS might be here to stay. In one of the big 'adviser' scandals in the early Cameron government, the fact that the person concerned, Adam Werritty, did *not* have the legitimacy that comes with the official status of a SpAd, contributed to the resignation of the Secretary of State for Defence in 2011.

That SpAdS have come to exert a significant impact on decision-making in Whitehall is widely accepted. In the 1980s comedy *Yes, Minister* the hapless SpAd was a minor figure easily manoeuvred to the sidelines in episode one, and occasionally manipulated by the canny senior civil servants thereafter. In *The Thick of It* some 25 years later, the position is reversed: the minister–adviser nexus is the focus of decision-making in government departments, and the only civil servants that play any role at all, albeit minor parts, are the press officers and not the permanent secretaries. The shifting styles of BBC comedy cannot be taken as conclusive proof of change. Contemporary academic accounts of policy-making in Whitehall would now be considered incomplete without some mention of the role of SpAdS ([Rhodes, 2009](#)); less than 20 years ago they were unlikely even to be mentioned in them (see [Dowding, 1995](#); [Pyper, 1995](#); [Richards, 1997](#); for exceptions see [Fry, 1981](#); [Lee, Jones and Burnham, 1998](#)). We know lots about the non-routine activities of SpAdS from the scandals that hit the headlines. Yet we do not know much about the more routine contribution of SpAdS to the contemporary world of policy-making in Whitehall.

This paper uses the first ever survey of SpAds to get a more precise understanding of what SpAds do and how they do it. While there are already two excellent studies of SpAds (Blick, 2004; Fawcett and Gay, 2010), they can only offer a limited account of the everyday reality of this new life at the top of Whitehall departments. The evidence on which these accounts are based tends to come from sources that cast a stronger light on the unusual and remarkable. They emphasise the roles of big name SpAds such as Alastair Campbell, Ed Balls, Andrew Adonis and Pat McFadden. As regards what SpAds do, they rely significantly on sources such as the Wicks Committee ([Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2002](#)) or the [Select Committee on Public Administration \(2002\)](#) that sought, in one way or another, to discover and remedy perceived pathologies in the system rather than offer an account of how it worked in helping make policy. Moreover, even from this limited perspective there is generally more information available on the minority of SpAds working for Number 10 or HM Treasury, accounting for approximately one-third of SpAd positions in the 1997–2010 period, than on the majority working in other Whitehall departments.

We were able to secure responses to our survey from 125 former SpAds. In addition, we conducted interviews with 26. Because the survey was anonymous we do not know how many of those interviewed responded to the survey too. Since our figures indicate that 291 individuals served as SpAds in the 1997–2010 Labour administrations,² this study is based on information gained from at least 43 per cent of them.

This paper examines the policy roles filled by SpAds. It starts with a discussion of the roles that they might be expected to fill and goes on to look at how much time is devoted to these roles by examining SpAd descriptions of their activity and then exploring their interactions with others involved in policy-making. These roles would, one might think, bring SpAds into conflict with civil servants since SpAds appear to some degree to have taken over some civil service functions. In fact, as we show, there is surprisingly little evidence of conflict or rivalry. A variety of features of the SpAd's job appear to create incentives among both SpAds and civil servants to avoid conflict. One of these features, the reliance by SpAds on their close relationship with the minister, also suggests that the notion that SpAds are a new, powerful group that shapes policy, is likely to be highly misleading.

²We drew up a list of SpAds from 1997 to 2010 using press reports, *Dods Parliamentary Companion* and the *Civil Service Yearbook*. This yielded an initial list of 313 advisers. On closer examination, 21 of these appeared not to be employed under SpAd contracts. Thus, we estimate that 292 individuals served as SpAds, a figure close to [Sellers' \(2011\)](#) estimate. Of the 292, we found contact details for 212. Our questionnaire was administered online using Bristol Online Surveys software between February and March 2011. We received 125 valid responses: a response rate of 59 per cent.

2. Assessing SpAd roles

Political appointees in government organisations are not new or unique to the UK. Unlike appointees in the national bureaucracies of some other countries, such as political executives in the US, *politische Beamte* in Germany or *statssekreterare* in Sweden, UK SpAdS do not occupy positions that come with any significant executive powers. The various formalisations of their roles generally has them offering 'assistance' directly to the minister; the 'model contract' operative in the early years of the Blair administration had their role as 'to advise the Minister in the development of Government policy and its effective presentation' (see [Gay, 2000](#), p. 13). In the 2009 'Code of Conduct for Special Advisers', the role is outlined as helping 'Ministers on matters where the work of Government and the work of the Government Party overlap and where it would be inappropriate for permanent civil servants to become involved. They are an additional resource for the Minister providing assistance from a standpoint that is more politically committed and politically aware than would be available to a Minister from the permanent Civil Service' ([Cabinet Office, 2009](#)). The 2009 code points out that they are able to 'request officials to prepare and provide information and data, including internal analyses and papers' but otherwise there is no formal executive power associated with the position³ (for a discussion of the development of the codes, convention and law surrounding special advisers, see [Gay 2011](#)).

UK appointees are not alone in having no significant executive powers of their own—the same can be said for Swedish advisers (*politiskt sakkunniga*), members of EU Commissioners' *cabinets* as well as advisers in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Canada (see [King, 2003](#); [Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010](#); [Page, 2012](#)). Yet we cannot assess the role and influence of appointees by their formal powers alone. For example, the fact that an appointee can speak for a minister is one of the fundamental bases of the extensive political power of members of ministerial *cabinets* in France. In the UK, what the minister is believed to think provides a significant cue to civil servants as they initiate, develop and maintain policies (see [Page and Jenkins, 2005](#)). Thus, the claim to speak for the minister, or even have the confidence of the minister, is likely to give SpAdS far more influence than that which arises directly from the interpersonal transaction between minister and SpAd.

While the powers, duties and expectations associated with the role of a political appointee vary significantly from one jurisdiction to another, one can detect two broad, not mutually exclusive, images in the academic literature of the policy

³The limited exceptions were two of Tony Blair's SpAdS: Alastair Campbell (as Press Secretary) and Jonathan Powell (as Chief of Staff). They were appointed under an Order in Council in 1997 which allowed for the appointment of up to three SpAdS with executive authority over civil servants. This Order was revoked after Blair left office in 2007 (see [Gay 2000](#), p. 27; [Fawcett and Gay 2010](#), p. 56).

role of appointed advisers in executive government that appear relevant to UK SpAds. There is the *political commissar* role, where advisers serve as the eyes, ears and mouth of the politician who appoints them in an executive organisation which is otherwise hard for him or her to control. This, for example, is the role of the member of the French *cabinet* set out in Suleiman's (1975) work on French bureaucracy (see also Eymeri-Douzans, 2008). A second role is that of the *political fixer*: the person who does political jobs for the politician that civil servants could not do—dealing directly with party colleagues, legislators and writing political speeches (see Goetz, 1997; see also Fawcett and Gay, 2010, p. 31). We should not look to the various Codes of Conduct for exact descriptions of what SpAds do in practice. However, both roles can be found in the formal job specifications set out in them. Commissar roles are found in the specification that the job can 'convey to officials Ministers' views and work priorities, including on issues of presentation' (Cabinet Office, 2009, para 7(i)). Fixer roles are more obliquely referred to in the Code, such as by the suggestion that advisers might provide 'a channel of communication' with Party MPs and officials, and in this context '[S]pecial advisers paid from public funds have a legitimate role in support of the Government's interest, which they can discharge with a degree of party political commitment and association which would not be permissible for a permanent civil servant' (Cabinet Office, 2009, para 16).

These broad types of role⁴ are expressed here as extremes. The political commissar role can be relatively unobtrusive. In their commissar role, advisers need not necessarily be inclined or able to give orders: speaking for the minister can mean indicating to a civil servant what the minister might think of a proposal, and this is at least as likely to be welcomed as condemned by civil servants developing a policy. The essence of the commissar is that she or he is integrated in the policy-making structure within the ministry or agency. The political fixer is not. Fixers do jobs that civil servants cannot do, or cannot do easily or well. Fixers can also provide services welcome to civil servants, including using political contacts and networks to find out what parts of legislation they are developing are likely to cause problems in the legislature or to smooth the passage of interministerial negotiations.

⁴A third policy role is that of the *political trustee*, who serves as someone to exercise executive leadership in their own right, not directly working with the person appointing him or her, but believed to be broadly sympathetic or supportive of their appointer. Many top US political executives would fall into this category (see Heclo, 1977). Yet it is not discussed here as SpAds have no direct executive authority. Since we are concerned with their interactions with civil servants and others involved in policy-making, we do not discuss roles of advisers insofar as they refer primarily to direct transactions between advisers and the politician appointing them and no other actors, such as might be found among advisers who serve as confidants, confessors, speechwriters or bag carriers.

Of course, defining roles as commissars or fixers does not fully describe what political appointees do in detail—much depends on the people appointed (e.g. whether they are outsiders, insiders, partisans, policy specialists) and how they behave (e.g. whether they remain party loyalists, 'go native' or confront officials). Moreover, there will be no prizes for guessing, even on the basis of what we already know, that SpAds can serve both as commissars and fixers. But what is the relative weight given to these roles and how do they affect the balance of power at the top of government ministries where others, notably civil servants but also junior ministers, might have been expected to carry out these roles in the past? Our survey helps us to answer these questions. The questionnaire was of necessity brief. Moreover, the study looks only at the perceptions of SpAds and not the people with whom they interact such as ministers, Members of Parliament, civil servants, journalists, party officials and interest group representatives. In consequence our evidence about the role of SpAds is the role as seen from their perspective.

3. The policy activities of SpAds

We know that political advisers are overwhelmingly party loyalists. Indeed, most SpAds answering our questionnaire (79 per cent, $n = 125$) had been party members for five or more years before they were appointed, a further 15 per cent were members for less than five years and only 6 per cent were not members of the party. The central question in distinguishing between commissar and fixer roles is the degree to which the adviser performs roles at the top of Whitehall that are distinct from the traditional Whitehall policy advisory roles.

How far are commissar and fixer roles reflected in the everyday activity of SpAds? Two key commissar-type activities are those of the policy 'wonk' and the policy 'enforcer'. The wonk provides advice on how policies should be developed; the kind that one might in earlier periods have expected civil servants to have provided. As *Blick (2004, pp. 253–254)* suggests, when planning for government before 1997, senior Labour strategists argued that the Prime Minister 'has to get personal control of the central government machine and drive it hard in the knowledge that if the government does not run the machine, the machine will run the government'. Similarly, departmental ministers should recruit politically committed advisers 'who can make a serious contribution to the issues in hand and are able to work closely with departmental officials in developing policy'. The 'enforcer' makes sure that these policies are delivered. As *Blick (2004, p. 254)* put it, they would be able to 'work on the implementation of policies which are central to the New Labour strategy'. Given the prominence of 'delivery' in the Blair administration, one might expect this to be an especially significant task of advisers. These activities can be distinguished from communication

activities associated with dealing with the media, groups, MPs and other politicians, whether to 'spin' the government's message to a wider public, to get a wider understanding of political and public reaction to government proposals and actions or to help gain wider political support for government policies.

We asked SpAds on what proportion of their time they spent working on matters connected with policy design, policy delivery and communicating with others about the government's policies. New Labour's SpAds reported that they did all three of these things (Table 1). Communication, the most distinctive form of fixer activity, occupied most of the time of SpAds: 63 (59 per cent) spent all or most of their time on it and only 13 (12 per cent) spent little or no time on it. Yet communicating occupied only marginally more of SpAds' time than policy design, with 59 (55 per cent) spending a lot of time on it against 23 (21 per cent) spending little or no time. Only policy delivery and implementation appeared to be a major task for a minority of SpAds: 36 or 34 per cent spent all or most of their time on it, although the majority did this kind of work at least some of the time. Forty-five (42 per cent) spent little or no time on delivery. While activities associated with the fixer appear the most important, when added together, activities associated with a commissar role—wonk and enforcer—appear to be at least as, if not more, important.

The degree of integration of SpAds into the departmental policy-making structure, characteristic of a commissar role rather than of semi-detached fixers, can be seen in the frequency of contacts with key groups with whom they might be expected to interact in the policy process. We asked whether contacts tended to be daily, once a week or more or less frequent. Table 2 sets out the frequencies of the key groups involved in policy-making about which we asked. The clear predominance of contact with middle ranking and junior civil servants within the department might reflect in part the fact that they work alongside each other in both fixer and commissar roles, not least because many had their own civil servant administrative assistants and SpAds were generally located in their

Table 1 Amount of time spent on different kinds of adviser functions^a

	Communications	Policy design	Delivery
All or most of the time	63	59	36
Some of the time	31	25	26
Little or no time	13	23	45
Total	107	107	107

^aThe wording was design: 'helping design policies', communications: 'communicating with others, including the media, interest groups and MPs, about the work of the department' and delivery: 'ensuring the delivery or implementation of policies'.

minister's Private Office. Private Office is made up of a group of civil servants that arranges the minister's diary and also serves as the immediate point of contact for civil servants and others wishing to contact the minister (see Rhodes, 2009). As one SpAd put it, 'it was almost like [we] were ... part of the Minister's Private Office'. Even when writing speeches, the SpAds we spoke to had to deal directly with civil servants, often junior civil servants who knew the details of policies and policy proposals they were covering.

Although this was not included in the questionnaire, the interviews suggested that SpAd contact with senior civil servants, especially Permanent Secretaries, was less frequent than with other officials junior to them. One adviser argued that 'the most effective relationships were formed with civil servants who were one rung below the most senior level, as they were more involved in the details of policy, and had more time to develop a relationship' with advisers. Another said, 'generally SpAds don't like to have much contact with [Permanent Secretaries] because normally that would be an indication that there's a problem'. SpAds would be expected to resolve potential difficulties before they get passed up the administrative hierarchy that far. This is not to suggest that SpAds had no contact with top officials. Physical proximity and working with the minister often meant that they would meet frequently. As one put it 'the Permanent Secretary's office was next to mine so I would see him daily, although we rarely had formal meetings'. However, none of those we interviewed suggested their main contact with the civil service came through top civil servants.

Dealing with civil servants from their own departments was clearly the most frequent of their contacts (with 87 out of 122 or 71 per cent having daily contact with them, see Table 2). As already suggested, this might not be quite so characteristic of commissar rather than fixer roles as one might think. However, taken together with the importance of dealings with junior ministers in the Department (56 or 46 per cent having daily contact), it suggests that

Table 2 Contacts of SpAds

	Daily	At least weekly
Civil servants below senior level from own department	87	109
Junior ministers from own department	56	101
SpAds from other departments	49	99
Members of parliament	37	89
Representatives from interest groups (including unions)	20	73
Ministers (including junior ministers) from other departments	15	58
Officials (junior or senior) from other departments	15	45
(n = 122)		

participation in the policy process within the department characteristic of a commissar role occupies a large portion of their time. However, daily contacts characteristic of 'fixer' roles, above all with SpAds from other departments⁵ (49 or 40 per cent had daily contact) and Members of Parliament (37 or 30 per cent), was also strongly represented in the answers to our questions about frequency of contacts. This suggests a significant portion of SpAd time is spent helping to square government policy intentions with fellow party supporters in government and parliament.

Do SpAds fall into neat categories of wonk, enforcer and fixer? The answer appears to be largely 'no'. No SpAd reported one thing as making up 'all or almost all of my work' and having 'little or none of my work' occupied by anything else. Nevertheless, a significant number of SpAds tended to concentrate on one role: a slight minority (51 out of 107 or 48 per cent) tended to concentrate their efforts on one of these three roles (i.e. replying that it made up 'a large part of my work' or more and a lower proportion being taken up by one or both of the other two). Communication (27/51) was the most common specialism among these 'specialists', followed by policy (21/51) and only 3/51 specialised in delivery. A further 41 (37 per cent) spent 'all or most of their time' on two of these functions and the remainder (16 or 15 per cent) divided their time more or less evenly between the three functions with no one or two of them occupying all or most of their time.

Some of the SpAds we spoke to suggested that specialisation in a particular type of work was a 'luxury' that could only be afforded by ministers with larger numbers of SpAds. One of them, for example, suggested that ministers who for the most part only had two SpAds 'are looking for people who can do both policy and press work'. However, the survey offers little support for this as a generalisation. SpAds working in the Treasury or for Number 10, with larger numbers of advisers than other departments and accounting for a third of our respondents, did not appear to be noticeably more likely to emphasise a single role than those working for Secretaries of State. The handful of SpAds ($n = 14$) who did not work in conventional departmental SpAd positions (i.e. did not work directly under Secretaries of State, Prime Ministers and Chancellors of the Exchequer but under other kinds of political leaders such as Ministers of State or Leaders of the House) were less likely to specialise. However, the numbers are too small to be statistically significant.

⁵One should not be surprised at the relatively frequent meetings with SpAds from other departments since SpAds working in different departments across Whitehall are expected to attend a *weekly* meeting in the Cabinet Office (see Lee, Jones and Burnham 1998, p. 87; Corry 2011, p. 464), although at least 17 per cent somehow manage to avoid this. However, since we are attaching more weight to reports of *daily* contacts, the data in the table might be expected to measure the importance of these contacts to the everyday work of an adviser rather than attendance at the weekly meeting.

The combination of such commissar and fixer roles thus appears to be even, with only the enforcement side of the commissar role being clearly minor. Moreover, both roles tend to be combined in the same adviser, although not necessarily evenly, with some tending to concentrate somewhat more or less on one role rather than the other.

3. Friction at the top?

The policy wonk activity of the commissar, which a clear majority of SpAds fill to some degree or other, might plausibly be assumed to generate friction with other key figures who have traditionally dominated the higher reaches of the ministerial policy-making system, including above all civil servants. SpAds might even have been expected to have displaced them. Yet SpAds might also be expected to deal with different things from civil servants: handling 'the politics' of a proposal and leaving the 'technical' parts to career officials. As one adviser put it in an interview: 'I would not think it was my job to manage the development of a policy, it was my job to develop the management of that policy into a piece of politics.... I didn't have time to say 'I want to develop a policy all the way through'.... [A] policy is ten people working for a month on something and there's no way I could have done that'.

However, others considered their role as wider than one that simply dealt with the 'politics'. Several pointed to the detailed aspects of policy development they became involved in. For example, one said that a good SpAd 'figures out that the civil service jumps to the tune of the red box [which contains submissions and proposals for ministerial approval that ministers typically work on at home], and that you must work closely with those civil servants who put stuff into the minister's box every night'. Some pointed to the difficulty of separating 'the politics' from policy development. A former SpAd from the Home Office argued that even 'political advice' requires involvement in the technical detail:

My explanation for the role of special advisers is that there is a very difficult translation that has to take place, like a linguistic translation, between politics and policy and then back between policy and politics. Civil servants do not understand both the languages, and nor should they, they are not politicians. So then the Secretary of State would try and explain it, and then my job would be to go through in some detail that translation. I would say that most civil servants felt, I think, that I was explaining what the Secretary of State meant when he said x. The Secretary of State was always extremely busy and that was my job – my job, if I had a spare hour – was to ensure someone writing a submission really understood what the Secretary

of State wanted. Otherwise someone has done a lot of work on something and then it comes up and it's completely wrong because they've not understood that translation. So I would spend lot of time doing this; they would say, 'look I know you said he meant x, but he can't really mean x can he?' So then so I said, 'let's talk about it again' and then they said, 'oh yes'. Then I would have a lot of those sorts of meetings, which would be when the submission was halfway done, talking to them about what he meant.

Another who worked in the Ministry of Defence even argued that his job was not political in this sense since 'the MoD was a hard department to be political in, as the civil service wouldn't accept it and nor would the army'.

Our questionnaire asked whether SpAds have a general policy-making role that extends simply beyond advising on 'the politics' of a particular proposal in a question that asked whether they agreed their advice to ministers is 'political' rather than 'technical'. At first glance SpAds were rather split on whether there was such a division of labour: 55 per cent agreed and 45 per cent disagreed ($n = 120$). Not surprisingly, those SpAds who were less frequently engaged in shaping policy and more involved in communicating to the outside world were significantly ($p < 0.01$) more likely to agree; 65 per cent of the 71 respondents spending a large part or all of their time on communication agreed that there was such a division of labour compared with 43 per cent of the 63 respondent spending much or all of their time developing policy. Only one-third (7/21) of those who 'specialise' in developing policy and spend less time on other activities are likely to see their role as distinctive from the technical side of civil service advice.

In addition, the work of SpAds does not appear to be limited to a few areas of departmental activity of special interest to the minister, thus leaving much of the rest of the department's policy free from SpAd influence. Only 23 per cent of all SpAds said they 'concentrated on a few projects' rather than on issues across the department. Those more involved in developing policy (33 per cent of those for whom 'a large part' or more of their work was taken up with designing policies) were significantly (at $p < 0.01$ level) more likely to concentrate their attention on a narrow range of issues than those that spent less (10 per cent), indicating that a significant number of advisers were invited in to help on specific projects. Yet the large majority of SpAds, even among those developing policy, ranged across the whole department.

Given that a large proportion of SpAds see it as their role to become directly involved in helping shape policy across the whole department, and in ways that are not clearly limited to giving 'political' advice, there might be expected to exist a large potential for conflict between SpAds and civil servants. However,

our survey suggests the perceptions of the relationship between SpAds and civil servants appear remarkably non-conflictual, at least from the perspective of the SpAd. On the one hand, SpAds are evenly split as to whether they believe 'civil servants tend to think SpAds have too much power', with 51 per cent disagreeing and 49 per cent agreeing ($n = 120$). This did not vary significantly according to whether the respondent tended to spend more time on policy than communication. However, this question assesses the *potential* for conflict, and on a more direct assessment of *actual* conflict the level of harmony appears even greater. We asked whether the advice that they gave tended to agree with that of senior civil servants, 68 per cent ($n = 114$) said they 'tended to agree more often than not', 11 per cent that they disagreed, 20 per cent that they 'advised on different things'. Contrary to what might be expected, those more involved in policy seemed to perceive less disagreement. The 21 advisers tending to concentrate their attention on policy development (spending much or all their time on policy development and substantially less on other areas of activity) were the least likely to say there is any disagreement with civil servants (none of the 21 argued that they disagreed, a finding significant at the $p < 0.05$ level).

The argument that there is relatively little apparent friction between SpAds and civil servants might appear somewhat odd in the light of the scandals that brought some Labour SpAds into front page headlines, above all the resignation of Charlie Whelan in 1999, the dismissal of Jo Moore in 2002 and the Damian McBride scandal in 2009 (see Select Committee on Public Administration, 2003; Kenny, 2009). However, it is worth noting that these scandals did not directly involve conflicts over substantive policy advice or even advisers trespassing in areas that civil servants considered their own; a common thread, if any, was the accusation of some form of *excès de zèle* in 'spinning' to the media. They are also too infrequent to be used as a basis for claiming they reflect a basic underlying antipathy within Whitehall to SpAds.

We cannot say to what degree SpAd perceptions of harmony are endorsed by those of the civil servants they deal with. However, the SpAd perceptions seem to be based on a belief that the fixer and commissar roles are closely interlinked. In the interviews several mentioned the well-established point that SpAds 'take quite a lot of crap away from civil servants' indicating the belief that civil servants find it useful or convenient to have people working in the department who are allowed to act politically and operate in areas that are either out of bounds or grey areas for 'non-political' permanent officials. Others mentioned the importance of SpAds as the route by which civil servants could find out what the minister was thinking, especially on matters of detail that civil servants would find hard to refer continually up to her or him. Our questionnaire asked about this: 71 per cent agreed that 'civil servants often find out the minister's views from SpAds' and only 29 per cent disagreed ($n = 121$), and those spending more

time on policy were significantly (at the $p < 0.01$ level) more likely (81 per cent) to believe this to be true than those less involved (58 per cent).

It was to be expected that the interdependence between fixer and commissar roles might help explain the lack of evidence of conflict between officials and SpAds, with SpAds doing the jobs civil servants cannot, or are reluctant to, get involved in and compensating for difficulties with access to ministers caused by the time or attention span constraints from which ministers suffer. Less expected was the SpAds' own perception that their authority and power as commissars in the policy-making system could also depend on the degree to which they could act as political fixers. Several respondents referred to this interdependence in one way or another. One referred to it through the parable of Ed Balls:

If SpAds establish themselves as having the backing of the Secretary of State they can become very powerful – for instance Ed Balls . . . ended up being [like a] 'chief executive' of the Treasury. Because he could deal with the civil servants on a level that Brown could not manage, once the civil servants realised that his decisions were backed, he became very powerful

Another pointed out that SpAds had influence with policy officials 'only as far as they were doing what the minister wanted. Power comes from the minister, and the SpAds were only powerful to the extent that they were carrying out the minister's wishes'. Yet another took this point further 'power is totally derived from the Cabinet Minister. As a SpAd in general you are less of an individual in your own right as you become more of an extension of the Cabinet Minister . . . How good a SpAd you are depends entirely on the relationship you have with your minister and how aligned you are to his thoughts and decisions'.

Good relations with the civil service came up in many of the interviews as the basis for effective commissar roles:

Since SpAds work with Private Office a great deal, poor relations with them would undoubtedly be difficult. Poor relations would mean SpAds could not be invited to meetings and left out of circulation lists for important papers. Good relations with Private Office were needed in order for SpAds to be successful, because fundamentally, Private Office and SpAds have a shared agenda: to ensure the smooth running of the department, and to ensure that their minister does the best that they can possibly do and delivers on all the things they want to do.

And indeed there could be many occasions when the SpAd and the departmental civil servants could find themselves on the same side in any politico-administrative conflict. For example, one argued that she successfully

mobilised departmental officials to block a No 10 proposal to develop a White Paper that the minister concerned opposed. Another suggested that a 'civil servant may seek the SpAd to help influence the minister if the civil servant is aware that the SpAd agrees with their viewpoint. Making sure that they are in agreement with the adviser is the best way for a civil servant to ensure that their specific policy may reach the minister'. Two SpAdS described enlisting civil service support to try to dissuade a minister from doing something that they thought politically unwise.

4. Conclusions

The balance between fixer and commissar among our New Labour SpAdS appears from the evidence to be rather even. Our survey and questioning is admittedly limited. It did not ask direct questions about relationships with the media since our concern was with more direct involvement with the policy-making structures at the top of Whitehall. Yet SpAdS exclusively concerned with 'spin' and not at all with policy development appear to be, judging from our evidence, relatively few in number. While 'communication', which includes spinning as well as political fixing, appears to account for the largest single portion of the time of SpAdS, few did this to the exclusion of other activities. Moreover, as one put it 'advisers involved in specific areas of policy would need to understand how this policy was presented in the media, while advisers involved in a media role would also need a detailed grasp of policy'.

The roles of fixer and commissar appear to be strongly interdependent in the specific context of SpAdS in UK government in a way that one would not expect of political appointees in other systems, such as Germany and France. In part this is because of SpAdS' lack of direct executive authority: their power is second hand from the minister, and their abilities to help shape policy derive from their ability to speak for the minister and achieve what their minister wants them to achieve. The closer they stick to what the minister wants, the more effective they can be as commissars. This makes the question of whether they are 'too powerful', the question that has dominated much public discussion about their role, less immediately relevant than one might think. They are additional players that have distinct uses from the point of view of the minister and the civil servants with whom they interact, but are not necessarily independent shapers of policy. How the balance between fixer and commissar is struck depends upon the individual adviser as well as the minister for whom the SpAd works. It might also be expected to reflect the political context. One might have anticipated that our survey, had it been conducted among SpAdS (and we suspect our high response rate as resulted in part from the fact that we were asking people who were no longer in office) operating the intricate details of coalition politics in the Conservative–Liberal Democrat government after 2010,

would have shown the fixer role to occupy more of their time. However, on the other hand, [Hazell and Yong's \(2012\)](#) study of the coalition suggests that politicians might play a prominent role in brokering interparty deals making SpAds play a less important role as fixers than under Labour.

This relatively newly enlarged layer at the top, between the minister and the civil service, does not appear to be a significant usurper of civil service power, at least not from the evidence derived from the SpAd point of view. The power and authority that SpAds have appears to be closely linked to the relationship that each SpAd has with the minister. The importance of this direct and personal relationship is not necessarily a characteristic of advisers in all jurisdictions, not even those where advisers have no direct executive authority of their own. In Sweden, for instance, during periods of coalition government at least some advisers operate in ministries where the minister is not from their party but from that of a coalition partner, suggesting a stronger link between the adviser and party networks than the more direct and personal relationship with the minister found in Britain ([Pierre, 2004](#)).

The close link with the minister often places SpAds in the role of the diviner of the minister's mind. Whether SpAds are accurate diviners of the minister's mind is impossible to tell. Our evidence suggests that, when asked how SpAds 'mostly learn the minister's views', the most important route is through 'informal meetings' (50 per cent) and their 'general knowledge of the minister's views' (45 per cent), and far less frequently through formal meetings (13 per cent) and written instructions (10 per cent). Informal methods of learning ministers' wishes are not unique to SpAds as informality and anticipation appears to characterise the way civil servants do it too ([Page and Jenkins, 2005](#)). It is likely that SpAds will have at least as good an idea of the minister's mind as the civil servants: probably a better one as they generally know them better and spend far more time with them.

Yet despite the obvious advantages for democracy of having the political leadership better represented throughout the bureaucracy by advisers, a downside to the routinisation and development of the role of the SpAd in British government comes into view when one considers one consequence of the creation of an additional layer between the minister and the civil servants. In the somewhat different context of the growing ranks of political appointees in US agencies, [Light \(1995, p. 167\)](#) pointed to a 'thickening' of government in which an ever-expanding group of political appointees clogs up communication between the career service and executive political leadership at the very top. In comparison with the near doubling of the numbers of layers in the upper reaches of US executive hierarchies over 35 years, the addition of a thin sprinkling of political advisers to help UK ministers appears modest.

However, British ministers seem to be notably remote from the process of everyday policy-making already (see [Page and Jenkins, 2005](#); [Page 2012](#)). Taking away even further from the minister the everyday task of having to deal with a department, however faithfully the adviser might reflect his or her wishes, runs the risk that the notion of a ‘minister’s wishes’ could almost become a counterfactual hypothesis. Civil servants spend a lot of time trying to work out what a minister’s wishes might be or asking themselves: if ministers had some idea about this or that issue what would they think? If ministers are even further removed from having to deal with the level of detail and fine tuning that can only be resolved at a political level usually involved in putting together a policy, ministers will find it even harder to develop wishes that shape such policies. For an official putting together a policy, a quick reply from a SpAd certainly speeds up the policy-making process; makes it easier, even, than having to get the minister’s attention. But it could take the minister even further away from an understanding of how policies work. A couple of SpAds apiece is not, of course, enough to change the basic structure of ministerial decision-making. However, with direct ministerial involvement in everyday policy decisions in British government being already quite slight, if reliance on SpAds were to be associated with an even greater propensity for ministers to retreat from any familiarity with policy detail, the blessings of SpAds would be more mixed.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Andrew Blick, Philip Cowley, George Jones, Martin Lodge, Tony Travers and Ben Yong who offered advice and comments on our work, and to three anonymous referees for their suggestions.

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