

# Democratic Communication and the Role of Special Advisers in Northern Ireland's Consociational Government

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# **Democratic Communication and the Role of Special Advisers in Northern Ireland's Consociational Government**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of ministerial Special Advisers in Northern Ireland's government communication. Using data gathered from elite interviews with Special Advisers, Government Information Officers and political journalists, we argue that the role of the Special Adviser is influenced by the post-conflict political culture in Northern Ireland and the consociational structure of government. The paper suggests that current theorising of the role of Special Advisers in democratic societies must also take account of how they operate within *mandatory* coalitions such as those found in Northern Ireland. We call for more research into their communication role in post-conflict consociational environments.

**Key Words: Special Advisers, consociational government, post-conflict societies, Northern Ireland**

## **1. Introduction, theory and context**

This paper examines the role and relationships of 'Westminster style' Special Advisers (SpAds) working in Northern Ireland's post-conflict, mandatory power-sharing government and assesses their impact within broader debates about government communication in democratic societies. The 'Westminster style' SpAd is a temporary civil servant who is appointed by a government minister to assist him/her in a

political capacity, while working within a civil service department (Gay, 2000). Most of the research on SpAds has been carried out in the UK Westminster administration or other majoritarian democracies (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010a). There is a dearth of research into the micro-level communicative relationships of SpAds in more complex political environments and this leaves a significant knowledge gap in respect to how SpAds impact on government communication in other political systems. Our investigation is timely, therefore, in explaining the role of SpAds within mandatory coalitions, at a time when consociationalism is increasingly advocated as a solution to the fragmented conflict ridden societies such as sub-Saharan Africa, and has already emerged as a political system in divided societies such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, India, Macedonia, Lebanon, Belgium and Northern Ireland (Lemarchand, 2007).

Data was gathered via in-depth elite interviews with SpAds, Government Information Officers (GIOs), and political journalists working in Northern Ireland. Our findings suggest that while there are various similarities to the role SpAds play in other polities, SpAds in post-conflict consociational governments such as Northern Ireland's play a more complex role to that which we see in 'normal' majoritarian democracies, and the differences shine through most clearly in their communication activities. In this paper, we consider why our findings might vary from those found in other political systems and thus contribute to both the normative and critical debates on SpAds in democratic societies. We further consider what our findings mean for current theory on SpAds and suggest that more comparative research is required into politically and constitutionally complex systems in order to more fully understand the role of this important political role in contemporary democracies.

## **1.1 Special Advisers and the professionalisation of government communication**

Professionalisation in the government communication context is characterised as the increased employment of 'experts' or professionals in communication, and the use of public relations strategies which entail: "skills specific to the media and persuasive communications" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999:213). This is considered necessary since the media is the main vehicle of citizens' political knowledge (Gelders et al., 2007). It is also clear that the process of government communication is affected by micro-level interactions with journalists in this professional mediatised environment (Davis, 2002; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). These source-media relationships are viewed as oscillating between contest, reciprocity, and cautious cooperation, in the quest for each group to set the media, and therefore the public, agenda (Franklin, 2004; Larsson, 2002; Moloney, 2006).

In the UK (and Northern Ireland) the flow of information on government matters to the media is managed on a day to day basis by GIOs, and increasingly so, also by SpAds. In the UK and other Westminster style civil service systems, the role of the GIO is designed to be apolitical, in that they assist the government of whichever political persuasion in an impartial civil servant capacity, to communicate with the public/media (Rice et al., 2013). These communicators are bound by a Code of Conduct where upholding political impartiality is key (Cabinet Office, 2010a). SpAds, on the other hand, are personally appointed by government ministers but paid for out of civil service funds and in the UK legislatures they are bound by a specific SpAd Code of Conduct (Cabinet Office, 2010b). This differs from the traditional civil service Code of Conduct, in that SpAds are not required to be politically neutral and

are not recruited and appointed via the merit principle, their appointment is, in fact, usually the result of the minister's personal preference (Gay, 2000). The role and impact of SpAds on government communications is therefore an important issue for Westminster style democracies, given the civil service ethos that communication should be apolitical, transparent, and provide a public service by ensuring citizens have adequate access to information on public policy issues in a democratic society (Fairbanks et al., 2007; Somerville and Ramsey, 2012). There are, therefore, also broader democratic concerns surrounding how information from government is controlled by political actors and used strategically to exercise power (Bennett, 2001).

Research into SpAds in democratic societies falls into various categories. Firstly, there are those who consider the emergence of the SpAd, like other communicative developments, as merely a product of the broader contextual changes discussed above. For instance, Fawcett and Gay suggest a combination of factors which have led to the increase in SpAd numbers and influence: "the professionalization of politics; a lack of confidence and trust in the permanent civil service; and the need to respond to a 24-hour media environment" (2010:37). Wodak argues that in modern day (Western) politics: "Spin-doctors have become ever more important, increasingly taking on the role of 'mediators'...linking the fields of politics, administration, media and so forth" (2011:2). Indeed, several scholars suggest that the SpAd plays a positive and important negotiation role in modern democracies, facilitating government functioning, particularly in coalitions, and in assisting in the development of robust government policy (Connaughton, 2010a; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2005).

Secondly, critics have associated the rise in the numbers of SpAds with a culture of 'government by spin' (Franklin, 2004; Gaber, 2000; McNair, 2007). The role of SpAds and their relationships both with GIOs and journalists has received considerable attention in recent years, with SpAds being depicted as powerful policy influencers, vital news sources and 'Spin Doctors' (Negrine, 2008). It has also been suggested that it is: "...increasingly difficult (if not impossible) to formally divide the 'official' work of civil servants from the 'political' work of special advisers" (Fawcett and Gay, 2010:49), prompting concerns about the 'politicization' of the UK civil service. Thus such a reading of the SpAd role suggests SpAds politicise policy issues and therefore promote political agendas at the expense of public understanding and transparency.

What is undeniable is that the SpAd role is contentious, fuelled in part, no doubt, by the fact that much of what SpAds actually do on a day to day basis, and across political systems, remains unclear. Accordingly, some research has more explicitly focused on exploring and conceptualising the SpAd role. For instance, Connaughton (2010b) proposes four typologies, derived from her study of Ministerial Advisers in the Republic of Ireland. Type 1, the *expert* involves: "assisting with, contesting and promoting policy advice in a specific sector" (p.351). Type 2, the *partisan*, is: "appointed predominantly for political association with the minister and in instances where there are levels of distrust between politicians and the civil service. These advisers are responsive and best placed to anticipate ministerial demands" (p.351). Type 3, is the *coordinator*, which involves: "monitoring the programme for government, liaising with various groups and offices to facilitate an oversight of the minister's agenda" (p.352). Lastly, Type 4, is the *minder*: "which emphasises the

importance of trust in the relationship between minister and adviser. Minders should be looking out for issues that may be potentially harmful to ministers, both politically and in terms of reputation" (p.352). Similarly, Maley (2000), in her study of SpAds in the Keating Government of Australia, outlines five distinctive policy roles: one, 'agenda-setting'; two, 'linking ideas, interests and opportunities' (e.g. from their minister to broader government agendas); three, 'mobilising' (e.g. building political support, driving proposals); four, 'bargaining' (e.g. between themselves and other ministers' advisers in relation to policy matters); and five, 'delivering' (i.e. combining all the above four tasks to achieve a policy objective/outcome).

Although the above role typologies were derived by focusing on the policy and political aspects of the SpAd role, rather than strictly their communication role within the political and policy spheres, such studies are useful in analysing the SpAd role in Northern Ireland; this article will therefore consider these typologies in the discussion section of this article.

## **1.2 The Northern Ireland Context**

Although there is no one agreed narrative on the cause of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Miller, 1994; Roche and Barton, 2013), the major catalysts were disagreements on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and accompanying issues over ethnic, religious and civil rights and identities. From the partitioning of Ireland, into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in 1921, until March 1972, Northern Ireland was governed by a Protestant dominated administration, and as a result, Catholics complained of discrimination in basic access to housing,

employment, and their ability to influence political elections (Somerville and Kirby, 2012). This led to widespread public unrest, and ultimately political conflict and violence, between 1968 and the signing of the *Good Friday Agreement* in 1998; it also meant that Northern Ireland was governed by 'Direct Rule' since 1972, that is, administered by the British government from Westminster (Darby, 2003; Rice and Somerville, 2013). The Good Friday Agreement was an agreement signed by the British and Irish governments and the majority of the Nationalist and Unionist parties to signal support for the implementation of a local power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland, based on a consociational model and a rejection of the use of violence to promote political aims.

Thus in order to accommodate the polarised (Unionist and Nationalist/Protestant and Catholic) communities which make up Northern Ireland, the power-sharing government was constructed on a consociational framework. Consociationalism's most important contemporary theorist, Arend Lijphart, explains: "Consociational democracy means government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy" (2008:31). Lijphart (2008) notes that to ensure socio-political stability in post-conflict/divided societies, *grand coalitions* between the main groups/communities are the norm, *mutual veto* is also typical to make sure a simple majority is never enough in decision making processes and *proportionality* is usual with representation based on the population and guaranteed in political office, the civil service, the police, to ensure widespread confidence in emerging civic institutions (Rice and Somerville, 2013; Rice et al., 2013). Presently, there are five diverse political parties which make up the governing coalition and there is no official opposition party: *The Democratic Unionist Party* (British Unionist), *Sinn Fein* (Irish Nationalist), *The Social Democratic Labour Party*



(Irish Nationalist), the *Ulster Unionist Party (British Unionist)*, and the *Alliance Party* (cross-community). However, an 'uneasy' peace exists in this current post-conflict consociational environment.

It should be noted that the role of SpAds in Northern Ireland is different to their role in Westminster and other parts of the UK, in regard to their appointment procedures and accountability. In the current Northern Ireland Executive, there are nineteen SpAds: four each for the First and Deputy First Ministers; and one SpAd each for the remaining eleven ministers. Although the Code of Conduct for SpAds in Northern Ireland (Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), 2013) is largely the same as the UK Westminster arrangements, it differs in one important respect. The First and Deputy First Minister, do not have the ability to authorise or prohibit SpAd appointments as would be the case for the UK Prime Minister in Westminster or the First Ministers in Scotland and Wales (Gay, 2000). A recent review of the appointment of SpAds in Northern Ireland states that: "each Minister, and the Minister alone, is the "Appointing Authority" for his/her Special Adviser" (DFP, 2011:3). Thus, the element of central control and accountability is removed in the Northern Ireland governmental context. Moreover, the Westminster Code of Conduct For Special Advisers (Cabinet Office, 2010b) was amended to include a clause that SpAds: "...are appointed to serve the Government as a whole and not just their appointing Minister" (p.1). Gay states that, in light of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition: "this newly-added provision ensures that special advisers are serving the interests of the whole Government, regardless of the party affiliation of their appointing Minister" (2010:10). However, the Northern Ireland code has no such provision.

There are three aspects of the Northern Ireland government which make it a particularly distinctive political environment. One is that Northern Ireland is a devolved polity (some responsibilities of government have been 'redistributed' from Westminster to the regional legislature). Secondly, it operates on a consociational power-sharing basis. Thirdly, it is a post-conflict environment. This context offers scholars a different territory for analysis compared with the vast majority of research on SpAds which is focused on 'normal' majoritarian parliamentary or presidential systems. Additionally, while there are claims that consociationalism produces a different political sphere to that of such 'normal' democratic governments (Lijphart, 2008) little research has been conducted on government communication in this context, particularly on societies governed by consociational institutions in the post-conflict phase.

The overall aim of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the role and key impacts of SpAds on Northern Ireland government communication. We examine the roles and relationships between those most professionally involved in the process: SpAds, GIOs and journalists, and focus on three research questions:

- 1) How do SpAds perceive their communication role and their working relationships with GIOs and journalists in Northern Ireland?
- 2) How do GIOs and journalists perceive their working relationships with SpAds in Northern Ireland?
- 3) What are the main impacts of SpAds on the communication of government issues in Northern Ireland?

## 2. Methodology

Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques we targeted individuals who are involved in the government communication process and who could provide data relevant to our research questions (Bryman, 2012; Tansey, 2007). The sample consisted of 33 interviewees made up of 9 senior GIOs (69% of the total number), 8 SpAds (42% of the total number) and 16 political journalists. All were senior level or experienced employees; GIOs interviewed held the rank of *Principal Information Officer* in the civil service and like the SpAds who participated, they worked in a number of different departments and spanned all five coalition government partners. The political journalists interviewed were from the main press and broadcast organizations in Northern Ireland, alongside two experienced freelancers. Interview questions focused on probing participants on their daily work routines of producing and disseminating government information, and their interactions with the other participant groups. McEvoy's (2006) advice on interviewing elites in divided societies was noted and consideration was given to framing questions in a manner which avoided inciting political sensitivities or identity issues. All interviews were conducted in the participants' workplaces and lasted around sixty minutes; interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed in full.

The analysis of interview transcripts employed a broad thematic discourse framework, where findings were based on the recurrent themes, patterns and categories which surfaced in the discourse (Deacon et al., 2007). Conclusions were derived by combining and comparing the thematic findings from all participants groups (Davis, 2009). In the next section representative quotations from the

interviews are presented in italic type and have been edited (i.e. repetitions, stutters and non-verbal sounds removed) for ease of understanding, to a narrative form.

### **3. Findings**

#### 3.1 The SpAd perspective

As has been found in other research contexts (Fawcett and Gay, 2010; King, 2003; Maley, 2000) the SpAd role in Northern Ireland involves several distinct functions, depending on their minister's specific needs and their own expertise. However, a recurring finding, was that SpAds' professional ideology was overwhelmingly driven by serving their minister rather than public service or departmental service. One SpAd commented:

*"[a Special Adviser] has to be someone who is completely...committed to the minister's interest and not the department's interests and there is a difference...you know there's two and a half thousand people or something like that working in [the department], there's only one of them working for [the minister] and that's me".*

The fact that SpAds are personal ministerial appointments, clearly influences the values which they (and their ministers) consider important in their role. SpAd interviewees unanimously expressed the importance of being in agreement with, or at least 'sympathetic' towards their minister's party political values. SpAds' strong focus on ministerial service was evident in their descriptions of their role in communicating their minister's position:

*"Everything that goes on around here, whether it's Executive policies, whether it's presentation of speeches, whether it's new policy initiatives, whether it's, you know, event organisation, whether it's out to meet and greet you know I am looking with one eye to, where does that leave the...minister's profile, where does that fit in with a communication strategy that we will have rolling forward...that will follow through in terms of speeches, press releases, Q and As, meeting and greeting".*

Such views have been expressed elsewhere and reinforce the strategic role of the SpAd in contemporary democracies (Maley, 2011).

In order to protect their minister's interests, SpAds stressed that sanctioning the departmental communication produced by GIOs, was an important part of their role in terms of accurately portraying their minister's agenda. For example, one SpAd emphasised: *"I wouldn't want anything done or said that would embarrass the minister or be contrary to his political values"*. However, several SpAds explained their role in communication in terms of compensating for the impartial nature of civil service communication and for the limitations which exist in the Executive Information System (EIS). SpAds (and in fact GIOs and journalists) commented on the lack of centralisation between departments as a hindrance for communicating via the EIS. Several SpAds discussed the 'silo' mentality of the EIS, where each department has its own press office, with one naming it: a *"replication of the political structure which sits above it"*. They contended that the consociational government system results in ineffective and decentralised communication because it facilitates competition between ministers from different parties. According to our interviewees,

this structure does not enable GIOs to disseminate a clear unified message, as one SpAd explains below:

*"it's one thing for a press officer, you know at a UK level, to push a particular line and clearly they've constraints as well against the opposition, it's another thing to push a particular line against a minister and they're sitting at the Executive table to whom you're you know at least in part accountable to...So it's a difficult system to operate, I guess like all of that in essence reduces them to, sort of event management, and fairly you know mundane press releases...as opposed to a considered communications message which sort of sells the overall achievements...and that may just be a function of the way government is organised here. Because it's not like...in England where, or [the] UK as a whole where there's a single party government...or a coalition with a single agenda...whenever you've four or five parties in the Executive, each of whom may have competing interests, it's hard to get one clear line that you know a government press officer is comfortable putting out...it does blunt the capacity to deliver that message".*

Several SpAds commented that as a result of this situation, the most 'important' communication work is often done via the party route. For instance one stated: *"most of the things which are of any interest...isn't put out by the government press office. You know I would have written it, [the minister] would amend it and then you know [it has] gone out through the party".*

It seems that Northern Ireland's mandatory power-sharing government encourages an increased caution among GIOs which constrains them from communicating

effectively and strategically with journalists on important issues, and some SpAds acknowledged that their role in communicating government issues may contribute to this restraint. For example, one SpAd suggested the GIO in his government department: *"may well say that fella tells me what to do, when to do it and how to do it"*; another said:

*"I think they're [GIOs] much more aware of the need to get out good messages than what was the case previously, they're much more accountable obviously now...in the old system [pre-devolution and power-sharing] they didn't have to work to advisers. That might be a sore point".*

SpAds are (understandably) concerned with the promotion of a political message, but this practice of delivering government communication through party sources could quite easily be viewed as a fusion of what should be impartial government information with party political communication, and therefore a breach of the Westminster model of communication. In addition, there seems to be a distinction emerging among SpAds between important *political* news and less important *government* news. This assessment fuels journalists' own perceptions that the 'everyday' functioning of government is not actually 'news', with higher news value attached to controversial political issues; a situation hardly unique to Northern Ireland but nevertheless problematic for democratic institutions (Flinders and Kelso, 2011; Wodak, 2011). Moreover, SpAds in Westminster have also been documented as controlling departmental communication for political gain (Fairclough, 2000; McNair, 2007). But, one could contend that the institutional structures in fact

facilitate Special Adviser domination, through the complex political and communication system which is perceived as a legitimate basis for this involvement.

With regards media relations, SpAds, and indeed GIOs and journalists, agreed that the traditional tensions between government and media actors in terms of access and agenda setting (Lee, 1999; Wolfsfeld, 1997) were heightened by the post-conflict power-sharing context in Northern Ireland. Several SpAds perceived journalists to be "*shaped by the conflict*" and so perceive journalists' attention to remain skewed towards reporting political conflict and constitutional issues over everyday government business, and that many actually lacked the competencies to report on policy matters. Media coverage of this nature is viewed as particularly detrimental to the image of politics in Northern Ireland, given its still fragile peace. Some SpAds even suggested journalists act like an unofficial opposition to the government given the absence of an official opposition in Northern Ireland's constitutional architecture. A typical comment from one SpAd noted:

*"the press here, because there's no formal opposition at Stormont probably take the view that they effectively are the opposition. Which creates a culture where people tend to think little or nothing's been achieved which can be a bit damaging for the political process...the difference is in the UK as a whole, you would have some of the large national papers be broadly sympathetic to one party some sympathetic to another, most of them are just generally hostile here".*

Such perceptions mean that SpAds carefully select which journalists they disseminate information to, creating a group of 'elite' journalists who may be given access to



exclusives and 'off the record' briefings. This is either because they are trusted, from the SpAd point of view, to be competent and fair, or are viewed as having the power to influence the public by virtue of their large public audience (Rice et al., 2013). Accordingly, one SpAd admitted: *"some will say to me...there's a golden hierarchy here, some people get better access than others and to a certain extent that's probably true"*. This is a situation which is deeply resented by several journalist interviewees.

The consociational structure and post-conflict context produces a particular set of communication management issues within the Northern Ireland government. Interviewees agreed with Wilford's (2007) sentiment that due to the consociational structure of government, departments are operated as 'party fiefdoms'. For this reason, and as suggested by SpAds already, it is particularly difficult to communicate a cohesive message which is agreed upon by the five parties. SpAds have therefore become particularly valued for their inter-party communication role as parties try to control communications in the context of a grand coalition (Rice and Somerville, 2013; Rice et al., 2013). Almost all SpAds explained that a significant part of their role involved negotiating agreement with other departments on cross-departmental issues. One SpAd explained:

*"we are the negotiating contact with other parties...when there's cross departmental issues, where there's areas of controversy, where there's blockages, Special Advisers are the people that are sent in to try and resolve those issues...that's how that's worked through day to day issues right through to the big, big peace stuff"*.

These findings are supported by research on other coalition governments where political advisers were found to play a negotiating, centralizing role (Connaughton, 2010a; 2010b; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010b; Paun, 2011). There are of course additional issues to manage in the Northern Ireland situation given that there is a stark lack of, as one SpAd put it: *"philosophical agreement on many areas"*. For example, interviewees explained that there was a lack of trust between the parties, as acknowledged in past research on Northern Ireland (Birrell, 2012; Wilford, 2007), and overall a very antagonistic political culture remains in the region. Inter-party working cannot however be avoided given there was, as one SpAd noted, an *"unnatural separation"* between departments meaning: *"almost everything is cross-cutting"*. This was explained by interviewees as necessary in facilitating the various political parties in government, in line with the consociational design. Comments from SpAds however indicate that this inter-departmental communication between SpAds could itself cause problems. A recurring topic was that having eight Special Advisers in OFMDFM<sup>1</sup> slowed down decision making and caused internal wrangling, even between SpAds from the same party. In addition, it seems that SpAds can contribute to the lack of collective cabinet responsibility and inter-departmental working in the Executive by their input into ministerial decisions. For example one SpAd explained that he often warned his minister to avoid involvement in departmental matters which were not 'his responsibility', in case they resulted in negative media coverage which would be associated with the individual minister himself. Thus SpAds may at times actually fuel the already antagonistic relations between government ministers of different political parties in Northern Ireland, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister*

indeed they can play a role in perpetuating the idea that the government department is a party fiefdom rather than part of a unified administration.

### 3.2 Working with SpAds: GIO and journalist perspectives

GIO and journalist perspectives on working with SpAds produced quite different perspectives to that of the SpAd, on the SpAd role. GIOs contended that the emergence and increasing dominance of SpAds since the devolution of a power-sharing government, has reduced the autonomy of the GIO role. This is exemplified by the sanctioning of government information which SpAds discussed above. One GIO stated: *"every media enquiry we receive needs to go through the adviser...Nothing goes out without their approval"*. Another noted: *"Whatever he says goes, simple as that, I can't over-rule him"*. GIOs, as primarily public servants, are professionally obligated to uphold political impartiality. SpAds' control over departmental information however can limit GIOs' abilities to carry out their public service responsibilities and this may strengthen those conflicting loyalties many GIOs explained they felt between public and ministerial service. GIOs spoke of the need to communicate cohesively: *"part of our job is to promote, you know, that [government] is working, you know the cohesiveness...that's part of our job"*. But, SpAds' focus on promoting individual ministerial agendas, may override GIOs' abilities to communicate such an impartial and collective agenda. A journalist commenting on this situation noted, that while there may be an official government information service: *"it [the EIS] does the basic press releases and the road safety campaigns and the, don't set fire to your grannies this winter all that sort of stuff but, the really big shouts, the really big decisions are invariably taken by the parties"*. GIOs discuss

their relations with SpAds through the frame of an 'informal hierarchy' (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). One GIO explained this as follows:

*"your relationship with the SpAd is crucial...if you look at the civil service issue, none of them are my reporting line managers...my line manager in [the department] here is a policy official...But...you wouldn't do anything against the advice of a Special Adviser or minister...You know we're public servants after all".*

Thus, it seems GIOs accept SpAds' decisions and operate as if they cannot effectively challenge the SpAd, even though the Special Adviser Code of Conduct explicitly prohibits them from 'managing' or 'directing' civil servants (DFP, 2013). Another GIO put it this way: *"the Special Adviser will have the mind of the minister better than any other civil servant right. So, a Special Adviser can give the press officer like me really good advice and say they'll run with that, he'll not go with that".*

It is debateable whether this kind of interaction illustrates 'advice', or rather instruction or permission. This finding arguably bears out Mumby's analysis of how organizational power works. He notes:

*"A particular group's interests will be best served if those interests become part of the taken-for-granted social reality that structures organizational life. Once these interests become part of the organizational structure, then that structure simultaneously mediates in and reproduces those interests"* (Mumby, 1988:67).

This situation illustrates how occupational identity works to bolster Special Advisers' influence by virtue of the associative power which they bestow from their minister (Fawcett and Gay, 2010), who now have more influence over organizational decision making in Northern Ireland's consociational government, than in pre-devolution times (Knox, 2010). It also suggests that formal accountability procedures are not necessarily enough to overcome a strong organisational culture in respect to the SpAd role and its perceived authority in the Executive (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2006).

Additionally, a number of GIOs complained that SpAds sometimes communicated 'off the record' with journalists, providing exclusive information, for party-political rather than departmental gain. According to GIOs, this means they appear as a less valuable source to journalists and hence this undermines their position:

*"they would leak an awful lot of stuff that they shouldn't really leak at all. So, it's unhelpful when they do speak to journalists because I'm in one room trying to sell something and he's in a room just over there talking to the same journalist about something else, it makes us look...moronic...but they all do it...it's just something we're faced with".*

Indeed, journalists understand that as close confidants of ministers, Special Advisers had more 'inside' knowledge on political issues, and given they were freed from political impartiality restrictions, they could reveal 'political' information which is considered more newsworthy. Typical comments were: *"they [SpAds] can be very useful, if they'll talk to you about what's really going on. But civil servants don't*

*really like them...they get in the way I suppose for the civil servant to get the minister's decision".*

These findings diverge from Gaber's work on the UK Westminster system, where he found that: "Journalists speak with senior press officers on much the same basis as they speak with special advisers" (2004:368). Moreover, it is obvious from journalist comments such as "*civil servants don't really like them...they get in the way...*", that they recognize a tension between GIOs and SpAds in terms of communicating departmental business.

Conversely, the ability of SpAds to override GIOs' dissemination of information also affects journalists' access to information. Journalists explained how SpAds have the power to 'block' them from accessing information. For example, one journalist stated:

*"we were blocked by [names a party] SpAds...a straight forward press enquiry was held up for about twelve days...because the civil service press officer had to get clearance to release information, straight forward information...the Freedom of Information request subsequently showed that the SpAd had vetoed the release of the piece...it's political office at the end of the day, it is the parties who are in charge so therefore...even the SpAds are his [GIO's] masters".*

Indeed, with regards to the previously noted SpAd contention that journalists behave as a political opposition, most journalists disagreed with this claim and many in fact commented that SpAds were too quick to use the history of conflict to prevent the

media actively scrutinising government functioning in Northern Ireland. One journalist summed up this perception:

*"they will play the peace process card... say you're being too negative you're gonna damage this fragile plant that we have carefully nurtured...but you can't stop asking questions just because of that, if...a bit of hard-nosed journalism brings the whole thing down then it isn't very stable to begin with".*

There was also agreement among journalists that SpAds were predominantly concerned with protecting their ministers, acting as a powerful army. For instance one journalist stated:

*"Special Advisers would be quite aggressive...in a small country...power and influence is disproportionate, so you have to be very careful...these guys are powerful people, and there's a battle there...they [politicians] will use the Special Advisers as the attack dogs if you like".*

Further, several journalists questioned the dominance of SpAds over the civil service in Northern Ireland government given their sometimes limited experience and the personal nature of their appointments. The importance of the SpAd role was encapsulated by one journalist's comment, who noted that: *"Special Advisers are becoming increasingly important and this is something new...they're becoming more professional, more powerful, and that's one of the most interesting aspects of the way our politics is evolving".*

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Our findings in some ways mirror past research in other political systems. For instance, SpAds are primarily concerned with ministerial service, they have become dominant figures in government communication, operating as part of an informal hierarchy both in influencing GIO work and in journalists' access to government information. The findings indicate, that in Northern Ireland's consociational government, SpAds occupy the 'dominant coalition' (Berger, 2005) in respect to government communication. It is important to note that this shift in the balance of communicative power from GIOs to SpAds, is most certainly linked to broader structural changes resulting from the devolution of administrative powers from Westminster to the local Northern Ireland Assembly (Rice and Somerville, 2013). Power has moved from civil servants, to ministers and their support network, who now have more influence over decision making and organizational matters than in pre-devolution times (Knox, 2010). In this sense, Northern Ireland mirrors other 'normal' democratic societies where the increased influence of SpAds has been noted alongside the decline in civil service power within political systems (Blick, 2004; King, 2003; Winstone, 2003). Therefore, perhaps the growing dominance of SpAds may actually be an indication, at least to some degree, of the 'normalizing' of Northern Ireland's government system.

To gauge the extent of this similarity to other polities it is worth comparing the work of SpAds in Northern Ireland to that identified by research elsewhere. For example, a comparison with the research on SpAd 'role typologies' (Connaughton, 2010b; Maley, 2000) is instructive. While the roles identified by Maley (2000); 'agenda-



setting', 'linking ideas, interests and opportunities', 'mobilising'; 'bargaining', and 'delivering' are clearly applicable to varying degrees to the roles of Northern Ireland SpAds, in terms of their communicative interaction with GIOs and journalists, Connaughton's typologies are particularly useful for comparative purposes. Three of Connaughton's four typologies can be recognised in this study of Special Advisers in Northern Ireland's Executive, these are: the 'partisan', the 'coordinator' and the 'minder'; the 'expert' role is not apparent to any significant degree, similar to Connaughton's own findings on SpAds in the Republic of Ireland. As Connaughton also found in her study, individual SpAds in Northern Ireland often enact a number of these roles and do not 'conform to any one type' (p.353). As noted above, SpAds describe their own role in terms of the partisan, minder and coordinator (section 3.1). Thus, SpAds view their role as promoting their minister's agenda, as protecting their minister from reputational damage and, albeit to a lesser extent, as a means of coordinating with other SpAds to push through policy or seek inter-party agreement. The coordination role does however, seem ultimately to be directed towards promoting their ministers' partisan agenda and safeguarding their minister's reputation. These roles are linked by Special Advisers to the fraught and complex political system in Northern Ireland, which means ministers feel they need particular support in promoting their political agenda within a five party mandatory coalition. This situation therefore provides additional issues for SpAds working in the Northern Ireland Executive, which is discussed further below.

What is more, it is clear that the roles of the SpAd are perceived differently by our other participant groups in this study. So for example, while SpAds describe their role in terms of the partisan, minder and coordinator, GIOs and journalists talk of SpAds

as only partisans and minders (section 3.2). GIOs conceivably come to this conclusion as they are often involved in tailoring their work around SpAds' ideas of ministerial preferences and they witness SpAds' partisan input into the communication of policy. Likewise, journalists understandably view SpAds as partisan minders, because they largely interact with SpAds when they are trying to access information about ministers and their departments, which the SpAd can either facilitate or block, to protect their minister; or when they are receiving a clearly partisan perspective or positive account of a minister's/department's work. In Northern Ireland, GIOs or journalists do not appear to understand, value, or even perceive the coordination role of the SpAd, a role which SpAds themselves consider to be of central importance.

While there are some similarities with Connaughton's (2010b) findings on role typologies, it is clear that Northern Ireland's political context and its consociational governmental structure makes government communication, and the role of the SpAd within this, particularly complex. We see that in addition to the government communication structure established as a result of consociationalism, SpAds' political loyalties can at times hinder GIOs' abilities to impartially and strategically disseminate information on policy issues from government departments. SpAds 'compensate' for the EIS system, by essentially overriding it, and use the political structures as legitimisation for this action. For this reason, unlike SpAds, senior GIOs in Northern Ireland are not usually viewed by journalists as valuable information sources. However, SpAds and journalists, both view each other as 'shaped by the conflict' and this increases the traditional suspicion in their relationships, perhaps contributing to the tight control SpAds assert over government communication, and

therefore GIO work. At the same time, there is a consensus across the SpAds we interviewed that in Northern Ireland they play an important mediation role in facilitating inter-departmental/inter-party engagement and in working through the ongoing post-conflict issues which remain unresolved in the power-sharing administration.

There are several institutional and cultural explanations for these findings. The emergence of departmental party fiefdoms has resulted in ongoing competition between ministers and departments. This is understandable on a political level given the remaining distrust between parties and the recognition that voting remains 'tribal' in Northern Ireland (Evans and Tonge, 2009). Indeed, perpetuating the deep community divisions in Northern Ireland may be considered vital by some parties for their longevity and their re-election prospects (Rice and Somerville, 2013). The media then arguably reinforce this division by sometimes focusing on partisan political issues at the expense of more mundane government communication, to fulfil perceived news values. The problems of inter-departmental frictions which have been found even in the UK Westminster system (Gaber, 2004; Gregory, 2012), are intensified by, as one GIO put it, the 'built in flaws' of the Executive Information System which is arranged around the consociational multi-party political structures. The result is that SpAds seek to protect their minister's 'fiefdom' and yet are often vital in facilitating cross-party communication. They are not, however, formally required to serve the whole power-sharing government, as in the UK (Gay, 2010). They compensate for what they view as the ineffective EIS system by sanctioning departmental communication and strategically disseminating information and by liaising with journalists themselves, primarily for ministerial and political gain.

SpAds perhaps take a more direct role in disseminating departmental information than in other political contexts because of the consociational structure of governance in Northern Ireland and the lack of inter-party collaboration in the post-conflict environment. Simultaneously, journalists often neglect GIOs in favour of SpAds who have the power to speak more freely. Thus the influence of SpAds impacts detrimentally both directly and indirectly (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008), on GIOs' abilities to communicate a cohesive and impartial government message to the public.

These developments are important issues to consider in debates about democratic accountability and the role of government communication within this. The idea of an impartial civil service communicating with society in a transparent manner is a key component, at least in theory, of the Westminster democratic model. Our GIOs spoke of a sense of responsibility to the public in terms of informing citizens impartially on government matters and even in facilitating a transition to a shared society. However, clearly a situation where government communication is dominated by SpAds with a party political agenda, and the consequent devaluation of the GIO role is potentially harmful for public access to transparent, politically impartial information (Rice and Somerville, 2013). There is also a danger that the day to day communication of the important policy work that goes on in the power-sharing government may be displaced by the cultivation of controversial issues and antagonistic politics. As other studies have argued (Flinders and Kelso, 2011) this may have a detrimental effect on the public's view of government, despite the fact that building public engagement is arguably even more important in a society recovering from a violent conflict. A lack of unified and politically impartial communication from government may result in sustaining and even increasing division, and detract from the trust citizens have in

government institutions to deliver collective societal improvements (Gormley-Heenan and Devine, 2010).

Eichbaum and Shaw's comments seem to be pertinent to the Northern Ireland context, when they state: "Clearly, in some jurisdictions...the constitutional context, and specifically a transition to multi-party Government, opens up institutional spaces that...political staff in particular, may be required to fill" (2010c:199). However, the SpAd role in Northern Ireland is complex in that they at times encourage inter-departmental competition by way of their strong focus on ministerial priorities and by their power to dominate departmental decisions. On the other hand, they play an important role in coordinating inter-departmental policy issues and in maintaining the multi-party government coalition. SpAds are therefore paradoxical political actors in Northern Ireland, they are important in maintaining the very existence of the Executive, but do little to combat the overall lack of collaboration between the parties and the consequent silo approach to public communication (Rice and Somerville, 2013).

Our findings highlight that when theorising and analysing the Special Adviser role, it is essential to take account of the particular political context and inter-party dynamics in which SpAds operate, and also the perspectives of other political actors with whom SpAds regularly interact. This study illuminates the issues which a consociational system and post-conflict context produce for the role of SpAds in government communication, and thereby addresses the wider democratic implications of government communication for a post-conflict society. Indeed, we suggest that the SpAd role is a good indication of the kind of problems which exist in post-conflict

consociational democracies and scholars may learn a considerable amount about the functioning of these institutions by examining the communicative role and relationships of SpAds.

In conclusion, we call for further research into the communication role of SpAds in post-conflict, consociational democracies and indeed other complex political contexts, in order to assess the extent to which constitutional architecture and political culture impacts upon the role of the SpAd, and vice versa. Previous theoretical studies on SpAds (e.g. Maley, 2000; Connaughton, 2010b) usefully conceptualise their roles in terms of their policy and political tasks and responsibilities. While they do consider party composition of government and the majoritarian-coalition distinction, these studies do not focus in detail on the political structures of the polities in which SpAds operate, or explicitly consider the centrality of communication to the typologies which they identify. The line of inquiry pursued by this paper, with its focus on the communication role of SpAds does, we contend, contribute to the more comprehensive theorising required in order to understand the role of these important political actors. The findings from this study are particularly significant at a time when we see coalition, consensus and consociational governments increasing throughout the world (Hueglin, 2003).

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