

Ministers appoint special advisers for their policy expertise as much as for their partisan views

By The Author

*Special Advisers are now a fixture of British government, with “SpAds” patrolling the political space in between Ministers and the Civil Service, offering the kind of policy and political advice which “Sir Humphreys” don’t feel inclined or able to offer. Drawing on research from New Zealand, **Richard Shaw** and **Chris Eichbaum** show that little research has been carried out into why Ministers opt to have Special Advisers, while arguing that it is as likely that SpAds are recruited for their specific policy expertise as they are for their partisan viewpoint and connections.*



Alastair Campbell – one of the most famous “SpAds” (Credit: Financial Times, CC BY 2.0)

The recent conviction of Andrew Coulson, Prime Minister Cameron’s former communications chief, on charges of plotting to hack phones has once again turned the spotlight on special advisers (or SpAds). Recently there has been a [spike in academic interest](#) in the issues raised by the emergence of this particular type of adviser on the stage of executive government. However, the focus has largely been on either permanent civil servants or the partisans. Consequently, explanations of ministers’ motives in appointing SpAds have fallen back on reasons offered by others. Rarely has the question been asked directly of ministers: ‘Why do you appoint SpAds?’

The orthodox narrative is that ministers take on political advisers because they mistrust the motives of the “Sir Humphreys” lurking behind ministerial shoulders, and/or because they wish to dispense with official advice altogether in favour of focus group or poll-driven policy-making. Evidence emerging from [a survey](#) of ministers in the New Zealand government, however, tells a subtler story. Most ministers who participated in the research considered the advent of SpAds a response to the increasingly demanding nature of contemporary government (which, in the New Zealand context, includes coping with the exigencies of proportional representation), rather than a reflection of ministers’ desire to politicise the public bureaucracy.

They also interpreted their own growing recourse to SpAds as evidence of a failure of public service capacity and capability, and as an indication of appetite for greater contestability in the market for policy ideas and options. Summing up the prevailing feeling amongst ministers, one explained that SpAds ensured that ‘my time was much more efficiently used on the more important policy issues because the adviser could negotiate out the trivia.’

Those motives are reflected in the attributes ministers look for in their SpAds. Contrary to the received wisdom that ministers look primarily for partisan compatibility in their SpAds, the attributes ministers valued most in a political adviser were those associated with policy making. Principally, they looked for a thorough knowledge of the ins and outs of executive government, competence in policy analysis and evaluation, and the ability to work constructively with civil servants. A shared ideological preference came some way down the league table.

What might explain these various motives? First, ministers work in demanding and complex environments, and the constraints they confront are such any one minister (including the prime minister) will require access to colleagues' influence, authority, networks and detailed policy knowledge (both personal and departmental) in order to achieve her or his objectives. The intricacies of these arrangements create roles for political brokers which civil servants cannot go near – but which SpAds are perfectly placed to play.

Ministers' requirements of their SpAds also reflect the shape of the cabinet (either single party or coalition), and whether or not the government holds a parliamentary majority. Regarding the first, coalitions need people who can run the political touchlines, can identify points of friction between governing partners and put out fires before the government sustains too much damage. Apropos the second, under conditions of minority government (which was last experienced in the UK in May 1997) bargaining uncertainty increases and ministers require advisers able to work with parliamentary supporters who are not in government.

Ministers also identified other reasons for engaging the services of SpAds that related to processes of public sector reform. Marketisation, privatization and devolution have pared back the role of the political centre. Paradoxically, in many cases this has pushed responsibility for service delivery a long way from the core civil service, and in so doing has made the business of co-ordinating the implementation of ministers' policy decisions much more challenging. In this context SpAds reflect ministers' attempts to re-assert at least a measure of control over the delivery of their governments' decisions.

It is reasonable to question the extent to which empirical research undertaken in Wellington speaks to the environment in Westminster. The most obvious point to make is that minority government, which is now the norm in the New Zealand context, is not the way things are done in the United Kingdom (UK). On the other hand, the UK now has some experience of coalition government, and it would be surprising (and not a little concerning, perhaps) if it were still the case that [Special Advisers](#) have not yet taken on roles in interparty negotiations. More surprising still would be the failure of ministers across the UK to carve out a role for SpAds as [political sherpas](#).

In at least two respects, however, the circumstances that apply in the UK bear more than a passing similarity to those in New Zealand. Indeed, although country specifics differ, in general terms the challenges stemming with ministerial overload confront government ministers right across the Westminster community of nations. Similarly, the demise of the old bilateral relationship between ministers and senior civil servants is common to many countries in which public sector reform has been pursued. New Zealand's ministers are not the only ones turning to partisan advisers in the increasingly congested and contestable market for policy advice.

None of this is to gainsay the problem, and the risks, associated with Special Advisers. There have been, and are, SpAds who have inappropriately inserted themselves between ministers and senior officials; there remain legitimate concerns about the parliament's ability to hold SpAds to account for their actions. Neither is this piece asleep to the possibility that ministers may be hiding their real motives behind more acceptable explanations. This has to do with politics, after all, and it would naïve not to accept that SpAds help ministers in creating the art of the possible.

Equally, however, it would be churlish to dismiss the mounting evidence that not all political advisers are [living in the dark](#). Adopting a ministerial perspective forces us to reconsider these things anew. At least in the New Zealand case, it transpires that most ministers do not look at their SpAds and see a bulwark against the predations of civil servants; neither are they overly concerned to ensure that advisers share their ideological positions. Instead, ministers want their political advisers to contest others' ideas, to contribute technical expertise to policy design, and to bring voices into decision-making fora that might not otherwise be heard. Above all, they want SpAds to help them with demanding workloads and with the vagaries of a job that is increasingly difficult, consuming and unpredictable.

To that extent, at least, advisers are moving out of the dark and into the light – except for Andy Coulson, who appears to be heading in the other direction.

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