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New life at the top: Special Advisers in British Government

GV314 Group[†]

(Corresponding author e.c.page@lse.ac.uk)

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Here to stay

Special advisers (SpAds) have long been a feature of British government. Precisely how long depends on whether one is concerned with the formal position, in which case one would date the institution back to the 1970s, or whether one is concerned with the general 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 (Blick 2004 chapter 2; Gay 2000; 2010). Either way, the election of the Blair administration in 1997 is likely to be considered a significant turning point in the career of the institution of the special adviser. Most obviously, the number of special advisers nearly doubled overnight 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 *routinization* of the position in British politics: a range of characteristics that had been occasionally noticeable before 1997 became established as enduring, or at least longer-lasting, features of British political life. Special adviser contracts were regularised and standardised, service as a SpAd became an important mainstream path to senior political office, their influence was not limited to whispering in the ears of ministers but having a direct role in policy making and implementation in government, and two of them 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 special adviser itself largely unscathed (see, for example, Select Committee on Public Administration 2002). That the Conservative-Liberal coalition appointed at least as many advisers as the outgoing Labour government, despite David Cameron's declaration that he would end the "control freakery" of the special advisers system as it had developed under new Labour, suggests that SpAds might here to stay. In the biggest "adviser" scandal in the early Cameron government, the fact that the person concerned, Adam Werrity did *not* have the legitimacy that comes with the official status of a special adviser, 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 special adviser 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 twenty-five years later, the position is reversed: 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 prism 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 special advisers (Rhodes 2009); less than twenty years ago they were unlikely even to be mentioned in them (Dowding 1995; Pyper 1995). We know lots about the non-routine activities of SpAds from the scandals that hit the head. Yet we do not know much about the more routine contribution of SpAds to contemporary life in Whitehall. The aim of this note is to explore the evidence provided by a small empirical study of advisers to Labour ministers between 1997 and 2010 (consisting of a survey of 125 advisers and interviews with 26).

Assessing SpAd roles

Political appointees in government organizations are not new or unique to the UK. While the powers, duties and expectations associated with the role of a political appointee vary significantly from one jurisdiction to another, one can detect three broad, not mutually exclusive, images in the academic literature of the role of appointed advisers in executive government that appear relevant to UK SpAds. There is the *political commissar* role, serving as the eyes, ears and mouth of the politician that appoints them in an executive organization which is 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, writing political speeches. These broad types¹ 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 which 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 smoothe the passage of interministerial negotiations.

Of course, defining roles as commissars or fixers does not fully describe what political appointees do in much detail -- much depends on the people appointed (e.g. whether they are outsiders, insiders, partisans, policy wonks) and how they behave (e.g. whether they remain party loyalists or "go native", confront officials). However, our knowledge of the impact of SpAds is rather unsystematic. The good studies of their role that we have (Blick 2004, Gay 2000) have tended to focus on some of the more prominent SpAds and on the publicly documented aspects of their roles, such as Jo Moore or Damian McBride. We still need more evidence to understand their role in the everyday operation of government.

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? In spring 2011 we conducted a small survey, supplemented by interviews, of former Labour special advisers to which we received 125 replies². The questionnaire was of necessity brief. 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 special advisers is the role as seen from their perspective.

We know that political advisers are overwhelmingly party loyalists. Indeed, most SpAds answering our

¹ A third 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 Hecl 1977), it is not discussed here as SpAds have no direct executive authority.

² A list of Special Advisers from 1997 to 2010 was drawn up using press reports, Dods Parliamentary Companion and the Civil Service Yearbook. This yielded an initial list of 292. Of these we found contact details for 212. 125 valid responses were received to a questionnaire administered online using Bristol Online Surveys software between February and March 2011, a response rate of 59 per cent.

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.

The policy activities of SpAds

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 otherwise have expected civil servants to have provided. As Blick (2004: 253-4) 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" and likewise 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: 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.

Table 1 Amount of time spent on different kinds of adviser functions³

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

N=107, multiple responses possible

We asked special advisers how much time they spent helping design policies, delivering policies and communicating with others about the government's policies. New Labour's special advisers 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 special advisers, 63 or 59 per cent spent all or most of their time on it and only 12 per cent only spent little or no time on it. Yet communicating occupied only marginally more of special advisers' time than policy design (59 or 55 per cent spending a lot or time on it against 23 or 21 per cent little or no time). Only policy delivery and implementation appeared to be a major task for a minority of special advisers (36 or 34 per cent) although the majority did this kind of work at least some of the time (45 or 42 per cent did it rarely or never). While activities associated with the fixer appear the most important, when added together, activities associated with a commissar role -- wonk and enforcer -- appear when added together 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 semi-detached fixers can be seen in the frequency of contacts with key

³ The 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"

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 all roles -- not least because many have their own civil servant administrative assistants and were generally located in their minister's Private Office, the group of civil servants that arranges the minister's diary as well as serving as the immediate point of contact for civil servants and others wishing to contact the minister (see Rhodes 2010). As one SpAd put it, "it was almost like [we] were ... part of the Minister's Private Office". Even in 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.

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 suggested 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 suggested "generally SpAds don't like to have much contact with [Permanent Secretaries] because normally that would be an indication that there's a problem" as 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 few in the interview stressed the top civil servants as their main contact with the civil service.

Dealing with civil servants from their own departments, was clearly the most frequent of their contacts and is more characteristic of commissar than fixer roles. However, daily contacts characteristic of "fixer" roles, above all with SpAds from other departments and Members of Parliament, were 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.

Table 2 Contacts of Special Advisers

	Daily	At least weekly
Civil servants below the Senior Civil Service level	73	91
Junior Ministers from your own Department	47	84
Special Advisers from other Departments	41	83
Members of Parliament	31	74
Representatives from interest groups (including unions)	17	61
Ministers (including Junior Ministers) from other Departments	13	48
Officials (junior or senior) from other Departments	13	37

(N=122)

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 "a large part of my work" or more) and being less 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 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 argument. 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.

The combination of such commissar and fixer roles thus appears to be pretty even, with only the enforcement side of the commissar role being clearly minor. Moreover, both roles tend to be combined in the same adviser, with some tending to concentrate somewhat more or less on one role rather than the other.

Friction at the top?

The policy work activity of the commissar, which a clear majority of SpAds fill to some degree or other, might be expected 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 have been expected to have displaced them. Moreover, SpAds do not always stick with “the politics” of a proposal and leave the “technical” parts to civil servants. As one 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 simply 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 jump to the tune of the red box [which contain 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 special adviser from the Home Office argued

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, 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 the message about what the government was doing 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) than those spending much or all of their time developing policy (43 per cent of 63 respondents) -- only one third of those more heavily involved in developing policy 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 leaving much of the rest of the department to the traditional groups that helped ministers decide policy before the growth of the SpAd system. 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 $p < .01$ 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, but even so, 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, 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 officials tending to concentrate their attention to 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 $p < .05$ 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 have brought some SpAds into front page headlines. However, it is worth noting that many of these scandals did not involve policy development or even directly the civil service. The 1999 Charlie Whelan resignation arose from the SpAd briefing against Peter Mandelson, a colleague of his boss, Gordon Brown. The scandals surrounding Jo Moore, whose alleged disposition to "bury bad news" on one occasion when the media were concerned with 9/11 or another with the funeral of Princess Margaret, were more clearly conflicts between advisers and civil servants. However, the relative infrequency of such conflicts, and the fact that in the Jo Moore cases this was essentially a conflict within a ministerial press office, mishandled spectacularly to the

extent that it led to a ministerial resignation and damage to a top civil servant's career, mean that it would be mistaken to see these as a sign of more widespread conflicts over policy making.

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 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 would be 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 special advisers” and only 29 per cent disagreed (N=121), and those spending more time on policy were significantly ($p<.01$) 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 compensate 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 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 special advisers 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 the Private Office were needed in order for SpAds to be successful, because fundamentally, the 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.

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, was the single most important consumer 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 secondhand 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. 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 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 – it is likely that our survey, had it been conducted among current 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, would have shown the fixer role to occupy more of their time.

This relatively new layer between the minister and the civil service does not look, from the evidence derived from the SpAd point of view at least, to be a significant usurper of civil service power. The power and authority that special advisers 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 such a direct and personal relationship with the minister (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 if not better idea of the minister's mind than the civil servants because 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, a downside to the routinization 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: 167) points to a “thickening” of government. In comparison to the near doubling of the numbers of layers of upper reaches in US executive hierarchies in 35 years, the addition of a thin sprinkling of political advisers to help UK

ministers appears a modest addition. However, taking away 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 "minsters wishes" becomes almost a counterfactual hypothesis: if ministers had some idea about this or that issue what would they think? If they do not have 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 hard to develop wishes that shape such policies. For an official putting together policies a quick reply from a SpAd certainly speeds up the policy making process; makes it easier even. But it could take the minister 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 (Page and Jenkins 2005), if they were to be associated with an even greater propensity for ministers to retreat from significant policy detail, the blessings of special advisers would be more mixed.

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