Special advisers: aiding responsive government, not unaccountable government
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Introduction
This application is made under the Trust’s Power and Responsibility programme. The project’s aim is to open up to debate the appropriate roles and functions of special advisers in the UK. We hope, through the provision of an evidence base and a greater understanding of what special advisers do, to encourage the political parties to provide much more transparency in the recruitment and role of special advisers – and by so doing to improve their effectiveness.

Special advisers (‘spads’) are popularly seen as malign figures—‘spin doctors’ or ‘people who live in the dark’. They are portrayed as trainee politicians who do little of value, and poison the relationship between ministers and civil servants. But in fact we know very little about special advisers: who they are and what they do has not been documented. The focus remains on well-publicised controversies, on a single role (‘spin’) and on a tiny number of special advisers (eg. Alastair Campbell or Andy Coulson). But since 1997 there have been over 70 special advisers working in government in any one year: yet we know little about special advisers as a group and their influence on government and government decision-making.

So this project asks: who are special advisers; how are they appointed; what do they do; and how can their role and effectiveness be improved? It is very difficult to talk about the role of special advisers in government and the impact they have without having an evidence base from which to work. We aim to remedy this through the construction of a database and semi-structured interviews with special advisers, their ministers and civil servants.

We also hope to move the policy debate on from a largely negative attitude to accepting the presence of special advisers in government and to discussing how to improve their effectiveness. Special advisers exist for a reason: they are an important resource for politicians. Some of the original special advisers—‘chocolate soldiers’—were funded by Rowntree. That is why, in spite of calls for a cap, the number of special advisers has continued to rise. Ministers need special advisers: they often feel overwhelmed by the civil service and the information overload. And so we wish to examine how special advisers could become a more effective resource in supporting ministers and ensuring the democratic responsiveness to the people. In our current work on coalition governance, there have been concerns about the inexperience and ineffectiveness of the current batch of special advisers; while special advisers themselves have described their haphazard appointment, lack of a job description or induction.

We recognise, however, there is a dual critique: many spads are ineffective; but some are seen as too powerful and yet unaccountable. Where we find that special advisers exercise more power than appropriate, we need to ask how this might be remedied. We will examine various means by which special advisers might both improve their performance, but also be held more accountable—such as providing more explicit job requirements, induction training, continuing training, better supervision, performance evaluation and possibly pre-appointment hearings. In doing so, this project fits within the Trust’s remit: strengthening the democratic process and building confidence in the way decisions are taken.

Research Questions
Our primary research questions are:

- Why do ministers appoint special advisers?
- Who become special advisers, in terms of age, skills and experience? How are they recruited? What are their subsequent careers?
- What are the roles and functions of special advisers?
- What has been their impact on the workings of government? How can their role and effectiveness be improved?

Special Advisers: characteristics, roles and motives
We need an account of the work special advisers do, on a day to day basis; their own views on their role(s) within government; and where they ‘add value’. Our initial assumptions are that:

- the functions of special advisers have changed from an emphasis on policy expertise to communications;
- they have allowed Whitehall departments to be more politically responsive to ministers.

Ministers: motivations and needs
Ministers appoint special advisers, but rarely are their needs and motivations discussed. They include: overload; the need to respond to a 24-hour media environment; a lack of trust in the civil service, and the wish for a more responsive bureaucracy.³ Our starting assumptions are that:

- Ministers trust special advisers because they are politically aware, and special advisers owe their loyalty to ministers;
- Ministers do not trust civil servants because officials owe their primary loyalty to their department and the government as a whole;
- Special advisers are a link between minister and department, filtering departmental submissions and communicating ministerial wishes.
- Special advisers are an extension of the minister, helping to maintain links with the party, interest groups and the media.

The Civil Service: relationships and responses
Traditionally understood as the key advisers to ministers, civil servants now share this function with special advisers. We want to see if:

- special advisers complement the senior civil service, providing political advice that officials cannot and reinforce the Westminster ideal of civil service neutrality;
- Special advisers have replaced the civil service in the formulation of policy, leaving civil servants more to its implementation and delivery;
- Special advisers have replaced the civil service in the area of government communications.

Research Methods
Database of Special Advisers
We cannot do any proper research on special advisers without contacting them. So we will start by developing a comprehensive database of special advisers from 1997 till 2012. We will compile it initially from published sources (Who’s Who, Dods, Civil Service Yearbook, PQs, the Powerbase

website). We will conduct a written survey (using Survey Monkey software) to collect additional biographical and career data.

The resultant database will be used to analyse the backgrounds of special advisers; recruitment; subject expertise; political party connections; duration of tenure as special advisers; and subsequent careers. It will provide for the first time reliable data about the age, skills and experience of special advisers.

**Interviews**

We will then collect qualitative data through interviews, of individuals and groups. This data will help to answer our questions on roles, functions and impact. To our knowledge, only one previous British study\(^4\) conducted interviews concerning special advisers. Our interviews will collect the views of all three sets of actors in the executive (ministers, special advisers and civil servants), and by this triangulation produce a more rounded picture of the impact of special advisers within the UK government.

Using the database, we will divide special advisers into four cohorts, chosen to capture the mid-term of the first Blair government (1999), the second Blair government (2003), the Brown government (2009), and the current Coalition (2012). We will select five Special Advisers to interview from each cohort, choosing three from Whitehall departments and two from the No 10 Policy Unit who worked with those departments. The departments will include a range of large and small, domestic and international; and be held constant across the four cohorts. We will then identify the Cabinet ministers the special advisers worked for, and two senior officials they worked with (Permanent Secretary, the Private Secretary, etc). Retired officials will be traced using *Who’s Who* and the FDA, the senior civil servants’ trade union. That makes for 20 special advisers, 20 Cabinet Ministers and 40 civil servants, a total of 80 interviewees. We may also interview a small number of third parties: for instance, staff within the political parties who are involved in recruitment.

Interviews with special advisers, ministers and officials will focus on the role and functions of special advisers; the reasons for appointing special advisers; how they were recruited; what made for a good special adviser; their key tasks; the division of labour between special advisers and officials; and concrete examples of impact. We will also ask all interviewees for suggestions of how special advisers could be made more effective, and collect a set of ‘best practices’.

**Primary and secondary literature**

We will search Hansard for all PQs about special advisers: to collect data about their names, numbers and pay; and to use the annual number of PQs as an indicator of parliamentary interest and concern. We will also study the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers, and their model contract, and changes to these; and reports from bodies such as the Committee on Standards in Public Life.\(^5\) We will also study ministerial and other memoirs for mention of special advisers and their contribution.\(^6\)

**Impact**

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We hope to move the debate away from the limiting frame of whether there are too many special advisers, to a more nuanced position—not just how special advisers can be made accountable, but also how they can contribute to government, and whether they could be managed more effectively. We hope to focus discussion on their recruitment, management, appraisal, discipline and training. We will also organise private briefings on these issues for Nick Clegg and Oliver Letwin, Cabinet Office Ministers; Sir Christopher Kelly, chair of the CSPL; and Bernard Jenkin MP, chair of the Public Administration Select Committee (all well-known to us); and to the political parties, which are often the ‘training grounds’ for future spads.

We will also publish an interim report, and test our initial findings with later interviewees. We will hold two private group seminars with ministers, spads and civil servants to see how our recommendations hold up with participants. Group seminars are a means of striking sparks off participants, and for dissenting views to be directly tested against their counterparts.

The main output of the project will be a report of 50 to 100 pages: and a short guide on ‘how to be an effective special adviser’. The final report will be launched by a public lecture at the Unit, and publicised via the Constitution Unit website and newsletter, circulated to around 4000 academics and policymakers in the UK and throughout the world. Presentations will be given to think tanks like Policy Exchange, the IPPR and the Institute for Government, to the Constitution Unit’s monthly seminars, and to the Institute for Government. We will also write articles for the press.

Project team, timetable and budget
The project team will consist of Professor Robert Hazell, Dr Ben Yong and Peter Waller from the Constitution Unit at UCL. All applicants have contacts with Westminster and Whitehall.

Robert Hazell has been the Director of the Constitution Unit since 1995. He is a former senior civil servant with strong links to Whitehall, and has been influential in a number of areas including devolution, freedom of information and hung parliaments. Professor Hazell will ensure production of all outputs and activities conduct some interviews and supervise Dr Yong.

Dr Ben Yong is the project manager. He will design the database, and organise the survey and data collection; carry out interviews; and do general analysis of materials. Dr Yong has worked on Constitution Unit projects concerning minority and coalition government, and the possibility of appointing unelected experts to ministerial office. From February to June 2010 he was seconded to Whitehall to work on the new Cabinet Manual.

Peter Waller is a retired senior civil servant in the Department of Trade and Industry, and Honorary Research Fellow at the Unit: he has worked on projects such as pre-appointment scrutiny and coalition government. He works for the Unit on a voluntary basis, and will assist with interviews and general analysis.

The project will last one year, from April 2012-March 2013, with a budget of £74,247. The construction of the database and interviews will be carried out over the first seven months; with the interim report to be published in October-November 2012; and the final report in March 2013.