



UCL

BEING A SPECIAL ADVISER



"OH, PLEASE! CAN WE CALL A SPAD A SPAD?"

Being A Special Adviser



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FOREWORD

This handbook is the product of an 18 month research project into the effectiveness of special advisers. During that project we interviewed just over 100 people. Many of the special advisers interviewed complained that they had received no training and little guidance, especially when they started. This handbook is intended to help fill that gap.

The handbook is aimed mainly at new special advisers, whether they form part of an incoming Government, or join it mid term. But we hope it will also contain useful tips for those who feel they need a refresher. It distils the advice from our interviewees, all of whom were asked variants of 'What makes for an effective Special Adviser?' and 'How can they be made more effective?' In addition we have commissioned top tips from eight special advisers, from across the parties. Special thanks go to them, and to all the others who have kindly contributed.

Special thanks also go to Hilary Jackson, a former senior civil servant who commissioned all the contributions and has edited the Handbook. She was one of the research team, which also included Ben Yong, Peter Waller, David Laughrin, Brian Walker and Max Goplerud. Special thanks too to Private Eye for allowing Richard Jolley's cartoon to be used on the front cover. The main output of our research project is a book, *Special Advisers: Who they are, what they do and why they matter*, to be published by Hart Publishing in summer 2014. Finally, we should thank the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, who generously funded the research which led to the book and this handbook.

Robert Hazell

Constitution Unit, School of Public Policy, UCL

February 2014

BEING A SPECIAL ADVISER

1. Special advisers were first appointed in a formal and systematic way by Harold Wilson's Labour Government of the early 1970s. Harold Wilson saw special advisers as a way of helping ministers manage *'the burden of modern government the immense volume of papers, the exhausting succession of departmental Committees, of Party gatherings and meetings with outside interests.'*¹ All Governments since then have shared the view that special advisers have a part to play in providing support to ministers. Their place in Whitehall is now well established and, over the years, their numbers have increased and their role has continued to develop.
2. For those working in, or with, Whitehall today the role of special advisers – or spads as they are commonly called – is a familiar one. Others who may be contemplating a spell as a special adviser may, however, be less familiar with the realities of the role. Drawing on research carried out by the Constitution Unit² and on the personal experiences of former special advisers, this short guide aims to give some insight into life as a special adviser and some tips on how to approach the role and get the best out of it.

THE ROLE AND THE JOB

The role

3. Special advisers add *'a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the political impartiality of the permanent Civil Service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support.'* (Quote from the current Cabinet Office Code of Conduct for Special Advisers³)
4. A special adviser, put simply, is extra political support for a Government minister – usually a Secretary of State or the Prime Minister. They are personally appointed by the Secretary of State (or Prime Minister) and their tenure and career as a special adviser are largely tied to that of their minister. They may bring a particular policy expertise or communications expertise. But, as is reflected in the above quote, special advisers are part of a much wider support system for ministers, in particular the civil service, and their contribution is intended to complement, not replace or substitute for, the advice and input of civil servants.

The job

5. What an individual special adviser does is, and has always been, determined by what the minister requires. However, what special advisers do now also sits within a framework set out in a formal code of conduct written and owned by the Cabinet Office.⁴ Special advisers potentially have a wide remit. The Cabinet Office Code of Conduct describes the sorts of work a special adviser may do as:
 - i. *Reviewing papers going to the Minister, drawing attention to any aspect which they think has party political implications and ensuring that sensitive political points are handled*

- properly. They may give assistance on any aspect of departmental business and give advice to their Minister when the latter is taking part in party political activities;*
- ii. 'Devilling' for the Minister, and checking facts and researching findings from a party political point of view;*
 - iii. Preparing speculative policy papers which can generate long-term policy thinking within the Department, including policies that reflect the political viewpoint of the Minister's party;*
 - iv. Contributing to policy planning within the department, including ideas which extend the existing range of options available to the Minister, with a political viewpoint in mind;*
 - v. Liaising with the Party, to ensure that the department's own policy reviews and analysis take full advantage of ideas from the Party, and encouraging presentational activities by the Party which contribute to the Government's and department's objectives;*
 - vi. Helping to brief Party MPs and officials on issues of Government policy;*
 - vii. Liaising with outside interest groups including groups with a political allegiance to assist the Minister's access to their contribution;*
 - viii. Speech writing and related research, for instance adding party political content to material prepared by permanent civil servants;*
 - ix. Representing the views of their minister to the media including a Party viewpoint, where they have been authorised by the Minister to do so;*
 - x. Providing expert advice as a specialist in a particular field;*
 - xi. Attending Party functions (although they may not speak publicly at the Party Conference) and maintaining contact with the Party members;*
 - xii. Taking part in policy reviews organised by the Party, or officially in conjunction with it, for the purpose of ensuring that those undertaking the reviews are fully aware of the Government's views and their Minister's thinking and policy.*
6. No single special adviser is likely to cover all that ground. Current practice, which has its origins in the approach adopted by the 1997 Labour Government, is most commonly for a Secretary of State to have two special advisers, one focussing on departmental policy issues and the other on communications. Media handling has become an increasing 'burden of modern government' noticeably absent from those burdens initially listed by Harold Wilson almost 40 years ago. The aim of two such departmental special advisers, working together and working with the officials who comprise the Secretary of State's private office, is to help make sure that the Secretary of State's long and short term policy objectives are achieved; to look out for potential problems and pitfalls; and to help manage his or her relationship with the Party and his or her public profile. In recent years, particularly in the current Coalition Government, some junior ministers also have a special adviser. And, the number of departmental special advisers may increase if the recent proposal for extended ministerial

offices is taken forward. Whatever the numbers, or precise organisational structures, the aim of special advisers is, however, likely to remain the same.⁵

7. The Prime Minister and, in a Coalition Government, the Deputy Prime Minister will have more than two special advisers. So too will the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Special advisers who work in these central departments, particularly in No 10 and the Cabinet Office, play a very similar role to departmental special advisers but are likely to spend much of their time co-ordinating across Whitehall, helping resolve disputes or differences between departments and nudging or cajoling departments to make progress on areas of policy which are key to the Government's overall programme and to the Prime Minister's reputation.
8. The exact job description of an individual special adviser will depend on the needs and working practices of the Secretary of State/Prime Minister and on the nature of the department. One of the first tasks of a newly appointed special adviser is to clarify and define the job he or she is required to do. But as a guide, **Annex A** provides some ideal type job descriptions for both departmental special advisers and those working in No 10, drawing from the range of tasks listed in the Cabinet Office Code of Conduct for Special Advisers and from the experience of individual special advisers. They are intended simply to give an idea of what the job may look like.

A typical day

9. Whatever the precise job description, a special adviser's day is long and busy. In practice it is driven by the Secretary of State's diary and by unexpected events, particularly those with a public profile, that occur during the day. None of this makes long term planning or policy development easy. Fridays, when ministers tend to be in their constituency, and periods during Parliamentary Recess, are likely to be the only times when a special adviser is relatively free to control his or her own time and diary. These can provide thinking time, catch up time and time to go out and talk to stakeholders. But mostly the focus will be on the business of the day.

10. Here is an example of a typical day in the life of a special adviser to the Labour Government.

A typical special adviser's day

- 6am Review news stories on blackberry at home;
- 6-7am Fire off first few emails and texts;
- 7am Travel to work; breakfast on train; check blackberry: more emails, catch up on various papers in bag; review diary;
- 8-8:30 am Arrive at department; see private office and minister(s);
- 8.30 am First meeting with Secretary of State.

Ministerial diary takes over...

One special adviser (of two) is likely to be in every meeting that the Secretary of State has.

Depending on the commitments that week, this may include attending the Secretary of State's

Policy meetings with officials

Meetings with ministers

Press Office meetings

Meetings with stakeholders and others

Parliamentary business such as Oral Questions or Select Committee evidence

Appearances in Parliament for debates

Both special advisers usually look to see where their 'free' non-minister time is during the day to arrange meetings they need to have with civil servants or with stakeholders or to brief press or MPs or just to catch up on emails, reviewing answers to written and oral parliamentary questions and responses to freedom of information requests, reading and fire-fighting.

- 8-9pm** Leave for home (may be later if attending an event). On way home check diary for next day/rest of week; read press cuttings/media briefs; reply to texts and key emails.

Repeat until reshuffle...

Working relationships

I think the most effective special advisers were the ones who got on well with civil servants and didn't make enemies of them; who were trusted by other junior ministers and weren't seen as going around plotting on behalf of their minister.

Quote from a former special adviser.

So, someone like ... for example was very highly respected. He was liked and he was trusted. He was trusted by backbench MPs, he was trusted by junior ministers and he was trusted by his own Secretary of State. He was trusted by peers and as a consequence people confided in him and provided him with bits of information and asked him for help which was precisely what made him effective.

Quote from a former special adviser.

There were special advisers who just floundered. So they didn't really know what their ministers wanted, they weren't adding much to their minister in terms of effective advice. They were not having good relations. The worst are the ones who just fell out with civil servants, or fellow special advisers.

Quote from a former special adviser.

11. One consistent theme in observations from former special advisers about working in Whitehall is the importance of working with and through others. Any special adviser's key relationship is clearly with his or her minister. But delivering what his or her minister wants depends on good working relationships with many others, particularly with officials. As one of perhaps only two special advisers working in a department, it is much easier to make a difference by working with others. The following table highlights some of the ways in which a special adviser may work with key colleagues to help support his or her minister. The Secretary of State will of course have his or her own direct dealings with all these contacts. A special adviser's working relationships should complement but not cut across those of the Secretary of State.

SPECIAL ADVISERS – WORKING THROUGH AND WITH COLLEAGUES TO ACHIEVE YOUR SECRETARY OF STATE’S OBJECTIVES

WHAT COLLEAGUES CAN DO FOR YOU	KEY WORKING RELATIONSHIPS	WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR COLLEAGUES
<p>Keep you in touch with progress within the department in developing policy for which they are responsible. A Lords minister, who of necessity covers all the department's business in the Lords, will have a view across the whole of the department.</p> <p>Alert you to any potential difficulties in development of departmental policies or sensitive casework etc.</p> <p>Help engaging with, and getting the views of, business and community leaders. Again a Lords minister may be particularly helpful here through his or her contact with other peers who may have a business, community or voluntary sector background.</p> <p>Someone to bounce ideas off in their policy areas to help you provide advice to the Secretary of State.</p>	<p>Departmental ministers</p>	<p>Give a steer on the Secretary of State's likely views on a policy issue for which the minister is responsible; diary pressures mean that it's not always easy for ministers and the Secretary of State to have face to face time.</p> <p>Alert the minister to any concerns of the Secretary of State (or No 10) relevant to his/her policy responsibilities.</p> <p>Party political advice on handling of announcements – you may have different contacts/networks.</p> <p>Someone to bounce ideas off/talk things through with – it can be lonely as a minister.</p>

WHAT COLLEAGUES CAN DO FOR YOU	KEY WORKING RELATIONSHIPS	WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR COLLEAGUES
<p>Explain how the department, Whitehall and parliament works – from acronyms to committee structures.</p> <p>Facts and figures to help you understand policy proposals, develop new ideas or as input to speeches etc you may be putting together for the Secretary of State or for Party briefings you may need to prepare.</p> <p>Early warning of any potential difficulties in getting necessary Whitehall agreement to policy proposals; you may need to offer help or advice to the Secretary of State on handling.</p> <p>Early warning of potential good news stories and bad so you can plan ahead.</p> <p>Extra insight into the views of stakeholders on a policy – they may have different networks.</p>	<p>Departmental officials</p>	<p>Extra advice on the Secretary of State's thinking on a policy or on his/her working practices; it takes time for officials to get to know a new Secretary of State.</p> <p>Someone with whom officials can test out policy options before presenting them to the Secretary of State; there may be party political considerations of which officials are unaware.</p> <p>Someone to whom officials can give a more detailed face to face explanation of a complex or sensitive policy issue. You may be the first person the Secretary or State turns to after reading a submission.</p> <p>An insight into any Party relationships/personalities that may impact on handling of government business.</p> <p>Extra insight into the views of stakeholders on a policy – you may have different networks.</p> <p>Help in smoothing things through Whitehall through your special adviser contacts.</p>

WHAT COLLEAGUES CAN DO FOR YOU	KEY WORKING RELATIONSHIPS	WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR COLLEAGUES
<p>Keep you in touch with the PM's views/priorities/interest in your department's work and alert you to any concerns the PM may have about departmental policies.</p> <p>Keep you in touch generally with developments across Whitehall that your Secretary of State may need to be aware of.</p> <p>General support and advice on working in Whitehall.</p>	<p>No 10 special advisers</p>	<p>Keeping them in touch with departmental progress in delivering the Government's objectives; early warning of potential difficulties.</p> <p>Early warning of good/bad news stories; No 10 never likes surprises but does like good media opportunities for the PM.</p> <p>Chivvying the department if things are not progressing as quickly as they should.</p> <p>Adding political perspective to departmental briefings for No 10.</p>
<p>Early warning of any issues within their departments which may impact on issues within your own department.</p> <p>Help in resolving any potential issues of conflict between your department and theirs which haven't been resolved by officials.</p> <p>Early warning of departmental announcements which may impact on your own department's policies.</p> <p>Mutual support and advice on working in Whitehall.</p>	<p>Other departmental special advisers</p>	<p>Help in resolving any points of contention between departments which have a political aspect and can't be resolved between officials before the need to involve ministers.</p> <p>Early warning of any departmental announcements etc which may impact on their department and which may have a political as well as policy aspect.</p> <p>Mutual support and advice on working in Whitehall.</p>

WHAT COLLEAGUES CAN DO FOR YOU	KEY WORKING RELATIONSHIPS	WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR COLLEAGUES
<p>Keep you in touch with Party MPs' concerns about/interests in your department's policies.</p> <p>Keep you in touch with Opposition thinking.</p> <p>Provide advice and support on any parliamentary handling issues, including on political issues relevant to oral and written answers to parliamentary answers.</p> <p>Help in planning the political side of ministerial visits – liaising with local MPs for example – and in providing advice on which MPs would appreciate a political visit from the Secretary of State or other ministers.</p>	<p>Parliamentary Private Secretary</p>	<p>Help with briefing the Parliamentary Party on departmental policy issues, particularly up and coming legislation.</p> <p>Early warning of any particular or new concerns of the Secretary of State.</p> <p>Help in handling/briefing individual MPs who may have a particular concern or interest in a policy or issue for which your department is responsible.</p>
<p>Provide advice and support in getting departmental business through both Houses of Parliament.</p> <p>Keep you in touch with MPs' concerns about/interests in your department's policies and general 'gossip' which your minister may benefit from being aware of.</p>	<p>Party Whips</p>	<p>Help in explaining departmental policies and decisions to MPs and heading off critics.</p>
<p>Keep you in touch with any constituency issues which may be bothering or putting extra pressure on your minister or which may potentially be a media story.</p>	<p>The minister's constituency office staff</p>	<p>Along with private office staff, keep them in touch with the minister's diary commitments which may impact on his or her time in the constituency.</p>

Working with officials

...the crucial thing is probably really building the relationship with the officials. It is the officials you are going to spend most time talking to, not your minister really. Most cabinet ministers are pretty busy... You will look for those opportunities where you can grab hold of them for five minutes. You might have a weekly meeting or twice-weekly meeting of substance, but your ability to sit down and talk to them for any length of time is somewhat limited.

Quote from a former special adviser.

For me, a good adviser makes my job easier. That is the first thing. I appreciate them being there. One of my first tips for new special advisers would be that they need to take time.

They need to, first of all, work out what job they will be doing. They need to spend time with their key officials, and work out what they want to achieve in their job and discuss how they can best help each other.

Quote from an official.

Special Advisers cannot hope to achieve their and their minister's agenda without working with or through officials. The same is true for officials.

Quote from a former special adviser

12. Most former special advisers say that their most crucial working relationship is with officials. This is because:

- the Secretary of State, ministers and special advisers depend on departmental officials to develop and implement government policies;
- special advisers spend a lot of time with officials;
- there is considerable overlap between what special advisers do and what officials do. The priority for both, in their different roles, is to deliver the Government's objectives. Each brings a different perspective, knowledge and experience but there is, nevertheless, potential for unnecessary and unhelpful duplication, without an understanding of who is doing what and how the different contributions come together. Equally, there is potential to enhance each other's role and effectiveness if relationships work well;
- there is also potential for conflict and tension not only from duplication but also from the way in which special advisers relate to civil servants and vice versa.

13. The table at **Annex B** gives an idea of the range of activities which are likely to involve both special advisers and officials working together – how they make different contributions and where the areas of potential duplication may arise. **Annex C** provides a case study of how ministers, officials and special advisers worked together, and made different contributions, to resolve a particular policy issue.

14. The Cabinet Office Code of Conduct for Special Advisers⁶ (para 7) sets out in broad terms how special advisers should relate to, and work with, the civil service. It says:

Special advisers may, on behalf of their Ministers:

- convey to officials Ministers' views and work priorities, including on presentation. In doing so, they must take account of civil servants' workloads and any priorities Ministers have set;*
- request officials to prepare and provide information and data, including internal analyses and papers;*
- hold meetings with officials to discuss the advice being put to Ministers;*

But Special Advisers must not:

- ask civil servants to do anything which is inconsistent with their obligations under the*

Civil Service Code;

- v. behave towards permanent civil servants in a way which would be inconsistent with the standards set by the employing department for conduct generally;*
- vi. authorise the expenditure of public funds, have responsibility for budgets, or any involvement in the award of external contracts;*
- vii. exercise any power in relation to the management of any part of the Civil Service (except in relation to another special adviser);*
- viii. otherwise exercise any statutory duty or prerogative power;*
- ix. suppress or supplant the advice being prepared for Ministers by permanent civil servants although they may comment on such advice.*

15. This is essentially about mutual respect and respect for the constitutional position of ministers, civil servants and special advisers. It is also about efficient and effective working. In some areas – such as the authorisation of expenditure of public funds – the guidelines are precise. In others – such as behaviour consistent with the standards set by the employing department – the expectation of special advisers is the same as any employer would expect of any employee – fairness, politeness, respect, honesty etc. In others – such as not asking civil servants to do anything inconsistent with the Civil Service Code⁷ – the implications may be less obvious and potentially areas of tension and misunderstanding.

16. Here are some examples of where tensions can arise:

Communication

One of the key roles of the Secretary of State's private office is to convey the Secretary of State's decisions, views and requests for advice to officials in the department and to make sure that such decisions and requests are actioned. Sometimes Secretaries of State will pass on a request via a special adviser. Tensions, and confusions, may arise if the special adviser doesn't let his or her private office colleagues know. Similarly private office staff should always keep special advisers in the loop. Some special advisers choose to keep their comments to the Secretary of State on official advice private. Or occasionally civil servants will fail to copy advice to a special adviser. That too can lead to confusion as well as lack of trust. There are similar, and potentially more serious, risks of mixed messages and loss of trust if special advisers brief the press or others without the departmental press office being aware or vice versa.

Special advisers act on behalf of ministers and not on their own behalf. Tensions can arise with civil servants if a request is made by a special adviser for work to be done which appears to go wider than the priorities and work requested by the Secretary of State and is not something the Secretary of State's private office is aware of. Reluctance on their part does not necessarily mean they are being difficult; it may just mean that they are unsure of whether this is what the Secretary of State wants.

The boundaries of political neutrality

Civil servants support the Government of the day and in doing so will develop, implement, explain and promote government policy. They don't, however, support the political party from which the Government is drawn. The distinction may not always be obvious but, by way of example, civil servants may provide factual information for a speech on departmental business that a special adviser may be writing for the Secretary of State for Party Conference or some other Party event. They may also check the final speech for factual accuracy. But civil servants cannot write the speech or provide support at the event.

Similarly, a speech given at a Party event, particularly Conference, may include a departmental announcement of a new policy for which the Secretary of State wants some publicity. The departmental press office may publish a departmental press notice to coincide with the announcement but such a notice would not be issued through the Party and would not include any political criticism of the Opposition parties.

The boundaries of propriety

Transparency and accountability can sometimes involve a lot of process which may be slow and frustrating – for example, in handling freedom of information requests, in making decisions about individual appointments or about services, such as the closure of a hospital. That may lead to tensions, with special advisers pulling one way – to speed things up – and civil servants pulling another – to keep to the process. Sometimes the process may be unnecessary, reflecting a practice that has developed and never been questioned, and should be challenged. But often the process will be there to ensure transparency and fairness, to avoid judicial review and to protect ministers.

17. The Cabinet Office Code of Conduct for Special Advisers⁸ also provides valuable advice on 'rules of engagement' with the media and involvement with politics in a private capacity. It is essential reading. The guidance and rules are there to help, not to get in the way.

How to be effective and get the most out of being a special adviser

18. The basics to success as a special adviser are the same as for any other job:

- A good fit between your skills and experience and those required of the job;
- Clear aims and objectives;
- Adequate support and training on the job and feedback;
- Good working relationships with colleagues and particularly with your boss;
- Knowing and understanding the organisation in which you work and the internal politics.

19. But there are clearly particular challenges:

- A 24/7 heavy workload;
- An uncertain tenure;
- A job that is determined by the needs/aims of your minister which can range from involvement in high level government policy negotiations to literally carrying his/her bag on a visit and a whole host of things in between
- Balancing short term and long term demands
- Being within the organisation but not of it
- Having an impact on a large organisation when you are likely to be only one of two special advisers
- Punching your weight with senior civil servants who are likely to have more knowledge and experience of the department, its issues and the way Whitehall works, and more status.
- Being 'the grit in the oyster' on occasions without alienating others
- Managing relationships with other special advisers, who may be from the same political party or, in the case of a Coalition Government, working within the same government programme, but nevertheless have as their primary focus and concern the success and reputation of their own Secretary of State.
- Being potentially the subject of a media story - the media takes a lively interest in special advisers with a perhaps inevitable focus on things that go wrong, rather than right, and on personalities.

Top Tips

20. Here are some tips from those who have been special advisers on how to handle these challenges, make a difference and enjoy life as a special adviser. These top tips cover experience over a thirty year period. The messages and learning points are remarkably consistent.

A special adviser to the Labour Government, 2009 –2010

Be nice to the civil service

On the whole, civil servants will want to have constructive, helpful relationships with you and the minister, and some will turn out to be worth their weight in gold for the advice and expertise they bring.

Don't be too nice

You're there to help the minister get his or her job done, on behalf of the Government and, ultimately, the electorate. If you sense that officials need a gentle nudge to understand what the minister wants and how he or she wants it, step in.

Be careful

In public, you are not only the eyes and ears of your minister, you are also his mouth. Better to be thought out of the loop than to say something too interesting, which you then have to explain to your minister. Above all, resist the urge to tell the world what you think your minister thinks without his permission, especially if you're asked about his ministerial colleagues. That way lays unemployment – for you, and maybe for him.

Get out of the office

You can't be the minister's eyes and ears from inside the department. Get out and talk to people – and not just your old mates from party HQ. But remember that, as with ministers, any hospitality received over £25 is recorded, and details of any of your meetings are liable to be published in response to a freedom of information inquiry.

Be straight with the boss

He has dozens of highly-educated, well-trained civil servants giving him safe, sensible, orthodox advice. You are there to call it as you see it, and the minister needs your perspective. So if you see it differently, tell him.

Be nice to your fellow special advisers

Ministers and officials will rely on you to get information on what other departments are planning through the informal special adviser network. Doing so will be much easier if you haven't just bawled out that 'dopey special adviser in another department'. Put the politics and personal differences to one side and commit to getting along

Be ready to leave

Political careers can be over in a flash and, as a special adviser, you are tied to your minister. Travel light and keep your CV updated. You may need it sooner than you think.

Enjoy it

It's a cliché, but very few people will be granted the access you will get, and the opportunity to influence (however minutely) policy and the politics that come with it. You might be too tired to keep a diary, but try to pause along the way, to enjoy the view and smell the flowers. It'll be over before you know it.

(A fuller version of these 'tips' was previously published on the Total Politics website)

A special adviser to the Conservative Government – 1991–1997***Have an open mind***

Don't believe all the myths about the civil service.

Get the best out of it

The job is what you make of it and what you make of your relationship with the Secretary of State

Help make the 'machine' more effective

Work with civil servants and not against them. Better to work with officials and feed in political perspective before advice goes to Secretary of State rather than wait until advice is submitted and then say it is wrong. And if you can show you are adding value civil servants will want to work with you and not against you.

Build relationships

A key relationship is with the Secretary of State's private office and particularly the Principal Private Secretary. It's the role of the Secretary of State to decide direction of policy and to persuade colleagues and the public that it is the right way to go. It's the role of the Permanent Secretary to make sure resources are available and that the department is heading in the direction determined by the Secretary of State. It's the role of the Principal Private Secretary to make sure the department is doing what is needed on a day to day basis – responding to the requests/decisions of the Secretary of State.

Keep your head above the parapet and look around you

Part of the role of special adviser is to watch out for the Secretary of State so you need to read as much as you can across all your areas of responsibility to spot things that might be difficult; individual civil servants work in relatively narrow policy areas, have bigger management responsibilities, and may not see, or have time to see, the bigger picture.

Accompany your minister or Secretary of State on relevant visits and trips, including overseas travel

It's a good way to secure time with your minister to discuss longer term issues and to see the Secretary of State working with his or her private office in less formal and sometimes less pressured circumstances.

Keep within the rules but use the flexibility that you have constructively

There are things that special advisers can do that civil servants can't because civil servants have less flexibility and are always seen as speaking on behalf of the Secretary of State; special advisers can add value by operating appropriately within this 'grey area'

A special adviser to the Labour Government – 2007–2008

Resist the temptation to go a bit Malcolm Tucker

Work well with private office, civil servants and with Parliamentary Private Secretaries, junior ministers and fellow special advisers. They can make it lot easier (or harder) for you to get things done.

Accept that detailed knowledge or detailed briefings aren't what people will want from you

Your Secretary of State, other ministers, No 10, MPs and the Parliamentary party want short narratives, top lines, lines to take, elephant traps; much of your job will involve creating short scripts and briefings from much longer papers.

Be accessible both within the department and Whitehall and to stakeholders and the media.

Make sure you have mobile phone numbers of key people. Much of the time you'll want to talk to them will be 'out of hours.' And have Downing Street switchboard on speed-dial; it is a miracle of technology and knowledge and a life saver if, for whatever reasons, you don't have someone's phone number.

Work with private office on both the Secretary of State's diary and the red box

Help manage the information – what needs to go in and what doesn't – according to your Secretary of State's time, mood, priorities – especially weekend boxes.

Coax and chivvy...

Check out with civil servants how a speech is coming on or a draft of a white paper. Don't wait for it to come to you all the time. If it's important to your Secretary of State, help manage it.

'Infamy, infamy they've all got it in for me...'

Most ministers have a moment like this when they think the world is against them. Avoid thinking this way. It's unlikely to be true. But if/when it does happen make sure that it doesn't last as a mindset for long.

Enjoy Fridays

The Secretary of State is likely to be in his/her constituency with a full diary. Friday is a day when you can control your time and your diary. In recess and/or when the minister is away on an overseas trip or holiday this time is magnified. Get out – visit your key departmental agencies and other key organisations directly involved in delivery. This is so valuable it's hard to underestimate.

Remember

Speak to your family, book holidays and, every so often, do other things.

A Liberal Democrat special adviser to the Coalition Government – 2010 –2012***Decide your priorities***

The sheer volume of papers and meetings can be overwhelming. Know what matters to your Secretary of State and decide your priorities early on.

Pace yourself

Make sure you get some free time, not thinking about or doing work, if only at weekends.

Quality time with your Secretary of State

He or she will be busy and so will you but you need to keep close and in touch if you are going to add value within the department and across government. Build in regular weekly meetings with your Secretary of State if you can.

Share your knowledge with civil servants to get a better outcome for your Secretary of State

You will know better than they will what your Secretary of State wants in terms of policy options and how he or she likes to work. Share that knowledge with the civil servants who are doing the work. And use your contacts with outside groups. Understanding their perspective will help you and your civil servant colleagues to get things right for ministers.

Build relationships with special advisers in other departments but don't always expect them to share your aims and objectives

The extent to which a department will have cross cutting issues with other departments will vary but almost all departments will have some. As special adviser you can help build alliances and resolve differences. But beware, special advisers, and their ministers, may be 'captured' by their department and have different aims and objectives so make no assumptions and don't take it personally if issues can only be resolved at ministerial level or by the centre.

Put aside any aspirations to write lengthy policy papers

Mostly the input of special advisers is to comment, advise on and add political context to papers and speeches written by civil servants – you won't have time to do otherwise nor is it your job. But always check the facts and challenge if they don't look right. Or you will be providing short, and short term, snappy briefings for the media or MPs

A special adviser to the Conservative Government – 1984-1986

Approach the job in the spirit of co-operation with colleagues, rather than as a built-in 'awkward squad'.

(Rare) differences with civil servants I found were usually around personality rather than political diffidence or distaste for my activities. The first essential is to establish a good working relationship with the private office; then with the press office; and finally with senior officials.

Use the ambiguity of the position to play to one's own experience and strengths.

As there is no firm blueprint for what a special adviser does and ministers' requirements and expectations of their special advisers may vary, add value where you best can and, in particular, make best use of practical, hands on or technical expertise that you have and civil servants may not have.

Have your own meetings with civil servants

I had access to the minister privately and attended 'prayers' etc, but apart from reading all the incoming submissions, I would often attend working meetings with officials only. These could be at my initiative and request (on the basis of a submission, or something I had noticed); or at theirs, when they needed to find a way through.

Be open rather than secretive

Generally, I felt my input on paper was best made 'en clair', so that officials knew what I was up to, and what was in my mind, and did not feel I was bent on subverting them. Mutual trust and respect are important.

Get out and meet stakeholders

On the substance of work, clearly media and parliamentary matters were paramount. I also spent a good deal of time in liaising with local stakeholders. This 'eyes and ears' activity, which also gives the minister a local profile, was invaluable in politically testing times.

Make use of the special adviser network

The special adviser network and their regular informal meetings is important (particularly for a lone special adviser) for sharing intelligence, bouncing issues of political acceptability off like-minded colleagues, and occasionally brokering a deal between principals.

A special adviser to the Labour Government – 2007-2010***Beforehand***

It's better to work with someone (a Secretary of State) you know, or get to know through an interview process. Don't take any special adviser job.

You and your boss

It's a personal relationship but don't mistake this for being anything but highly professional. Work out the dynamic your Secretary of State wants – are you a charm offensive for them or a bad cop to their good one?

There is no definitive job description – it's whatever your boss wants you to do.

Work with what you have

Be nice to officials – it makes life easier, more fun and the road is littered with former special advisers who tried to change the system and achieved nothing in their time in the role. Officials can also provide very useful references for when the electorate sacks you.

Don't be afraid to challenge your Secretary of State, Permanent Secretary or senior officials but don't always do it in public.

Don't be famous

If in doubt about whether to write something in your own name, speak in public etc, don't. You can be famous later.

Don't accept any hospitality – a zero policy is the only way.

Be more efficient than you've ever been before

You can never look at enough written questions, or freedom of information request responses. See all of them before they go out of the door.

Evidence is key. Much policy is made with a small evidence base, so gather more.

Don't think you know everyone – you don't. You should always be looking to know more people – civil servants in other departments, regional paper journalists, charities, for example.

A media special adviser to the Labour Government – 1997–2006

Work with not against officials

Avoid the temptation to see yourself as the master of the universe. Help shape advice before it goes to ministers. See your role as different but complementary to that of civil servants. This saves a lot of time, energy and will – ultimately – provide you and your minister with a more successful tenure in the department.

Prioritise, prioritise, prioritise

You can spend 24 hours a day sticking your nose into every issue and every paper. Help your PA to help you prioritise those things where you can make the most difference and are worthy of your attention.

Don't become an alternative press office

If you are ever available then journalists will come to you for everything. This will rapidly make your job untenable. Work closely with departmental communication people to shape advice and ensure consistent and effective media output. Save your role for the 'value-added', the bit the press office can't provide.

Build trusting relationships with key journalists but avoid favourites

Having just one or two favourites in the lobby will cause resentment and increase the tendency for others to seek to undermine you and your minister.

Don't ignore specialists

Special advisers can get too close to the lobby. Build good relationships with specialist correspondents too – they are often the source of difficult stories and you will need them!

Talk straight

Be creative to get good coverage but avoid the temptation to exaggerate and enhance issues. Always tell the truth and be polite at all times – these things matter when things hit the fan!

Keep the price of a minister high

Ensure your minister has contact with key media but deploy him or her sparingly to increase impact. The price of a media-hungry minister soon drops!

A Conservative media special adviser to the Coalition Government – 2010 –2012***Be the bridge over troubled water***

Government departments seem to me to be perpetually at war with one another, with No 10, and with the Treasury. Most of the arguments which broke out between my department and others were repeats of old dramas, played out with a new cast. This is a consequence of strong Whitehall identities and cultures coming into conflict with each other, and a special adviser's role can be quite influential in either getting closer to resolution; or deepening the row and encouraging your Secretary of State to take sides and make it personal. Try not to get swept along by the tide of civil service enmity and be the bridge, the person who is prepared to open a more constructive and collegiate dialogue.

Don't sell out your officials. You are all in the same boat.

Media special advisers in particular are under daily pressure from the press and politicians to lay the blame for the latest debacle on some under-performing part of the civil service. There are many under-performing parts of the civil service, let's face it, but the one thing guaranteed to help them stay there is if their department's single noisiest spokesman (i.e. you) is rubbishing them to the press or to MPs. Morale is damaged further, it is even harder for them to recruit good people and the culture of poor performance and blame is embedded for another parliament. Seeking to understand their challenges in a mature way and conveying the reforms in place to address these to your network is different to blame and suggests you realise that you are all in the same boat, rowing in the same direction, trying to deliver better public services.

Don't try to do too much.

You are the chief adviser to a 'here today, gone tomorrow' politician, so it is understandable that you would seek maximum impact from your ground-breaking programme of reforms, a major legacy project and a landmark public services initiative polished off before teatime. The more effective advisers guide their bosses towards modest and achievable milestones that are more in keeping with the steady and cautious pace of the civil service. Getting to these modest goals takes more effort than I ever anticipated, because daily crises and routine items have such dominance over the Secretary of State's (and everyone else's) schedules. It takes political capital and persistence to get small changes made to the way your department functions: these should be embraced as genuine achievements, with the recognition that soon a new political team will be in your place to (ideally) build on your initiatives, rather than knock them down and start over.

21. **Annex D** summarises the kind of skills that the most effective special advisers use to achieve their goals. It draws on both the top tips above and the interviews conducted for the Constitution Unit's research⁹.

PRACTICALITIES AND STATUS

22. A special adviser is appointed personally by the minister for whom he or she will work, subject to approval by No 10. Though some special advisers go on to work for other ministers, the norm is that when a minister leaves post, for whatever reason, special advisers leave too. The future, and job security, of special advisers parallels that of their minister.
23. Special advisers join government as temporary civil servants under the terms of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (section 15). Terms and conditions of employment include pension and severance pay arrangements. Special advisers' salaries, like those of civil servants, are paid from taxes. A special adviser's salary is agreed with the Permanent Secretary of the department to which he or she is appointed, within Cabinet Office guidelines, and is approved by the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Office publishes regular information about the number and costs of special advisers. More details about the formal arrangements for special advisers, including a model contract, can be found in the Cabinet Office Code of Conduct for Special Advisers.¹⁰
24. It is for the department in which the special adviser works to provide appropriate accommodation, IT and administrative support as needed. Special advisers will normally be located close to the Secretary of State's private office¹¹, working alongside civil servants but independent from them, and managed directly by the Secretary of State. Administrative support, if needed, will be provided by civil servants appointed to support the special adviser team. If working for the Prime Minister, special advisers will work alongside civil servants in No 10. Few Ministers of State yet have special advisers but where they do the special adviser would similarly be located close to the Minister of State's private office, directly managed by the minister and with administrative support as needed.
25. Practice varies between governments but often special advisers will meet together on a regular basis under the chairmanship of a No 10 or Cabinet Office senior special adviser. These networks of special advisers are also a source of support and advice.
26. When anyone joins a new employer or a different working environment one of the first challenges is getting to grips with terminology which the organisation takes 'as read' and familiar to everyone. Largely that has to be learnt on the job but **Annex E** provides a brief guide to some of the more obvious terminology which is likely to be common to all departments, including some of the most common parliamentary terms.

LAST WORDS

27. The civil service has been working with special advisers for many years. So when a special adviser joins government today, he or she is joining an organisation which is, by and large, comfortable with the role of a special adviser; understands the potential value of that role; and has a set of expectations of the role based on experience and practice. Generally the role is seen by civil servants as normal, largely trusted and potentially helpful. Special advisers can, therefore, expect a welcome although the degree of warmth will inevitably reflect past experience. Some of that experience will be good and some not so good.
28. Special advisers today will find themselves potentially visible outside, as well as within, Whitehall. This reflects the level of Parliamentary scrutiny there now is of government through Parliament's committee system; scrutiny which includes the role, accountability and behaviour of special advisers – (see for example the work of the Public Administration Select Committee¹²). It also reflects an increasing level of media interest which has fed off such cautionary examples as those of Adam Smith and Jo Moore. Making the most of the support and advice available within Whitehall, and more widely, as well as knowing, and keeping the right side of, the rules and boundaries that govern your accountability and your responsibilities will help ensure that neither you, nor your minister, become the next media story. Never freelance (i.e. exceed the brief set for you) and never break the bounds of commonsense good behaviour.
29. Special advisers are there to do the best for their minister and for the Government. Their approach to the job and their colleagues will be key in determining how good that best will be.

Being appointed to the post is not enough to win the respect of officials, backbench MPs, journalists, etc – you have to earn it as in any other organisation. If you don't have many years of experience before starting the job, acknowledge that you won't be seen as a heavyweight until you have proved it.

Quote from a former departmental special adviser.

It is all very well if your political patron says you are doing a good job, that is fine. But actually, particularly if you are there a long time, you need the senior civil servants also. Part of your value is whether the civil servants think that you are contributing, rather than just if your political boss thinks you are contributing.

Quote from a former special adviser who worked both in a department and in No 10.

My great view of politics is that it's a team game. The special adviser has got to be part of your team, but they've got to be integrated into a bigger team.

Quote from a former minister

30. A list of suggested reading which will give further insight into how government works and the role of special advisers is at **Annex F**.

Notes

1. Harold Wilson, 'Appendix V: The "Political Advisers" Experiment' in *The Governance of Britain* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1976).
2. Constitution Unit book reference
3. Cabinet Office, 'Code of Conduct for Special Advisers' [2010].
4. Ibid.
5. Extended ministerial offices guidance
6. Ibid.
7. The Civil Service Code is reproduced in Annex A of the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers, Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid
11. A Secretary of State's private office is normally a dozen or more civil servants headed by a Deputy Director senior civil servant (the Principal Private Secretary). Together the team is responsible for ensuring that the department knows what the Secretary of State wants and that all advice and action is delivered on time; for managing the Secretary of State's diary; for organising his or her papers; and generally ensuring that the Secretary of State has all he or she needs to operate effectively.
12. Public Administration Select Committee, *Special Advisers in the Thick of It*, 2001, HC 293.
13. Ibid

ANNEX A – MODEL JOB DESCRIPTIONS

A departmental media special adviser

1. Working with the departmental press office, advise the Secretary of State, particularly from a party political aspect, on media handling of departmental policy and other public announcements, publication of departmental reports etc and publication of new legislation
2. Work with the departmental press office on a forward looking media handling plan for departmental business and the drafting of press notices etc.
3. Attend the Secretary of State's media handling meetings with officials and other ministers as requested by the Secretary of State
4. Brief media contacts, and other stakeholders, as agreed with the Secretary of State, on political aspects of departmental business and announcements
5. Liaise with the Secretary of State's private office – Principal Private Secretary and diary secretary – on the management of the Secretary of State's diary to help prioritise demands and ensure the right balance of departmental business, media events and party political events
6. Working with the departmental press office, advise and sit in on, as requested by the Secretary of State, one to one media interviews by the Secretary of State
7. Monitor the press, media, and social media networks on a daily basis and advise the Secretary of State on any handling issues – liaising with the departmental press office on those which concern departmental business
8. Provide advice and comment on drafts prepared by officials of speeches, parliamentary statements, answers to parliamentary questions, responses to freedom of information requests which may attract press/media interest
9. Liaise with the Secretary of State's Parliamentary Private Secretary on political and media handling of parliamentary business – legislation, statements, oral questions, appearance at Select Committees etc – and attend key debates, statements and oral question time.
10. Draft speeches and provide media support to the Secretary of State in preparation for and throughout the Party conference and for all other Party functions
11. Liaise with No 10 media special advisers and special advisers in other relevant departments on cross government issues or party political issues and advise the Secretary of State
12. Liaise with relevant Party committees and officers on handling and development of relevant Party policy and advise Secretary of State
13. Provide support to other departmental ministers as needed and as agreed with the Secretary of State

A departmental policy/political special adviser

1. Working with officials, provide advice to the Secretary of State, particularly on party political aspects and in the context of the Government's overall aims and objectives, on new policy proposals and policy development and implementation [within the policy areas which fall within your remit as agreed with the Secretary of State]
2. On behalf of the Secretary of State monitor progress in taking forward policy proposals
3. Provide advice to officials on the Secretary of State's policy aims and objectives and, against that background, on the pros and cons of different policy options and legislative options
4. Attend the Secretary of State's policy meetings with officials and ministers as requested by the Secretary of State
5. Provide advice and comment on drafts prepared by officials of policy White Papers, other departmental reports, speeches, parliamentary statements, answers to parliamentary questions, responses to freedom of information requests which may attract press/media interest
6. Maintain a network of contacts in relevant stakeholder organisations and provide advice and feedback to officials and to the Secretary of State and ministers on their views on departmental policy proposals and on concerns or issues on which the Government may need to focus. Draft speculative papers as appropriate
7. Contribute to briefings for the Secretary of State's appearances at Parliamentary Select Committees or in handling legislation etc.
8. Draft briefing papers on departmental business for the Parliamentary Party, as requested by the Secretary of State, and liaise with the Secretary of State's Parliamentary Private Secretary
9. Liaise with special advisers in No 10 and other relevant departments on cross government policy issues; advise the Secretary of State, ministers and officials; help to resolve any differences of view between departments where departmental proposals require Cabinet Committee approval etc
10. Support the Secretary of State in preparing for and through out Party Conference, including on speech writing, and support the Secretary of State through providing briefing, speeches etc, on all Party functions
11. Keep abreast of wider government developments to advise and alert the Secretary of State as necessary and to help support him or her in attending Cabinet Committees etc
12. Liaise with relevant Party committees and officers on handling and development of relevant Party policy and advise Secretary of State

A special adviser in No 10

1. Establish and maintain good working relationships with the Secretaries of State of the departments within your remit, and his or her special advisers
2. Provide the Prime Minister with regular updates on implementation of key Government policies by the relevant departments, as agreed with the Prime Minister, and alert him or her to any potential difficulties
3. Provide advice to the Secretary of State, and his or her special advisers, on the Prime Minister's views or concerns and alert them to any cross Whitehall issues which are relevant to the department's policy or any issues raised by stakeholders etc
4. Help resolve any differences of views between departments
5. Liaise with departmental special advisers on any speeches, answers to parliamentary questions that the Prime Minister is to make in areas which are the responsibility of the department
6. Liaise with departmental special advisers on opportunities for Prime Minister announcements of new policy and visits etc
7. Comment and provide advice on briefing, speeches etc, provided by officials, for the Prime Minister
8. Liaise with departmental special advisers on Party Conference matters and other Party functions

[In a Coalition Government, this role and job description might apply equally to a special adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister]

ANNEX B – TASKS AND FUNCTIONS OF CIVIL SERVANTS AND SPECIAL ADVISERS

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
Priority setting	Officials seek to identify the priorities of an incoming Secretary of State whether from the Manifesto or (after an election) from submissions to and discussion with the Secretary of State.	<p>Special advisers will help ministers identify key priorities from a political perspective. They will focus on what can be achieved within political timescales, with an eye to the electoral cycle and the Secretary of State's likely tenure.</p> <p>Special advisers also have significant external contacts, notably with the political parties, think tanks and other stakeholders in the work of the department. They will be a channel for new ideas and proposals.</p>	At this stage, there will be close dialogue between the Secretary of State, special advisers and officials, with numerous meetings. Officials will be seeking to improve the Secretary of State's and special advisers' understandings of the issues confronting the department - some of which may be politically unattractive but unavoidable. Special advisers will focus on explaining the core values and philosophies of the Secretary of State.

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
Key priority areas	<p>Officials will develop policy options for key priority areas.</p> <p>In particular, they will manage the policy making process, including timetabling, consultation, assembling evidence base and identification of options.</p>	<p>Special advisers will get involved in detailed development of key priorities, seeking to ensure that impetus is being maintained. They may well generate policy ideas and options for consideration.</p> <p>Special advisers are also likely to want to see key submissions in draft.</p>	<p>Special advisers will be quite hands-on and work closely with officials. They may well attend the internal meetings which officials will have to develop options and discuss draft submissions. Alternatively, special advisers will have informal email or oral conversations with those officials to check progress. Special advisers will then invariably attend meetings the Secretary of State has with officials to discuss the policy options.</p>
Lesser priority areas	<p>Officials will continuously review existing policies and services for incremental change and improvement. They will also seek approval from ministers for potentially contentious decisions that need to be made.</p>	<p>Special advisers will expect to keep a watching brief over non-priority areas, to ensure that officials are not missing political implications. They will usually read all submissions to ministers and may decide to comment to the Secretary of State.</p>	<p>In non priority areas, contact between special advisers and officials will be limited and ad hoc. Officials will, however, often seek a steer from special advisers on issues where they are not sure of the Secretary of State's likely reaction or political implications of the issues.</p>

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
Engagement with stakeholders	Officials will know which external stakeholders are most likely to be affected by emerging proposals – and are likely to consult them informally to identify the practical impact of new proposals on those affected.	Special advisers have their own networks and will consult with those. Their networks will be more likely than officials to focus on the political attractiveness of emerging ideas, whereas officials are more focussed on practicality.	Special advisers and officials are likely to work closely together in this area, though with some degree of overlap.
Drafting of public documents	Officials will expect to draft all consultation documents plus Green papers and White Papers.	Special advisers will very seldom draft documents themselves. But they will look critically at successive drafts and seek to ensure that the political merits of the proposals or policies are clearly articulated within the wider framework of government policy.	Special advisers will usually be consulted on successive drafts of documents on key issues, largely through internal e-mail. Special advisers might comment extensively, and occasionally might offer specific text.
Whitehall clearance of policy	Officials will consult other government departments and organise collective clearance through write-rounds or Cabinet Committee meetings	Special advisers may well discuss contentious policies with special advisers in other departments and in No 10, seeking to encourage support in the write-rounds.	The clearance with other government departments is quite likely to be a joint operation between special advisers and officials, with both operating in parallel to ensure that emerging proposals are likely to find favour at the level of both detail and political attractiveness.

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
Presentation of emerging policies	When a new policy or initiative needs to be announced, officials will usually make recommendations on both the formal announcement and any parliamentary statement. They will also liaise with No 10 on the timing of the announcement. They will usually develop a media plan, and arrange interviews with the media.	<p>On any major announcement, the communications special advisers will discuss handling plans with others in the special advisers network, particularly No 10, and with ministers.</p> <p>They will comment on draft press notices and may take over some of the drafting, especially putting the issue in a political context.</p> <p>They will also identify key press contacts and brief them informally on the political background to the emerging proposals.</p>	In principle, special advisers and the departmental communications team will work closely together on the presentation of proposals, discussing together the handling plan and whether it meets both policy and political objectives.

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
<p>Parliament and Legislation</p>	<p>Officials will prepare detailed briefing and draft speeches for ministers for all Parliamentary debates, both in the Commons and Lords.</p> <p>They will also provide drafting instructions for legislation; and then set up Bill teams to take it forward.</p>	<p>Special advisers will review the briefing for Parliamentary speaking occasions, often adding attacking points on the Opposition position and attractive political sound bites.</p> <p>Special advisers may also talk to difficult backbenchers before debates (though this will often be shared with the Secretary of State's Parliamentary Private Secretary). Special advisers will also prepare briefing for the parliamentary party.</p>	<p>Special advisers and officials will discuss informally with each other specific issues as they arise - and how to manage backbench and opposition concerns in the Committee stages.</p>

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
The ministerial diary	<p>The private office will seek to achieve a balance between ministerial work in the office, external events focussed on the minister's direct responsibilities, wider political engagements and constituency work. Private office will seek advice from officials on the speaking invitations the Secretary of State receives.</p> <p>The private office will also manage the logistics of the ministerial diary, organising the mechanics of the daily meetings and external activity – provided it is related to the activity of the department.</p>	<p>Special advisers will regularly review the Secretary of State's diary and see whether they agree the balance of activities – and will usually be concerned to see whether the diary has too many internal meetings and external events which the department wants but which are less strategically important.</p> <p>Special advisers will also be expected to lead on the Secretary of State's purely political activities – eg a meeting with a constituency party during a regional tour or managing the minister's diary at the Party Conference.</p> <p>Special advisers might well for such events have some responsibility for the logistics – though often working closely with the constituency secretary and private office.</p>	<p>Special advisers and the private office will discuss together the programme of speeches and contents of important speeches.</p> <p>Special advisers will also need a strong direct relationship with the Secretary of State's diary secretary to ensure that the departmental activities and the politically led activities are harmonised and work smoothly together.</p>

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together
Moral support	<p>The private office often provide moral support for the minister, alongside the formal business – sympathising after a hard day or political setback, ensuring the minister has regular breaks in the day for meals and avoiding burn-out.</p> <p>Other officials tend not to see this side of departmental business unless they are dealing with a very high priority area.</p>	<p>Providing moral support is a key aspect of many special advisers' daily life. They can provide an outlet for the Secretary of State to express and discuss his or her frustrations with officials or other politicians. They can help the Secretary of State manage difficult relationships by providing a sounding board.</p>	<p>Providing moral support is a joint responsibility of the private office and the special advisers. It is usually shared, though there may be occasions when the Secretary of State wants to discuss essentially political matters and the private office officials may withdraw.</p>

ANNEX C – CASE STUDY: FAREPAK CHRISTMAS BOXES COLLAPSE

When Ian McCartney was Minister for Trade he was faced in October 2006 with a public crisis over the collapse of the Christmas hamper scheme run by a company called Farepak. The victims – mainly low-earners paying regularly into the scheme through the year – had the prospect of a poor Christmas and a lengthy wait for, derisory, if any compensation.

By December 2006 a fund set up for victims of the collapse had raised £8m. So some payouts to the families were possible and all of the hampers that were in stock got distributed.

The fact that there was any good news for these families, and in time for Christmas 2006, was due to the role of McCartney's special advisers in conjunction with the minister, his Principal Private Secretary and officials won over to their cause.

In the words of the Private Secretary:

'There were all of these thousands of people, some welfare dependent, that weren't going to get their Christmas savings. They had been saving responsibly to pay their way at Christmas but the system had let them down.

Because of their low incomes, many were locked out of mainstream banking and financial products and were now left without a penny in compensation. We were worried that they could end up going without over Christmas or else turning to loan sharks. We knew we had to act quickly and that this was going to be big.

From the minister's perspective, the priorities had to be:

- *to get some money back in the pockets of these families before Christmas – some 8 weeks away.*
- *ensure confidence in the remaining players in the industry or they could also collapse – which would be catastrophic.*
- *turn a potentially hostile media into a supportive one – it would be easy for them to blame the Government.*
- *be responsive to Parliament – MPs would rightly be concerned for their constituents and select committees might want to look at policy failures*
- *avoid the pressure for a knee-jerk reaction on regulation. The Prime Minister was very keen on keeping 'red tape' to a minimum.*

We commissioned urgent advice from officials at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) who told us this was "just a straightforward insolvency of a commercial company. Nothing ministers can, or should, do about it. It's a matter for the Insolvency Service".

This reflected the formal policy position that the Treasury would expect to see. But the minister saw the case for something innovative, taking a risk for the public good. The minister despatched the special adviser and me to see the top officials. We said:

"Hang on a minute, this is no ordinary insolvency – these are people on the breadline – families up and down the country in every constituency. There is no one other than government who can clear this up. People will expect it of us. The Government and the DTI will take a huge hit if we fail to act. As for the timing, it couldn't be worse for the families, just before Christmas. What's the media fallout going to be if we don't act?"

These were people putting aside a few quid each week in order to put food on the table and a few toys in the kiddies' christmas stockings. Their prospects were bleak. We knew, we couldn't give any formal Government compensation or intervene in the insolvency process. But there was no way we could walk away either.

We persuaded the Director of Consumer Affairs that we needed to put some official resource into this. He, and his team, played a full part in helping put together the solution. They attended a Saturday Summit organised by the Minister – bringing together policy officials, lawyers, the Administrators of the insolvency, directors of the other Christmas Savings Schemes and representatives of a charity. With the aid of Derek Walpole of the Family Fund we set up a charitable fund. The Charity Commission pulled out all the stops and processed the application in record time for us so we could be up and running – taking donations within a few days.

Our strategy was to combine the resources of the officials in the DTI, the Minister's private office, stakeholder groups and the special advisers to make things happen. We contacted people like ASDA, Tesco, Sainsbury and Morrisons to ask them to put their hands in their pockets – which they did. While the Minister secured £2m from HBOS (the banker to Farepak's parent company whose tough debt repayment policy had aggravated the situation), the policy officials began working out options for a voluntary code and regulatory system. The crucial activity was the special advisers ensuring that we got high levels of parliamentary and media interest - without that there would have been little pressure on the Christmas Savings industry, HBOS, many of our donors or even other ministries and ministers.

We had to get a constant flow of media headlines and stories – this was not something that an official DTI press release would be able to achieve. The Press Office worked closely with the special advisers who could add the colour to the story that would excite the media. The special advisers got the Sun and the Daily Mirror on board and the papers printed things the Government was not able to say.

We also needed constant and consistent pressure from Parliament – again officials could only do so much, arranging ministerial statements and so on. But we used the special advisers to provide detailed briefing for the parliamentary party, ensuring they had facts about the impact on their constituents and encouraging them to raise the issue in the House. This ensured that we got a number of heavily attended Westminster Hall debates. Mr Speaker realised the strength of parliamentary interest and was kind enough to allocate a debate on the floor of the House. This put pressure on the remaining companies in the Christmas Savings Industry.

All that stacked up nicely and it got the Government out of a hole because had that fund not been set up, there would have been a lot of pressure for the Government to intervene on an insolvency, and to regulate the industry. That might have resulted in the industry collapsing and leaving thousands of people without any form of viable savings scheme. It led to the Pomeroy Inquiry into Christmas savings products, the setting up of the Christmas Pre-payments Authority (protecting savings in the schemes) and, of course, to some payment and goods before Christmas. Without the work of the special advisers this would, in my view, not have happened.'

This example shows that special advisers were able to add real value by helping everyone think out of the box. They took on informal, exploratory and unorthodox tasks where official approaches were likely to have floundered. Their flexibility and willingness to take on whatever was needed was critical to the team effort: ministers, an innovative private secretary, officials and special advisers working together to solve a crisis.

ANNEX D – EFFECTIVENESS: THE SKILLS NEEDED

Strategic	Focused on the minister's key priorities, not trying to get involved in everything.
Political	Adding the party political dimension from Parliament, the Party, the media agenda, with other political intelligence.
Professionally experienced	In policy development or media handling, as well as politics.
Creative but practical	Governments start with Manifesto commitments but may need new policy ideas as parliaments progress or an election gets nearer.
Cooperative	With the civil service, and other colleagues, working with not against them.
Analytical	Government is complex and technical and solutions are not easy.
Efficient	Commenting quickly and clearly on papers, parliamentary questions etc avoids creating a blockage or holding up business.
Open	With the civil service and with junior ministers. Sharing knowledge and information leads to better advice and decision making.
Challenging	Constructive questioning of accepted wisdom but never bullying.
Flexible	The day to day business of government is unpredictable. Special advisers have to be ready to provide support on the unexpected as well as the planned.
Loyal and Trustworthy	Loyal to the Government as a whole as well as their Secretary of State, trustworthy and discreet.
Informed and Outward looking	Aware of what is happening inside and outside Whitehall, and accessible to outside interests and expertise.
Committed	Ministers work a 15-18 hour day. Special advisers must be ready to do the same.

ANNEX E – SOME COMMON CIVIL SERVICE AND PARLIAMENTARY TERMINOLOGY

HIERARCHIES

Ministers

The conventional structure for ministerial appointments places ministers in one of three tiers:

- **Cabinet Ministers** - essentially one for each department with two for the Treasury (the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary);
- **Ministers of State** - one, two or occasionally three in each department. These are the most senior roles outside the Cabinet;
- **Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State** - the most junior level. Again there are one, two or three in each Department.

Not all departments follow this nomenclature - the Treasury, for example, has traditionally had posts of Economic Secretary and Financial Secretary (as well as Chief Secretary mentioned above), which are not easy to classify in the conventional structure.

The Senior Civil Service (SCS)

The concept of the Senior Civil Service (SCS) was introduced about 25 years ago. It essentially consists of the Permanent Secretaries and the top three tiers of management (see below) beneath the Permanent Secretary in the central Whitehall departments and central government agencies – just under 5,000 people in total.

The civil service grade structure – a guide to current titles and their roles

The titles used for the different civil service grades have changed over the years. The current terminology is explained below.

Tier 1

The civil service head of a Whitehall department is universally known as the **Permanent Secretary**, invariably shortened to Perm Sec. A couple of the more prestigious departments such as the Treasury may have two people at that level, with the more junior known as the second permanent secretary.

The **Permanent Secretary** is the executive head of department and is responsible for ensuring that the department has the leadership, resources, structures and processes to deliver its responsibilities and support the Secretary of State effectively.

The **Permanent Secretary** is also the department's **Accounting Officer**. Ministers are answerable to Parliament for policy decisions and the actions of their department and its executive agencies. The Accounting Officer is directly accountable to Parliament for the efficient and proper use of funds

allocated by Parliament each year to his or her department.

Tier 2

Staff at tier 2 are currently called **Director General (DG)**. Departments will usually be structured into **groups** covering a particular policy area or corporate service with a **Director General** at the head of each group.

There are likely to be only a handful of DGs in a department. For example, the Home Office currently has 10 covering Crime and Policing, Security and Counter Terrorism, Visas and Immigration, Immigration and International, Communications, Finance and Commercial, Strategy and Delivery, Human Resources, Legal services, Operational Systems Transformation

DGs, along with the Permanent Secretary, are likely to comprise the executive members of the department's management board. Departmental boards also include non-executive members. Traditionally departmental management boards have been chaired by the Permanent Secretary but the 2010 Coalition Government decided that Secretaries of State should chair their departmental board and that other ministers should be members along with the Permanent Secretary, senior officials and non-executive members.

Tier 3

The third tier is **Director**. **Directors** manage a directorate, a smaller, but still large area of the department's policy. So in the Home Office you might expect a Director of Policing, Director of Crime Prevention etc.

Tier 4

The fourth tier is the lowest rung of the Senior Civil Service and called **Deputy Director**, in charge of what in some departments is still called a division. Deputy Directors are likely to be the most usual day to day contact for special advisers because they, and their teams, are responsible for the day to day delivery of particular policy objectives, projects, drafting of consultation documents, legislation etc.

Below the SCS

Below the SCS each department has freedom to decide its own titles. There used to be a hierarchy (in descending order) of Principals, Executive Officers and Clerical Officers, each with their own subdivisions but these are hardly ever used now. 'Grade 6s and Grade 7s' were also commonplace – Grade 7 is the equivalent of Principal. But there are now a range of terms like 'Assistant Directors', 'team leaders', 'team members', 'policy advisers' and so on.

STRUCTURES

Departments vary in their organisational structures but there are some functions that are common to all.

The ministerial private office

Each minister typically has an immediate support team of about five or six officials – double that for most Cabinet Ministers. The team manages the minister's departmental life, notably organising meetings, papers and correspondence, give clear guidance to the department on the minister's preferred working style and commissions the department, on behalf of the minister, to carry out particular pieces of work or provide briefing for visits, debates etc. They also give officials in the department the minister's feedback and comments on papers (usually referred to as submissions) that are prepared for the minister's consideration/decision. The role of private office is two-way – to advise the department of the minister's thinking and priorities; and to advise the minister on how best to get things done within the department

The Secretary of State's private office will be headed by a **Principal Private Secretary** (often referred to as the PPS, a term that is also used for a minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary) usually at Deputy Director level. He or she will be supported by a small number of **Private Secretaries**, usually at Assistant Director level, a **Diary Secretary** who is responsible for managing the Secretary of State's diary and making travel arrangements etc and one or two other support staff. The **Diary Secretary** will liaise with the minister's constituency office, as necessary, on diary matters.

The **Principal Private Secretary** also usually has line management responsibility for the staff who comprise the private offices of other departmental ministers. These will be similarly configured but will have fewer staff and will be headed by a Private Secretary.

The **Principal Private Secretary** may also manage the department's **Parliamentary** section. This team, wherever it sits in the department, is responsible for liaising with House of Commons and House of Lords officials on all departmental parliamentary business – oral and written parliamentary questions, Bills, debates etc.

There may also be a **Correspondence** section to handle all incoming and outgoing letters to ministers from MPs or Lords (**minister's cases**) and the general public on departmental policy. Letters from MPs and Lords are answered by ministers; letters from the general public are usually answered by officials. A Correspondence section will commission draft replies for letters to be answered by ministers and send out final replies within the target dates required of departments.

If departments choose to set up extended ministerial private offices (EMOs) as recently proposed, their structures may differ from the above in some respects but the essentials will remain the same (see Cabinet Office Guidance for Departments)¹³.

Press Office

All departments will have a press office headed at **Director or Deputy Director** level depending on the size of the department (often called **Head of News**). The departmental press office is responsible for providing long and short term press and media handling advice to ministers, preparing and

issuing all departmental press notices, organising and managing press and media briefings on new policy announcements etc, organising and providing support to ministers on all departmental press/media interviews, handling day to day press/media inquiries.

Legal Advisers

Most large departments have a team of lawyers. **Departmental lawyers** provide ministers with legal advice on all departmental issues. They prepare instructions for **Parliamentary Counsel** for the drafting of departmental legislation and instructions to government litigation lawyers (usually **Treasury Solicitors**) or **Treasury Counsel** for court cases in which the department is involved or when senior legal advice is needed on a particular case or policy issue.

The **Office of Parliamentary Counsel** is a government department. Parliamentary Counsel draft all government Bills and liaise with the parliamentary authorities on the printing, tabling etc of Bills and any subsequent government amendments.

Treasury Solicitors (TSol) is a separate government agency which handles most government litigation, representing the Government in court.

Treasury Counsel are experienced and highly regarded legal Counsel who are appointed to a panel by the Attorney General and who may be called on by departmental lawyers to offer expert advice.

PRACTICES

First Day Briefs

Departments will always provide written briefing for new ministers. These are usually referred to as First Day Briefs. They will explain the department, its responsibilities, current key policy issue etc. They will be particularly substantial and extensive when there is a new government and a completely new ministerial team and will set out the department's initial advice on how to give effect to Manifesto commitments. Written briefs will also be provided during the duration of a government for any new minister or Secretary of State. First Day briefs are useful background document for special advisers too.

Red Box

All ministers have a 'red box'. In essence it is a large, heavy and very secure brief case used by ministers to transport all departmental papers to and from home, their parliamentary office or on outside trips.

At the end of each day the minister's private office will normally put all papers that the minister needs to deal with overnight, including papers from special advisers, in the 'red box'. Private Secretaries will indicate on submissions from officials what action is required of the minister, attach any relevant papers and draw the minister's attention to any points of particular significance. They will also prioritise the papers. Papers are returned to private office in the red box the next morning. Private Secretaries will action the papers as the minister has indicated. The 'red box' ensures that papers are transported securely and also helps ensure that papers do not go astray and can be dealt with quickly and easily both by ministers and private office.

Bill teams

For a large piece of government legislation, departments will often set up small Bill teams of officials, headed usually at Deputy Director level, to manage and provide support to ministers on the drafting of a Bill and its passage through Parliament.

PARLIAMENTARY PROCESSES AND PEOPLE

Parliamentary Private Secretary

A backbench MP who is a minister's personal assistant in the House of Commons providing advice and help on parliamentary business. The Parliamentary Private Secretary is also often referred to as the PPS.

Written Parliamentary Questions

Large departments will receive dozens of parliamentary questions for written answer each day from MPs and peers. The convention is that questions from MPs should be answered within seven days and from peers within 14 days. MPs, but not peers, can specify a day by which they would like a reply – a **named day question**. They must give at least 2 days notice of the 'named day'. Questions are normally answered by the responsible departmental minister or if the question is from a peer by the department's Lords minister. The Secretary of State will answer questions from the shadow Secretary of State, from a former Cabinet minister or a Privy Councillor or on major policy issues.

Oral Questions

Question Time – **oral questions** – is an opportunity for MPs and Members of the House of Lords to question government ministers about matters for which they are responsible. These questions are asked at the start of business in both chambers. A department usually has an oral question session once a month. MPs and peers must give notice of questions but they and other MPs and peers may also ask follow up questions to the main question.

Prime Minister's Questions – PMQs

Departments may also be asked by NO 10 for briefing for the weekly Prime Minister's question time (PMQs) on any topical departmental issues.

Written Ministerial Statements –WMS

Ministers are expected to tell Parliament directly of new policies, new publications, new expenditure or other significant new developments for which they and their department are responsible. A ministerial statement is the most usual mechanism for doing so. It will often be accompanied by a departmental press notice.

Parliamentary Guidance says that

Written ministerial statements are often used to provide:

- *Detailed information and statistics from the government*
- *The publication of reports by government agencies*
- *Findings of reviews and inquiries and the government's response*
- *Financial and statistical information*
- *Procurement issues*
- *Procedure and policy initiatives of government departments.*

Oral statements

Ministers – usually the Secretary of State in the Commons – make oral statements to Parliament in the case of major incidents, policies and actions about which MPs or Lords are likely to want to ask questions. Examples might include a major natural or other disaster overseas in which British nationals are involved; sustained street riots or violence; the outcome of a major public inquiry; a decision to close hospitals or other public service provision; a major new policy proposal not already part of the Government's planned programme and expenditure. The giving of a statement needs to be agreed by the Speaker. It is usually about 30 minutes long and is made at the start of the Parliamentary day immediately after the day's scheduled oral questions.

Urgent questions

If something has happened which an MP believes requires an immediate answer from a government minister, and the minister is not already giving an oral statement, they may apply to ask an urgent question. If the Speaker (or in the House of Lords the Lord Speaker) agrees that the matter is urgent and important, the question will be asked at the end of question time. The minister is required to attend and give a response – the equivalent of an oral statement.

Bills

There are several steps in parliament's consideration of proposed government legislation. Bills can start either in the House of Commons or the House of Lords. The stages are:

- **Introduction and First Reading** – Largely a formality and no debate.
- **Second Reading** – focusses on the principles and key objectives of the legislation rather than the detail of the drafting. The Secretary of State (in the Commons) will normally make the opening speech and the relevant minister will make the closing speech.
- **Committee stage** – In the Commons this stage is normally taken outside the main chamber of the House by a small cross party group of selected MPs. In the Lords it is taken in the main chamber. MPs or peers consider each clause and schedule of the Bill and may propose amendments which are debated and voted on. The Government too may propose amendments.

- **Report stage** – This stage is taken in the main chamber of each House. The Bill, as amended in Committee, is considered by MPs and Peers. Further amendments can be made, including by the Government. Amendments are debated and voted on.
- **Third Reading** – In the Commons, the Third Reading Debate on the Bill is usually short, and limited to what is actually in the Bill, as amended at Committee and Report stages. In the Lords amendments can be made at Third Reading provided the issue has not been fully considered and voted on during either Committee or Report stage. When Third Reading ends the Bill goes to the Other House for consideration or if both Houses have considered and agreed it goes for Royal Assent.

[More information about parliamentary processes can be found on the Parliamentary website – www.parliament.uk]

ANNEX F – USEFUL READING AND VIEWING MATERIAL

Research and External Advice:

Institute for Government, *Special Advisers and Ministerial Effectiveness* (http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/special%20adviser%20research%20paper%20final_0.pdf)

Institute for Government (2010), *Oiling the Machine: Thoughts for Special Advisers Working in Government* (http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/Oiling_the_Machine.pdf)

Institute for Government (2012), *Leading a Government Department – the first 100 days* (<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/First%20100%20days%20final%20web.pdf>)

Ben Young and Robert Hazell, *Special Advisers: who they are, what they do and why they matter* (Hart Publishing, Summer 2014)

Government Publications:

Cabinet Office (2010a), *Model Contract for Special Advisers*, (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62452/special-advisers-model-contract_0.pdf)

Cabinet Office (2010b), *Ministerial Code*, (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61402/ministerial-code-may-2010.pdf)

Cabinet Office (2010c), *Code of Conduct for Special Advisers*, (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62451/special-advisers-code-of-conduct.pdf)

Parliamentary Publications:

Public Administration Select Committee, *Special Advisers: Boon or Bane?*, 2001, HC 293. (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmpubadm/293/29302.htm>)

Public Administration Select Committee, *Special Advisers in the Thick of It*, 2012, HC 134. (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmpubadm/134/13402.htm>)

Diaries, Biographies, Blogs:

Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting To Transform British Public Services*, (Methuen 2007).

Damian McBride, *Power Trip: A Decade of Plot, Policy, and Spin*, (Biteback 2013).

Lance Price, *The Spin Doctor's Diary*, (Hodder & Stroughton 2005).

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The Constitution Unit at UCL is the UK's foremost independent research body on constitutional change. It is part of the UCL School of Public Policy.

Robert Hazell founded the Constitution Unit in 1995 to do detailed research and planning on constitutional reform in the UK. The Unit has done work on every aspect of the UK's constitutional reform programme: devolution in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions, reform of the House of Lords, electoral reform, parliamentary reform, the new Supreme Court, the conduct of referendums, freedom of information, the Human Rights Act. The Unit is the only body in the UK to cover the whole of the constitutional reform agenda.

The Unit conducts academic research on current or future policy issues, often in collaboration with other universities and partners from overseas. We organise regular programmes of seminars and conferences. We do consultancy work for government and other public bodies. We act as special advisers to government departments and parliamentary committees. We work closely with government, parliament and the judiciary. All our work has a sharply practical focus, is concise and clearly written, timely and relevant to policy makers and practitioners.

The Unit has always been multi disciplinary, with academic researchers drawn mainly from politics and law. We also have people with public service backgrounds, and welcome secondments from the public service. We maintain a forward-looking research programme which covers all aspects of the constitution.

The Unit publishes a newsletter, The Monitor, three times a year and many of our publications are available to download from our website. For regular updates, please join our mailing list by completing the online form.

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