

Research Note: Former Special Advisers in Cabinet, 1979-2013

Executive Summary

- Sixteen special advisers have gone on to become Cabinet Ministers. This means that of the 492 special advisers listed in the Constitution Unit database in the period 1979-2010, only 3% entered Cabinet.
- Seven Conservative party Cabinet members were formerly special advisers.
 - Four Conservative special advisers went on to become Cabinet Ministers in the 1979-1997 period of Conservative governments.
 - Three former Conservative special advisers currently sit in the Coalition Cabinet: David Cameron, George Osborne and Jonathan Hill.
- Eight Labour Cabinet members between 1997-2010 were former special advisers.
 - Five of the eight former special advisers brought into the Labour Cabinet between 1997-2010 had been special advisers to Tony Blair or Gordon Brown.
 - Jack Straw entered Cabinet in 1997 having been a special adviser before 1979.
- One Liberal Democrat Cabinet member, Vince Cable, was previously a special adviser to a Labour minister.
- The Coalition Cabinet of January 2013 currently has four members who were once special advisers.
 - Also attending Cabinet meetings is another former special adviser: Oliver Letwin as Minister of State for Policy.
- There are traditionally 21 or 22 Ministers who sit in Cabinet.
- Unsurprisingly, the number and proportion of Cabinet Ministers who were previously special advisers generally increases the longer governments go on.
- The number of Cabinet Ministers who were formerly special advisers was greatest at the end of the Labour administration (1997-2010) when seven of the Cabinet Ministers were former special advisers.
- The proportion of Cabinet made up of former special advisers was greatest in Gordon Brown's Cabinet when almost one-third (30.5%) of the Cabinet were former special advisers.
- David Cameron and George Osborne are the first special advisers to go on to hold the offices of Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer.
 - Their counterparts in Opposition, Ed Miliband and Ed Balls are also former special advisers.
- The fact that former special advisers remain a minority on the front benches of both parties is a useful corrective to any suggestion that they have come to dominate politics. The success of former special advisers in reaching the highest offices in both the Conservative and Labour parties prompts interesting questions about the skills, experience and other benefits that they gain from their period working in government.

1. Introduction

1.1. This note can be related to three distinct arguments that are commonly made about special advisers.

1.2. The first argument suggests that being a 'spad' is an emerging career path for professional politicians who have had very little experience of work outside politics. The argument usually sketches a path that includes a period as special adviser that is highly advantageous when later seeking elected office. Former special advisers who have obtained elected office are often referred to in discussions about the professionalisation of politics. Sometimes a normative claim is made that the professionalisation of politics is an undesirable development, resulting in politicians with less experience of 'real life' outside of political jobs.

1.3. Secondly, comment has been made about the apparent success of ex-special advisers in securing the top offices in British parties. The present Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Chancellor and his shadow were all special advisers. After Ed Miliband was elected Leader of the Labour party, Philip Cowley noted the brevity of the party leaders' experience as MPs relative to their predecessors. He went on to argue that the career routes of senior politicians in the UK appear to be changing, with a possible fast track to the very top for those who have followed the path of the 'career politician'.¹ A period as a special adviser is often included in this career path.

1.4. A third argument has to do with the utility of a period as a special adviser when later becoming a Cabinet minister. Nearly all special advisers serve Cabinet Ministers and their role has been described from their inception as being an 'extra pair of hands, ears and eyes'² for their Minister. The proximity of this role gives them insight into what is required of an effective Cabinet Minister; this insight is unavailable in any other job. Lord Adonis wants to encourage this apprenticeship function of special advisers: 'However maligned the office of SpAd may be, it is an excellent preparation – in many ways an apprenticeship – for ministerial office. Apprenticeships are a good thing, we need more of them in all fields of employment.'³

1.5. If there really is an emerging political career path, including a fast track for former special advisers to the front bench, then Adonis and those who agree with him would presumably welcome such a development. Others may think this leads to a poverty of non-political experience in government. This note is meant to inform these debates and others by quantifying and identifying the Cabinet ministers who had previous experience of being a special adviser.

2. Methodology

2.1. To produce the charts that illustrate the numbers and proportion of Cabinet Ministers with special adviser experience, three sources were used. The first source was the list of Cabinet Ministers from 1979-2005 in *British Political Facts*.⁴ The second source was a set of archived pages of the Cabinet Office website, listing Cabinet members and attendees from 2005 to 2010 (and accessed through a web archive, the wayback machine).⁵ The final source was the webpage about the Cabinet on the Cabinet Office website.⁶

2.2. If an individual was listed as a member of Cabinet (as opposed to simply attending meetings), then she was included in the total number of Cabinet members.

¹ Cowley, P. *Arise, Novice Leader! The Continuing Rise of the Career Politician in Britain*, (2012) *Politics*, 32: 31–38

² Wilson, H, *The Governance of Britain*, (1976) pp. 203

³ Adonis, A, Foreword. *The Challenge of Being a Minister* by Riddell et al. (2011), Institute for Government

⁴ Butler & Butler, *British Political Facts*, (2011), Palgrave MacMillan

⁵ http://wayback.archive.org/web/20050615000000*/http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page2988.asp

⁶ Accessed 16th November 2012 and 21st January 2012

2.3. Only significant Cabinet reshuffles served as data points in the time series below. A significant reshuffle is defined here as a reshuffle that changes the number of Ministers in Cabinet, the entrance or exit of a former special adviser, or the only reshuffle with more than two changes in that year. This means that mini reshuffles of one or two ministers that might take place after a resignation did not serve as new data points. Significant reshuffles occurred annually or less frequently, and the month has been included in the label to make clear which reshuffle provides the new data point.

2.4. This note uses the Constitution Unit special adviser database (which collates all written ministerial statements and government data releases on special advisers from 1979 to 2013) and compares the list of Cabinet Ministers with this list of special advisers since 1979 to identify former special advisers in Cabinet. Additionally, a list of special advisers found in Andrew Blick's book *People who live in the Dark*⁷ from 1974 provides a final source of comparison for the Labour era. The use of these sources enabled us to identify Cabinet members who were previously special advisers.

2.5. One problem posed when trying to decide whether a Minister is a former special adviser for our purposes is that the special adviser role has evolved over time. This means that people who did work similar to special advisers or who are often thought of in the same bracket are not included in our analysis. For example, David Willetts is described in a Financial Times blog titled *Rise of the backroom boys* as a 'former adviser'⁸ to Lawson and Thatcher in the Financial Times, but has not entered our database since he was not identified as a special adviser in any written ministerial statement over the period. He may have been a 'policy adviser' or something similar, rather than a special adviser.

2.6 The fact that this note confines itself to special advisers and Cabinet Ministers limits the way in which it can inform the debate about the professionalisation of politics. There are many other roles that involve similar work to a special adviser. Nick Clegg is an example of a politician who took one such role before making his way to a very senior position in his party and into Cabinet. His role as a policy adviser and speech writer to Leon Brittan at the European Commission appears very similar to the work done by special advisers in Whitehall.

2.7 Once the special advisers who went on to become members of Cabinet had been identified, the following analysis was conducted.

⁷ Blick, A, *People who live in the Dark*, (2004)

⁸ Barker, A, *Rise of the backroom boys: Cameron first special adviser to become Prime Minister*, Financial Times, May 13 2010, <http://blogs.ft.com/westminster/2010/05/rise-of-the-back-room-boys-cameron-first-prime-minister-to-rise-from-tory-secretariat/#axzz2COZrLFLC>

3. Statistics

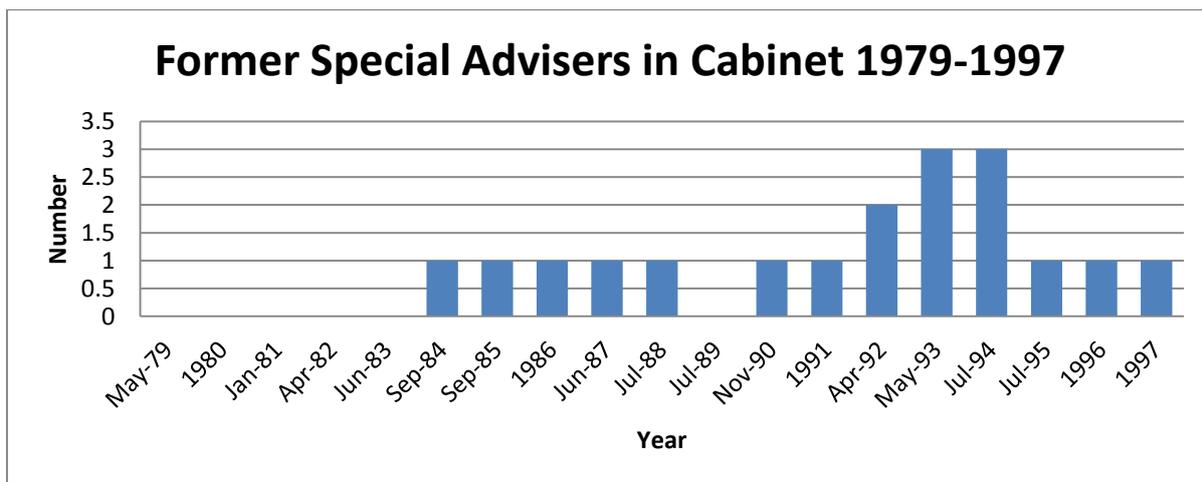


Figure 1: Number of former Special Advisers in the Cabinet 1979-1997

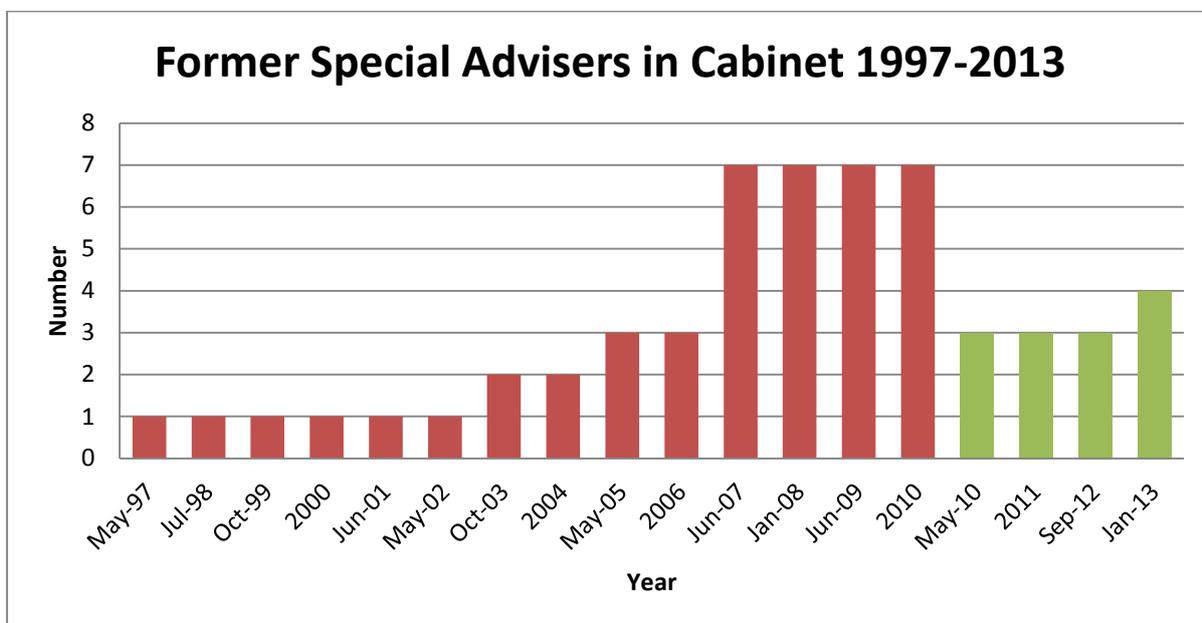


Figure 2: Number of former Special Advisers in the Cabinet 1997-2013

3.1. The Conservatives had a maximum of three former special advisers in John Major’s Cabinet between May 1993 and the summer of 1995. Major’s loss of support in 1995 accounts for the loss of two former special advisers.

3.2. Under Labour (1997-2010) there was an initial low explained by spending 18 years out of office and a very small number of special advisers before 1979. The number of special advisers in the Cabinet increased to its highest level yet: 7 in 2009-2010. A big jump in the numbers of former special advisers in Cabinet came with Brown’s first Cabinet in 2007.

3.3. The advent of the Coalition saw the reduction of the number of former special advisers to just three, though the first new addition was made in January 2013 bringing the current number of special advisers in Cabinet to four.

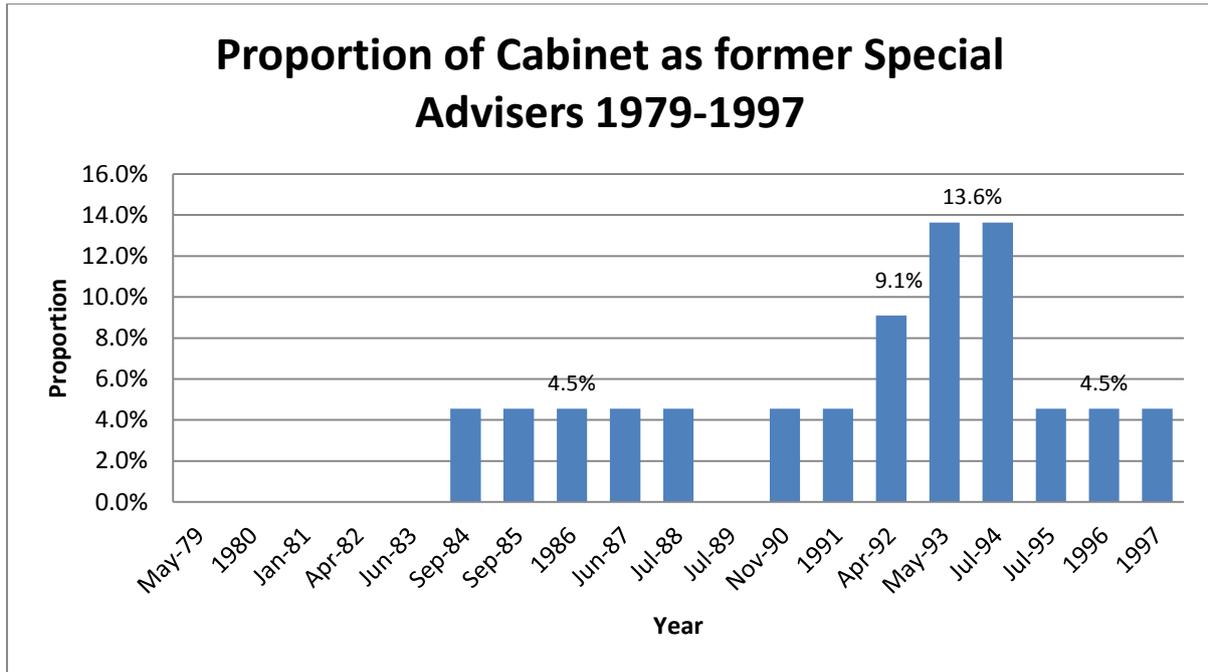


Figure 3: Proportion of Cabinet who were former special advisers 1979-1997

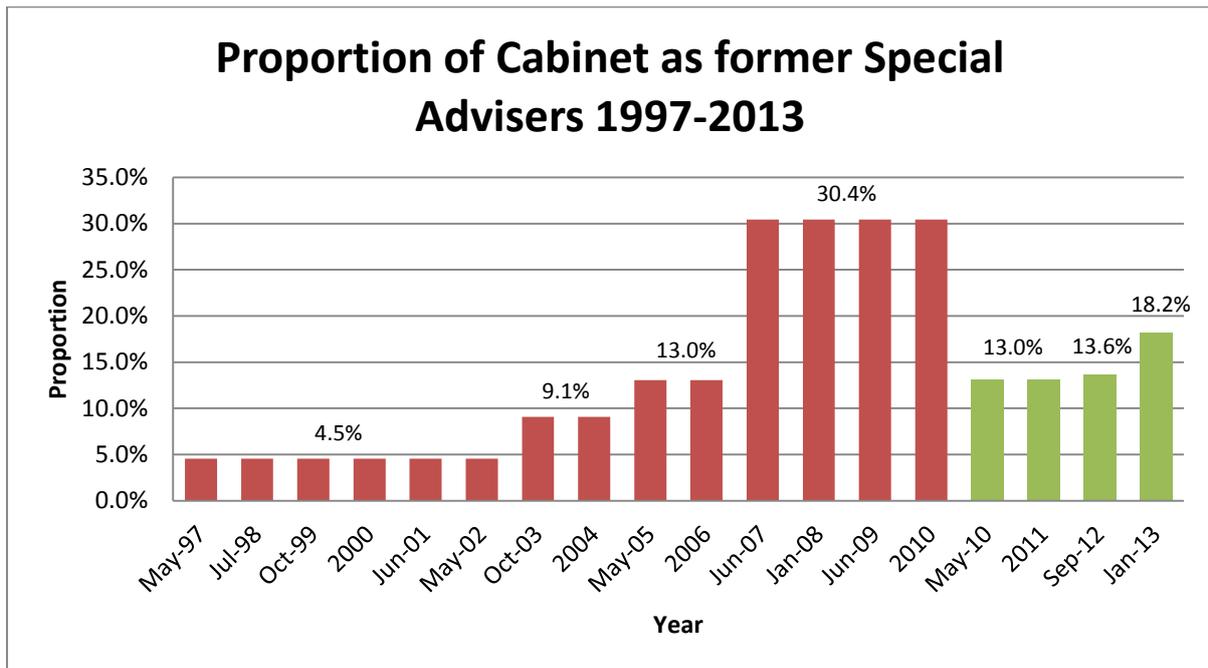


Figure 4: Proportion of Cabinet who were former special advisers 1997-2013

3.4. Looking at the numbers proportionally, the proportion of former special advisers in Cabinet was as high as 12% under John Major. Under Labour, there was an initial decrease to be expected with so few special advisers existing pre-1979 and also being 18 years out of government. The proportion of Cabinet made up of former special advisers under Blair reached similar levels to those seen under Major: 13% of Blair’s Cabinets after the 2005 election were special advisers.

3.5. There was a marked increase in the proportion when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister. It is notable that under Brown nearly one third of those in Cabinet were former special advisers.

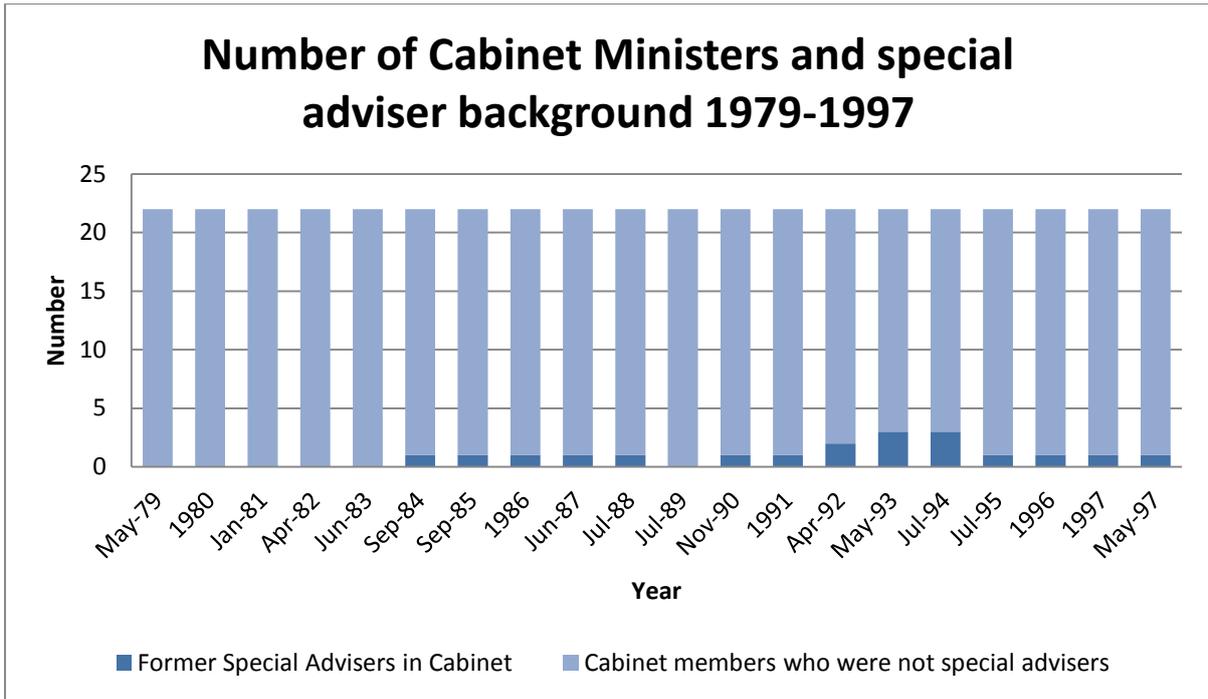


Figure 5: 1979-1997 Cabinet composition by special adviser background

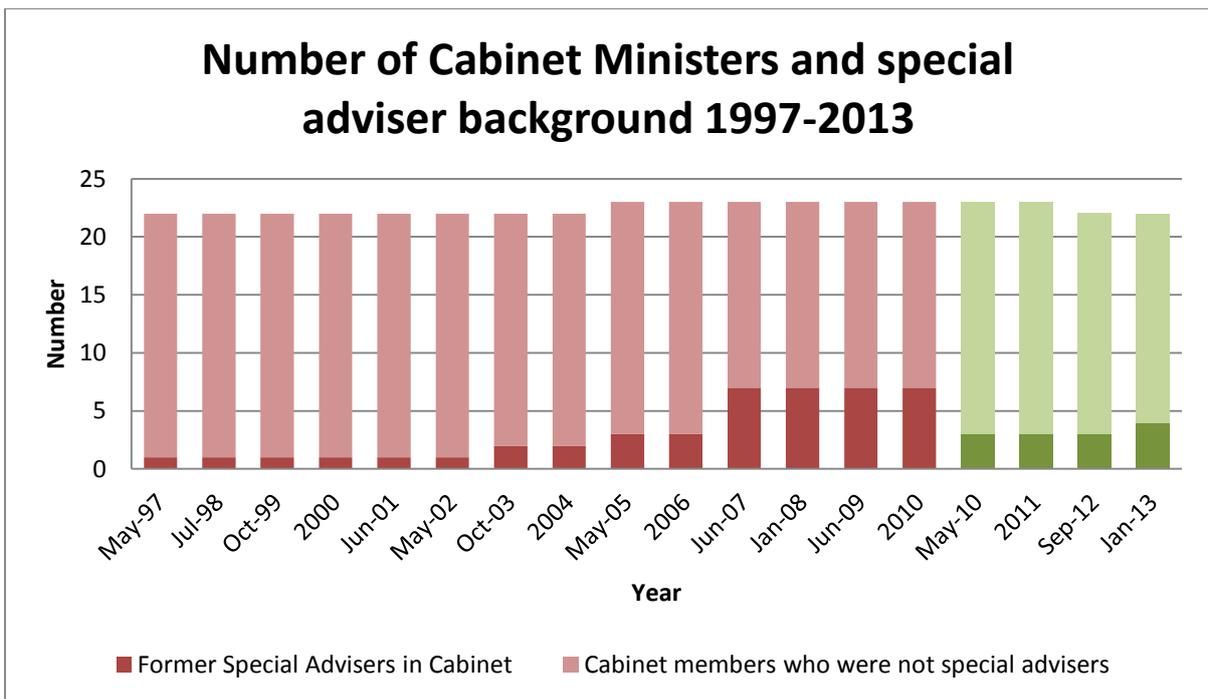


Figure 6: 1997-2012 Cabinet composition by special adviser background

3.6. Because the number of Cabinet members changes slightly, it is worth using a graph like the one above to see how the composition of the Cabinet changes in absolute, rather than proportional terms. Figure 6 makes clear that the slight change to the proportion of Cabinet made up of former special advisers in September 2012 was due to the reduction in the overall size of Cabinet rather than a former special adviser leaving the Cabinet.

4. Personalities

Name	Entered Cabinet	Experience as Special Adviser
David Young ⁹	1984 as MWP (Left: 1989)	1979-1982 to Keith Joseph at DI 1981-1982 to Patrick Jenkin at DES
Richard Ryder	1990 as CWOC (Left: 1995)	1979-1981 to Margaret Thatcher at PM
Michael Portillo	1992 as CS at HMT	1979-1981 to David Howell at Den 1983 to Cecil Parkinson at DTI
John Redwood	1993 as SoS at WO (Left: 1995)	1983-1984 to John Moore at HMT 1983-1985 to Margaret Thatcher at PM
Total Number: 4	* = attending	

Figure 5: Former special advisers in Conservative Cabinets 1979-1997

4.1. In the Conservative governments of 1979-97, the first former special adviser to enter the Cabinet was David Young, who was formerly Director of the Centre for Policy Studies. He was elevated to the peerage in August 1984 and entered the Cabinet as Minister Without Portfolio (MWP) one month later. He was the only former special adviser to have entered the Cabinet this way (the rest were all MPs) until Andrew Adonis in 2009.

Name	Entered Cabinet	Experience as Special Adviser
Jack Straw	1997 at HO	1974-1976 to Barbara Castle in DHSS; 1976-1977 to Peter Shore in DoE
Hilary Benn	2003 as SoS for DFID	1997-1999 to David Blunkett in DfEE
David Miliband	2005 as Min in DCLG ¹⁰	1997-2001 to Tony Blair as PM
Ed Balls	2007 as SoS in DCSF	1997-2004 to Gordon Brown in HMT
Edward Miliband	2007 as Min for CO	1997-2005 to Gordon Brown in HMT
Andy Burnham	2007 as CS in HMT	1998-2001 to Chris Smith in DCMS
James Purnell	2007 as SoS in DCMS (Left: 2009)	1997-2001 to Tony Blair as PM
Andrew Adonis	2009 as SoS in DTP	1998-2005 to Tony Blair as PM
Total Number: 8		

Figure 7: Former special advisers in Labour Cabinets 1997-2010

4.2. It appears Jack Straw was the only special adviser from the previous Labour government before 1979 who was in the Cabinet at the beginning of the Labour government in 1997.¹¹ Seven Labour special advisers of the post-1997 cohort made it into the Cabinet. Hilary Benn was the first of the new generation of special advisers to become a Cabinet Minister.

4.3. One interesting observation is that the special advisers brought into Cabinet served the dominant figures of New Labour. Most (five out of seven) special advisers who became Cabinet ministers before the end of the Labour government did so after serving as special advisers to Gordon Brown or Tony Blair. It should also be

⁹ While sometimes not thought of as a special adviser, Lord Young was identified as one in *HC Deb 04 February 1982 vol 17 c195W*.

¹⁰ Ministers of State are not normally members of the Cabinet but this case is exceptional. David Miliband took on the brief for Communities and Local Govt and entered the Cabinet but was not given the title of Secretary of State. This was because John Prescott was Deputy Prime Minister and his office had responsibility for the area.

¹¹ There is a lack of comprehensive lists of special advisers in the years 1974-1979, so we have been unable to confirm whether or not any other former Labour special advisers became Cabinet ministers in the early (New) Labour Cabinets.

noted that Hilary Benn was a special adviser to David Blunkett, another 'big beast' of the early New Labour era. It seems that special advisers to more significant members of Cabinet went on to become Cabinet members and 'big beasts' themselves.

Name	Entered Cabinet	Special Adviser
David Cameron	2010 as PM	1992-1993 to Stephen Dorrell in HMT 1993-1994 to Michael Howard in HO
George Osborne	2010 as Chancellor at HMT	1995-1997 to Douglas Hogg in MAFF
Jonathan Hill	2013 as Leader of Lords & Chanc. Duchy of Lancaster	1986-1989 to Ken Clarke at DE, DTI then DH; 1991-1994 to John Major in PM
Vince Cable	2010 as SoS for BIS	1970s to John Smith in DTI
Total Number: 4		

Figure 8: Former special advisers in Coalition cabinets 2010-present

4.4. Three ministers in Cabinet at the beginning of the Coalition government had been special advisers in the past. The first new addition to the ranks of former special advisers was Lord Hill of Oareford who was promoted to be Leader of the House of Lords and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in January 2013.

4.5. One very significant development with the Coalition government is that former special advisers now control two jobs at the top of the Cabinet. The first former special advisers to obtain those posts: David Cameron as Prime Minister and George Osborne as Chancellor.

4.6. Vince Cable previously worked for John Smith, a Labour Minister. He is the only example of a Cabinet minister who had worked for a different party as a special adviser to the one he represented in Cabinet.

5. The Future

5.1. The number of former special advisers in Cabinet dropped in 2010. That is no surprise: the Conservative party had been thirteen years out of office and the Liberal Democrat party in its current guise had never been in government. Moreover, the institution of special adviser is a relatively new one: while it is true that many British governments have had advisers in some form or other, special advisers only become institutionalised in the last quarter of the 20th century.

5.2. Now though, special advisers are firmly entrenched in the architecture of British government. Even with the drop, there are already more former special advisers in the current Cabinet than there ever were under the last Conservative administration. So one question which arises is: will more special advisers be appointed to the Cabinet?

5.3. It seems likely that there will be no shortage of former special advisers. As the Constitution Unit has written in a recent blog post *The latest special adviser reshuffle*, there are more special advisers now than ever before (more than the previous record of 85 set in 2005, and as many as 90).¹² This record was set despite an initial commitment to reduce and keep down the numbers of special advisers. This increase is commonly explained by an argument that effective Coalition government requires more special advisers.

5.4. There will therefore be an increasing number of former special advisers from which future Cabinets can select their special advisers. However Coalition special advisers would not expect appointment during the current five year Coalition if they sought election. Even the exceptional Ed Miliband entered Cabinet two years after his stint as a special adviser. When forecasting the near term influence of special advisers in Cabinet, one has to look to other pools of special advisers.

Former special advisers among MPs

5.5. As it took eight years for the first Labour special adviser to make it into the Cabinet, it seems very unlikely that the current cohort of special advisers will make it into the next Cabinet immediately following the election in 2015. There is another source of former special adviser Cabinet candidates, however: current MPs who were special advisers in a previous administration. It would be worth finding out how many Conservative special advisers from 1979-1997 went on to become MPs.

Shadow Cabinets

5.6. Moving to the medium term, beyond the next election, one can look at the alternative government, the Shadow Cabinet, and see how many former special advisers populate that. Currently, eight former special advisers are part of the Shadow Cabinet. Ed Miliband, Ed Balls, Andy Burnham and Hilary Benn, who were all special advisers, have been in Cabinet before. But Owen Smith, Stewart Wood, Liz Kendall and Michael Dugher are new additions to the Labour front bench who were previously special advisers. A return to Labour's front bench for David Miliband would swell the number of former special advisers even further.

5.7. It should be no surprise that special advisers retain their proportional significance on Labour's frontbench. The proportion of former special advisers attending the Labour Shadow Cabinet (29%) is similar to the makeup of Cabinet during Brown's premiership. Some additional support for the argument that special advisers are now most likely to obtain the most powerful jobs is found in the facts that four former special advisers contested the Labour leadership election among five candidates in 2010 and Ed Miliband and Ed Balls control the two 'top jobs'.

¹² Honeyman, M, *The latest special adviser reshuffle*, Constitution Unit blog, October 23 2012, <http://constitution-unit.com/2012/10/23/the-latest-special-adviser-reshuffle/>

The balance between parties

5.8. At the moment there is an imbalance in the number of former special advisers between the parties, brought on because of the rise in the number of special advisers under New Labour. Major's administration employed under 40 at any one time, while Blair's employed at its height 85. Since the rise in special adviser numbers has continued under the Coalition despite an initial reduction, the balance will continue to change into the future. The reservoirs of former special advisers will continue to grow.

Hostility to special advisers as a political asset

5.9. Looking long term, it is not certain that the continued increase in special advisers rebalancing will lead to further dominance of the Conservative front bench by former special advisers. Party attitudes towards special advisers may differ – the Coalition parties may not view former special advisers in Cabinet as positively as Labour. That is, there may be differences between the parties in terms of the experience that they value when selecting frontbenchers. There may be political mileage in being seen by the public to reject 'career politicians' and favour those with non-political experience in selecting Cabinet members. Cameron pursued this kind of presentation with an open invitation to political novices to join his party's list of candidates before the 2010 election.¹³ Party attitudes to special advisers have changed before and could change again in the future, perhaps if and when single-party government returns.

6. Conclusion

6.1. It seems safe to conclude that the influence of former special advisers' over Cabinet, in numerical terms and in terms of political power, will not diminish over the coming years. Confidence in this conclusion ought to be increased by observation of the Shadow Cabinet. However, the fact that they are still in a minority on the frontbenches of both parties is a useful corrective to any suggestion that they have come to dominate politics.

6.2. Their numbers may continue to increase somewhat but it is by no means certain that 'career politicians', at least those with special adviser experience, will end up dominating politics. It was seen before the 2010 election with Cameron's open invitation and pledges to cap the number of special advisers; the very fact of their existence and their greater visibility in lieu of politicians with real world experience can prompt reactions against them.

6.3. The fact they currently remain a minority in Cabinet requires those who posit and criticise the professionalisation of politics and the narrowing of experience to make a more nuanced argument. The current Cabinet is a long way from being made up exclusively of former special advisers (though further work must be done on how many had jobs *similar* to special advisers). Proponents of the professionalisation thesis might then refer to the power wielded by special advisers. They might be outnumbered, but hold jobs with the most significant powerbase and influence Cabinet in that respect.

6.4. If we accept that former special advisers have come to hold great power in Cabinet, then an appropriate question to ask is: what is it about being a special adviser helps in gaining the positions of power on frontbenches? Lord Adonis might be correct in that serving an apprenticeship as a special adviser makes an individual a better minister, but it is doubtful that the prospect of being a more competent minister alone would persuade someone's colleagues in the party to grant them high office. Their success is more likely to be due to bonds formed and status acquired within the party hierarchy and the political skills acquired whilst accompanying the Minister under intense scrutiny in government.

¹³ McSmith, A, *Cameron invites political novices to join the Tory candidates' list*, The Independent, 25 May 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-invites-political-novices-to-join-the-tory-candidates-list-1690407.html>