

The role of special advisers should be clarified and there must be more transparency about their work

*The seemingly nebulous and underhand role of special advisers has featured prominently in many of the government's recent scandals – most recently in the case of Adam Smith and the handling of the News Corps bid for BSkyB. **Martin Smith** argues that the problem is not their existence per se, but a lack of clarity about what they do and transparency about how they do it.*



Since special advisers were first introduced in the 1970s they have regularly hit the headlines. Under Margaret Thatcher, special advisers were seen as a mechanism for providing the prime minister with advice to counter her departmental ministers. Ultimately this led to a clash between her adviser Alan Walters and the Chancellor Nigel Lawson resulting in Lawson's resignation. Under Blair special advisers were seen as developing an alternative civil service that engendered a government. Special advisers were often the frontline troops in the battle between Blair and Brown fighting their war by proxy. Two of Brown's special advisers Charlie Wheelen and Damien McBride had to resign because of their activities in releasing different types of information.

Special advisers are seen often as blocking the civil service or over politicising government. At the same time the lack of special advisers in Number 10 is seen a factor of the 'omnishambles' of the coalition government. It is argued that by lacking sufficient political antennae in Number 10 policy mistakes have been allowed to happen.

Special advisers were recently back in the news again with the resignation of Adam Smith who, as Jeremy Hunt's special adviser, was forced to take the blame for inappropriate contacts with News International at a time when the minister was acting in a 'quasi-judicial' role. Within this context, the Public Administration Committee is undertaking an inquiry into special advisers because they seem to be a recurrent problem within the British polity.

Special advisers do raise a number of issues but generally the questions they raise are more to do with the overall operation of British government than the role and activity of special advisers per se. In a sense, it is not the bad examples that we need to examine but the everyday operations of ministers and their advisers. What is clear is that it has been easy to blame special advisers when things go wrong.

Special advisers have a particular, but ill-defined, role in government. It can range from being bag carriers and door openers (or famously taking the empty yoghurt pot from Peter Mandelson) to being people who are right at the centre of No.10 policy and presentation as in the case of Alastair Campbell or Steve Hilton. Often they can be a key mechanism in supporting the process of government by ensuring that the wishes of ministers are known within the department and in enabling a minister to have access to a wider range of advice than would be the case if there was a simple reliance on the civil service.

The problem is not the existence of special advisers but a lack of clarity about what they do and transparency about how they do it. We have to be clear that special advisers are patronage, and not open, appointments and therefore the minister has to be responsible for their appointment and their role. At the same time they are working within government and employed as temporary civil servants which means that the Permanent Secretary should have some oversight into their activities. There are suggestions that special advisers could be paid for by a separate fund making them party employees rather than temporary civil servants. Such an arrangement would blur further the lines of accountability and effectively increase their autonomy.

Already we have seen that one of the issues with special advisers is that they provide ministers with deniability. It was the defence of both Gordon Brown and Jeremy Hunt in the case of Damon McBride and

Adam Smith respectively. The Ministers claimed that they did not know or authorise the activities of the special adviser and so it was the adviser who took the blame. Of course, this position is untenable. Special advisers are the ministers eyes and ears, they are there to do his or her bidding and they have no independent existence.

For minister's to deny their responsibility is actually to undermine the system of special advisers; it places the special advisers in an indefinable space and creates the lack of clarity about their quasi-official status. The position needs to be that special advisers are an adjunct to the minister. They are there to work for the minister and the minister is responsible for their actions. An adviser is responsible to the government as a whole in the way the minister is bound by collective responsibility.

The other issue that is frequently raised in relation to special advisers is the numbers in government. There is a widely shared view that under the Blair government there were too many. And, of course, with too many there is the danger of a shadow civil service; which would be an ad hoc shift to a more politicised system of policy advice.

Clearly, the growth in special advisers in Number 10 under Blair gave the prime minister a policy capacity that had not previously existed and that created the potential for conflict with departments and departmental officials. Yet, the number of special advisers in the British system is low compared to other Westminster-like systems. Indeed, in a way the issue is not numbers; it is in defining the role of special advisers and realising that it may be appropriate to have more advisers in the Home Office than in DEFRA.

We need to do get away from the hyperbole surrounding special advisers. They are not Svengalis or a parallel civil service. But, there does need to be more clarity about their roles and more transparency about their work. They provide a useful role in providing ministers with a wider range of advice than the traditional civil service. Like much else within the British polity, they have developed in an ad hoc way without any reflection about where they sit within the Whitehall machine.

Yet the problems when they occur are usually problems of behaviour rather than rules and it is bad behaviour that grabs attention. Moreover, in most cases the issues of controversy have been around external media advice rather than policy advice. The vast majority of special advisers get on with their work quietly and work well within departments with both ministers and officials. If we had more transparency about their work there would probably be less controversy, and politicians and the media could look for someone else to blame.

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