

Policy ‘tsars’: Time for action to ensure propriety and effectiveness

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*Policy ‘tsars’ are public appointments but neither the Cabinet Office nor the Commissioner for Public Appointments seem willing to introduce a code of practice to secure propriety and effectiveness. To fill this gap, **Ruth Levitt** and **William Solesbury** have drafted a [simple code](#). Among other things, it calls for more formality in selection and appointment processes, greater diversity in the appointees, and for a final, fully evidenced and argued report to be the norm.*

Despite Ministers’ commitment to more ‘open policy making’ by greater outsourcing of policy advice, first stated in the *Civil Service Reform Plan* of July 2012 and reiterated since, they remain willfully blind to the role of ‘tsars’, whom they appoint to advise them. Our [earlier research](#) revealed the astonishing growth in such appointments: over 300 since 1997 and more than 100 of those by Coalition Ministers. Even the scandals surrounding their appointment of Emma Harrison, Adrian Beecroft and James Caan [seem not to disturb them](#).

What is needed is a simple code of practice to secure propriety and effectiveness, analogous to the codes that govern every other source of expert advice to Ministers, like Spads, scientific advisers, consultants, advisory committees, inquiries or consultations. ‘Tsars’ are public appointments but neither the Cabinet Office nor the Commissioner for Public Appointments seem willing to introduce such a code. To fill this gap we have drafted [a simple code](#) ourselves, advised by a number of former tsars, civil servants who worked with them, journalists and academics who observe the ways of Whitehall. It was launched on 15 October.

In the code we seek to address issues of both propriety and effectiveness. Regarding propriety, we call for more formality in selection and appointment processes, with oversight by a senior responsible official; clarity about remuneration; assessment of conflicts of interest; written terms of reference; greater diversity in the appointees; and a commitment to publicise tsar appointments, to publish their reports and to respond formally to them.

Regarding effectiveness, we propose that more thought to job and person specifications will help to identify candidates with relevant experience or expertise; that tsars be encouraged to be open in how they conduct their work; and that a final, fully evidenced and argued report should be the norm. Also that the work of tsars should be reported in departments’ Annual Reports and that departments should periodically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of previous appointments to inform the development of good practice.

At our launch three previous tsars spoke supportively of the proposed code. Dame Steve Shirley (former UK Philanthropy Ambassador) said: ‘When Ministers ask an independent expert to advise on a particular issue, the civil servants need to welcome the (often free) input and share what works in and between departments.’ Otto Thoresen (whose review of financial advice resulted in the creation of the independent, publicly funded Money Advice Service) said: ‘By definition, an independent reviewer will have strong experience in his or her field but usually little or no experience of the ways of Westminster and Government. The Code will help reviewers become more effective faster, with consequent benefits for all who have a stake in the outcome of their work.’ Professor Sir John Hills of LSE (who has undertaken reviews of social housing, equality and fuel poverty) said: ‘Getting the ground rules clear at the very start on the reviewer’s degree of independence seems to me to be crucial.’

Media coverage of the code has prompted a brief comment from the Cabinet Office. In a statement a spokesman said: “It is entirely appropriate, and in the public interest, for Government to draw on a wide range of advice. Successive administrations have chosen to bring in external expertise in various ways to provide an additional resource to ministers in considering difficult and complex issues. We think it’s important to maintain a degree of flexibility in such appointments, particularly since they may be required to be made at short notice.” Indeed – but

flexibility and speedy action are not incompatible with propriety and effectiveness.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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