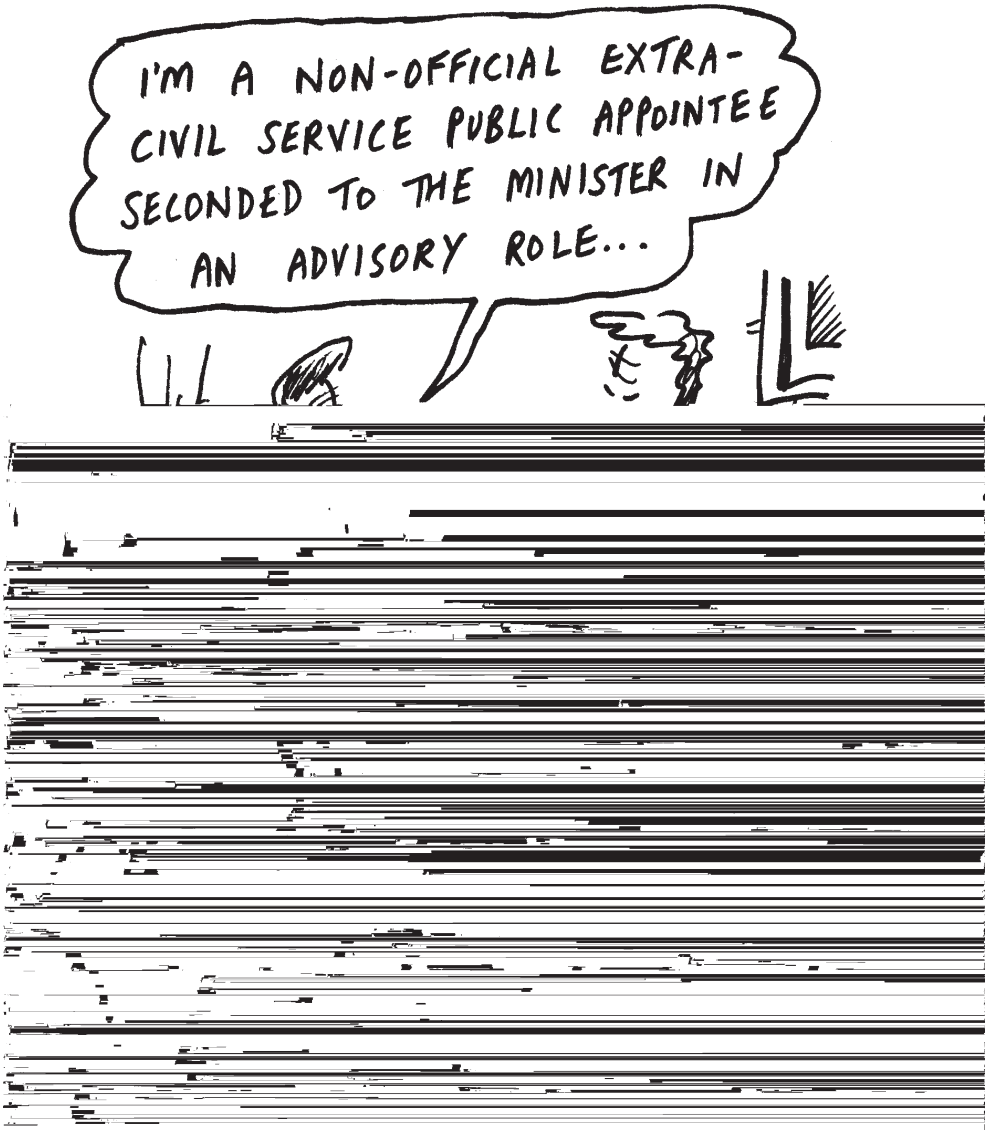
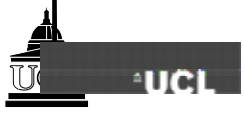
UCL DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BEING A SPECIAL ADVISER



Constitution

Being A Special Adviser



The Constitution Unit

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BEING A SPECIAL ADVISER

'the burden of modern government ..... the immense volume of papers, the exhausting succession of departmental Committees, of Party gatherings and meetings with outside interests.'

THE ROLE AND THE JOB

The role

'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.' ([3])

The job

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.

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[illegible]

Annex A

[illegible]

A typical day

[illegible]

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.

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.

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.

SPECIAL ADVISERS – WORKING THROUGH AND WITH COLLEAGUES TO ACHIEVE YOUR SECTRETARY OF STATE'S OBJECTIVES

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.

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.

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

- the Secretary of State, ministers and special advisers depend on departmental officials to
- special advisers spend a lot of time with officials;
- there is considerable overlap between what special advisers do and what officials do.
- there is also potential for conflict and tension not only from duplication but also from the

Annex B **Annex C**

[6]

Special advisers may, on behalf of their Ministers:

i. 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;

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.*

A special adviser to the Labour Government, 2009 –2010

Be nice to the civil service

Don't be too nice

Be careful

Get out of the office

Be straight with the boss

Be nice to your fellow special advisers

Be ready to leave

Enjoy it

A special adviser to the Conservative Government – 1991-1997

Have an open mind

Get the best out of it

Help make the '<u>machine</u>' more effective

Build relationships

Keep your head above the parapet and look around you

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

A special adviser to the Labour Government – 2007-2008

Resist the temptation to go a bit Malcolm Tucker

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

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

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

Coax and chivvy...

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

Enjoy Fridays

Remember

A special adviser to the Labour Government – 2007-2010

Beforehand

You and your boss

Work with what you have

Don't be famous

Be more efficient than you've ever been before

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

Work with not against officials

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Prioritise, prioritise, prioritise

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Don't become an alternative press office

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A Conservative media special adviser to the Coalition Government – 2010 -2012

Be the bridge over troubled water

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

Don't try to do too much.

. **Annex D** [illegible]

PRACTICALITIES AND STATUS

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LAST WORDS

Notes

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. t , *Special Advisers in the Thick of It*, , .
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ANNEX A – MODEL JOB DESCRIPTIONS

A departmental media special adviser

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A departmental policy/political special adviser

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A special adviser in No 10

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

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together

Field of Activity	Civil Servants	Special Advisers	Working together

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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.

ANNEX D – EFFECTIVENESS: THE SKILLS NEEDED

Strategic

Political

Professionally experienced

Creative but practical

Cooperative

Analytical

Efficient

Open

Challenging

Flexible

Loyal and Trustworthy

Informed and Outward looking

Committed

ANNEX E – SOME COMMON CIVIL SERVICE AND PARLIAMENTARY TERMINOLOGY

HIERARCHIES

Ministers

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- **Cabinet Ministers -** t ( )
- **Ministers of State -** , . t
- **Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State -** t . , .

t - t , , ( ), t t .

The Senior Civil Service (SCS)

( ) t t . ( ) t t , .

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

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[illegible]

Tier 2

[illegible] **Director General (DG).** [illegible] **groups** [illegible] **Director General** [illegible]

[illegible]

Tier 3

[illegible] **Director. Directors** [illegible]

Tier 4

[illegible] **Deputy Director,** [illegible]

Below the SCS

[illegible]

STRUCTURES

The ministerial private office

[illegible]

Legal Advisers

[illegible] . Departmental lawyers [illegible] Parliamentary Counsel [illegible] (Treasury Solicitors) Treasury Counsel [illegible]

Office of Parliamentary Counsel [illegible]

Treasury Solicitors (TSol) [illegible]

Treasury Counsel [illegible]

PRACTICES

First Day Briefs

[illegible]

Red Box

[illegible]

- **Report stage** [illegible] t [illegible] t [illegible]
- **Third Reading** [illegible] (eport. Whis D0ai7 0 Tdd)]TJm1hersing by

ANNEX F – USEFUL READING AND VIEWING MATERIAL

Research and External Advice:

t , *Special Advisers and Ministerial Effectiveness* (. t . t t t % % % % .)

t ( ), *Oiling the Machine: Thoughts for Special Advisers Working in Government* (. t . t t .)

t ( ), *Leading a Government Department – the first 100 days* (. t . t t t % % % % .)

t / , *Special Advisers: who they are, what they do and why they matter* (t , t)

Government Publications:

( ), *Model Contract for Special Advisers*, (t t t 6 .)

( ), *Ministerial Code*, (t t t 6 .)

( ), *Code of Conduct for Special Advisers*, (t t 6 t .)

Parliamentary Publications:

t , *Special Advisers: Boon or Bane?*, , . (. t . t t .)

t , *Special Advisers in the Thick of It*, , . (. t . t t .)

Diaries, Biographies, Blogs:

, *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting To Transform British Public Services*, (t).

, *Power Trip: A Decade of Plot, Policy, and Spin*, ( ).

, *The Spin Doctor's Diary*, (& t).

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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