

Special advisers and the Johnson government

How the prime minister and his
team are changing the role

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About this report

Special advisers play an essential role in any government. Under Boris Johnson, the way advisers work with each other and with No.10 is changing. This report examines the impact of this and considers further changes the government could make to help special advisers be as effective as possible.

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Summary

Special advisers – or ‘spads’ – play an essential role in the UK government, providing ministers with the political advice that civil servants, as impartial government employees, cannot. Certain advisers in the current government, particularly Dominic Cummings, have attracted much public attention. But behind the headlines, the government has also been making changes to the recruitment and remit of, and relationships between, special advisers. Many of these changes are helping advisers to do their jobs more effectively, but others risk undermining advisers’ ability to provide support to their ministers.

This report examines the role of special advisers – temporary civil servants appointed to provide political advice to ministers – in Boris Johnson’s government.* It considers both high-profile advisers like Cummings and David Frost, Johnson’s chief Brexit negotiator, and the majority who carry out their work behind the scenes. It looks at the impact of the changes that the government is making to how advisers do their jobs. It also considers some of the long-standing obstacles that special advisers face, and how these could be resolved.

Key findings

Chapter 1 looks at the work of special advisers. It finds that:

- **Special advisers do not stay in their job for long.** Of the 109 special advisers in post in December 2019, 58 had joined government in the previous 12 months while another 21 had moved from a different job in government.¹ Their jobs are inherently insecure: if the minister they work for loses his or her job, advisers by default lose theirs too.
- **Special advisers need strong relationships inside and outside government.** Ministers want advisers who share their priorities. While advisers’ relationship with their minister is the most important, they do need to work with other people too, including other ministers, officials and party members, to get things done.
- **The prime minister is using his advisers differently from his predecessors.** More than a third of special advisers work in No.10, mainly because the prime minister does not have the support of thousands of officials, unlike his ministerial colleagues. Johnson is also using his advisers to direct the work of other ministers more closely than some previous prime ministers.

* “Temporary” refers to the fact that special advisers are employed to serve a particular government minister, as opposed to the permanent civil service, which serves governments of all parties. Throughout this report we prefer ‘special advisers’ and ‘advisers’ to ‘spads’. ‘Officials’ refers solely to permanent civil servants.

Chapter 2 looks at how Johnson's government is changing the work of special advisers. It finds that:

- **Special advisers are working more closely with No.10**, with many in departments also reporting to those in the prime minister's team, and working to their instructions. This is creating a stronger team spirit and helping advisers to get things done across government. But at times this closer working reduces the space for debate in government and disempowers ministers, who lose a trusted source of advice, and thereby leads to a weaker government overall.
- **Johnson's No.10 is playing a more active role in the appointment and dismissal of advisers.** The Conservative Party has published job adverts for special advisers for the first time, which is welcome: creating more open routes for people to become special advisers is a good thing. But Cummings' dismissal of Sonia Khan, adviser to then chancellor Sajid Javid, was a low point.² When the team in No.10 forces a minister to accept a particular adviser, or forces out an adviser appointed by another minister, it both disempowers that minister and creates an unproductive atmosphere of fear among advisers.
- **The civil service is providing more professional support to special advisers** and has dealt with some of the long-standing issues it faces, including a lack of transparency regarding how their salaries are set. However, given the political nature of advisers' roles, the civil service cannot solve all the problems they face, such as political disagreements with other advisers – that task falls to ministers.
- **Rules around transparency and accountability have not kept up to date with the changes the government has introduced.** While there are formal rules that govern the relationship between ministers, advisers and officials, these have not been updated for years.³ More responsibilities mean special advisers should be prepared to face more scrutiny.

Chapter 3 looks at some long-standing obstacles that special advisers face in doing their jobs effectively. It finds that:

- **Advisers have little access to induction or training** and instead are expected to 'sink or swim' in the job. This amateur approach means advisers are not as effective as they could be, and contrasts with the approach of other countries.
- **Ministers – and senior advisers – rarely take their responsibilities for managing advisers seriously.** This means advisers miss out on guidance on how to do their job better and, in the worst cases, do not have ways to raise grievances or seek professional support.
- **Many ministers want more advisers.** While secretaries of state are formally limited to two special advisers, many have larger teams. Ministers would find more advisers helpful, and a small increase would not dilute the close relationship between a minister and their team.

Recommendations

The prime minister and his team are clearly serious about reforming how the government works. They want the civil service to become more expert, more professional and more in touch with the country. They should want the same for the advisers who support ministers across government.

Some of the changes the government has started to implement are improving the effectiveness of special advisers. But we believe there are further steps the government should take, including to mitigate the negative effects of some of the less helpful moves already taken. The intention is not to turn special advisers into permanent civil servants, but to help them to play their essential political role more effectively.

The relationship between No.10 and special advisers

- No.10 should continue to build a strong network among special advisers. But weakening the relationship between a minister and their adviser can lead to less debate and challenge in government and less effective ministers. If No.10 wants to ensure departments are operating effectively it should ensure that ministers are still able to build close relationships with their advisers.
- Ministers should continue to use open, well-publicised routes to build a pool of potential special advisers. No.10 should allow ministers to choose their own advisers – subject to the conventional prime minister’s approval – rather than imposing its own candidates.
- If the prime minister wants to dismiss another minister’s special adviser, he should discuss that with the relevant minister and should not delegate the formal process to his own advisers.
- The Cabinet Office should continue to ensure that special advisers have equal employment status across departments and to explain why they are awarded particular salaries. However, ministers should not expect the Cabinet Office to solve the political problems that special advisers face.

Transparency and accountability of advisers

- The prime minister should update the Ministerial Code to clarify that when he appoints advisers to other ministers’ teams, he is accountable for their conduct.
- The Cabinet Office should set out clearly in its Annual Report on Special Advisers which advisers have been appointed by which minister – and the remit and responsibilities of each.
- Where special advisers have significant roles in government, ministers should agree to requests from appropriate select committees for them to give evidence.

Professional support for advisers

- Ministers should arrange for induction training for special advisers on how the government they work for operates, and how to be an effective part of it. They should also ensure that those advisers who want it have access to further training.
- The prime minister should ensure that ministers and his senior advisers provide proper management support to special advisers, and that advisers have a way to raise grievances.

Numbers of advisers

- The prime minister should relax the cap on two advisers per cabinet minister: a team of up to five would be sensible if ministers want to appoint them. But this should not be a target as such, and ministers may feel a smaller team allows them to build close working relationships with each of them.

Introduction

Since the role of special adviser was introduced and formally recognised in the 1960s, their number has steadily increased:⁴ there are now more than 100 working across all government departments.⁵ Their role is essential to the working of modern government. In Boris Johnson's government, advisers are playing an increasingly central, and sometimes controversial, role.

The main purpose of a special adviser is to bring a party political perspective or outside expertise to the work of government. But the to-do list for the job is very long: advisers review and advise on many of the submissions going to ministers; build and maintain relationships with key outside groups; work together to resolve disagreements between ministers and between officials in different government departments; and brief journalists on behalf of their ministers. They provide support to ministers that permanent civil servants cannot, protect the civil service from politicisation and help the government achieve its objectives. And the role can serve as a training ground for future parliamentarians and ministers – 26 current MPs were formerly special advisers.⁶

The job is inherently difficult. Special advisers must manage large workloads, and work long hours, to support their minister. They also have little job security: like many in politics, they may lose their job through no fault of their own. Advisers are appointed to work for a particular minister and their contract makes clear that if that minister leaves the government, their employment ends too; there is no guarantee that they will get a job elsewhere in government.

Special advisers working for the current UK government are adapting to changes in their role made at the behest of the prime minister and his team. Reforms driven by Johnson's influential chief aide, Dominic Cummings, seek among other things to make advisers working across government more accountable to No.10. While these changes are designed to help drive the implementation of the prime minister's priorities, there is a risk that they weaken the effectiveness of the working relationships between ministers and their special advisers, leading ultimately to weaker government.

Special advisers are a key part of how this government works

All prime ministers rely on their advisers. But since entering No.10, Johnson has shown that he wants his advisers to be dominant figures in his government. Certain advisers in No.10 have high profiles and unique roles. At the same time, the government is changing how special advisers in other departments relate to No.10.

Much recent media attention on special advisers has focused on the role played by a few individual advisers who have been particularly prominent and been given unusual new responsibilities. The most prominent in the current government is the

prime minister's senior adviser, Dominic Cummings. Formerly a special adviser to Michael Gove, now chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Cummings became well known for his role in the Vote Leave organisation created to campaign on the 2016 EU referendum.⁷ In 2020, his decision to travel from London to Durham during the coronavirus lockdown provoked a public outcry that culminated in a rare televised press conference in the Downing Street rose garden.⁸ Johnson said he agreed to this because he wanted to make sure "people could understand what I had understood myself previously... about what took place."⁹ But it is highly unusual for an adviser to respond to questions in this way – normally they are seen as acting on behalf of, or at least with the consent of, their minister, who would answer for their behaviour.

Cummings' actions have raised the profile of special advisers generally. But it is his ideas on how government should work that are having the biggest effect on what special advisers do in Johnson's government. As a special adviser he is subject to the rules laid out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. These say that he cannot authorise public expenditure, manage civil servants or exercise any executive powers.¹⁰ However, he can still wield a huge amount of power to set the agenda of government and drive change. Recently he and his team have moved from 10 Downing Street into the main Cabinet Office building at 70 Whitehall, from where he hopes to oversee key government business.¹¹ He also is taking greater interest in the day-to-day work of other special advisers than many of his predecessors.

Johnson has given new responsibilities to other special advisers. David Frost, himself previously a civil servant at the Foreign Office, is now the UK's chief negotiator with the EU, a role previously held by a permanent civil servant, Olly Robbins.¹² Unlike Robbins, Frost makes speeches and issues public statements in his own name, actions that would normally be undertaken only by a minister. This seems to contravene the code of conduct for special advisers.¹³ Like Robbins, Frost clearly acts on behalf of the prime minister (it may have been partly because of concerns on the Conservative backbenches that Robbins was *not* acting on behalf of Theresa May that led Johnson to appoint a political adviser, rather than an official, as his chief negotiator).¹⁴ But as a special adviser, Frost is unable to manage the teams of officials who provide the advice that informs the negotiating positions he takes on behalf of Johnson.

Frost is now also the new national security adviser (NSA),¹⁵ a role that since its creation in 2010 had been carried out by civil servants, and since 2018 by the previous cabinet secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill. As NSA, Frost is not a special adviser, but a special envoy instead. He has also recently been appointed to the House of Lords.¹⁶ Frost's appointment to these key roles has drawn attention to the prime minister's preference for specific advisers to run key parts of his government.

Johnson has also given extra licence to the Downing Street director of communications, Lee Cain.¹⁷ All departmental press offices are due to report to four new communications chiefs in the Cabinet Office, who will in turn report to Cain, as well as to the cabinet secretary, Simon Case.¹⁸ In a more high-profile move, in October 2020 the government announced that Allegra Stratton would serve as the government's press secretary, a new role akin to the White House spokesperson, to

host daily press conferences.¹⁹ She, too, will report to Cain. Previous prime ministers have sought to control government messaging and communications closely – Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s director of communications, was well known for his control over the New Labour government’s ‘grid’ of announcements.²⁰ But the current government’s plan for taking control of messaging across government goes a step further.

Controversy surrounding the role of prominent special advisers to the prime minister is not new. Since 1997, interest in how prime ministers deploy advisers to advance their particular priorities has seen some of them gain a high profile and provoked complaints of politicisation in the heart of government (again this in no small part relating to Alastair Campbell).²¹ But while Cummings, Frost and Cain have attracted particular attention, this government is also making wider changes to the role of special advisers and their relationships with the ministers they work for, with other special advisers and with No.10. Cummings is using the network of special advisers in government departments to oversee and direct the workings of government much more closely than has been the case in the past.

Johnson is clearly happy to make use of advisers to carry out key roles in government and does not mind courting controversy to do so. This style of governing has upsides for individual advisers, and the government as a whole, but ultimately risks disempowering ministers. In this report we assess the effect of the prime minister’s approach to special advisers on the work of individual advisers and ministers and on the government as a whole.

This report

During our research we conducted extensive interviews with current and former special advisers and civil servants, and former secretaries of state.

The report begins by examining the work that special advisers have traditionally carried out. It then assesses the changes the current government is making to this role and looks at how the government can further reform recruitment and cross-departmental working of advisers. It also looks at how advisers are held to account and whether the processes for doing so are still fit for purpose. It concludes with suggestions for reforms that would help tackle some long-standing problems that make special advisers less effective.

There are also special advisers in the devolved governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. But the differing political contexts in each of the capitals in the UK, and the differing numbers and influence of special advisers in each of the governments, led us to focus this report solely on those working in Westminster.

1. The work of special advisers

“[Special advisers are] your personal appointments and therefore you’ve got a closeness to them and a faith in them, a confidence in them that is crucial in this cold, harsh world that you’re dealing with. You trust them.”
– Alan Johnson, *Ministers Reflect*²²

The role of special advisers is varied and complex

Every adviser’s experience of the job differs depending on the period in which they are in government, the party and minister they work for and the issues they deal with. Each of the advisers we spoke to set out a slightly different vision of the job, but there were some common themes in their descriptions of the role:

- **Providing policy advice.** Many advisers are responsible for supplementing the advice that ministers receive from policy officials with additional advice on the likely politics of an issue. To do this they will commission further policy work, talk to external groups and liaise with other advisers, politicians and their party.
- **Providing media advice.** Other special advisers are responsible for handling the media on behalf of their minister. This consists of proactively discussing policy issues with journalists, reactively managing stories as they break (including handling negative press coverage of the department or the minister), and in many cases building their minister’s media-handling strategy.
- **Building relationships.** Advisers spend lots of time talking: to officials, ministers, other special advisers, parliamentarians and others from their party, and those outside government who have an interest in their minister’s work. This allows them to build support for their minister’s decisions, which can help smooth the parliamentary passage of a tricky piece of legislation or ensure a positive reaction to an announcement. Because they are exempt from the requirement on permanent civil servants to be impartial, special advisers can build explicitly political relationships where they advocate the position of the governing party.
- **Taking on delegated work.** Advisers will take on work to reduce the workload of their minister, such as assessing officials’ answers to parliamentary questions and Freedom of Information requests, meeting relevant interest groups and explaining their minister’s views to civil servants.
- **Chasing progress and unblocking issues.** Special advisers follow up on ministerial decisions and resolve disagreements between different parts of government. Special advisers can sometimes find solutions where officials cannot because they are able to take a wider view and focus on the government’s political priorities. However, ministers will often need to resolve bigger disagreements themselves.

Most cabinet ministers have two special advisers – one for policy and one for media, with one of the two also taking charge of parliamentary work. The policy/media division is not always discrete, and occasionally one adviser will perform both roles. Some junior ministers (generally those who also attend cabinet) may have a single special adviser. Table 1 summarises these different responsibilities and looks at the experience and background each type of adviser tends to bring to the role.

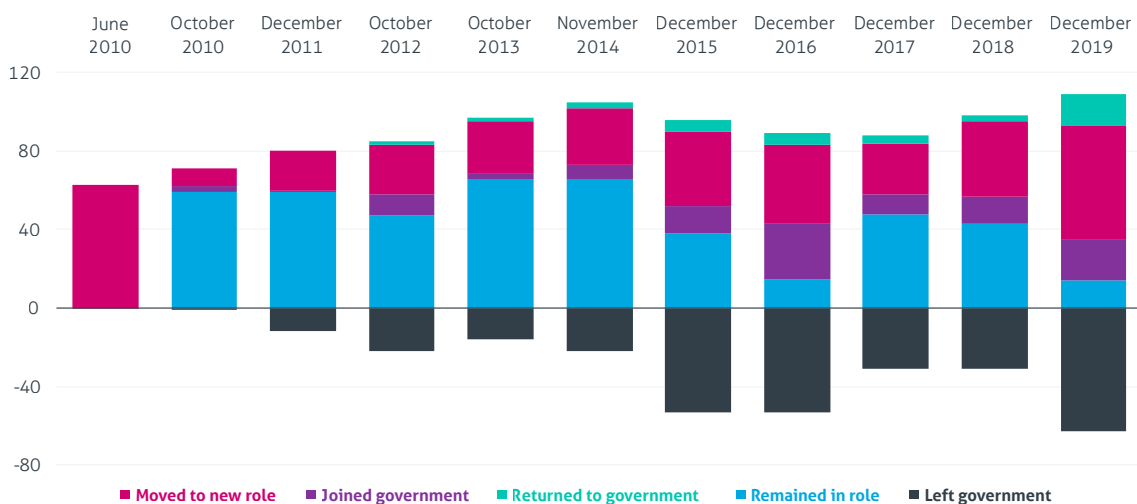
Table 1 **Special adviser responsibilities, relationships and experience**

Focus	Responsibilities	Key relationships	Relevant skills and experience
Policy	Progress ministers’ priorities, develop long-term policy ideas, represent minister to external groups, negotiate with other parts of government	Policy officials, political party, other advisers, external groups	Political nous, ability to grasp many policy issues quickly
Media	Communicate intent behind policies to media, find and promote policy success stories, tackle negative coverage	Journalists, department press office, party	Print and broadcast journalism and social media
Parliament	Drive minister’s legislative agenda, create parliamentary support for policies	Government whips, backbenchers	Understanding of parliamentary rules and legislative process

Special advisers move jobs frequently

Special advisers’ jobs are inherently insecure – they can lose their job at any moment, either because of their own misstep or, more likely, because of events beyond their control. If a secretary of state loses their job, their advisers do too. This is reflected in the high turnover of special advisers within government. Figure 1 shows the number of special advisers in government over the past decade. The highest numbers of departures come after elections (particularly 2015 and 2019) or a change in prime minister, as in 2016. At least 10% of advisers have left government each year since 2011. While this level of turnover is not as high as within the wider civil service, it still means a substantial departure of expertise from government each year.²³

Figure 1 **Turnover of special advisers, October 2010 to December 2019**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office special adviser data releases, June 2010 to December 2019. Categories calculated as change from previous data point. ‘Moved to new role’ shows a change of department.

After leaving government many special advisers go to work in the private sector – this was the case for most of our interviewees who had been advisers. However, some go on to play a more direct role in future governments. A handful become MPs themselves – 26 current members of the House of Commons (18 Conservatives, seven Labour MPs and one Liberal Democrat), including seven who were elected for the first time in December 2019, are former advisers.²⁴ And some become cabinet ministers or even prime minister: David Cameron, George Osborne and David Lidington had all previously worked as special advisers, as had eight other MPs who have attended cabinet since 2010.

Only a minority take this path. As former adviser Nick Hillman told *Civil Service World* in June 2020, “a lot of spads don’t want to be the story themselves”.²⁵ For those who do hope to enter parliament, however, this ambition will shape the relationships they seek to build during their time as an adviser. The support of the prime minister and other powerful ministers will help an adviser progress through the party. So they will need to use their time as an adviser to build relationships with key patrons, while also being mindful of the possibility of particular supporters falling out of favour within the government and/or party.

Ministers want special advisers who share their priorities

Most of our interviewees agreed that an adviser’s most important relationship has, historically, been with their minister. Their primary responsibility in government is to further their minister’s priorities. Former secretaries of state described key moments when their adviser(s) helped move something important forward. Examples included securing the support of backbench MPs for controversial legislation, building strong relationships with important civil society organisations and explaining the secretary of state’s position on a contentious issue to advisers in No.10, ensuring that the government took a united approach on the issue.

To pursue their minister’s agenda effectively, advisers must know their minister’s mind and be able to respond to events as he or she would. An open and trusting relationship is essential to develop and maintain this level of understanding. Advisers told us that spending as much working time as possible with, or at least talking to, their minister was key to understanding their priorities and opinions and maintaining this close relationship. And ministers we spoke to agreed that the most important attribute of a special adviser was that they understood and shared the minister’s priorities.

But if their minister is battling other departments or No.10 on an issue, this closeness can leave an adviser at odds with their colleagues across government. One former minister we spoke to said that a little tension between ministers is no bad thing, as it can lead to better decisions. Healthy challenge and discussion is a key part of how government works.

But special advisers (other than those who work in No.10) must deal with a ‘dual loyalty’: while they work for their minister, their appointment has been signed off by the prime minister. In 2010 David Cameron added a line on this point to the special advisers’ code of conduct, the rules governing their status in government, which now

explicitly states that advisers are appointed to serve “the government as a whole”, not just their appointing minister.²⁶ The model contract for special advisers also makes the point that they work for their “appointing minister, the prime minister and the government as a whole”.²⁷

This means that on the rare occasions where there is ongoing disagreement between a minister and No.10, the adviser is effectively forced to choose which of their two masters they will prioritise. The consensus in our interviews was that successful special advisers in departments primarily serve their minister, putting their interests first when conflicts of loyalty arise. This is understandable from a minister’s point of view: they want to know that their adviser is advancing their priorities. If they feel that their adviser is supporting a course of action they do not agree with on the instructions of No.10, they will be less inclined to trust that adviser.

Special advisers need strong relationships across government

Despite the growth in the number of special advisers, there are still very few of them in government compared with other countries with similar systems of government, such as Australia and Canada. To get things done they need to work with and through others, including:

- **No.10.** A departmental special adviser needs to be in close contact with No.10 – both the other special advisers and the officials who work there – in order to understand No.10’s objectives for their department, help influence the prime minister’s thinking in their policy area and understand how their work fits into the government’s wider strategy.
- **Other special advisers.** Good advisers are well networked among other advisers and use this network to capture the mood in other departments, gather intelligence and seek support. Pre-existing links from election (or, indeed, referendum) campaigns and party work can be useful in providing a network, but it is also possible to build one in government.
- **Other ministers.** Special advisers can use relationships with other ministers to unblock disagreements between departments, build their understanding of an issue (and, potentially, line up their next job). At the same time, depending on the attitude of their secretary of state, some advisers may be more influential within a department than the junior ministers.
- **Civil servants.** There can be tension between special advisers and civil servants. A former adviser told us that, when in opposition, political parties can foster an attitude of suspicion towards civil servants, viewing them as a barrier to their own policy agenda. This can create lingering issues when that party enters government after an election. And a civil servant explained that some officials are suspicious of special advisers, often so daunted by their reputation that they are hesitant to consult them.

Beyond government, special advisers also need to maintain relationships with their party, both to support their minister and, where relevant, to help them achieve their political ambitions. Advisers will play an important role in preparing their minister's contributions to party conferences, and to the development of the party manifesto. Both of these require insight into the priorities of party members. The place of the party in advisers' work can differ depending on which party they are members of. Few of the former advisers we spoke to who had worked for Conservative ministers identified the party as one of their most important relationships. On the other hand, former Liberal Democrat and Labour advisers stressed the importance of the relationship with their parties during their time in government.

Special advisers have a unique status within government

As their job title suggests, special advisers play a unique role within government. They are employed by the government and paid from tax revenues, but they are allowed to provide political advice of a kind that the permanent civil service is not. They enjoy a close relationship with their party, but are not employed or paid by it. Their status as civil servants means that they can use the government machine to further their minister's objectives in a way they would not be able to do as party employees.

Special advisers are not the only way ministers have of bringing political advice into government. Secretaries of state appoint non-executive directors (NEDs) to their departmental boards to advise on how the department can improve its performance. Many NEDs are drawn from the private sector and, while they are appointed on merit, some have links to the secretary of state they work with.²⁸ Michael Gove, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, appointed four new NEDs to the board of the Cabinet Office in May 2020. He had worked with three of the four before, and one was his special adviser when he was education secretary.²⁹ While NEDs can be powerful allies for a secretary of state who is interested in reforming how their department works, they do not have the same access to papers and officials that special advisers do.

With this access comes a certain level of external scrutiny. As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, the current arrangements for scrutiny of special advisers are in need of an update. However, what there is shows the value of their being government, not party political, appointments: if employed by their party, there would probably be even less transparency over who they are and what they do. Their civil service status means that advisers can bring political understanding into government while working with the officials who actually implement ministers' decisions, and that they are subject to a certain level of transparency and accountability.

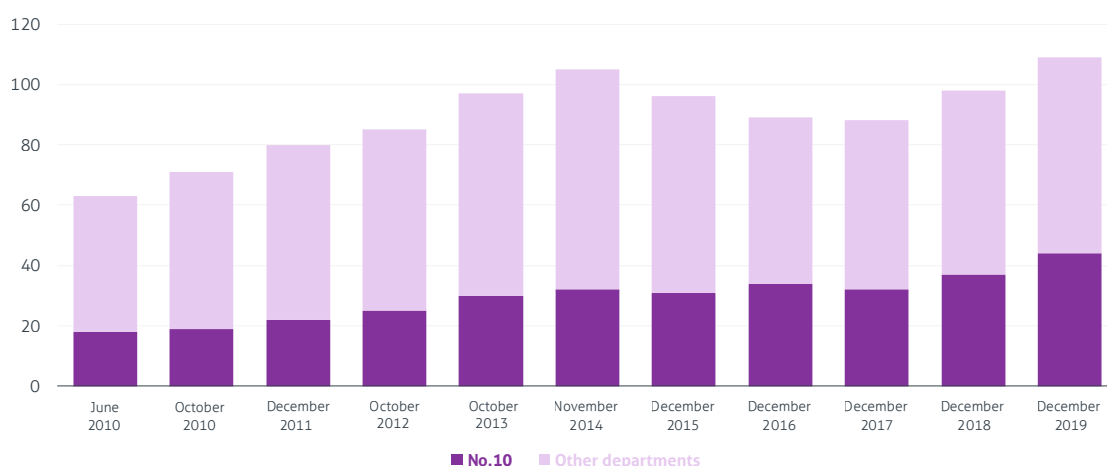
The prime minister is using his advisers differently from his predecessors

The role of advisers in No.10, while ostensibly operating under the same rules, can be very different to those in departments. Some can be far more powerful, if they have a senior role and are very close to a powerful prime minister. Cummings, who serves a prime minister with a parliamentary majority of 80 and who has a wide-ranging remit, falls into this category. The power of No.10 advisers in general derives from them

speaking on behalf of the prime minister. But special advisers in departments are closer to where policies are actually implemented, so can see how things are playing out in more detail. The relationship between advisers in No.10 and those in other government departments is an important factor in a prime minister's ability to drive the rest of government to focus on his or her priorities.

While most secretaries of state have two special advisers, the prime minister has many more. And this number has increased over time. Figure 2 shows that there are now twice as many advisers in No.10 than in 2010: by 2019, no fewer than 44 advisers – well over a third of all employed by the government – worked for the prime minister.

Figure 2 **Number of special advisers working for the prime minister and in other departments, 2010–19**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office special adviser data releases, June 2010 to December 2019.

This is in part because of the small size of No.10, compared to other departments in government, and the nature of the British premiership, where the prime minister is, in theory at least, *primus inter pares*, while responsibility for actually implementing decisions lies with other ministers. This means it can be difficult for prime ministers to ensure that other parts of central government carry out their will. Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to Tony Blair, characterised this difficulty as

“the guilty secret of our system... No. 10 Downing Street and the prime minister are remarkably unpowerful... it is the departments that have the troops, in the form of civil servants, and the money, in terms of the budget. No.10 does not have civil servants and does not have budgets.”³⁰

The internal set-up of No.10 changes depending on the prime minister's preferences. No.10 is currently home to a joint unit of special advisers who work on economic and financial issues for No.10 and the Treasury, and who were appointed following the February 2020 reshuffle.³¹ No.10 also contains the Policy Unit, which employs advisers responsible for shadowing the work of particular departments. It can offer a steer to ministers and their own advisers on the prime minister's priorities and help to drive

policy development and delivery in line with these. Both units keep the prime minister up to date with what is happening elsewhere in government and ensure that ministers and their departments are carrying out his decisions.

While there are civil servants in No.10, it is a much more political organisation than other departments in government. Margaret Thatcher began the practice of choosing a political appointee for chief of staff to the prime minister, with responsibility for overseeing No.10, providing policy advice and managing relationships with the rest of government. Prior to 1979, these responsibilities were shared between senior civil servants (usually the cabinet secretary and the principal private secretary).³² Most prime ministers since then have had political advisers as their chief(s) of staff: John Major appointed Jonathan Hill, Tony Blair appointed Jonathan Powell, David Cameron appointed Ed Llewellyn, and Theresa May appointed Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, and then Gavin Barwell. (Gordon Brown is the only prime minister since Thatcher to appoint a civil servant to the role.) Their very close relationship with the prime minister and authority over special advisers in No.10 – as well as the rest of Whitehall, although historically this has been less direct – makes the chief of staff the most influential adviser in government.

Johnson has built a No.10 team to suit his objectives and style of governing. The prime minister is said to rely on close advisers to drive forward his priorities across government to an even greater extent than some of his predecessors.³³ There is currently no No.10 'chief of staff', but Cummings and Sir Eddie Lister carry out many of these functions for Boris Johnson, and the prime minister is apparently recruiting someone to take on the role full-time. The prime minister also recently appointed three deputy chiefs of staff in No.10, although their exact responsibilities are unclear.³⁴

2. The government's changes to the role of special advisers

"A chancellor, like all cabinet ministers, has to be able to give candid advice to a prime minister so that he is speaking truth to power. I believe that the arrangement proposed would significantly inhibit that."
– Sajid Javid, February 2020

Special advisers are working more closely with No.10

The current government is taking more of an interest in what advisers do on a day-to-day basis. Our interviewees explained that there are a few advisers within government who even split their time between working for a secretary of state and working for No.10. The most noticeable example of this is the joint team of advisers who, since February 2020, work for both the prime minister and the chancellor of the exchequer³⁵ – but they are not the only advisers who work both in a department and No.10.

Even those advisers who do not work for both a departmental minister and No.10 spend a fair amount of time with the No.10 team, including at the weekly meeting of special advisers. This is not wholly new: previous chiefs of staff and other No.10 advisers have held regular meetings with the special adviser network. For example, at the start of the coalition government, advisers from both parties met regularly, and Conservative and Liberal Democrat advisers continued to meet their party colleagues and their respective chiefs of staff throughout the coalition's time in office. Similarly, under Theresa May special advisers met in No.10, although the difficulties faced by that government meant that those meetings were often sources of leaks.

John McTernan, who served as Tony Blair's director of political operations, described his approach to weekly meetings with special advisers:

"I would have somebody from one department present an issue of concern to them... and then I would take the second half of the meeting to give them the party line... So, it was a kind of social thing, it was an exchange of ideas thing, it was a get together, people often had lunch after it. But people knew it was so that they came together to hear what the line was, what they had to say, because by and large you get in your silos, and you need to be told what the overall government view is."³⁶

Our interviewees noted that these meetings are useful as they provide advisers with an opportunity to share information about issues they are working on. As McTernan says, they also help reinforce the sense of working as one team across government. Under Johnson, Cummings leads these meetings, and they have become more directive in nature. Where previous administrations used the meeting primarily for sharing information about political priorities, Cummings is said often to allocate

explicit tasks from No.10, and to maintain discipline among advisers. They can also be combative, with reports that Cummings has threatened advisers' jobs in meetings, and criticised advisers or departments that haven't complied with his instructions.³⁷

As well as instructing advisers from other departments, some No.10 advisers have apparently played crucial roles in the decisions of other cabinet ministers. As the backbench rebellion to the government's Internal Market Bill grew, *The Times* reported that:

"A key Downing Street aide, Oliver Lewis – nicknamed Sonic – fatefully briefed Brandon Lewis, the Northern Ireland secretary, to tell MPs that, yes, the plan might be in breach of the UK's international legal obligations, but the government was still prepared to do it."³⁸

Brandon Lewis's admission in the Commons caused a political storm, raised tensions with the EU³⁹ and led to various Conservative grandees criticising the government.⁴⁰ As No.10 has relatively few civil servants, directing other ministers' advisers, or ministers themselves, is a way for the prime minister's team to exercise some degree of control over what happens elsewhere in government. But there are risks to this approach, for individual advisers and their ministers, as well as for the government as a whole.

Closer working between teams of special advisers helps government function better

By enforcing closer relationships between departmental advisers and No.10, the government has started the process of building a coherent team of special advisers across government. Advisers in this government have better connections with each other and have a stronger sense of what the mission of this government is than some of their predecessors. This may be partly down to a comparison with its immediate predecessor – many of our interviewees had served in the May government, which was extremely divided over Brexit and had to endure a difficult parliamentary situation. They recounted how relationships between different teams across government had effectively broken down and there was little or no attempt by the prime minister's team to marshal the political appointees across government. Any government by comparison would appear united, but particularly one with an 80-plus seat majority.

However, according to those we spoke to, a sense of unity in the current government goes beyond just being better than under May. Many of our interviewees felt the government's approach to centralising the work of special advisers had strengthened the relationships between advisers working in different departments, and between departmental special advisers and their colleagues in No.10. Despite some early reports in the media that relationships between special advisers were difficult,⁴¹ the communication and 'esprit de corps' among the current set of special advisers is reportedly much improved.

This has meant that it has been easier to resolve tricky disputes between departments than had been the case under previous administrations. Departmental civil servants have a good sense, via their special advisers, of what No.10's priorities are, and what their likely reaction to difficult issues will be. One official told us how this closer working meant that communication was easy and problems could be resolved early on. This unblocking of disagreements is a key part of a special adviser's role.

In particular, the joint team of advisers working to both the Treasury and No.10 has certain clear advantages. There is often friction between the prime minister and chancellor, as exhibited between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and later Theresa May and Philip Hammond, who said that "all prime ministers want to spend more money than most chancellors think is prudent".⁴² Aligning the approach of the prime minister and chancellor's teams early on can prevent this tension from escalating. Gavin Barwell told us that during his time as chief of staff to Theresa May:

"I had talked to Philip Hammond about the difficult relationship No.10 and No.11 had and whether actually, having a common team of economic advisers between the two of them would help make that relationship work better."⁴³

The joint team of advisers means that the prime minister and chancellor receive the same advice on key decisions. Greater input from the Treasury means that the prime minister has a more comprehensive understanding of economic and fiscal impact when making decisions. In addition, strengthening the sense of team working among advisers helps the government make progress on its priorities. Special advisers in the joint unit act with the authority of both prime minister and chancellor, and do not have to waste time brokering issues between the two.

No.10's approach risks losing valuable debate and diluting the minister–adviser relationship

But there are also downsides to a network of special advisers closely controlled by No.10. First, this set-up could lead to a reduction in discussion and debate inside government. After resigning from the government rather than accept a team of new advisers chosen for him by the prime minister and his own aides, former chancellor Sajid Javid told the House of Commons that:

"A chancellor, like all cabinet ministers, has to be able to give candid advice to a prime minister so that he is speaking truth to power. I believe that the arrangement proposed would significantly inhibit that."⁴⁴

Of course, any prime minister and their team will want the rest of government to work to achieve the goals that No.10 has set. But if all advisers are working to No.10's instructions, this could come at the expense of necessary challenge in government including when a department and minister's thinking is not in line with No.10's. As Javid said, it is important that where ministers disagree with the prime minister, they are able to say so without fear. If they know their special advisers are on the side of the prime minister, a minister and/or their officials may not feel able to present difficult truths that should be taken into consideration when making a decision.

Any departmental adviser who is seen as working for No.10 rather than the department's secretary of state may be less trusted by both the minister and the officials in their department. If a minister does not trust their adviser, they are less likely to bring them into their confidence or ask them for advice on difficult issues. This means they will no longer have access to an independent, loyal source of advice and support, and are likely to be less effective as a result. Following the recent furore over the government's Internal Market Bill, James Dowling, who had been special adviser to David Gauke when he was justice secretary, tweeted that:

"[Robert] Buckland and [Suella] Braverman, in particular, look increasingly shoddy. Can't help thinking that if both had more/some political advice from people who actually know how to deliver legislation then this might have been avoided."⁴⁵

Of course, we cannot know what advice Buckland, the secretary of state for justice, and Braverman, the attorney general, received – or from whom. But Dowling's point is clear: ministers benefit from informed advice, and suffer when they do not get it. If ministers are unable to trust their advisers, they are going to lose access to advice that can enable them to make reasoned and evidenced policy decisions.

This lack of trust will also make the individual adviser's job more difficult. As noted in Chapter 1, officials work for the secretary of state and their department, not the prime minister; and special advisers need to work with officials to make progress on their priorities. One former secretary of state told us that if officials feel like a special adviser has been 'foisted' on to the department by No.10, it will be more difficult for that adviser to build effective relationships with the civil servants. This risks effectiveness as well as relationships – and will ultimately mean they are less able to get things done.

It is understandable that the prime minister and his advisers want to know what the rest of government is doing, and direct it to their priorities, but it is impossible for the centre to maintain oversight of every issue in every department. As Gavin Barwell told us: "You can't try and run the whole British government from one building... you have to trust talented ministers to get on and drive other parts of the government's agenda."⁴⁶ Knowing when to delegate is a key skill for a prime minister, and one not often attributed to May or Brown, both of whom were known to micromanage government. They found that they were unable to do so effectively, and that such an approach frustrated colleagues. Johnson, and his team, would be wise to take note.

Greater co-ordination with No.10 is a good thing. But if it reduces the space for debate in government and undermines the close relationship between minister and adviser, it will lead to a weaker government overall. **No.10 should continue to build a strong network among special advisers. But weakening the relationship between a minister and their adviser can lead to less debate and challenge in government and less effective ministers. If No.10 wants to ensure departments are operating effectively it should ensure that ministers are still able to build close relationships with their advisers.**

No.10 is playing a more active role in the appointment and dismissal of advisers

Although special advisers are temporary civil servants, there has never been a set recruitment procedure for their appointment, unlike the rest of the civil service. Though appointments must be signed off by No.10, individual ministers have traditionally recruited their own advisers, but they receive little guidance on how to go about the task. Positions are rarely advertised formally, and most ministers (particularly if appointing advisers for the first time) embark on the process without a person specification or job description for the role.

Advisers are not always personally known to their minister prior to appointment, but it is common for ministers to be drawn to those that they already trust from within the party political machine, parliamentary offices, think tanks, consultancies and the media.⁴⁷ In many cases, a minister will spread the word among colleagues, party contacts and other networks that they are looking to hire an adviser, and mutual contacts will suggest potential candidates or make introductions. These personal recommendations can carry considerable weight in ministers' decision-making. Nicky Morgan described this process when she became secretary of state for education:

“Of course you're looking around thinking 'I've no idea where to find people' and... it's a personal fit. You are more reliant on recommendations and meeting people and thinking, 'Actually is this the sort of person that I can work with?' than anything else.”⁴⁸

Some ministers have taken a slightly more systematic approach to recruiting their special advisers, but this has been their own initiative rather than anything organised by the government. Jack Straw, home secretary and foreign secretary in the last Labour government, used headhunting firms to recruit some of his special advisers.⁴⁹ And in 2009, Jim (now Lord) Knight used Twitter to advertise that he was looking for an adviser.⁵⁰

These are exceptions rather than the rule. As a result, the government misses out on attracting a more diverse, experienced candidate pool with a broader range of perspectives – something this government has said it wants the civil service to focus on more in its own recruitment.⁵¹

Former adviser Giles Wilkes described the stereotypical special adviser as a “raw twenty-something with a degree in politics who happens to wander into the right political office”.⁵² The government does not publish data on special advisers' backgrounds, so it is impossible to know how accurate this stereotype is, but many of our interviewees suggested that the jobs appeal to those who are younger and have strong party political leanings. The role is also dominated by men, who account for 71 of the 109 special advisers currently employed by the government.*

* As of the last data release in December 2019, Cabinet Office, Annual Report on Special Advisers 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/854554/Annual_Report_on_Special_Advisers.pdf

The absence of a clear recruitment strategy presents practical problems for ministers – particularly those in secretary of state roles for the first time. They often lack a clear idea of what an adviser’s role should be, the kinds of skills and attributes they should be looking for, and where they should look for appropriate candidates. This inhibits them from recruiting their advisers more effectively and from ensuring that they are able to make an informed decision about who would be best for the job.

The government has taken some positive steps towards a more open, professional recruitment process

Over the last two decades, recommendations about introducing more open competition for adviser positions, and using clearer job descriptions and person specifications, have been made by the then Public Administration Select Committee,⁵³ UCL’s Constitution Unit⁵⁴ and the Institute for Government.⁵⁵ Boris Johnson’s No.10 team has gone some way towards following these recommendations, and taken a much more active approach to overseeing the recruitment of special advisers by ministers across government.

An initial, and somewhat idiosyncratic, sign of the new approach was Dominic Cummings’ blog post on 2 January 2020, which said that No.10 was looking for “an unusual set of people with different skills and backgrounds to work in Downing Street... some as spads and perhaps some as officials”.⁵⁶ His detailed post outlined the different types of people he was looking for, and included the infamous “weirdos and misfits”⁵⁷ line, whom he said would bring different skills and experiences from those traditionally associated with special advisers and civil servants.

It is not clear how many successful recruitments have been made as a result or whether the initiative has been judged a success by No.10. But the move attracted controversy when two recruits (employed as ‘contractors’ rather than special advisers, but who seem to have played quasi-political roles) were forced to leave their new roles soon after their appointment: one for allegedly making racist and sexist comments online,⁵⁸ the other for suggesting that live rounds be used on Black Lives Matter protesters.⁵⁹

In February 2020 the government introduced a more systematic and proactive approach by establishing the website spadjobs.uk. This site, which at the time of writing is still live, states that “the Conservative Party is launching a search for talented and experienced communications and digital professionals... the best candidates may be considered for political appointments to serve as special advisers.”⁶⁰

The website includes a description of the skills prospective applicants should have – with a focus on media and digital skills – and sets out a clear timetable for the recruitment process. This is a welcome move towards creating a pool of potential media-focused special advisers who could be called on when vacancies arise. The website does not appear to have been designed to find candidates with policy expertise. This is an insight into the government’s priorities for its advisers. Most ministers we spoke to agreed that having policy-focused special advisers was helpful as they provide an extra, political set of considerations on top of the advice officials provide. If the party is not interested in recruiting these kinds of advisers for ministers, they again risk losing out on useful advice.

If the government wants to make the recruitment process for special advisers still more open, there are further steps it could take. In New Zealand, the Department of Internal Affairs publishes job descriptions when it is searching for new advisers, which set out clearly what their responsibilities will be and what kind of salary they can expect.⁶¹ This is almost unheard of in the UK. New Zealand has clear divisions of responsibilities and three separate grades of adviser, which help define their salary bands. This openness helps attract a wider range of applicants than a minister would be able to attract if their recruitment was based solely on personal connections.

A significantly more open process would be a big change for the UK government. Introducing a New Zealand-style approach would need institutional support, either from a minister's political party or the civil service. The use of spadjobs.uk was managed by the Conservative Party, and if it has proved successful in recruiting media advisers the party should continue to use a similar route to build a pool of potential advisers who can work on policy too. The Liberal Democrats took a more systematic approach during the coalition government, working with their party networks to identify a pool of people who could be suitable advisers.

Involving the civil service more directly in special adviser recruitment would be difficult. As advisers are political appointments, it would be inappropriate for civil servants to make hiring decisions in relation to these roles. However, the UCL Constitution Unit has previously recommended that ministers wishing to advertise more widely for advisers could be supported by the civil service to do so.⁶² It would still be for ministers to make the decision on what they want their adviser to be responsible for and whom to hire, not least as one of the most important criteria will continue to be that the minister and adviser 'click' and can form a close working relationship. But the Cabinet Office could provide logistical support in terms of advertising the vacancy and organising interviews.

Ministers need to be able to choose their own advisers and if they want to appoint someone they know, or whom a friend recommends, that is their prerogative. But a more open approach, with job adverts and a clear process, will help attract potential advisers from a wider range of backgrounds.

It is important that ministers can still choose their own advisers, however they are identified and recruited

As well as helping to identify potential advisers through spadjobs.uk, Johnson's No.10 is also intervening more in the recruitment process than its predecessors. Interviewees explained that although previous prime ministers did sometimes veto special adviser appointments, this was rare (though one interesting example, from the beginning of the coalition, was when David Cameron vetoed the appointment of one Dominic Cummings as a special adviser to the new education secretary, Michael Gove).⁶³ But in some cases now, rather than approving or rejecting a minister's choice of adviser, No.10 has sent a minister a shortlist of people to choose from. The most extreme, and best publicised, example of this was when Sajid Javid was 'offered' an entirely new team of advisers – but this is not the only case according to our interviewees.

This prescriptive approach is limiting. It also risks the recruitment of individual advisers receiving less buy-in from ministers, essential for such a close working relationship. And ministers benefit from advisers whose advice they can trust. They may be less inclined to do so if they do not feel they were entirely free to select the candidates for these important roles. **Ministers should continue to use open, well-publicised routes to build a pool of potential special advisers. No.10 should continue to allow ministers to choose their own advisers – subject to the prime minister’s approval – rather than imposing their own candidates.**

In allowing his team to fire other ministers’ advisers, the prime minister risks creating an atmosphere of fear and resentment

In addition to taking a greater interest in co-ordinating special advisers across government, the current No.10 has been much more involved in their dismissal. In the past year, the prime minister’s team has removed several advisers. While past prime ministers have required that their ministers get rid of specific advisers,* weeding out advisers who are not behaving appropriately or who are not seen as performing effectively, the current No.10 has done this much more frequently than its predecessors.

The most notable example of this occurred in August 2019 when Sonia Khan, an adviser to the then chancellor of the exchequer, Sajid Javid, was fired from her post by Cummings, who had not consulted Javid about it in advance. She was reportedly fired for being in contact with ex-chancellor Philip Hammond, her previous boss. She was escorted out of Downing Street by a police officer and has since launched a legal case for unfair dismissal and sex discrimination.⁶⁴ In February 2020, Javid resigned as chancellor of the exchequer rather than accept the prime minister’s request to fire all of his advisers and accept a new team of joint advisers working across both No.10 and the Treasury.⁶⁵ His successor, Rishi Sunak, accepted the joint unit.

Javid’s special advisers have not been the only ones to leave government. Peter Cardwell, adviser to the justice secretary, Robert Buckland, tweeted on 13 February that he was leaving the government.⁶⁶ He later explained that “No.10” had decided they wanted a change of personnel.⁶⁷ After reportedly criticising Cummings’ treatment of advisers, Lynn Davidson, adviser to Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, left the government in February 2020.⁶⁸

These dismissals, and the potential for them to happen in the future, matter. Being deprived of a trusted adviser by No.10 undermines a minister’s authority and decision making. Cummings’ dismissal of Sonia Khan was portrayed in the press as evidence of No.10 seeking an inappropriate degree of control over the then chancellor.⁶⁹ If No.10 can sack a minister’s adviser without telling them, so the thinking goes, they can also override that minister’s decisions.

* For example, David Cameron required Theresa May’s then adviser, Fiona Cunningham (now Hill), to step down in 2014 after a No.10 inquiry found that she had briefed against Michael Gove and his team. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-27750921

This behaviour is counterproductive. Ministers may be concerned that they cannot protect the advisers that they have appointed. Advisers will be fearful of raising inconvenient truths, as they will not want to be perceived as disloyal or troublesome. As Matthew Taylor, head of the No.10 Policy Unit under Tony Blair, told *Civil Service World* when the joint unit of advisers to No.10 and the chancellor was announced, that the creative tension between No.10 and the Treasury “also means you’re less likely to make bad mistakes”.⁷⁰ With a joint unit of advisers, some of that ‘creative tension’ is inevitably lost.

Sonia Khan’s legal case, if it continues, may shed light on whether Cummings was acting on his own accord, or with the prior approval of the prime minister. However, the perception that Cummings was able to act unilaterally in the case is deeply damaging. All special advisers require the approval of the prime minister to be appointed, and this approval can be removed at any time. When previous prime ministers have dismissed other ministers’ advisers, they have done so themselves or been clear that their advisers are acting with their approval. However, under the current administration, more advisers are being removed, and more publicly, than has been the case in the past, and seemingly by the prime minister’s advisers, not by Johnson himself. This risks a loss of both expertise and morale. **If the prime minister wants to dismiss another minister’s special adviser, he should discuss that with the relevant minister and should not delegate the formal process to his own advisers.**

The civil service is providing more professional support to special advisers

It is not only the No.10 team that is changing how special advisers interact with the rest of government. The civil service, and particularly the Cabinet Office, has started to take a more standardised, professional approach to working with special advisers. This includes providing a standard contract, which means all special advisers are subject to the same employment terms, and implementing a clearer pay structure. Some of these changes began before Johnson took office, while others have taken place in the last year. These changes are welcome: they are providing greater clarity as to what being a special adviser actually entails. But given the political nature of the role, the civil service will never be able to solve all the issues advisers face.

The Cabinet Office’s provision of uniform service to all advisers is welcome, but it can only go so far

While a model contract for advisers has existed for some time, the exact provisions in each adviser’s contract differed according to the department they worked in. Now, all advisers are employed under the same model contract,⁷¹ a new version of which was issued by the Cabinet Office in September 2019, two months after Johnson became prime minister, with a subsequent update in August 2020.⁷²

While advisers are all still formally employed by their secretary of state and paid from their department’s budget, the standardisation of the contract means they are all employed on the same terms. For example, all special advisers now have a proper entitlement to parental leave. But in a change from previous editions, the 2019 version also made explicit that the prime minister’s chief of staff is responsible for managing

disciplinary matters and employment grievances relating to special advisers. Given nobody in No.10 currently has this formal title, it is hard to know who is responsible, though, as noted, Cummings and Cain are often described as de facto chiefs of staff. Presumably the prime minister's new chief of staff will take on this responsibility when he or she is appointed. Sir Mark Sedwill, the former cabinet secretary, explained to a select committee that the new contract is "properly commensurate with employment law in a way that perhaps some were not in the past".⁷³

Another change introduced by the Cabinet Office, this time before Johnson took office, was the creation of a small team that handles HR matters for special advisers across government (but is not involved in recruitment). While ministers are still formally responsible for dealing with any issues their advisers may have, the Cabinet Office is now able to provide uniform advice on these issues to ministers, if they request it. But the team is apparently not always easy to seek support from. Former adviser Jason Stein told *The Times'* politics podcast that it was hard to contact them to discuss adviser welfare and employment rights. He added that "if any of these things improve, I know it will make the life of special advisers much, much easier".⁷⁴

While that may be true, the support the Cabinet Office team can offer advisers is necessarily limited. The special adviser role is deeply political, and as a result so are many of the problems advisers face. Special advisers may, for instance, face difficulties in working with their minister or with other special advisers, particularly, given the current climate, those in No.10. The Cabinet Office is a civil service department, and so cannot resolve political disagreements between members of the government. This is understood: some interviewees said they would not approach the Cabinet Office for support on certain political problems or personal grievances.

There is clearly an appetite for greater support from the Cabinet Office for advisers. But officials can only do so much for them: it is up to their ministers (their formal line managers), the prime minister and his team to ensure that they do not face treatment that would be unacceptable elsewhere in government.

Clarification on special advisers' salaries is also welcome

There has historically been little consistency in how much special advisers are paid for their demanding and unstable job. Arbitrary pay settlements, which are made public, have in the past fuelled a feeling of resentment among advisers who find out that they are being paid less than peers doing similar jobs. In the past year, however, the government has made significant changes to the system to introduce more fairness and transparency. These changes, which are still bedding in, are an important step in professionalising the status of special advisers.

Interviews with advisers suggest that pay scales have in the past been unclear, and that there has been little opportunity to negotiate on salary. People we spoke to reported frustration on discovering that colleagues perceived to be less experienced or effective were receiving higher salaries than their own. Some also suggested that

there was little clarity about whether it was their minister or officials (in the Cabinet Office) who had the final say. One former adviser told PoliticsHome in June 2020 that “if ever I was making a case for a raise, you just had to shout and scream about it as much as possible until you could convince [the Cabinet Office] you deserved it”.⁷⁵ But as advisers are formally employed by their minister, and their appointment is signed off by the prime minister and his team, salaries are as much a political decision as an official one.

Over the past year the Cabinet Office has been working to deal with this perceived unfairness in the system of setting special advisers’ salaries. A central pay committee now takes descriptions of each adviser’s role from their department and allocates them to a particular pay band by comparing their responsibilities with advisers from other departments. Sometimes the salary is increased based on the adviser’s experience, so longer service in government or a relevant field is recognised and rewarded. Unlike civil service salaries, there is no expectation that advisers join government at the lower limit of their pay band. Each adviser received an explanation of what pay band they have been placed in and how that decision was arrived at.⁷⁶

Not everybody we spoke to agreed that this was a sensible step. One former adviser suggested that decisions should be made in each department, with special advisers’ salaries compared to deputy directors in that department rather than other advisers, given the difference in responsibilities between advisers. However, special advisers perform a uniquely political role, bringing skills and knowledge that the civil service does not provide. It therefore makes sense to set their pay separately, as long as it is done in a clear, systematic way.

While it is too early to see whether the changes to contracts and salary settlements have had a positive effect on morale, they are a sensible step in professionalising the work of special advisers generally. **The Cabinet Office should continue to ensure that special advisers have equal employment status across departments and to explain why they are awarded particular salaries. However, ministers should not expect the Cabinet Office to solve the political problems that special advisers face.**

Rules around transparency and accountability have not kept up with the changes the government has introduced

Various formal rules govern the status of special advisers and what they can and cannot do in government. Since 2010, the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act (CRAG) has codified the requirement for the prime minister to approve all appointments, to publish a code of conduct for special advisers and to provide an annual update to parliament on the number of special advisers in government.⁷⁷ The code of conduct was last updated in December 2016, after Theresa May took office.⁷⁸ However, aspects of the Ministerial Code also apply to special advisers. The last update to the Ministerial Code was published in August 2019, shortly after Boris Johnson became prime minister.⁷⁹ As certain advisers take on more responsibilities, and more departmental advisers work to instructions from No.10, the rules need to be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

The current rules state that ministers are accountable for the actions of their advisers. The Ministerial Code says that:

"The responsibility for the management and conduct of special advisers, including discipline, rests with the minister who made the appointment. Individual ministers will be accountable to the prime minister, parliament and the public for their actions and decisions in respect of their special advisers."⁸⁰

As a consequence, if advisers are deemed to have misbehaved, the minister they work for is generally taken to task in parliament. This principle does not mean, however, that in practice the minister will take the fall for the mistake of an adviser. In 2012, Adam Smith, adviser to the then culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt, resigned from the government after his contact with News International executives was found to have been inappropriate given Hunt's responsibility for making a decision over News International's bid for BSkyB.⁸¹ While Hunt answered questions on the matter in parliament,⁸² it was Smith who lost his job.

More clarity over what advisers do, and who they do it for, is needed

The new arrangements introduced since Johnson became prime minister mean that in some cases, it is not the minister who appoints a special adviser, but the prime minister himself (or his team of advisers). The most obvious example of this is the joint team of economic advisers who work for both the chancellor and prime minister – but several interviewees explained that the proportion of advisers across government appointed on No.10's say so has been increasing.

Calculating this split is hard. This creates a problem of accountability: if departmental advisers are appointed by No.10, or are working to implement the decisions of the No.10 team, rather than for their secretary of state, then it seems inappropriate for the minister to be held responsible for their 'management and conduct'. The government should be clear about when advisers are working for a departmental minister or the prime minister and his team, so that if an adviser appointed by No.10 is found to be behaving in an unacceptable way, it is the prime minister who answers questions on that behaviour. **The prime minister should update the Ministerial Code to clarify that when he appoints advisers to other ministers' teams, he is accountable for their behaviour.**

As well as greater transparency over who is working for the prime minister across government, if advisers continue to play a powerful role over key aspects of government business, they too should face greater scrutiny over what decisions they are allowed to make. The CRAG Act is clear that special advisers cannot "exercise any power conferred by or under this or any other Act or any power under Her Majesty's prerogative".⁸³ This means that an adviser, unlike a minister, has no executive powers.

But the actions and role of David Frost and Dominic Cummings have raised serious questions as to whether they are effectively playing an executive, rather than advisory, role. As chief Brexit negotiator Frost has issued numerous statements on behalf of the government.⁸⁴ Cummings' involvement in policy decisions – from the future of the UK's subsidy regime for businesses⁸⁵ to the integrated review of defence and foreign policy⁸⁶ – is widely believed to be influential.

It is possible to technically abide by the restrictions placed on special advisers and still wield great power. As Cummings, Lee Cain and other senior advisers have the ear of the prime minister, and are accepted as speaking on Johnson's behalf, then their decisions and demands are assumed to be them acting as the prime minister's proxies. As Gavin Barwell, chief of staff to Theresa May between 2017 and 2019, told us:

“As long as [civil servants] think that you're behaving with integrity, and that you have influence and understand the prime minister's mind, then if you say the prime minister would like you to do this, then they'll do it.”⁸⁷

This gives senior advisers great power to get things done, but can also blur the lines of accountability if advisers are not acting with the approval of the prime minister. At his press conference on the Durham trip, Cummings himself said that he frequently took decisions he did not share with the prime minister. If an adviser is acting without the prime minister's approval, it is for the prime minister to correct that. The greatest problem is that there is very little transparency about what role and remit these advisers have, a problem made worse by Cummings' apparent licence to range widely across government business.

In 2012 the then Public Administration Select Committee recommended that “information about ministers' special advisers should appear on departmental websites, including advisers' names and a description of the policy areas in which they work and the types of tasks they undertake [as] this would help parliament to hold ministers to account for the work of their special advisers”.⁸⁸ This recommendation has not been implemented: it is even more necessary now. **The Cabinet Office should set out clearly in the annual report on special advisers which advisers have been appointed by which minister and the remit and responsibilities of each.**

More responsibilities should mean more scrutiny

Given the power the prime minister has invested in some of his most senior advisers, it is more important than ever that calls for greater transparency are met. It is rare that special advisers appear before select committees, though Frost has been questioned by both Houses of Parliament's EU committees on the progress of UK–EU talks. In September 2020 Tobias Ellwood, chair of the Defence Committee, argued that Cummings should face questions after reports that he was involved in making decisions on defence policy.⁸⁹ Cummings, who was found in contempt of parliament for his refusal to appear in front of a select committee investigating fake news during the EU referendum campaign, is yet to appear in front of any committee in his capacity as a government adviser.⁹⁰

Advisers can give evidence where their minister or the prime minister allows them. Under the government's Osmotherly Rules, it is for ministers to decide whether to allow civil servants – including special advisers – to answer questions from select committees. If officials do appear before a committee, they do so as representatives of their minister rather than in their own capacity. The only exceptions to this are accounting officers and senior responsible owners of major projects, who are expected to account for their own decisions. The Cameron government changed the rules in 2014 to ensure that more civil servants could be questioned about the work that they do,⁹¹ and the same logic applies to very senior special advisers.

There are risks if special advisers were to appear more regularly before select committees, including increasing their own notoriety and misconceptions about how powerful they are inside government; they are not ministers and should not be treated as such. However, this has to be balanced against the need for appropriate transparency about their role and the need for select committees to be able to question the person with the most appropriate knowledge about the area they are seeking to scrutinise.

It would not be appropriate for most advisers in departments to begin appearing regularly before committees. However, given the emphasis that this government has placed on special advisers, the breadth of responsibilities for key advisers like Cummings, and the need for parliament to understand how the government works, it is appropriate and important that some advisers beyond Frost are allowed and encouraged to appear and be questioned. **Where special advisers have significant roles in government, ministers should agree to requests from appropriate select committees for them to give evidence.**

3. Long-standing barriers to special advisers' effectiveness

While the government has made some changes to how special advisers are recruited and how they work with No.10, it has done little to address other long-standing issues that impede the effectiveness of advisers in government. Special advisers are crucial to the performance of a minister, and yet the way in which they are managed and supported is rather amateurish. The government is working hard to increase the professionalism of the civil service, but is making no such efforts for special advisers. Many advisers feel that they are left to get on with the job with no guidance as to how to do it well. These jobs are inherently difficult, and high workloads and a lack of job security exacerbate this difficulty.

The government should address these problems and go further in some of the reforms it has already begun. This will strengthen attempts to attract a wider range of people into the role, and also enable new recruits to hit the ground running and continue to grow in the role. In this section we look at the ongoing challenges that special advisers face and make recommendations that would increase their ability to be effective.

Advisers have little access to induction or training

The rules, processes and informal subtleties of how government operates can be a huge learning curve for anyone coming into a role, not least for special advisers who are immediately thrown into a high-tempo, high-profile and high-risk role. A lack of training and induction means that advisers spend much of their first months in the role working out how their jobs work, what levers they can pull and how departments and the government actually operates. Without guidance, policy special advisers are often unable to get the best out of the government machine, which hampers their ability to provide useful advice to their minister. Media advisers face a similarly steep learning curve when trying to navigate a government press office for the first time.

The level of introductory information advisers receive largely depends on which department an adviser works for. Some departments have special advisers' officers, who arrange introductions and induction briefings for new special advisers, while others offer little on-boarding support. There is also rarely an opportunity for 'handovers' between outgoing and incoming advisers.

This seems to be an extraordinary failing for what is such a crucial job. If all advisers on appointment received training covering the basics of how certain government processes work, the responsibilities of different civil servants and what they can and cannot do as special advisers, they would be able to serve their ministers more

effectively from their first day in the job. In 2014 the Constitution Unit at UCL found that “the lack of any proper induction or training was the biggest single complaint... heard from special advisers”.⁹² Similarly, in his 2014 Institute for Government report,⁹³ former special adviser Nick Hillman recommended that training of this kind should be offered, as well as annual in-service training.

Other people we spoke to pointed out that professional development in the job, allowing advisers to choose their own areas for development, would be helpful. These suggestions are not new: Hillman pointed out that little had changed since a similar suggestion was made in 2002 by the then cabinet secretary, Richard Wilson, and the same applies to the intervening years since his report.

While the UK’s induction for special advisers is basic and patchy, other countries already provide tailored, in-depth briefing for political advisers, which brings them up to speed with how government functions and how they can be as effective as possible.

- **In Australia**, the Australian Public Services Commission is developing guidance and training to increase understanding and improve co-operation between ministers’ advisers and the permanent civil service.⁹⁴ Ministers’ advisers in the Victoria state government have access to a training course designed specifically for them, delivered by the Melbourne School of Government.⁹⁵ The course covers subjects including how to work with the public service and cabinet, political capital and judgement, policy development, and parliament.
- **In New Zealand**, new ministerial advisers are given training in parliamentary and governmental processes including the passage of legislation and the cabinet decision making process. They are also introduced to the ‘basics’ of government including how to protect government information and the role of advisers in responding to freedom of information requests. As well as these standard courses, the Department of Internal Affairs, which plays a similar role to the UK’s Cabinet Office in overseeing the terms of advisers’ employment, offers more tailored training courses and coaching for individual advisers to help them with the aspects of government that they find particularly challenging.⁹⁶
- **Austria’s** Federal Administrative Academy runs a seminar especially for ministerial advisers at the start of every new government. The seminar “focuses on the work of ministerial advisers and covers their legal status, rights and duties, and rules on anti-corruption and integrity”.⁹⁷
- And in **Denmark** the government established a mandatory training programme for new advisers in 2004 that covered “the organisation, *modus vivendi*, and procedures of the ministerial system so that they may operate more effectively in the system”.⁹⁸ The course has adapted over time and is now overseen by an agency of the Ministry of Finance responsible for personnel management. When they are appointed, advisers take a day-long training programme delivered by an ex-Supreme Court judge and a senior civil servant from the Ministry of Justice.

The programme explains how central government works, and the constitutional responsibilities of ministers and departments. Depending on the department they work in, advisers may also have access to other training courses.⁹⁹

Many of the people we spoke to suggested that training along these lines is needed for new special advisers in Westminster, who often find it difficult to understand how government functions. However, several interviewees also indicated that it would be difficult to introduce such a system in the UK because of questions about who would deliver it. If provided by the civil service, new advisers may be sceptical; theirs is after all a role distinct from that of a permanent civil servant. One interviewee told us that advisers can arrive in government suspicious of the intentions of officials; another that this might be seen as an attempt by 'the machine' to ensure everyone new to government adopts existing ways of doing things rather than bringing new approaches. This is a justified concern: weekly training sessions in a Whitehall meeting room are unlikely to inspire the "misfits and weirdos" sought by the current government. There is also the issue of demands on advisers' time. One interviewee indicated that ministers are often reluctant to release their advisers for training, even for a day or two, and advisers have an intense workload from their very first day in the role.

But if the Johnson administration is serious about wanting to improve the working of government, it needs to set the expectation that advisers learn how to work the machine and make it clear to ministers, departments and advisers that this is an essential skill. Some basic training will help special advisers understand the system and allow them to progress the government's priorities more effectively.

A joint effort between senior No.10 advisers and the civil service in facilitating this would help to mitigate some of the concerns over its delivery – the former could provide introductory insight into the political side of advisers' work, while the latter could cover the technical and parliamentary aspects of the role. As in Denmark and Australia, the civil service could also call in experts from other parts of the public sector, academia or think tanks, to deliver sessions about how government works. And ministers should spell out what they expect of their advisers and how they like to work. **Ministers should arrange for induction training for special advisers on how the government they work for operates, and how to be effective. They should also ensure that those advisers who want it have access to further training.**

Ministers – and senior advisers – rarely take their responsibilities for managing advisers seriously

Once they have got up to speed with the role, many special advisers report a lack of performance management and pastoral support, and that can make them less effective than they could be. Many of the former advisers we spoke to defined success in the role simply as averting political disaster and keeping their position. Most advisers receive no performance appraisals or formal feedback of any kind from their minister or from No.10, even though the model contract states that they will receive "an annual appraisal and review"¹⁰⁰ from the prime minister's chief of staff

and their appointing minister. This matters, not because special advisers need to become more like permanent civil servants, but because it will help them to do their jobs more effectively.

The lack of a more professional approach to special adviser support can also create a negative culture and risk causing problems that can undermine special advisers' ability to work well together and with others in government. Advisers lack clear and appropriate avenues to access pastoral support, or to report grievances. Some former advisers accept this as an inevitable feature of their unique status in government – being left isolated to get on with the job – but others state that a lack of pastoral support has left them exposed in instances of workplace bullying or harassment, and unable to access appropriate help. Many of our interviewees attributed this lack of management support to the fact that ministers do not have time to reflect on and review their advisers' performance, and that while ministers are formally responsible for managing their advisers, they do not always have people management experience.

The Cabinet Office special adviser HR team can provide some support and advice to ministers and advisers who seek it, but as noted is unable to get involved in political disputes. And special advisers' roles are not the same as those of permanent civil servants. They are extremely busy and need flexibility to behave outside of certain norms in order to resolve disagreements between different parts of government. Political disputes and personality clashes are part of what they are there to help manage. Therefore, a system of mandated feedback and review, like the one used by the permanent civil service, is unlikely to be helpful. But, with no structure at all around their evaluation, it is difficult for special advisers to know when they have been successful. Several advisers we spoke to said that more formal management and pastoral support would have helped them to both manage the stresses of the job and deliver their minister's objectives more effectively.

If ministers are unable or unwilling to take on full management responsibilities for their advisers, it makes some sense for the prime minister's senior advisers to do so. The Constitution Unit supported this idea in 2014, recommending that each new special adviser have a more experienced adviser as their mentor.¹⁰¹ It also proposed that the prime minister appoint a deputy chief of staff, tasked with the support and supervision of all special advisers. This would mean that advisers were supported by a political appointee, ensuring that the political nature of their role is reflected in their management discussions. One of the recently appointed deputy chiefs of staff at No.10 is apparently responsible for special adviser HR¹⁰² and presumably they or the soon-to-be-recruited new chief of staff will be responsible for managing special advisers.

This system is not perfect either – senior advisers in No.10 are further removed from each adviser's day-to-day work than their minister and, of course, may also not be neutral arbiters in any disputes. The government could look to how allegations of bullying and harassment have been handled in parliament, where an independent inquiry recommended the creation of a route for staff to seek support that does not mean they have to ask those they work closely with.¹⁰³

Constructive feedback, discussion of priorities and support when things are difficult will help advisers serve their minister and the government as a whole more effectively – whether the feedback comes from senior advisers or ministers. **The prime minister should ensure that ministers and his senior advisers provide proper management support to special advisers, and that advisers have a way to raise grievances.**

Many ministers want more advisers

As well as trying to support ministers effectively without adequate training or performance management, advisers also face very demanding working conditions. In departments where there are only one or two advisers, they tackle enormous workloads in an inherently insecure position. Many of our interviewees explained how special advisers are expected to be available to respond to ministerial requests or publicity crises at any moment. This can result in advisers working long hours as they try to stay on top of the wide range of responsibilities they have over policy or media, with little scope for work-life balance while in the role. While this is the nature of the job they have signed up to, there are some clear ways in which advisers can be supported better and reduce the risk of mistakes stemming from the sheer scale of the task they are taking on.

In comparison with other nations that have similar governmental structures, the UK is unusual in having a formal cap on the number of special advisers each minister can have. In Australia and Canada, ministers are typically supported by considerably more political appointees – there were 452 ministerial advisers in the Australian government in 2019, and 581 in Canada in 2018, compared to around 100 in the UK.¹⁰⁴ Instead of capping the number of appointees, Canadian ministerial offices have a set budget for employing advisers. As a result, ministers have the freedom to set up a team tailored to their needs and preferences, whether that is a larger team of less experienced advisers, a small handful of more senior political appointees, or a combination of both. This system also encourages ministers to think carefully about the specific role they want individual advisers to play, which is helpful for both the adviser and the minister.

While secretaries of state are formally allowed to appoint only two special advisers, the cap is not strictly adhered to. At the last data release in December 2019, eight ministers had more than two special advisers.¹⁰⁵ Where ministers do follow the cap, they often decide to bring more specialist advice into government through other routes. For example, chancellors including Gordon Brown and George Osborne have appointed a council of economic advisers.¹⁰⁶ Other ministers bring in expert advisers as civil servants. For example, in August 2020, Trade Secretary Liz Truss advertised for a full-time policy adviser, through the civil service jobs website.¹⁰⁷

Clearly, there is demand for more advisers in government, and ministers are already recruiting them, either through ignoring the cap on special advisers, or employing more civil service advisers. Hiring more advisers also allows ministers to bring experts who operate with a political lens into government. In his Ministers Reflect interview, Gregory Barker, a junior minister in the coalition government, highlighted the importance of having enough special advisers in government who have expertise in a specific policy area and share a minister's political beliefs:

“There was this commitment when we came into government to reduce the number of spads and it was a totally huge error. Particularly where you have an area like [the Department of Energy and Climate Change] that is quite technical and specialist, I think [you must] ensure that you have proper, efficient, professional delivery of policy, but through a prism that reflects the values of the minister, and reflects their priorities.”¹⁰⁸

Former adviser Nick Hillman has recommended that the ‘arbitrary numbers cap’ should be removed. Despite promises to reduce the number of special advisers, he says the coalition government and subsequent administrations failed to fulfil them, because of the value of “loyal, ideologically committed aides” to secretaries of state.¹⁰⁹

However, there are some drawbacks to employing more advisers. The more advisers a minister has, the greater the risk that the crucial close working relationships between advisers and ministers become diluted. Advisers – and the officials across government that they collaborate and negotiate with – need to be confident that they are speaking on behalf of their minister and are well-versed in their stance on policy issues. Gaining and maintaining this confidence requires considerable access to the minister, and there is a practical limit on how many people can have this level of access. Therefore, a larger team of advisers may in fact be less effective. Moreover, there is little compelling evidence from other countries that an increased number of advisers results in political appointees being less overworked.

But on balance, relaxing the cap on two advisers is a sensible way to help advisers manage their workload. Indeed, many departments do not follow the cap at present: removing it altogether is a logical next step, as the rules around number of advisers should reflect reality. Moving to the Canadian or Australian systems, with larger teams of political advisers around each minister, risks cutting ministers off from officials and making it harder for them to establish close relationships with their advisers. But one or two more advisers per minister – particularly for those leading large departments like the Home Office, or dealing with particular crises such as that posed by coronavirus – will mean greater support and a more manageable workload for individual advisers, without diluting the close relationship between a minister and their team or altering the UK’s model of a largely apolitical civil service. **The prime minister should relax the cap on two advisers per cabinet minister: a team of up to five would be sensible if ministers want to appoint them. But this should not be a target as such, and ministers may feel a smaller team allows them to build close working relationships with each of them.**

Many of these long-standing issues have been raised before and they are not all easy to fix. But there are ways the government can ensure that special advisers, who can wield such a strong influence on government and on a minister’s effectiveness, are themselves able to be far more effective. Boris Johnson relies heavily on special advisers. The government is reimagining their role. This, despite recent controversies, gives them an opportunity to improve special advisers’ abilities to make things happen in government.

4. Conclusion

Since taking office in July 2019, Boris Johnson has shown a clear desire to strengthen the power of No.10, exerting control from the centre with the support of a small number of advisers and close ministerial colleagues. Like many of his predecessors, the prime minister has empowered some of his senior advisers to take high-profile roles in government. He and his team have also played a greater role in the recruitment and oversight of special advisers working for other ministers across government.

Some of these changes are beneficial. They are creating a close-knit team of advisers able to work together to pursue the prime minister's priorities. The government is also creating new ways to recruit special advisers, appealing to people who might not have the connections or know-how to get an adviser's job in the traditional way. This has the potential for a more diverse special adviser network in Westminster.

But by taking greater control over other ministers' special advisers, the prime minister is disempowering his cabinet – already among the least experienced of recent times – and risks reducing the amount of healthy debate and discussion in government. He may find it helpful or reassuring to have closer control of government. It is clear Dominic Cummings does. But as Sir Bernard Jenkin, chair of the House of Commons Liaison Committee, has said, attempting to manage all of government from No.10 means that “disaffected ministers and officials are left carrying out decisions for which they are not responsible”.¹¹⁰ It has already cost Johnson one chancellor.

Rather than seeking to use the special adviser network to dominate the rest of government, the prime minister and his team should focus on helping special advisers across all of government be as effective as possible in their roles. The prime minister and his team are clearly serious about reforming how the government works. They want the civil service to become more expert, more professional and more in touch with the country. They should want the same for the advisers who support ministers.

This paper has identified some further steps the government can take to improve the effectiveness of special advisers and to mitigate the potential downsides of steps they have already taken. These changes will help the government attract special advisers with a wider range of backgrounds and experiences. Once they are recruited into government, better support will help them do their jobs more effectively. The furore over Cummings' “misfits and weirdos” advert and stories of advisers being escorted from Downing Street by police are unedifying. But these dramatic events should not distract the government from the real possibility it has created for itself to improve the ability of advisers to do their jobs well. It should embrace it.

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