1. Introduction to the Handbook on Ministerial and Political Advisers

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INTRODUCTION

Long before anyone had heard of Dominic Cummings, once an adviser to the former UK Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson, ministerial advisers had been characterised as the ‘junk yard attack dogs of the political system’ (Weller 2002, p. 72). Weller had Australian advisers in mind, but his words also captured the prevailing stereotype of political advisers: pugnacious political enforcers to whom ministers turn when something needs fixing. As with all such clichés, this one obscures as much as it reveals. For every Dominic Cummings there is a Heather Simpson (New Zealand PM Helen Clark’s famously discreet chief of staff); for every junk yard attack dog there is a different kind of beast, focused less on the politics of aggression and more on those of delivering the minister’s policy agenda. Ministerial advisers are less a single breed than a sprawling species.

This book is about that particular type of political animal. Such advisers are not, of course, a new phenomenon. As both Athanassios Gouglas and Andrew Blick point out in Chapters 3 and 21 respectively, across time and space political executives have always sought advice, and from a wide range of sources – from men and women of the cloth, sage lay people, spouses, lovers, the wealthy (and less frequently the poor), court favourites, servants of the public, and so on. Some leaders are less inclined than others to seek (much less take) advice, of course, but the ins and outs of the demand for and supply of political advice have long been a staple concern of those who study political institutions, the policy process, and public administration.

Within those broad literatures, however, the dominance of a conception of the executive branch of government as comprising elected politicians and appointed bureaucrats – the exemplar being Woodrow Wilson’s politics–administration dichotomy, which for many remains both a normative and descriptive template – is such that the ‘third element’ (Wicks 2003) in the executive has often been overlooked. But that is changing, and in recent decades the scholarship on ministerial advisers has burgeoned. Furthermore, as several contributors to this volume demonstrate, the early and necessary work of describing this relatively new type of adviser (at least in some contexts; advisers appointed on the basis of partisan rather than merit considerations have long been a feature of Napoleonic ministerial cabinets) is now part of a much richer empirical and theoretical palette.

Twenty years on from Weller’s pungent characterisation, the primary purposes of the Handbook on Ministerial and Political Advisers are to convey the essence of this literature, and to chart methodological, theoretical, and empirical agendas for the future. This chapter takes the first steps down that path by defining the core unit of analysis, explaining the emergence of ministerial advisers on the executive stage, providing a snapshot of what is known about advisers, and setting out the structure of the publication.
SETTING THE SCENE

Some Definitional Homework

There is plenty of spirited debate about precisely how the political actor at the centre of this book should be defined. Our preference has long been for ‘ministerial adviser’, which we have previously defined as a ‘temporary public servant appointed to provide partisan advice to a member of the political executive and who is exempt from the political impartiality requirements that apply to the standing bureaucracy’ (Shaw and Eichbaum 2018a, p. 3).

We appreciate that some take issue with this position. In particular, it is reasonable to ask why we do not make greater use of the more generic descriptor ‘political adviser’, which directs attention to matters of function rather than institutional location (see Craft 2015a). There is certainly a case for doing so, especially insofar as attention is thus focused on what this particular category of adviser actually does (provide partisan advice), a function carried out by a wider cast of dramatis personae than the actor we focus on. That said, we eschew this approach for three reasons. First, as the role typologies developed by Askim et al. (2017), Connaughton (2010), Maley (2000), and others demonstrate, ministerial advisers do not just provide political advice: sometimes the adjective changes, and the counsel they offer to political principals is technical or expert in nature.

Second, in addition to proffering advice ministerial advisers do a great many other things (see Craft 2015b and Veselý 2017 on some of the non-advisory elements of advisers’ work): they broker relationships, repair political damage, prise open (and occasionally slam shut) windows of opportunity, seek to redirect blame that is zeroing in on their ministers, provide shoulders for ministerial tears to fall on, and so forth. While it is central to some of this work, as a particular type of activity ‘advice’ does not fully capture the depth and breadth of the agency that ministerial advisers are called upon to provide. Neither does it encompass many of the other competencies – skills in relationship management, conflict resolution, media engagement, and so on – that are demanded of them. Indeed, several of the chapters in this Handbook (not least Chapters 22, 24, 26, and 27) would look quite different had we required our contributors to focus solely on the provision of advice.

The third reason behind our preference for ministerial adviser is that while plenty of people offer political advice – including advisers working for legislators, members of the judiciary, thinktanks, political parties, and interest groups (Aubin and Brans 2021) – in this publication we are primarily interested in that specific sort of counsellor whose intra-governmental proximity to members of the political executive grants them authority and influence that is not routinely available to advisers outside of government. The people we focus on are not always called ministerial advisers (for instance, the UK has its special advisers, Canada its exempt staff, and the Netherlands its political assistants), but the common denominator is an institutional home at the confluence of the political and administrative executives. It is the consequences of that particular institutional property of ministerial advisers that we are most concerned to explore. Clarity around functions is certainly important, but so is understanding the import of institutional locale.

We are mindful both that advice is provided by a range of political and administrative actors and that in some jurisdictions ministerial advisers as we have defined them do not exist (in the case of the latter we asked our contributors to concentrate on functionally equivalent roles). That said, while we accept that for some the terms ministerial adviser and political adviser...
are interchangeable, and that for others the second of these apppellations offers greater scope, neither are positions that we take here. Our sense is that characterising the core unit of analysis as a ministerial adviser provides empirical and theoretical coherence that would otherwise elude us.

Where Did They Come From?

Definitional dancing on the heads of pins aside, it is worth briefly noting some of the explanations for the existence of ministerial advisers as well as outlining their raison d’être. As is noted by the authors of several chapters – and the same point has been made elsewhere by Brans et al. (2017) and Di Mascio and Natalani (2016) – in some contexts ministerial advisers have been around for a long time. In their contemporary incarnation, however, particularly in the Westminster and continental European communities where they are a more recent phenomenon, their emergence can be explained by several factors.

Much can be attributed to what can probably no longer be called the ‘New’ Public Management (NPM) reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. Particulars differ across time and space, but in many countries the initial period of upheaval caused by the reforms was characterised by the institutional division of inputs, outputs, and outcomes; the splitting of the funder, purchaser, and provider roles (and the delegation of significant policy delivery responsibilities to arms-length agencies); and the implementation of short-term employment contracts for top civil servants.

On the distributed institutional terrains that emerged from these changes, ministers found themselves in need of advisers who were independent of both the civil service and the broader network of delivery agencies and organisations called into existence by the ideological preference for outsourcing policy implementation. They required the services of a new kind of agent who could patrol the delegation boundaries, guard against the various risks that such arrangements pose for ministers, contest the information asymmetries enjoyed by public bureaucracies, and generally ‘bring civil servants to heel’ (Niklasson and Öhberg 2018, p. 167). Enter the ministerial adviser.

So far, so historical. Latterly, the intersection of various technological and political phenomena has played out on the institutional foundations laid down under the NPM, further complexifying ministerial demands for support of various kinds. These days, the standard explanation for the existence of ministerial advisers takes a series of issues – intractable policy challenges, a media that never sleeps, exponential increases in the amount of information policy-makers must master, and the attentions of sceptical publics – and weaves them into a narrative that boils down to a concern with challenging ministerial workloads. Seen in this light, recourse to ministerial advisers is an adaptive response to a model of executive government that is under mounting pressure.

To that probably needs to be added a comment regarding the implications of the illiberal turn taken in parts of the world. Insofar as we are living through a turbulent time of ‘intensified and more conflictual interactions between political actors’ (Hinterleitner 2020, p. 199), this trend is likely to both cement advisers’ place at ministers’ sides and reshape the role as it is currently understood. There are many possible pathways that might be taken, of course, perhaps the most obvious of which involves the populist vilification of civil servants – exemplified by former US President Donald Trump’s ad hominem (and ad nauseam) attacks on the
‘deep state’ (Moynihan 2022) – and the subsequent displacement of evidence-based policy by policy-based evidence (Strassheim 2017).

Under such conditions it is not difficult to imagine the part ministerial advisers might play in nurturing a climate in which politicians feel no need to produce evidence to substantiate their claims, or in contriving ‘facts that … better fit with [a leader’s] desired narrative’ (Cox 2017, p. 533). Nor does it take much to imagine that under an extended populist regime ministerial advisers might flourish numerically (as disillusioned civil servants are replaced by personal loyalists) and gain greater influence (as the ‘alternative facts’ provided by a trusted coterie are favoured over the responsible competence that is the stock in trade of civil servants).

Of course, things could – and do – play out otherwise. Whether or not, or the extent to which, the scenario sketched above has come to pass is properly an empirical question (one which has not yet made its way into the mainstream of the literature on ministerial advisers, and which is addressed in greater detail in the concluding chapter of the Handbook). In the present context, the point is that the sorts of exogenous conditions which applied in the US under its 45th president (and which are, to a greater or lesser extent, material to other jurisdictions) now need to be accommodated in accounts of the imperatives behind the demand for ministerial advisers.

All of that said, it would be remiss – and theoretically and empirically dubious – to uncritically reproduce the normative assumption that ministerial advisers are congenitally inclined to behave badly. As Dennis C. Grube explains in Chapter 24, it does not pay to assume that ministerial advisers seek to politically taint all they touch, and neither should the principled case for politicisation be casually dismissed. Things are often more subtle than the tabloids would have us believe.

MAKING SENSE OF ADVISERS AND THEIR IMPACTS

The Temporal Evolution of Research

There are various ways in which the accumulated knowledge of the place of ministerial advisers within ‘the balanced triangle’ (Trewthitt et al. 2014) of executive government can be organised. The orthodox approach is to distinguish between broad temporal phases of research. Because much of the early English-language research on advisers emerged from Anglo-Westminster nations and broadly coincided with various scandals (the Children Overboard affair in Australia, the Gomery Commission in Canada, and, in the UK, the political contamination of civil service advice in the lead up to the Iraq War), it had a particular focus on accountability (Gay and Fawcett 2005; Tiernan 2007) and on the threat advisers allegedly pose to civil service impartiality (King 2003; Mountfield 2002; Walter 2006). The inductive crafting of role typologies, too, especially by Connaughton (2010) and Maley (2000), was central to the process of giving scholarly shape to the emergent field of study.

There has since been a shift in the character of the scholarship, and a growing awareness in the Anglo-sphere of the richness of the work published in other linguistic contexts (on which matter the authors of Chapters 2, 10, 11, and 12 have important things to say). The initial and necessary focus on describing the terrain, classifying roles, and addressing issues of accountability has been complemented by engagement with a wider range of empirical matters using an extended menu of research designs, data-generating methods, and theoretical framings. In
short, second-generation research on ministerial advisers rests upon increasingly sophisticated epistemological and methodological foundations. And what is emerging is a literature which, to use a fluvial metaphor, is less narrow and tumbling in nature than it is estuarine, stretching out over an expansive range of geographies, issues, and approaches.

**Designing Research**

A second way of classifying the literature is to distinguish those studies in which ministerial advisers are the dependent variable from those in which they feature as an independent variable. This approach helps avoid the temporal determinism that is sometimes found in accounts structured around generational shifts (and the impossibility of determining precisely when those transitions take place). The research path is not, of course, a smooth, linear journey to the sunlit uplands of knowledge; rather, it tends to wind around, double back on itself, and, from time to time, become a little overgrown. Neither do we ever really leave anything behind (and neither should we): accountability remains a critical issue in the field (Ng 2018), while new role typologies (see Askim et al. 2017) capture the nuances of advisers’ work under evolving conditions.

The second category – those positioning advisers as independent variables – merits particular mention, because it is here that the clearest evidence is often to be found that those studying ministerial advisers are also contributing to other scholarships. And so we have analyses of advisers’ place in policy advisory systems (Craft and Halligan 2016; Silva 2017); their impact on the politicisation of bureaucracies (Dahlström and Niklasson 2013; Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014) and on political-administrative relations more generally (de Visscher and Salomonsen 2012); the nature (Brans et al. 2017; Gouglas 2015; Rouban 2007) and historical trajectories (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013; Maley 2017) of their institutional habitats; and their influence on fiscal policy (Dahlström 2011) and the structuring of advice to ministers (Christiansen et al. 2016).

Beyond its broad empirical scope, several characteristics of this work stand out. One is that it is increasingly comparative (albeit that the comparisons are usually across European contexts): the single-country case remains the dominant research design, but scholars such as Christiansen et al. (2016), Dahlström (2011), de Visscher and Salomonsen (2012), Hustedt and Salomonsen (2017), Maley (2018), and Öhberg et al. (2016) are changing this. We think it likely that matters will change further still on the basis of some of the work published here.

It is also less geographically and culturally contingent in nature. True, much remains to be done in order to extend the literature into parts of the world (the Pacific, for instance, or Africa) that do not yet feature in the published record, but several of the contributions in this volume – principally those from Wei Li (Chapter 13), Katarína Staroňová and Marek Rybář (Chapter 14), and Diego Salazar-Morales (Chapter 18) – get us well under way.

Finally, this more recent research embeds – or is embedded in – several of the dominant theoretical churches of the wider public administration and/or political science traditions. A couple of examples will suffice by way of demonstration. A decade ago Robert Elgie (2011) made the point that the language of the core executive (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990) has come to dominate executive studies. Ministerial advisers did not feature in earlier accounts of the core executive, but they do now. Advisers are variously seen as an intra-governmental resource that is central to ministers’ capacity to coordinate activity across the machinery of government (Craft 2015b; Robson 2015); as key players in departmental and executive courts
(Rhodes and Salomonsen 2020; Rhodes and Tiernan 2016); and as valuable assets able to navigate, bridge, and catalyse policy networks, both within and beyond the core executive (Maley 2015). Broadly speaking, these and other contributions (e.g. Kolltveit and Shaw 2022) are sharpening the capacity of the core executive studies literature to account for the nature and exercise of power: in the context of power asymmetries within the core executive, the deployment of ministerial advisers is one way of securing a minister’s position relative to others in the executive court, and of extending ministerial reach into departments. In other words, it makes sense to see advisers as part of what Dahlström et al. (2011) consider the institutional recentralisation of power.

The second example speaks to one of the perennial issues in the literature on political-administrative relations, which is the tension between political control (and the legitimacy that stems from an electoral mandate) and bureaucratic power (which inheres in bureaucrats’ ties to interests, their possession of technical expertise, and their occupational longevity). Based on empirical observations, scholars including Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014) and Staroňová and Rybář (2020) have helped theorise the effects ministerial advisers have on relations between top politicians and administrators in the context of the wider political-administrative relations canon. The results are mutually beneficial: the literature on advisers is theoretically enriched and additional empirical stretch takes place in the host scholarship.

There are other instances of this sort of theoretical border crossing: de Visscher and Salomonsen (2012) and Shaw and Eichbaum (2017) have engaged with those whose primary focus is on public service bargains; while Craft (2015a), Kakabadse and Kakabadse (2021), and Veselý (2017) are amongst those weaving ministerial advisers into the policy process and policy advisory systems scholarships. This is nothing like an exhaustive list of the intellectual craft being applied (more on which is to follow in Chapters 2 and 3), but it does make the over-arching point that the literature on ministerial advisers has matured in different directions and to extensive effect.

THE CASE FOR AND STRUCTURE OF THE HANDBOOK

Why This Book?

The work reviewed above has dispelled many (although not all) of the shadows suggested by the title of Andrew Blick’s seminal 2004 contribution, *People Who Live in the Dark*. Some of what has been revealed is not all that flattering, but the collective endeavour of a considerable number of scholars has enhanced our understanding of ministerial advisers and the executive milieu in which they move. In so doing, this scholarship has pegged out a particular site of empirical endeavour and established the epistemological, methodological, and theoretical apparatus needed to make sense of material matters. While its proponents draw from an increasingly sophisticated menu of epistemologies, research designs, and theoretical framings, what unifies this scholarly ‘community of interest’ (Pollitt 2010, p. S292) is its subject matter; and what characterises and strengthens it – as will become apparent in the chapters that follow – are the fruitful, confident exchanges taking place regarding the nature and consequences of the interactions between that subject and other political and policy actors.
It seems clear to us that there is a place now for a publication that collates and consolidates the knowledge generated by and insights gained from all of this scholarly activity. Therefore, the first of the Handbook’s purposes is to serve as a compendium of ministerial advisers; to gather together in one place as much knowledge as can be feasibly attained from as wide a range of sources and settings as possible. The Handbook also strikes out in new directions, packaging theoretical and methodological considerations differently (in the chapters in Parts II and III), and both attending to emerging areas of empirical and comparative concern and venturing into geographies that have not hitherto featured in the English-language advisers literature (in Parts IV and V). Each of our authors contributes to both aspects of this heavy lifting.

As researchers who are closer to the end of our careers than to the start, for us an additional imperative has been to assemble a broad and diverse group of contributors. Some of the names encountered here are established scholars while others are promising young people who are in the process of emerging into the light. Most work in parts of the world in which there is an extant literature on ministerial advisers, but others come from places where that literature is being written – by them. Whatever the gender, methodological disposition, theoretical inclination, or position on the academic hierarchy, we wanted this book to serve as an exercise in epistemic community building, and are grateful to those who have helped us do that.

We are also conscious that some things are missing from the Handbook. Chief amongst these are contributions from certain parts of the globe. The bulk of the published work on ministerial advisers is generated in Anglo-Westminster and continental and northern European contexts. To the extent that there are countries and administrative traditions that are not represented here – African, Caribbean, and Pacific contexts loom large in this regard – that may reflect the sensitivities of undertaking the relevant research in certain places, the challenges non-native English-language speakers face when seeking to publish in English, and/or the fact that the role of the ministerial adviser as we define it does not exist in certain contexts. Or it may simply reflect our own failure to find that work and those who produced it. Whatever the reasons, more remains to be done, including on the place and work of advisers within international institutions such as the European Commission (something addressed in part in Chapter 16), and we hope the absences in this edition of the Handbook will become presences in the next.

The Structure of the Handbook

The usual approach in publications containing accounts of ministerial advisers (e.g. Eichbaum and Shaw 2010; Ng 2018; Shaw and Eichbaum 2018b) is to arrange the table of contents by country. We wanted to take a different approach here. The job of the three chapters comprising Part I is to set the scene. The present chapter provides an initial context to and outline of the book. In Chapter 2 Alexandre Belloir and Casper van den Berg set the stage by locating the study of advisers in the wider political-administrative relations canon, while Athanassios Gouglas lays out in detail the state of the literature – past, present, and perhaps future – on ministerial advisers in Chapter 3.

In Parts II and III the focus shifts to theoretical and methodological considerations. In effect, these chapters – which are conceived partly with a view to assisting graduate students and emerging scholars, and partly to help in the shaping of future research designs – lay bare the working machinery of the scholarship on advisers. In Part II the focus is on some of the dom-
inant theoretical frames to be found in the literature. Each author explains the architecture of their conceptual lens, reviews its deployment in the literature and explains subsequent insights and learnings, and reflects on potential future applications. More specifically, Fabrizio Di Mascio and Alessandro Natalini engage with new institutionalist approaches and the ways in which these have been deployed in studies of ministerial advisers (Chapter 4); Richard Shaw and Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen review the deployment of Hood and Lodge’s notion of the public service bargain (Chapter 5); and Sylvia Veit explores advisers through the lens of policy advisory systems (Chapter 6). Finally, in an extended reflection set against the backdrop of the wider political science oeuvre, Rod Rhodes weaves matters together in a chapter which complements (and occasionally contests) the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological contents of the other contributions to this section (Chapter 7).

The batch of chapters comprising Part III complements those theoretical pieces with close attention to several established and emerging methodologies. The intent here is to explain the broad particulars of the approach in question, review its use in researching ministerial advisers, outline the understandings thus generated, and reflect on the possibilities for applying the approach to new issues involving or unresolved questions regarding advisers. To those ends, Kristoffer Kolltveit, Rune Karlsen, and Jostein Askim tackle the use of survey research (Chapter 8); Amalie Trangbæk and Mathilde Cecchini make the case for greater recourse to the interpretivist method (Chapter 9); Heath Pickering, Marleen Brans, and Guy Peters assess the prospects for greater attention to comparative research (Chapter 10); Marleen Brans, Arthur Meert, Pieter Moens, and Pierre Squevin examine the prosopographic method (Chapter 11); and Arthur Meert, Heath Pickering, Marleen Brans, and Athanassios Gouglas test the scholarly opportunities and limits of the use of systematic literature reviews in a discussion which has the added benefit of pointing to opportunities for further comparative research (and which, because it surveys two substantial bodies of literature, is a little longer than the others) (Chapter 12).

The point of Parts IV and V of the Handbook is to explore various aspects of the material circumstances in which ministerial advisers (or their functional equivalents) operate around the globe. It also combines two sets of accounts, some of which are geographically bound and others of which are structured around contemporary issues. In Part IV, with the exception of Evan T. Haglund’s chapter on the US, we have chosen to use administrative traditions rather than the nation state as the core unit of analysis for comparing and contrasting arrangements. In a sense, then, not only do these chapters provide contemporary detail (at least some of which has not previously seen the light of day), but they also constitute what is essentially a comparative study within a study.

For Wei Li the canvas is Asia (Chapter 13); Katarína Staroňová and Marek Rybář focus on Central and Eastern Europe (Chapter 14); and Thurid Hustedt’s gaze is on continental European nations further to the west (Chapter 15). For their contributions, Arthur Meert, Marleen Brans, Fabrizio Di Mascio, Athanassios Gouglas, Alessandro Natalini, and Patricia Silva scrutinise institutional arrangements amongst Napoleonic countries (Chapter 16); Jostein Askim, Kristoffer Kolltveit, and Eivind Smith attend to circumstances in the Scandinavian context (Chapter 17); Diego Salazar-Morales’ analysis is located in Latin America (Chapter 18); Evan T. Haglund tackles the US case (Chapter 19); and Bernadette Connaughton, Charis Rice, and Richard Shaw profile the Westminster community of nations (Chapter 20).

The chapters in Part V explore a range of issues which cut across both time and space. Andrew Blick lays out an elegant deep history of advisers to political leaders (Chapter 21);
Jonathan Craft captures advisers’ contributions (both advisory and non-advisory) as policy workers (Chapter 22); Tobias Bach and Thurid Hustedt probe the lives of advisers in the executive triangle (Chapter 23); Dennis C. Grube interrogates the normative and descriptive dimensions of politicisation in the context of relations between advisers and civil servants (Chapter 24); Yee-Fui Ng revisits the perennial (and critical) issues of accountability and regulation (Chapter 25); Rune Karlsen and Kristoffer Kolltveit examine the complex relationship between ministerial advisers and the media, both new and old (Chapter 26); and Maria Maley provides a sociodemographic analysis of ministerial advisers, including an important (and overdue) account of the import and impact of gender on the working lives of women ministerial advisers (Chapter 27).

The short, final section of the book – Part VI – contains our own attempt at wrapping things up and tidying away loose ends (Chapter 28), and an excellent glossary compiled by Heath Pickering.

CONCLUSION

The popular, and contestable, view is that ministerial advisers are usually up to their necks in questionable activities of one sort or another. While there is some justification for this particular normative stance, there is also a constructive case to be made for advisers. All other things being equal (and that is not always the case, of course), they can help ministers manage towering workloads, expand policy conversations, and – in their de facto capacity as court jesters – ask awkward questions. Not least, advisers play important roles in the zone where the tides of politics and administration converge. To be sure, there are legitimate questions regarding their impact on civil service neutrality which need constantly to be asked. Equally, the assumption that officials’ behaviour always conforms to the best principles of disinterested professionalism has long been open to contest, and when required advisers can provide a legitimate counterpoint to bureaucratic obduracy.

Our intent in this book, then, is to provide a nuanced understanding of the nature and agency of ministerial advisers. In a way, each of the chapters that follow is a strand of an ongoing conversation with the scathing characterisation of ministerial advisers with which this chapter opened. Pat Weller’s junk yard attack dogs are still out there – but we hope that this Handbook tells a more subtle, comprehensive story of this very particular kind of political animal.

REFERENCES

Introduction


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