

Enemy or ally? Senior officials' perceptions of ministerial advisers before and after MMP

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Abstract

There is now a well-established literature on the various second-order effects of the adoption of proportional representation in New Zealand. One feature of the contemporary executive landscape, however, remains substantially under-researched. This article reports on research regarding ministerial advisers in New Zealand Cabinet ministers' offices. More specifically, it compares senior public servants' current attitudes towards ministerial advisers with pre-MMP speculation regarding the possible future influence of such advisers. The article concludes that, while there are concerns about the possible long-term influence of political advisers, for the majority of senior officials, working relationships with ministerial advisers are positive and productive.

Keywords

ministerial advisers, MMP, politicisation, Cabinet, public service.

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Introduction

In 1993 New Zealand became the first of the Westminster family of nations to adopt proportional representation as the system for electing its national legislature. In the decade or so since, the political landscape has been transformed: single-party majority governments appear to have become a thing of the past; the two-party system has made way for multi-partism; and the composition of the Parliament is now more reflective of the electorate that it purports to represent.

These and other consequences of the adoption of the mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system have substantially altered the environment in which the public service advises on, implements and evaluates public policy. These second-order effects of change have arguably been felt most sharply by those officials who advise the political executive. Where once they served ministers in single-party majority governments, senior officials now typically advise multi-party and/or minority governments. The virtual monopoly they once held over advice has gone (although not exclusively as a result of electoral change), and they now compete for the minister's ear with other policy players in what has become a more cluttered, contested policy market.

Most of these developments were anticipated well in advance of MMP. Many have also been scrutinised in an increasingly well established literature on the various effects of MMP, including those which directly concern the public service.¹

But there is one characteristic of the contemporary executive landscape which has thus far been largely overlooked. In the space of a decade or so, political advisers have become a central feature of executive government in New Zealand (as they have in other Westminster jurisdictions).² The emergence here of what in the United

¹ See Jonathan Boston, *Governing under Proportional Representation: Lessons from Europe* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 1998); Jonathan Boston, 'Institutional Change in a Small Democracy: New Zealand's Experience of Electoral Reform', in Leslie Seidle and David C. Docherty (eds.), *Reforming Parliamentary Democracy* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); Jonathan Boston and Stephen Church, 'The budget process in New Zealand: Has proportional representation made a difference?', *Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2002), pp. 21-43; Jonathan Boston, Stephen Church and Hilary Pearce, 2004. 'Explaining the Demise of the National-New Zealand First Coalition', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2004), pp. 585-605; Jonathan Boston, Stephen Levine, Elizabeth McLeay and Nigel Roberts (eds.), *From Campaign to Coalition. New Zealand's First General Election Under Proportional Representation* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1997); Jonathan Boston, Stephen Church, Stephen Levine, Elizabeth McLeay and Nigel Roberts (eds.), *Left Turn: the New Zealand General Election of 1999* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2000); Jonathan Boston, Stephen Church, Stephen Levine, Elizabeth McLeay and Nigel Roberts (eds.), *New Zealand Votes. The General Election of 2002* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003); Raymond Miller (ed.), *New Zealand Government and Politics*, 3rd ed. (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2003); Raymond Miller, *Party Politics in New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jack Vowles, Peter Aimer, Jeffrey Karp, Susan Banducci, Raymond Miller and Ann Sullivan, *Proportional Representation on Trial. The 1999 New Zealand General Election and the Fate of MMP* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002); Jack Vowles, Peter Aimer, Jeffrey Karp, Susan Banducci and Raymond Miller (eds.), *Voters' Veto. The 2002 General Election and the Consolidation of Minority Government* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2004).

² In New Zealand advisers are variously called 'political advisers' (Michael Wintringham, *Annual Report of the State Services Commission to the New Zealand Parliament*, 2002), 'personal advisers' (Cabinet Manual, 2001) and 'personal appointees' (Colin James, *The Tie That Binds. The Relationship Between Ministers and Chief Executives* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 2002), p. 59). Our preference is for 'ministerial advisers', which is the formal classification most likely to attach to staff employed by the Ministerial Services branch of the Department of Internal Affairs to furnish advice, including advice of a political or strategic nature.

Kingdom (UK) is now routinely called the ‘third element’³ has important consequences for the workings of government. Beyond an idea of how many ministerial advisers there are, however, and a general sense that they play an important and influential role, the Wellington version of this very particular type of public servant remains surprisingly under-researched.

There is an especially worrisome gap in our understanding of relations between ministerial advisers and their colleagues in the public service. Given the centrality of this relationship to contemporary government and governance, insofar as officials are increasingly working alongside – and, some might argue, sometimes against – their ‘partisan’ colleagues, there is a pressing need to better understand how this dynamic functions, and to what effect.

This article reports on the first stage of research intended to shed light on the various consequences of the increasing significance of the ministerial adviser in the New Zealand body politic.⁴ Our particular focus here is on senior officials’ perceptions of the contribution ministerial advisers make to the policy process under MMP. By way of establishing a context for this analysis, we begin by reviewing what officials had to say about possible developments in the number and roles of ministerial advisers before the adoption of MMP. We then report the relevant data from our research, and discuss the extent to which what has come to pass is consistent (or at variance) with what had been anticipated.

Setting the scene

Prior to the first MMP election in 1996 there was a good deal of speculation about, and preparation for, the likely effects of the new electoral arrangements on New Zealand’s political system. Drawing on the comparative evidence, much of it gleaned by the numerous politicians, officials and others who visited nations with experience of proportional representation, it was expected that multi-partism, coalition and/or non-majority government, and a more porous policy process would quickly become characteristics of the New Zealand environment.

Included in the predictions at the time were several prognoses regarding the potential influence of political advisers in the new environment. A survey of élites detected a widely-held expectation – notably amongst public service Chief Executives (CEs) – that the role of ‘non-departmental political advisers’ in the policy process would grow under MMP.⁵ The authors also suggested that non-single party majority governments would employ political advisers in greater numbers, and in so doing would inject greater contestability into the market for policy.

A 1995 report to the State Services Commissioner, too, noted the assumption amongst senior officials that ministers would have greater recourse to non-public

³ Nigel Wicks, *Defining the Boundaries within the Executive: Ministers, Special Advisers and the permanent Civil Service* (Ninth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2003).

⁴ We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Marsden Fund, administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand. The project supported by the Fund comprises two stages. The first entails the administration of tailored questionnaires to ministers in all governments since 1990, ministerial advisers, and senior officials in government departments. A series of in-depth interviews with a smaller sample drawn from the same populations is in train.

⁵ Jonathan Boston, Stephen Levine, Elizabeth McLeay and Nigel Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP. A New Politics?* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, 1996), p. 34.

service advisers in the new environment.⁶ That much was confirmed by the then Minister of State Services, who indicated that ministers would inevitably take advice from a wider range of sources than they had traditionally.⁷ In large measure, this would reflect the political imperatives of multi-party government, which would generate political demands from ministers (such as for assistance with the formation and management of coalition and/or minority governments) which impartial public servants would be in no position to meet.⁸

The State Services Commission and the Secretary to the Cabinet shared the view that ministers would make greater use of political advisers under MMP.⁹ In some quarters, at least, this prospect was considered an opportunity rather than a risk. In particular, advisers would be ideally placed to take on some of the new roles which would come hard on the heels of the advent of multi-party and/or minority governments. The Cabinet Secretary, for example, envisaged some replication here of the part political appointees in the Swedish Prime Minister's Department play in co-ordinating the policies of parties in coalition.¹⁰

One or two notes of caution were sounded. Questions were raised regarding whether or not political staff would be able to engage in explicit party political action, how their relationship with public servants would be managed, and whether they would be bound by the conventions governing the collective interest of the government-of-the-day.¹¹ And attention was drawn to the risks these sorts of developments might pose to the neutrality and policy capability of the public service. Specifically, some expressed concerns about the possibility that MMP governments might 'by-pass the public service in favour of overtly political appointments'.¹²

Beyond those relatively few references, the issue of political advisers seems to have received only fleeting attention.¹³ In summary, at the point MMP was implemented there appears to have been a broad consensus amongst officials that in the future there would be more political advisers, and that they would be key actors in the day-to-day management of coalition and/or minority governments, and perhaps in the wider policy process. These developments – along with the greater contestability likely to stem from them – were accepted with relative equanimity by the majority of senior public servants. On the other hand, some were clearly

⁶ Mel Smith, *Proportional Representation and its effects on the Public Service. Report to the State Services Commissioner* (report commissioned by the State Services Commissioner, 1995). While ministerial advisers are, in a formal sense, part of the public service, insofar as they are employed by the CE of the Department of Internal Affairs, Smith's reference is clearly to political staff.

⁷ Paul East, 'How Does the New Electoral Environment Affect the Role and Structure of the Public Sector?' (Address at the Conference *MMP: Changing the Way We Govern*, Wellington: Plaza Hotel, 1994).

⁸ Colin James, *Under New Sail: MMP and Public Servants* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 1997).

⁹ Marie Shroff, 'The Operation of Central Government under Proportional Representation Electoral Systems' (Unpublished Report by the Secretary to the Cabinet, 1994); State Services Commission, *Working Under Proportional Representation. A Reference for the Public Service* (Wellington: SSC, 1995).

¹⁰ Shroff, 'The Operation of Central Government', p. 25.

¹¹ SSC, *Working Under Proportional Representation*, pp. 73-74.

¹² Boston, Levine, McLeay and Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP. A New Politics?*, p. 34.

¹³ The MMP newsletter which the SSC produced in the run-up to the 1996 election made sporadic references to political advisers. One such indicated that advisers would probably be employees of political parties, rather than public servants (State Services Commission, *MMP Newsletter for Chief Executives* (Wellington: SSC, August 1994), p. 3.) In fact, the latter is the case.

concerned that the respective roles of advisers and officials would become confused. Others worried that an increase in the number and influence of ministerial advisers might, at the very least, markedly diminish officials' contribution to policy-making; at worst it could threaten the impartiality of the public service.

The research

A decade on, there has been little empirical analysis of the extent to which these prognoses have been realised. Granted, there are some largely anecdotal accounts of the state of relationships between ministerial advisers and permanent officials.¹⁴ There are also assessments of the number of ministerial advisers, and of the employment and accountability arrangements which apply to them.¹⁵ Specifically regarding the former, the indications are that the number of staff formally classified as ministerial advisers has increased since the mid- to late-1990s (Table 1).

Table 1: Numbers of ministerial advisers in the New Zealand public service (1998-2005)¹⁶

Designation	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Ministerial Adviser/ Senior Adviser	0	3	11	14	19	23	26	23
Executive Assistant	15	23	16	13	10	10	10	6
Press Secretary/ Media Assistant	24	24	21	24	22	23	23	22
Total	39	50	48	51	51	51	59	51

Beyond this, however, there is scant research on the sorts of issues canvassed in advance of MMP.¹⁷ The data reported here begin to address that deficit. They derive

¹⁴ James, *The Tie That Binds*.

¹⁵ Chris Eichbaum and Richard Shaw, 'A Third Force: Ministerial Advisers in the Executive', *Public Sector*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2003), pp. 7-13; Chris Eichbaum and Richard Shaw, 'Is Westminster dead in Wellington? Ministerial Advisers in the New Zealand Executive' (Paper presented at the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference: Otago University, September 28-30, 2005).

¹⁶ Data were obtained under the Official Information Act 1982, and apply as at 18 October 2005. Information from prior to 1998 is unavailable in the form requested. While the line of demarcation between the administrative and the political is indistinct at best, Ministerial Advisers/Senior Advisers, Executive Assistants, and Press/media staff tend to engage in political functions. Prior to the change of government in 1999, the designation 'Executive Assistant' captured many of the responsibilities now the preserve of Ministerial Advisers/Senior Advisers. Since the change of government the designation 'Executive Assistant' suggests a relatively lower level of status and responsibility, with duties more of an administrative nature.

¹⁷ Neither is the international literature on political staff in Westminster contexts especially exhaustive. Moreover, much of what is available focuses on ethical, accountability and/or media-related matters, rather than on the policy dimensions of the adviser's role. King (Simon King, *Regulating the Behaviour of Ministers, Special Advisers and Civil Servants* (London: The Constitution Unit, 2003)), for instance, compares accountability arrangements across Westminster nations, while Tiernan (Ann-Marie Tiernan, *Ministerial Staff under the Howard Government: Problem, Solution or Black Hole?* (PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2004)) assesses the conduct and regulation of advisers in Australia. An exception is Maley (Maria Maley, 'Conceptualising

from a large-scale survey of senior departmental officials carried out in the early part of 2005. The survey was endorsed by the State Services Commissioner on the basis that the identities of participants (and their departments) would remain anonymous to the researchers and in subsequent publications.¹⁸ To this end the Leadership Development Centre (LDC) agreed to contact all departmental CEs on our behalf seeking permission for senior officials to participate in the research, and in due course distributed a questionnaire which respondents returned directly to us.¹⁹

We explicitly sought the participation of senior officials who have, or have had at some point since 1990, contact with ministerial advisers. Moreover, because our concern is with the policy-related dimension of ministerial advisers' work, we specifically asked participants to limit their observations to those ministerial advisers with an active engagement in the policy process. Therefore, while we do not dismiss their importance or potential influence, in this particular instance we were not directly concerned with those 'advisers', such as press secretaries and media assistants, whose core responsibilities lie in communications.

The questionnaire itself was a 68-item instrument comprising a 21-item Likert-scale (which provided a composite measure of officials' overall disposition towards ministerial advisers), and a mix of forced-choice and open-ended questions.²⁰ Some 546 officials in 20 government departments and the New Zealand Police agreed to participate in the survey.²¹ Collectively, the departments surveyed accounted for 81.5% of all full-time equivalent staff in the public service.²² We received 188 completed questionnaires, equivalent to a response rate of 34.4%.²³

A final word on research design. Because no sampling frame exists for the theoretical population we are interested in – i.e. all senior departmental officials who have had contact with ministerial advisers at any point since 1990 – it was not possible to obtain a random sample. This clearly limits the kind of statistical tests

Advisers' Policy Work: The Distinctive Policy Roles of Ministerial Advisers in the Keating Government, 1991-1996', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2000), pp. 449-470), who analyses the policy roles of Australian ministerial advisers at the federal level.

¹⁸ We wish to acknowledge the support extended to us by the Commissioner, Mark Prebble, and by Jeanette Schollum (Manager, Strategic Development Branch).

¹⁹ Our considerable thanks go to Helen Coffey (Marketing and Communications Manager) and Bruce Anderson (CE) at the LDC.

²⁰ We used a standard five-point scale (where 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=disagree; 5=strongly disagree) to assess individuals' views on a range of matters concerning ministerial advisers. Items were coded (and as necessary reverse-coded) such that a high overall score on the scale indicated a positive inclination towards ministerial advisers. As it happens, the mean score of 61.5/105 (with a skewness statistic of -1.722 and a Kurtosis value of 4.680) suggested our respondents were, on balance, well disposed towards their partisan counterparts. In order to complement quantitative results with respondents' qualitative observations, in this article we have opted to unpack the scale and to group the various items thematically alongside responses to open-ended questions.

²¹ They were: Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, Department of Conservation, Department of Corrections, Department of Internal Affairs, Department of the Prime minister and Cabinet, Inland Revenue Department, Department of Survey and Land Information, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Ministry for the Environment, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Fisheries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Research Science and Technology, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Women's Affairs, National Library of New Zealand, State Services Commission, Treasury.

²² As at June 2004 (State Services Commission, *Human Resource Capability Survey of Public Service Departments. As at 30 June 2004* (Wellington: State Services Commission, 2004).)

²³ A further 33 officials communicated their inability or unwillingness to participate directly to us.

that can be deployed in analysing our data.²⁴ It is possible, however, to estimate the overall number of all senior departmental officials. The most recent estimate is provided by the LDC, who put the total number of the top three tiers of officials at 1,254 (as of 2003/04), of which our target population would comprise a much smaller subset. In that context, and notwithstanding that we cannot precisely establish the likelihood of results being attributable to sampling error, we have every confidence that our data, and the discussion predicated on them, are robust.

Profile of respondents

The participants in the research were overwhelmingly drawn from the upper echelons of the public service. We received seven responses from CEs. Over 80% of respondents reported directly to their CE (tier 2), or did so through a tier 2 manager (tier 3). A small proportion were managers of local or regional offices.²⁵

They came from across the span of departments. Just under a third (29.8%) worked in policy departments or agencies, and 67.9% of that group were employed in either the Treasury, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, or the SSC. Nearly a half (48.4%) were in departments in which policy and operations are institutionally combined. Only 12.4% came from departments with a sizeable service delivery capability, and even fewer (1.9%) from organisations with core funding and/or purchase responsibilities.

There was a split between male (55.2%) and female (44.8%) respondents. Not surprisingly, on the whole respondents had spent a considerable period working in the public service. Just under a third (30.7%) have worked in the New Zealand public service for 10 years or fewer. Of the remainder, 38.7% have more than two decades' worth of experience. The majority of all respondents (79.1%) have worked in three departments or fewer; most (70.6%) have been in their current department for between one and 10 years.

They were also well educated. A third (32.3%) specified either a Bachelors degree, or an undergraduate Diploma or Certificate, as their highest educational qualification. The remainder hold post-graduate qualifications: 14.9% have a post-graduate Diploma, 46% a Masters degree, and 4.3% a PhD.²⁶

Nearly one in seven of our respondents (13.5%) had in the past been seconded from their department to work in a minister's office. Of this group, nearly half (43.3%) spent less than six months on secondment, and 90% had finished their period of secondment within two years.

²⁴ David de Vaus, *Surveys In Social Science Research*, 5th ed. (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2002). Because there is no precise means of establishing the characteristics of the population from which our sample derives it is not possible to fully test for sample bias. Given the conditions under which the survey was administered, we accept that sample bias may have occurred (e.g. via the non-participation of some departments, differences in the approaches taken by CEs to 'recruit' possible participants, the distribution of respondents within departments, etc.).

²⁵ The data reported in this article relate only to those respondents in the top three tiers.

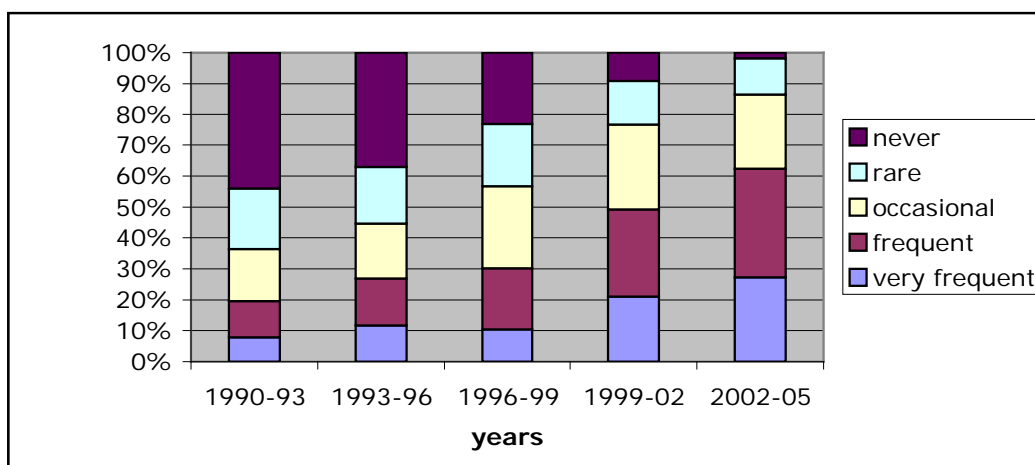
²⁶ The gamma coefficient of -0.312 indicates a moderate association between rank and educational qualification.

What we found

Contact within the executive

Respondents reported a good deal of contact between the three elements of the executive branch. At one level, that is to be expected. In particular, it comes as little surprise that the growth in the number of ministerial advisers has been accompanied by an increase in the amount of contact between advisers and officials (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Officials' contact with ministerial advisers (1990-2005)²⁷

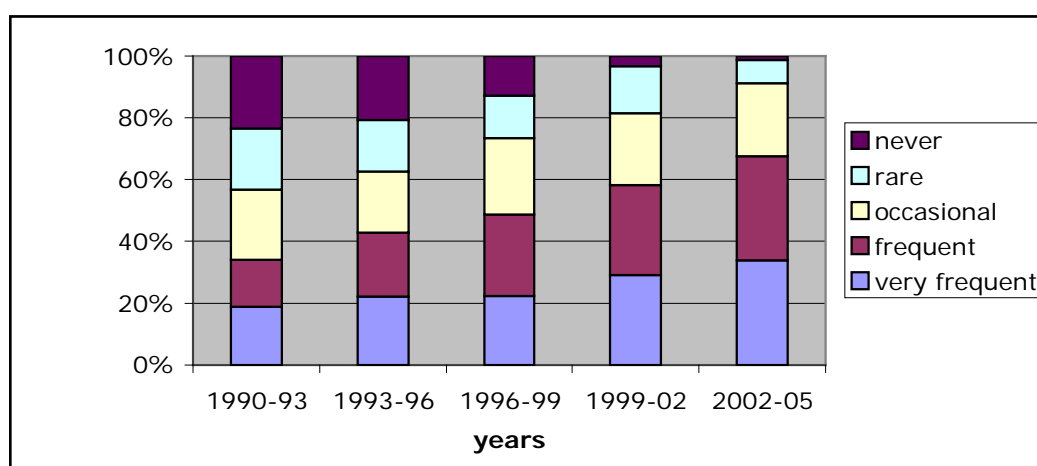


But the extent to which this interaction has accelerated in recent years is worth noting. Roughly a fifth (19.6%) of respondents recollect having had frequent or very frequent contact with ministerial advisers during the tenure of the fourth National Government (1990-93). The trend to greater frequency of engagement rises steadily across the early 1990s and into the era of MMP, but things really begin to accelerate with the advent of centre-left government in 1999. At that point there is a surge: the 31.6% of officials who had frequent or very frequent contact with ministerial advisers under the National/New Zealand First coalition leaps to 49.3% while the Labour/Alliance Government is in office, and then to 62.4% under the Labour/Progressive administration. Consequently, whereas 44.1% of respondents had no commerce at all with ministerial advisers just over a decade ago, these days the percentage of respondents who have no contact with ministerial advisers has dwindled away to virtually nothing (1.9%).

The patterns depicted in Figure 1 also describe senior officials' exchanges with the wider ministerial office. Several of our respondents suggested that, on occasion, some ministers deploy their political advisers for the express purpose of putting distance between themselves and their officials. Accordingly, one might expect a certain falling away of contact between officials and ministerial offices.

²⁷ In Figures 1 and 2 respondents were asked to indicate frequency of contact on a five-point scale: very frequent; frequent; occasional; rare; never. The data for (a) 1993-96 and (b) 1996-99 are averages of the contact reported for the following governments: (a) National (Nov. 1993-Sept. 1994); National/Right of Centre (Sept. 1994-Aug. 1995); National (Aug. 1995-Feb. 1996); National/United (Feb. 1996-Dec. 1996); (b) National/New Zealand First (Dec. 1996-Aug. 1998); National/Independents (Aug. 1998-Nov. 1999).

Figure 2: Officials' contact with ministers' offices (1990-2005)



That appears not to have been the case (Figure 2). Instead, and while the data do not reveal what has been driving the trend, or indeed what specific business is being transacted (and whether the mix has changed over time), they do make it clear that there is a significant measure of contact between senior officials and ministerial offices. The proportion of those who have only occasional contact with ministers' offices has remained more or less constant since 1990-93, but the percentage reporting either frequent or very frequent contact has doubled from 34% between 1990-93 to 67.6% between 2002-05. Correspondingly, of course, the number indicating that they have little or no contact with ministerial offices has plummeted.²⁸ In addition, there seems to be a positive relationship between degree of contact and seniority: the more senior the official, the more frequent the engagement with the ministerial office. And not only is the association strengthening, it has been strongest during periods of minority governments.²⁹

Ministerial advisers under MMP

While the broad patterns of contact noted above are consistent with the expectations of the SSC, Shroff and others, it is the substance of this interaction – especially as it relates to and influences policy-making – which is of particular interest here.

Much as was projected, our respondents were generally of the view that ministerial advisers now undertake a range of important MMP-specific roles and,

²⁸ To an extent the data in Figure 2 may reflect the increasing seniority of our respondents over time. However, while our data don't allow us to control for individuals' career paths, even when all public servants *other* than those with 21 years of service or more are excluded from calculations (thereby restricting analysis to the only cohort in the study which has had the opportunity to be in contact with each government since 1990), the trend is clearly towards greater contact with ministerial offices.

²⁹ During the fourth National Government there was a weak association between contact with ministerial offices and rank ($\gamma=0.178$). Things firmed up a little in the final FPP Parliament ($\gamma=0.245$) and during the tenure of the National/New Zealand First majority coalition government ($\gamma=0.346$). Since the advent of minority government in August 1998, however, the association between contact and rank has been reasonably substantial: the coefficient for the National-led minority administration ($\gamma=0.464$) is in much the same range as that for the Labour/Alliance ($\gamma=0.407$) and Labour/Progressive governments ($\gamma=0.425$).

moreover, that this amounts to a valuable contribution to the life and times of coalition and/or minority governments (Table 2).

Table 2: Officials' views on advisers' contribution under MMP

Statement	strongly agree	agree	neither agree/disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
advisers add value to the policy process under coalition &/or minority government conditions	7.7%	47.1%	38.1%	5.2%	1.9%
advisers play a positive role in facilitating relations between coalition partners	9	41.3	46.5	1.9	1.3
advisers play a positive role in facilitating relations between governments & their support parties	5.2	39.6	51.3	3.2	0.6

As to the nature of those roles, they tend to stem from the demise of single-party and/or majority governments. Since the demise of the National/New Zealand First Government in August 1998, New Zealand has experienced a sustained period of multi-party and/or minority government. Such arrangements rest upon relationships – within the political executive, and between governments and parliamentary support parties – which ministerial advisers are tailor-made to assist with. And although a significant proportion of respondents elected not to take a clear position on each statement in Table 2, those who did were overwhelmingly of the view that advisers' contribution in these contexts is a helpful one.

Respondents were also invited to specify ways in which they thought MMP has shaped the ministerial adviser's role. Not surprisingly, a majority (69%) indicated that matters had become more complex for advisers (although 8% said that as far as they were concerned the change had made no difference whatsoever) (n=112; missing=76). Pushed for particulars, the broad consensus was that advisers are in a position to add value they must be able to 'do the "backroom" stuff' (024) with coalition partners and support parties which is a defining feature of policy-making under MMP, but which is well beyond the pale for public servants.

Some respondents were scathing of the political 'make-work' they felt had become a hallmark of governing under MMP; one mused that there could 'possibly be a management role [for ministerial advisers]; i.e. keeping coalition partners happy by arranging meaningless meetings to "show" relationship building' (040). However, such dispositions were represented far less frequently than was the view that ministerial advisers are now central to the policy process, simply because of 'the need to manage coalition partners, and to negotiate policy options that bridge the political views' (108). The adviser's role in all of this is to ensure 'co-ordination and facilitation across several ministers, both within the same portfolio and with interests in the issues; [and] some coalition co-ordination across parties' (099).

Most respondents were clear that the contemporary political environment presents challenges for advisers (and equally adamant that these are not always met). But in addition, a number pointed out that in every challenge lies an opportunity. As one

put it, ‘the greater complexity of forming policy into legislation under MMP has broadened the political/executive niche that political advisers can best fill’ (011). That is, not only have the politics of multi-party and minority government increased ministerial advisers’ leverage in the policy design stages, they have also become key players in the implementation phase. Thus, advisers have a critical role as ‘brokers around legislation’ (140), and ‘often manage the negotiation between coalition partners or other parties when a majority is being assembled to move things through the legislative process’ (088). The point these respondents were making is that for those ministerial advisers who can and do rise to the challenge, MMP provides a constant flow of opportunities for influencing both the substantive and procedural dimensions of policy. They do not exist simply to expedite process.

Advisers’ place in the wider scheme of things

Beyond the imperatives associated with the structure of post-MMP governments, our respondents were also in general agreement that advisers play an influential part in the broader policy process (Table 3).

Table 3: Ministerial advisers’ contribution to the policy process

	Count	Responses (%)	Cases (%)
add contestability	14	6.2	9.2
add political perspective	43	19	28.1
stakeholder management	45	19.9	29.4
assist ministers	53	23.5	34.6
other	71	31.4	46.4
Total	226	100	147.7

Note: n=153; missing=35

Clearly, it is risky – and beyond a point probably futile – to try and quarantine those aspects of the policy environment which are MMP-specific from those which are not. That said, when asked to elaborate on what ministerial advisers have to offer the policy process, our respondents drew attention to several things which are not wholly a function of MMP (or at least, which would conceivably exist regardless of electoral arrangements).

On the one hand, some of our respondents advanced a somewhat jaundiced assessment of the role played by ministerial advisers. One echoed the sentiments of a number of others when she noted that ‘on occasion [ministerial advisers] can “capture” a minister and get in the way of frank advice, or create unnecessary work if they do not know a policy or operational area well’ (034). Another indicated that his experience ‘has been entirely negative – the adviser made decisions and dabbled in day-to-day management putting his minister at risk’ (062). And as far as a third was concerned, ministerial advisers’ ‘only major “contribution” is in driving ministers’ pet projects that they [ministers] might think would not be prioritised or got onto quickly enough otherwise’ (154).

But other participants identified areas where ministerial advisers clearly add (public) value to the policy process. One core policy-related function which advisers

undertake attracted particular attention. It concerns the co-ordination of actors and issues within a core executive the boundaries of which have become, since 1996, increasingly fluid and porous. In such a context 'a very skilled adviser can add enormous value and good governance [and] can help embed strategies across ministers' (013). The cross-cutting dimensions of that role were explained by an official for whom ministerial advisers serve as:

a useful "sounding board" for officials. Where they support the officials' view, they will assist and facilitate decisions by ministers. Assist also in management of relations between ministers' offices, which has been important with the increase in the numbers of ministers, associate ministers and parliamentary undersecretaries. (028)

For many of our respondents the most critical aspect of this role is played out at the nexus of the political and administrative wings of the executive. And the most valuable contribution a ministerial adviser can make is viewed as assisting officials to understand and negotiate the political context which encloses ministers' preferences. Good political staff earn their keep when they serve as 'the bridge between "neutral" advice and ... what is and isn't on the table for a particular government' (181). The importance of this was conveyed by two respondents who indicated that effective ministerial advisers:

provide a useful conduit/liaison with the minister. They can also provide useful information to departments on the political imperatives impacting on or driving the minister. They can communicate the areas of policy which are non-negotiable. (113)

facilitate the flow of information to and from busy ministers, exercising judgment and synthesising information so that ministers can be informed efficiently and in an up-to-date way. Can integrate information from different sources which aids ministers, but can also help to inform the policy process by incorporating different perspectives. (179)

Clearly, that advisers are able to offer insights on the state of ministers' thinking 'does not mean we [officials] should only deal with those issues' (049), but it can reduce the slippage which occurs when ministers and their officials talk past each other. It also helps officials understand the political drivers behind ministers' choices. Policy is not shaped in a vacuum, and rational, evidence-based criteria are not the only considerations taken into account when policy options are framed and decisions reached. Ministerial decision-making (both individual and collective) is inherently political - for much policy, the point of departure is an electoral mandate that is clearly political - and this presents challenges for impartial officials who must get close, but not too close, to the political crucible. We return to this matter below. But by hovering between ministers and public servants, ministerial advisers can both 'ensure that appropriate political dimensions are part of the advice' (087) and absorb much of the political heat which might otherwise be directed at officials.³⁰ In a nutshell, ministerial advisers:

provide advice on the political impact of policy choices [which] can provide a "reality check" for options presented by officials. In some respects they help preserve the neutrality of officials' advice (since political factors are drawn from elsewhere). (151)

³⁰ Chris Eichbaum and Richard Shaw, 'Why We Should All Be Nicer To Ministerial Advisers', *Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2005), pp. 18-26.

Roles and relationships

Responses to the officials' questionnaire usefully illuminate the nature of the ministerial adviser's role. Most of what respondents had to say – that amongst other things advisers broker policy agreements within coalition governments; find agreed positions with support parties; and engage with officials – accords with the pre-MMP speculation.

But looking back at those prognoses, what stands out is not so much a concern with the various aspects of the adviser's role *per se* as a wariness about the potential for confusion – and possibly conflict – between partisan advisers and public service advisers. The coming challenge was one of demarcation: of locating and then policing the boundary between the respective duties and prerogatives of ministerial advisers and officials.

We have sketched the formal arrangements which regulate the conduct of ministerial advisers in New Zealand elsewhere.³¹ Comparatively speaking, our arrangements are fairly unsystematic. New Zealand lacks legislation equivalent to Australia's Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984, which regulates the activity of political staff across the Tasman.³² Neither is there a dedicated code of conduct for ministerial advisers as there is in the UK, amongst the functions of which are to (a) identify where advisers' responsibilities end and those of public servants begin, and (b) articulate a grievance process for officials who feel that an adviser's actions may have compromised their impartiality.

Moreover, there are no formal limits here on the numbers of ministerial advisers, as is the case at Westminster (even if that is typically observed in the breach). And New Zealand has no equivalent of the requirement incumbent upon the Australian government to report on the size of ministers' staffing complements, and the number of political advisers.³³ This elasticity extends to the regulation of relations between ministerial advisers and officials. The relevant guidelines in the Cabinet Manual require ministers to establish a 'clear understanding ... [with] the chief executive so that departmental officials know the extent of the authority on which these [ministerial] advisers are speaking'.³⁴

In practice, there seems to be considerable variability in the protocols which govern relations between advisers and officials within ministerial offices. In fact, just 27.1% of those we surveyed said that there *were* protocols in place regulating contact between ministerial advisers in their minister's office and departmental officials (n=180; missing=8). Over a third (35.1%) said their engagement with ministerial advisers was not subject to a protocol (at least one respondent expressed surprise that when he had 'checked the intranet, nothing was there!'), and 33.5% were unsure one way or the other whether such arrangements existed.

Further, respondents also reported a variety of approaches to the form and content of protocols. The core distinction seems to be between written and unwritten protocols. Where respondents work to formal written agreements (and relatively few

³¹ Eichbaum and Shaw, 'A Third Force: Ministerial Advisers in the Executive'.

³² The efficacy of that regulation is a matter of dispute within the Australian context (see Tiernan, *Ministerial Staff under the Howard Government: Problem, Solution or Black Hole?*).

³³ In Australia, the Department of Finance and Administration provides twice-yearly documents at Estimates hearings which detail the numbers and classifications of government personnel (Tiernan, *Ministerial Staff under the Howard Government: Problem, Solution or Black Hole*, p. 31).

³⁴ Cabinet Manual, 2001, para. 2.187. The SSC's 'Fact Sheet 3: The Relationship between the Public Service and Ministers' (available at www.ssc.govt.nz) advises on how these guidelines might be operationalised. It restates the relevant contents of the Cabinet Manual, and specifies six principles which should underpin arrangements within ministers' offices.

seem to do so), these tend to be reasonably prescriptive, and directed either at processes ‘for seeking requests for briefings, information etc.’ (112), or at the level at which contact between advisers and officials can take place (which is typically at tier 3 and above).

On the whole, the preference seems to be for more informal and non-codified understandings. Quite a few respondents would recognise this CE’s explanation that the relevant protocols ‘are many, subtle and mainly preserved in the culture rather than in writing. They boil down to clear understandings of role boundaries’ (128). And many would probably agree that it is not a formal credo but ‘the personal judgement of officials contacting ministers’ offices [which] is the more significant factor in determining the nature of the contact’ (041). On matters such as these, it would seem, the view is that a point is quickly reached where the optimal way of managing contact is more by ‘relational’ and informal modes of ‘contracting’, with far less recourse to more ‘classical’ and prescriptive contractual vehicles.

This may go some way to explaining why so few respondents were convinced of the utility of formal protocols. Only a third (35.7%) of those whose involvement with ministerial advisers is subject to a protocol believe that this helps clarify roles and relationships (n=98). Most respondents (55.1%) reserved judgement on the issue; only 9.2% were adamant that the understandings to which they were subject did not work. And in these cases, there was no consensus on where the root of the problem might lie. For some the issue is that ministerial advisers fail to comply with expectations; others acknowledged that ‘there are also inconsistencies in the ways that directorates and departments refer to or follow the protocols’ (041).

Much depends on the conduct and disposition of individuals. And in particular, our respondents were strongly of the view that, perhaps more than anything else, much depends upon the minister. The importance of strong leadership from the minister was a recurrent theme in our research (even though, oddly, it tends not to feature in the literature as a determinant of relations between officials and ministerial advisers). Many respondents made it clear that, as far as the state of working relationships is concerned, ministers’ expectations and actions matter quite as much as the motives and dispositions of officials and advisers.

Above all else, the clarity with which ministers specify the nature and scope of their delegations to ministerial advisers is seen as crucial to role clarity. And for at least some respondents, altogether too little effort is invested in ensuring that all parties understand the bases of the authority with which ministerial advisers speak. One senior official framed the matter thus:

In my experience advisers’ delegations are generic and broad-based, leaving them substantial room for action. The nub of the issue is whether they act in accordance with ministers’ understanding of their delegations. (041)

There are really two dimensions to the issue. The first is whether or not, in general, ministerial advisers comply with their delegated authority. Most of our respondents believe they do: only 20.2% of them reported personal experience of instances in which a ministerial adviser had – in the official’s view – exceeded his or her delegated authority (n=172; missing=16). Just over half (50.5%) had never experienced an adviser over-stepping the mark, while 20.7% felt the issue did not apply to them.

The second and more substantive matter concerns the *nature* of the delegations made to ministerial advisers. Specifically, it has to do with the extent to which

ministerial advisers' dealings with officials are based on, or legitimised by, an authority which has been formally delegated by ministers.

For some officials this simply wasn't a concern. One respondent suggested that advisers are like a 'filtering mechanism rather than manipulative. There do not appear to be many (or any) "Sir Humphreys"' (061). But for others, including the 20 respondents who, in response to a question regarding the nature of advisers' 'transgressions', volunteered that they were not at all sure what delegated authority ministerial advisers actually possessed – it was a very significant matter.

We tend to share that view, as the absence of clear understandings of the extent of an adviser's authority may threaten the relationship between ministers and their officials. Sir Humphrey Appleby was, of course, a senior civil servant, not a political adviser. But behind the *Yes Minister* analogy lies an assumption that advisers are essentially an extension of the ministerial persona; a sort of cipher for conveying ministers' preferences to officials. (Much the same understanding is suggested by the existing accountability arrangements, according to which ministers are individually responsible for the conduct of the ministerial advisers they appoint.)

But the very act of clarifying a minister's views, or communicating his or her directions to officials, necessarily requires the adviser to exercise a degree of discretion and agency, and so is vulnerable to a sort of 'Chinese whispers' syndrome in which an original instruction is subtly altered – either consciously or unwittingly – in the process of transmission.

At the very least, confusion about the degree of delegated authority can create uncertainty for public servants as to the identity of the authorial voice; at worst, it can generate the appearance – if not the reality – that an adviser has arrogated executive authority. As one put it, when the limits of a ministerial adviser's delegation are unclear it can be difficult for officials 'to tell whether the line that the advisor is giving us is her line or the minister's line. It's hard to ask [an adviser] "is this just what you think, or is it what the minister thinks?"' (117).

Plainly, then, the specification and communication of delegated authority is important, if not to guard against the adviser who would deliberately substitute his or her own preferences for those of the minister, then to ensure some clarity on the respective – and at times quite possibly shared – roles and responsibilities of advisers and officials. But if clarity on this count is central to the definition of roles and responsibilities, so too are effective and workable protocols governing relationships between ministerial advisers and officials.

And so we return to the importance of the minister. For it falls to the minister, of course, to decide upon the extent to which an adviser speaks with his or her voice; to establish the working arrangements that will obtain within the ministerial office; to set the climate of expectation about how things will and will not proceed on his or her watch. And as one official noted, failure to do these things so can have unfortunate results:

There's a lack of accountability with ministerial advisers that makes it very difficult when things go badly. Who are you supposed to complain to? How do you know when they're misrepresenting the minister's views, and what's to stop them doing that? Who are they accountable to? Most ministers certainly don't have time to review their performance, and most ministers don't have any management skills anyway. We have also had issues when staff inside the minister's office don't get on, and bicker constantly, withhold information from each other, and give the department different messages. Again, who is meant to be responsible for resolving that? (162)

Risks and opportunities

Even before the introduction of proportional representation it was understood that, depending on the resolution of the sorts of matters raised above, recourse to political advisers would challenge the long-established role of officials in the policy process, and may even threaten the very neutrality of the public service.

But of course ‘neutrality’ is in and of itself a value-laden term. It is axiomatic that, as distinct from crude forms of political patronage – a ‘spoils’ system at its worst – public service neutrality is highly desirable. But while Westminster at its best is the embodiment of virtuous neutrality, a distinction needs to be drawn between two forms of public service competence: a neutral competence (which may be characterised by a measure of institutional scepticism) and a responsive competence which, while not falling victim to the predations of partisan loyalty, does nonetheless place relatively greater weight on the electoral mandate.³⁵

What may be viewed from within the administrative bureaucracy as an appropriate testing of a ministerial ‘good idea’, may be viewed within the political executive as obstructive. And to return to the distinction between ‘neutral’ and ‘responsive’ competence (which may be better characterised as a continuum of possibilities, bounded by the exigencies of context and personality), the advent of the ministerial adviser as the third element in the executive branch might be seen as a structural change designed to effect a shift along that continuum.

In terms of the threats that ministerial advisers may presage to public service neutrality, as our respondents understand the term, opinions on this risk have been canvassed in detail elsewhere, and so we touch on them only fleetingly here.³⁶ Briefly, the assessment of a clear majority of the senior officials we surveyed is that the impartiality of the public service remains intact. While 30.1% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that ministerial advisers constitute a risk to the neutrality of the public service (n=182; missing=6), a larger group (36.3%) disagreed to a greater or lesser extent with the statement (and 33.5% chose not to express a view on the matter.) But for most of those respondents, the threat remains a *hypothetical* one: when asked about their *personal* experiences with advisers, few recounted instances in which ministerial advisers had interfered with them, their work or their interactions with ministers in a manner consistent with politicisation.

Indeed, when asked if advisers pose a risk to the public service, one CE retorted: ‘Quite the reverse. They free us much more than would otherwise be the case from being drawn into the political process’ (096). This CE also volunteered that, although advisers *had* interfered in their department’s work, they had done so ‘only in the sense that their advice was contrary to ours, resulting in the minister choosing an alternative approach – which seems entirely legitimate!’ Another senior official offered this thoughtful insight on the question of politicisation:

There are risks – if public servants feel unduly pressured, or don’t understand how to work professionally with advisers. But this is not the fault of advisers individually or as a class, it is about public service professionalism. In other words, the risk of impartiality depends on what officials do, not what advisers do. (011)

³⁵ Donald Savoie, ‘The search for a responsive bureaucracy in Canada’, in B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre (eds.), *Politicization of the Civil Service in Comparative Perspective: The quest for control* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³⁶ Eichbaum and Shaw, ‘Is Westminster dead in Wellington? Ministerial Advisers in the New Zealand Executive’.

But if most officials had few fears for the neutrality of the public service, a number expressed concerns about the bearing advisers have had on the part they play in the policy process. The optimistic view before 1996 was that ministerial advisers would enhance the contestability of advice, and that this would be a good thing. And for some respondents, this has indeed been a feature of the post-MMP environment (see Table 3 above).³⁷

That said, ‘contestability’, like ‘neutrality’, is a contested term encompassing a wide range of different activities. So, for one respondent ministerial advisers are valuable because they ‘can be more closely attuned to the extremes of public opinion, and be more aware of non-Wellington viewpoints than public servants’ (090). For others, advisers have the ability to ‘question the work and conclusions of public servants’ (057), to ‘see the bigger picture [and] provide fresh eyes to question assumptions and probe technical issues’ (065), and to ‘provide a “reality check” [and] a clearer sense of the political context in which advice will be received and judged’ (096).

But alongside these positive views sits a more cautious assessment. It is consistent with the pre-MMP concern that governments would increasingly turn to political appointments for advice, such that, over time, officials’ part in policy proceedings would become progressively marginal. Several of the categories in Table 3 describe actions or interventions by ministerial advisers which our respondents felt can have precisely this effect. For instance, while adding a political perspective can mean ‘inserting viewpoints that might be overlooked by core public sector advisers’ (081), it can also mean ‘inhibit[ing] the policy process by seeking to rule out options deemed politically unacceptable’ (081).

Those comments demonstrate that the line between enhancing contestability and diluting officials’ contribution is a fine one – as is the boundary between providing free and frank advice, and respecting the nature of the electoral mandate – and that its precise location depends on who is asked to find it. They are also a reminder that adviser/official relations cannot be approached as a zero-sum game. The material experience of both parties is altogether more complex than that, as these contributions make plain:

I have worked with some (excellent) advisers who have seen their role as “adding value” – using the strengths, skills and expertise of the public servants, and augmenting that with political and in some cases sector knowledge. Other advisers have, it seems, explicitly regarded themselves as sources of contestable advice – and have blocked advice from officials to ministers, compromising the policy process. (147)

Working well, ministerial advisers can add value – if they understand the policy area, and where the department is coming from. They can then provide a useful constructive “challenge” role, which can result in better (more “pragmatic”) advice to the minister. Unfortunately, many ministerial advisers aren’t particularly knowledgeable or competent and can undermine good policy process because of this. (161)

³⁷ The data slightly understate the frequency with which respondents referred to ‘contestability’. Where participants first indicated that ministerial advisers assisted ministers, and then described an action that might be construed as adding contestability, that response was placed in the category ‘assist ministers’.

They contribute a valid perspective. If there was a criticism it may be that they are too pragmatic – or, they lack a strategic perspective, where strategy goes to really long-term goals. (124)

The last comment, in particular, suggests a concern that ministerial advisers may be inclined to sacrifice the long haul at the altar of short-termism. To the extent that this is so (and we do not yet have sufficient data to form a view one way or the other), that could well pose a challenge to the capacity of the public service to provide what one scholar has termed ‘institutional scepticism’, by which is meant a correction, or antidote to the attenuated time horizons that can drive ministerial decision-making.³⁸

Yet in itself a collective orientation amongst ministerial advisers towards the present or near future need not significantly undermine the role of the public service. One does not have to subscribe to a crude application of Downsian principles to appreciate that ministers and their advisers will to a greater or lesser degree be sensitive to political and electoral imperatives and the time-frames within which those imperatives operate. If anything, it would probably act as an added incentive – if such were needed – for officials to ensure that their advice was of the highest possible quality. In any event, we detected no nervousness amongst our respondents that ministers were routinely dispensing with their services in favour of advice provided by ministerial advisers. Instead, we found a confidence that public servants had coped well with the various challenges they had experienced under MMP and a sense that, some outliers aside, relationships between officials and ministerial advisers were generally on a sound and productive footing. As one respondent expressed it: ‘In the end [advisers] are as interested as officials in quality advice to/effective implementation for ministers, so [our] interests are aligned’ (011).

The state of the play a decade on

Sufficient time has passed to allow an appraisal of the directions in which relations between ministerial advisers and officials have developed since the adoption of MMP. In this section we take a step back from the data, the better to gain a sense of the ways in which those issues which were of concern to officials a decade or so ago have taken shape.

The assumptions that there would be more political advisers under MMP, and that ministers would have greater recourse to them, have been borne out. But it is important not to understand this development solely as a function of electoral reform. For one thing, ministerial advisers pre-date MMP; on this count Robert Muldoon’s Advisory Group, and the significant role played by non public service advisers over the course of the fourth Labour Government come immediately to mind.³⁹

For another, while MMP has given rise to new roles which ministerial advisers are ideally placed to fill, other drivers also lie behind the increase in their number. It may make most sense, in fact, to see the trend as a response to the convergence of several factors – of which MMP is but one – which have markedly increased the complexity of life as a minister, and of policy-making more generally. In other

³⁸ William Plowden, *Ministers and Mandarins* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1994).

³⁹ Helene Wong, ‘Muldoon and the Advisory Group’, in Margaret Clark (ed.), *Muldoon Revisited* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2004).

words (and as noted ten years ago), the use of political staff 'would probably have occurred in any event ... [as] a natural consequence of changes in the environment of politics and the management of the [political] process'.⁴⁰

Amongst other developments which have helped form an increasingly demanding and sometimes hostile policy environment, our respondents counted the Official Information Act 1982, the public sector reforms of the 1980s/1990s, and the growing expectation amongst citizens that they will be able to participate in shaping policy.⁴¹ In this challenging climate, the ministerial adviser has rapidly become an indispensable resource for most ministers.

Some of the advance expectations concerning ministerial advisers' roles have also been borne out. That is especially so as regards the more obviously MMP-related functions. Advisers have indeed become important actors in the day-to-day life of coalition and/or minority governments. Keeping all of the relationship and policy balls required to sustain such administrations in the air demands skills in negotiation, brokerage, conflict resolution and, on occasion, political enforcement, which are the stock-in-trade of a good ministerial adviser. On the whole, our respondents were supportive of the manner in which ministerial advisers attend to these aspects of their job. They appreciated, too, that if this sort of political spadework was not undertaken by ministerial advisers, the chances of officials getting caught up in, and perhaps compromised by, these intensely political relationships would be appreciably higher.

But the ministerial adviser's role is not restricted to the smoothing of ruffled political feathers. While it was widely expected, before the event, that advisers would have a part to play in the wider policy process, the pre-MMP prognoses contain few pointers as to the specifics of this contribution, or to the impact it might have on relations between officials and advisers.

Participants in this research provide interesting information and commentary on both points. Regarding the first, ministerial advisers routinely contest officials' advice at all stages of the policy process. But contestation is not restricted to public servants; advisers also act variously as an advisory counter-weight to, or conduit for, interest groups and lobbyists.

And of course, ministerial advisers bring not only policy expertise which may be of a generic kind, but more importantly, an expressly partisan perspective to policy-making, testing the advice of officials, interests and, for that matter, that which emanates from other ministers' offices, against their own minister's political imperatives. In our respondents' experiences, advisers also aid ministers by helping them set policy priorities; keeping them informed as issues emerge; assessing the political risks and benefits of various courses of action; assisting them digest policy detail; communicating and clarifying their expectations to officials; representing their views at meetings; and, when necessary, by cracking the policy whip.

Moreover, it is clear that this substantive and procedural input occurs right across the span of the policy process. Advisers, it appears, can engage in everything from

⁴⁰ Smith, *Proportional Representation and its effects on the Public Service. Report to the State Services Commissioner*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Indeed the logic of the public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, which cast relationships between ministers and officials as being between principals and agents, suggests the need for such a role. In effect, in addressing the information asymmetries associated with relationships between principals and agents, the ministerial adviser assumes the role of providing the principal with purchase and monitoring advice.

the planning of a government's broad policy agenda to evaluating the effects of policy delivery on external interests and stakeholders. In other words, ministerial advisers do not only provide politically-tailored advice; the technical or expert adviser from the days of Sir Robert Muldoon's Advisory Group remains a feature of the executive landscape.

On the consequences of all of this activity for relations between ministerial advisers and public servants, respondents tended to set up two camps. Many are upbeat, pointing to the contestability that ministerial advisers have brought with them as a positive example of the way things can function. We were told of instances in which advisers forged connections with important interests which officials had no prior links with; of times when advisers contributed expertise which public servants lacked; and of occasions when their probing questions kept officials on their toes.⁴²

In a slightly different vein, some respondents also felt that ministerial advisers complement the work of public servants. While this possibility seems not to have been widely entertained before MMP, in the opinion of a number of officials, advisers actually assist them to concentrate on the provision of free and frank advice by shielding them from demands that might otherwise heighten the risk of politicisation. For those inclined to this view, ministerial advisers are less a source of competition (and possible political contamination) than one of support, and their advent has, if anything, strengthened rather than compromised the institution of the public service.

But there are other assessments which are altogether less sanguine. Where some officials see contestability, others see obstructiveness; what for one official is a legitimate conduit between ministers and officials is for another an impermeable barrier. Respondents with negative experiences of working with (or, more accurately, against) ministerial advisers reported examples of advisers directly interfering in a department's work programme, demanding the rewriting of policy papers, and preventing officials from gaining access to ministers. Not surprisingly, these participants were more inclined to consider ministerial advisers a clear and present threat to the impartiality of the public service than those who were well disposed towards advisers.

Some respondents also tended to convey a palpable concern that ministerial advisers are slowly squeezing officials out of the policy-making process. It was suggested on more than one occasion that ministerial advisers are deployed to shield ministers from public service advice and that, thus excluded, officials find themselves unable to prevent the crafting of advice being dominated by imperatives which compromise the kind of 'public interest' test associated with 'good' public policy.

The prospect that public servants might come to occupy a marginal place in the policy scheme of things was certainly entertained before the advent of MMP. But in our view the degree of reported contact with ministers' offices (Figure 2 above), in conjunction with other qualitative data reported here, suggest that reports of the marginalisation of officials may be somewhat premature.

As we noted above, we cannot safely infer anything about the *content* of this contact from its reported frequency, but it seems unlikely that all (or even some) of the contact between ministers and their staff, and senior officials, revolves around

⁴² In 1995 the SSC had foreseen that ministerial advisers would 'place pressure on departments to ensure that their advice is of a high standard' (*Working Under Proportional Representation*, p. 31).

the niceties of the Wellington weather. Put alongside the incidence of reported contact with ministerial advisers (Figure 1 above), there are reasonable grounds for questioning the anecdotal reports regarding the creeping exclusion of officials from the policy process. If anything, the cumulative sense emerging from our data is of a ‘thickening’ of interaction within the executive branch.

Finally, our respondents were at pains to reinforce that the personalities, dispositions and skills of ministers are critical to relations between ministerial advisers and departmental officials. In the wealth of preparatory advice generated before MMP, this particular contribution was largely overlooked. But our respondents warned against ignoring the orientation of the minister as perhaps the chief determinant in the state of relations between political and public service advisers. The expectations which ministers communicate to their advisers and officials regarding roles and responsibilities; the nature and extent of the authority they delegate to advisers; and their views regarding the protocols that govern relationships amongst ministers, officials and advisers are all pivotal to the smooth and effective working of the trilateral relationship that now operates at the heart of executive government in New Zealand.

Conclusion

A decade ago, it was suggested that ‘[o]verall, any changes to the number and role of “political advisers” under MMP are likely to be modest and the impact on the public service correspondingly minor’.⁴³ In effect, this article has tested that prediction through an *ex post* assessment of *ex ante* speculation.

To some extent our data confirm the belief that the scale of any change would be relatively minor. There are more ministerial advisers now than there used to be, but at 23 (see Table 1) that number – assuming the worst – is unlikely to strike fear into the hearts of the 1,254 or so officials occupying the top three tiers of the public service.⁴⁴ Moreover, as anticipated, most ministers do not have a ‘substantial coterie of political advisers’; a continental *cabinet* system has not evolved.⁴⁵

Our sense is that this overall assessment also accurately describes the extent to which ministerial advisers threaten the impartiality of the public service. There are certainly examples of ministerial advisers behaving badly; but there is also evidence of role complementarity, the net effect of which can be better advice to ministers. Our respondents’ views lead us to believe that it is erroneous to assume that ministerial advisers and officials exist in a state of constant conflict and competition. It is in the nature of things that there are occasions on which they go head-to-head; equally, however, respondents reported collaborative relationships in which advisers and officials bring their complementary skills to bear on knotty policy conundrums. The game, in short, is often positive- rather than zero-sum.

⁴³ Boston, Levine, McLeay and Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP. A New Politics?*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ These data, which are accurate as of 2003/04, were obtained by the authors from the Leadership Development Centre.

⁴⁵ Boston, Levine, McLeay and Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP. A New Politics?*, p. 144. One issue that our future research will seek to illuminate is the extent to which ministerial advisers’ first order duty of service is to the minister, or to the government of the day. There is evidence – and the accountability and performance management arrangements for ministerial advisers in the post-1999 period are of relevance here – that advisers have a key role to play in ensuring that there is an appropriate balancing of ‘ministerial’ and ‘whole of government’ policy and political management. In this sense, to some extent the notion of a *cabinet* system of advisers, responsible in part to the Prime Minister through a Chief of Staff, is deserving of further attention.

But our findings also suggest that the role and policy influence of ministerial advisers, and therefore their impact on the public service, are greater than was allowed by some commentators. An adviser's core functions include but extend well past the facilitation of the complicated political and policy relationships which were expected under MMP. The role appears to be more multi-faceted than was expected, incorporating both procedural (e.g. harnessing different points of view) and substantive (e.g. the provision of issue-specific expertise) dimensions.

There have been other interesting developments. In particular, the delegation of authority from ministers to their political advisers emerged from our research as a central concern for officials; the centrality of the minister more generally also attracted much comment.

Looking ahead, this last suggests that future research needs to address the influence of the political executive. A good deal of the available scholarship is largely silent on the role of ministers, as a consequence of which it can be possessed of an oddly apolitical flavour.

In addition to filling that lacuna, future work in this area could also fruitfully engage in a little theory-building.⁴⁶ As in much of the comparative literature, the focus of the research completed to date has been primarily descriptive. That is justifiably and necessarily the case, given the need to provide a robust empirical foundation for the consideration of an issue which has not yet received much academic attention in New Zealand. But as a richer understanding of the subject matter develops, so the theoretical insights found in the scholarship on the core executive, and on policy networks and communities, should be applied to this particular corner of executive studies. It may well be that, as one of our respondents put it, 'the system works. Like democracy it's hard to think of a better way' (014). But like democracy, too, a deeper understanding of that system can also lead to improvements.

⁴⁶ The next phase of this project entails the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from ministers (and ministerial advisers).