

ABSTRACT

Political advisers are now an established feature of the executive branch of government in the community of Westminster nations. However, there have been few attempts to establish why ministers appoint political staff, and even fewer that are empirically grounded in politicians' own experiences and reflections. The purposes of this article are to (a) establish ministers' motives for appointing political advisers, (b) to theorise those motives through the lens of core executive studies, and (c) to assess the degree to which findings in one empirical setting enjoy wider applicability. Drawing on data from New Zealand, we find evidence that recourse to political advisers is one response to the multiple demands made of ministers in the context of contemporary governance; while that imperative has wider application, we also find that ministers' requirements are structured by personal and institutional variables which are contextually specific.

For good or ill, political advisers – variously called exempt staff (Canada), ministerial advisers (New Zealand, Ireland and Australia), or special advisers (United Kingdom) – are now an established feature of the executive branch of government in the community of Westminster nations.¹

Described as '[o]ne of the most significant examples of institutional innovation within Westminster political systems' (Maley, 2011: 1469), the *arrivistes* have increasingly attracted the attention of scholars (including in this journal; see LSE GV314 Group (2012)), various of whom have examined the ramifications of the advent of this 'third element' (Wicks, 2002: 43) in executive government for relations between ministers and officials, the non-partisan status of the permanent bureaucracy and for policy-making.²

The empirical focus has overwhelmingly been on either permanent public servants or the partisans: only infrequently have political principals found themselves under the evidential lens. As such, while a reading of the literature reveals clear *assumptions* about why ministers in Westminster democracies have recourse to ministerial advisers, there have been few attempts to interrogate these suppositions via data grounded in politicians' experiences. Rarely has the question been asked directly of ministers: 'Why do you appoint political staff?'

This article poses that question.³ We contend that in the rush to make sense of the third element in executive government, ministers' reasons for appointing political staff – as reported *by* those principals – have been largely overlooked. Explanations are typically derived from data gathered from advisers or permanent officials, but the voices of ministers remain largely silent.⁴ It is time they were heard more clearly.

In this context we seek to make a three-fold contribution to the scholarship on ministerial advisers. First, we wish to add a new empirical layer to an aspect (ministers' views on why advisers are appointed) of the wider issue that is under-researched. In so doing, and secondly, we hope to put down an empirical marker for further comparative work. Finally, we offer a theoretical context for this material. Specifically, and consistent with Dunleavy and Rhodes' (1990) original intention that the term 'core executive' be used to facilitate comparative theorisation, we draw on

¹ We follow Rhodes *et al.* (2009: 9), for whom 'Westminster' describes a group of nations 'connected by family resemblance rather than a single, essential idea.' We would like to thank Ben Yong of the Constitution Unit, and two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. We also thank the former New Zealand State Services Commissioner, Dr Mark Prebble; Jeanette Schollum of the State Services Commission; Bruce Anderson and Helen Coffey of the Leadership Development Centre; and Michelle Brokenshire, of Executive Government Support.

² Following the practice in New Zealand, Ireland and Australia, in this article we use the term 'ministerial adviser' to refer to advisers appointed on short term contracts to provide partisan advice, and whose tenure is tied to that of his/her minister.

³ This question is also being addressed in research presently being undertaken by UCL's Constitution Unit (<<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/special-advisers>>). Here we seek to explain ministers' reasons for engaging ministerial advisers rather than to account for the increase in the number of advisers across the Westminster world. For accounts of the latter see Dahlstrom (2009), Eichbaum and Shaw (2010), Maley (2011) and OECD (2007, 2011).

⁴ Maley's work (2002, 2011) is an exception; also, see Muller-Rommel (2008) for an analysis of the roles and influence of prime ministerial staff in central and eastern European countries that is based on interviews with former ministers.

the core executive studies literature to theorise ministerial recourse to ministerial advisers.

To those ends we begin by reviewing the literature on ministerial advisers in Westminster contexts. We then report the results of a survey of ministers in New Zealand governments between 1990-2005. In order to generate insights with comparative application beyond the specifics of our research and the institutional context in which it is situated, we analyse our data using the lens of the core executive and discuss the extent to which our findings enjoy application beyond the New Zealand context. Recourse to political advisers is one response to the multiple demands made of ministers in the context of contemporary governance. While that imperative applies well beyond New Zealand, we also conclude that individual ministers' requirements are structured by personal and institutional variables that are contextually specific.

1. Of ministers and advisers: the story thus far

The literature on ministerial advisers has grown steadily in recent years, driven by growth in their number and visibility and by their roles in *causes célèbres* such as the Children Overboard Affair in Australia (Keating, 2003; Senate of Australia, 2002; Tiernan, 2007) and the sponsorship scandal which brought down the Martin Liberal Government in Canada (Aucoin, 2006, 2010; Wanna, 2006). In the United Kingdom unfortunate events of one sort or another – including the ‘sexing up’ of intelligence in the lead up to war in Iraq, and allegations that Prime Minister David Cameron’s former communications chief, Andy Coulson, had been involved in phone hacking in his time as editor of the News of the World (Fawcett and Gay, 2010; Hutton, 2004) – have captured public attention. Most recently, the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee has launched an inquiry into the roles of special advisers.

The purported threats to Westminster fundamentals, and especially the accountability issues associated with this very particular type of public employee, have dominated scholarly attention. Across jurisdictions concerns about inappropriate behaviour on the part of political staff, threadbare accountability arrangements, ministers’ refusals to accept responsibility for the actions of their ministerial advisers and the absence of protections for public servants against the predations of political staff are recurring themes (Gay, 2000; Tiernan, 2007; Walter, 2006; Weller, 2002). Necessarily, questions regarding regulation and propriety on the part of ministerial advisers also feature (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2011; Gay and Fawcett, 2005).

The state of relations between ministerial advisers and officials is a second major thread in the scholarship. The pressing issue here has been the risk that the former pose to the non-partisan status of the latter. Elcock (2002) reminds us that threats to the impartiality of officials are nothing new, recalling the ‘Is he one of us?’ test Margaret Thatcher posed when approving appointments at the top echelons of the

British civil service.⁵ That noted, the case has been made (Connaughton, 2005; Edwards, 2002; Holland, 2002; Keating, 2003; Mountfield, 2002; Neill, 2000; Senate of Australia, 2002; Weller, 2002) that – absent appropriate regulatory arrangements – the privileged access that political staff enjoy to ministers enables them to exert a ‘funnelling effect’ on officials’ advice, such that advice at variance with ministers’ ideological preferences is screened out (Walter, 2006: 22). Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) find limited empirical evidence that the potential threat is routinely realised; rather, given clear understandings regarding roles and responsibilities the partisans may, in fact, prevent inappropriate political pressure being applied to officials (see also Connaughton, 2010; Shergold, 2003).

More broadly, the relationship between ministers, ministerial advisers and officials – described by former United Kingdom Cabinet Secretary Lord Turnbull as ‘the balanced triangle’ (UK Parliament, 2010) – has attracted the attention of Dahlstrom (2009), Eichbaum and Shaw (2007a), the OECD (2007, 2011) and Pelgrims (2005).⁶ On the whole these contributions assume a principal/agent relationship in which the ministerial adviser is a functional extension of his or her minister, enhancing the latter’s capacity to get the various aspects of the job done.⁷

The empirical question concerns the bearing ministerial advisers have on the conventional and procedural bases of relations between ministers and officials. Functional and dysfunctional relationships appear to coexist. On the one hand, ‘good relationships between Ministers, special advisers and permanent officials can generate an excellent working environment’ (UK Parliament, 2002: 14; see also Shergold, 2003); less a government of strangers (Heclo, 1977) than one of colleagues. Conversely, the combination of inexperienced ministers and ministerial advisers ignorant of public service conventions can undermine Westminster fundamentals: at worst, partisans have been accused of usurping the executive prerogatives of ministers (UK Parliament, 2001; Wicks, 2002).

Fourth, some have eschewed a concern with the exceptional in favour of the mundane, seeking to classify the different political and policy roles ministerial advisers play, and to explore the contributions they make to the policy process (Connaughton, 2010; Dahlstrom, 2011; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2007b, 2011; Gains and Stoker, 2011; Maley, 2000, 2010; O’Toole, 2006). Here, too, the tone of assessments varies. Maley (2011) presents evidence of a constructive contribution, while Elcock argues that the most important contribution ministerial advisers can make is ‘to ‘think the unthinkable’ [and to] challenge accepted orthodoxies, propose alternatives and review the Government's overall strategy and priorities’ (2002: 2).

⁵ Page (2011: 414), who dismisses the politicisation thesis, points out that ‘one of us’ tended to mean ‘Is he an enthusiastic reformer?’ rather than ‘Is he a Conservative?’

⁶ In evidence to a House of Lords Constitution Committee hearing, Lord Turnbull opined that the increase in the number of ministerial advisers, particularly at No. 10, had disrupted this strategic balance ‘to the extent that “the authority and closeness of civil servants has diminished”’ (UK Parliament, 2010: 19).

⁷ Pelgrims (2005: 2), however, argues that ministerial advisers are ‘more than loyal agents’, suggesting that – at least in the case of those appointed for their policy expertise – some advisers secure a measure of operational independence from their ministers.

Effectively, the adviser's role in this conception is that of the traditional civil servant, insofar as it is tantamount to ensuring that there is a 'pebble in the shoe'.

But others (Bennister, 2007; Tiernan, 2007) find that gate-keeping behaviour on the part of the partisans compromises the integrity of policy-making. Both camps, however, acknowledge the contribution advisers can make in the context of ministerial workloads which, as Hennessy has memorably noted, are 'a conveyor belt to exhaustion and under-achievement all round' (Hennessy 1986: 184; cited in Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1990: 8).

Disappointingly little of the *oeuvre*, however, is based upon primary data gathered from ministers.⁸ What we have, then, is a literature in which ministers are frequently invoked but seldom heard. The best efforts of some researchers notwithstanding, there remains a dearth of empirical work in Westminster contexts drawing directly on ministers' own reflections.⁹ Overwhelmingly, scholars have drawn on secondary sources, and where primary data are reported they tend to derive from officials (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2007b, 2008; Tiernan, 2007), political staff themselves (Connaughton, 2010; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2007a, 2011; Maley, 2000) or, infrequently, non-executive sources (Dahlstrom, 2009).¹⁰

Consequently, attempts to ascertain ministers' motives for appointing political staff of necessity fall back on reasons offered by or imputed from the accounts of others. This is unsatisfactory: better to place explanations about why ministers appoint partisans on an appropriate empirical footing. Further, the views of the political principals themselves will enhance understandings that currently rest largely on the reflections of actors denied the perspective afforded those at the very centre of executive arrangements. Such contributions are critical to a more rounded view of matters.

2. The research

In this section we report data from a survey of all politicians who held ministerial office at cabinet level in New Zealand between 1990-2005. Nine different administrations governed during that period, and 65 ministers held full cabinet rank.¹¹

⁸ Maley (2002, 2011) provides several exceptions.

⁹ Both Tiernan (2004) and Maley (2011), for instance, have expressed frustration at the unwillingness of ministers in John Howard's governments in Australia to engage with their research.

¹⁰ Dahlstrom includes data gathered via an expert survey (n=44) concerning ministerial advisers in 18 nations, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

¹¹ Following Muller *et al.* (2008: 6) we take as criteria for establishing a change of government (a) a change in the party political complexion of the cabinet, and (b) the formation of a new cabinet following an election. The nine governments thus arrived at are: (1) National (October 1990-November 1993); (2) National (November 1993-September 1994); (3) National/Right of Centre (September 1994-August 1995); (4) National (August 1995-February 1996); (5) National/United (February 1996-December 1996); (6) National/NZ First (December 1996-August 1998); (7) National/Independents (August 1998-November 1999); (8) Labour/Alliance (November 1999-July 2002); (9) Labour/Progressive (July 2002-September 2005). Three prime ministers presided over those ministries: the National Party's Jim Bolger (1990-1997) and Jenny Shipley (1997-1999), and the

At one level the size of our sample reflects the stability of government in New Zealand (and the political dominance over the 15 year period we surveyed of the centre-right National and the centre-left Labour parties). It should not, however, obscure that 1990-2005 was – in policy terms – a tumultuous period. Amongst other significant reforms, the state sector was radically restructured: under the provisions of the State Sector Act 1988, for example, the industrial relations framework governing the public sector was overhauled, and responsibility for the employment of public servants devolved to departmental Chief Executives, while the Public Finance Act of the following year introduced appropriations on the basis of outputs (see Boston, Martin *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, in 1993 proportional representation formally replaced a simple plurality as the basis on which the national parliament is elected.

Further, although ministerial advisers first emerged on the executive stage in New Zealand in the mid-1980s, until the late 1990s the decision whether or not to have one was generally left to the discretion of individual ministers. With the formation of the Labour-Alliance Government in 1999, however, the default has been that all ministers have had ministerial advisers in their offices (and sometimes, when ministers have been struggling, this has been required of them by prime ministers).

As a consequence of these developments, the institutional and political landscape evolved rapidly between 1990-2005. The extent of these reforms – and their ramifications for the politico-administrative environments in which politicians operate – make this an especially rich timeframe in which to study ministers' motives for appointing ministerial advisers.¹²

2.1 The survey and respondents

The survey, which comprised 101 items and a mix of forced choice and open-ended questions, was administered in late 2005 and achieved a response rate of 34%.¹³ The majority (78%) of our respondents had served in one or other of the seven National-led governments that held office between 1990-1999; the remaining 22% had been or were members of subsequent Labour-led administrations. Around a quarter of ministers had had some experience of single-party majority government. The last such ministry, however, lost its parliamentary majority in September 1994 (two years prior to the first election held under the new mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system); most ministers, therefore, were accustomed to governing in either coalition and/or minority governments.

Our respondents were a relatively experienced group. Some 43% had held ministerial office for between 1-5 years in total, but nearly half (47%) had between

Labour Party's Helen Clark. Clark's tenure as prime minister began in 1999 and ended with the defeat of the Labour Party in the 2008 General election.

¹² See Eichbaum and Shaw (2010) for the structure of executive government in New Zealand, the number of ministerial advisers, their employment and accountability arrangements, and the institutional context in which they function.

¹³ This includes two former ministers who indicated to us they would not be responding as they were, at the time, in diplomatic posts. One former minister opted to respond via email. Hence, n=21 rather than n=22 in most of the data reported here.

6-10 years experience as a minister; a further 10% had held cabinet rank for more than 11 years, and half of these had done so for between 16-20 years. Three quarters of participants (76%) had held at least six different portfolios during their ministerial careers, and 20% had exercised responsibilities in more than 11 portfolios.¹⁴

Fifteen of our 21 respondents (71%) had appointed ministerial advisers to assist them in discharging their responsibilities, including all eight ministers who had or were serving in Labour-led governments, and seven of the 13 ministers in National or National-led ministries. The only ministers who had opted not to appoint a ministerial adviser had served in centre-right administrations.

Only two ministers had required their adviser to work within the confines of one particular portfolio; each of the others has utilised the capacity furnished by ministerial advisers across the span of portfolios for which they were, or had been, responsible.

2.2 The increase in ministerial advisers

We asked ministers what they thought lay behind the increase in the number of ministerial advisers in New Zealand government in recent years. Responses fell into four categories. A handful (19%) indicated that the trend reflected the growing political intensity of government, or what one minister identified as a desire to ‘politicis[e] the machinery of executive government’ (M10).

Many more respondents (48%), however (and from both sides of the ideological spectrum), interpreted the advent of advisers as an institutional adaptation to the increasingly demanding nature of contemporary government. In the context of the thesis that cabinet government is an institution under pressure (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006b; Keating *et al.*, 2000; Laughrin, 2009), one minister explained that ‘advisers are trusted ‘reflectors’. They can sound the cautionary note or remind you that you are not meeting manifesto commitments (i.e. are being too cautious). They can get to the essence of an inter-departmental dispute, which helps clarify things for you and saves time’ (M45). A colleague of that minister added that ‘enormous departmental effort is wasted by the misuse of the OIA [Official Information Act], and QWAs [Questions for Written Answer], leaving shortfalls in departmental capability to serve ministers’ (M61).

Others, too, touched on capacity and capability issues in the public service. For one, the appointment of ministerial advisers was wholly a function of a ‘lack of public service capacity’ (M14). A more detailed assessment was offered by the minister who noted that ‘the public service is, at times, short of experienced, skilled policy analysts. Seconding them is therefore difficult. You tend to get younger, less experienced people, so a senior skilled ministerial adviser is very useful’ (M43). And a third respondent explicitly connected the complexity and capabilities themes, suggesting that ‘there is a greater need for contestable policy advice, as issues have

¹⁴ Typically, New Zealand ministers’ responsibilities are distributed across several portfolios (particular policy domains and associated departments and agencies).

become more complex. Policy advice from officials tended to be single focused and rarely provided realistic (as opposed to ‘strawmen’) alternatives’ (M4).

Finally, nearly half (43%) of our respondents pointed to the adoption of proportional representation – and specifically to the clutch of new political relationships subsequently created – as the principal reason for ministers’ recourse to ministerial advisers. That fully 66% of ministers (i.e. virtually all of those who have served in coalition and/or minority cabinets) received at least occasional assistance from ministerial advisers in managing relations with coalition partners – and that 38% of them did so on either a very frequent or frequent basis (see Table 2.10 below) – speaks to one of the major consequences for ministers of the demise of single-party majority governments. The truism that MMP demands ‘greater political management between parties in government’ (M24) means that for ministers these days there are:

more groups to talk with and keep happy and keep on board. The new system is all about compromise, the art of the possible, etc. In many ways it is much less capable of rigorous analysis [and] principled directions than the old [plurality] system. Maintaining the coalition (especially the leadership) is the sole purpose of government! (M26)

In short, ‘a lot more work is needed to keep essential allies in the loop and onside’ (M60). Given the inherently partisan nature of managing relations with coalition partners and parliamentary support parties, this endeavour invariably falls to ministerial advisers.

2.3 Why ministers appoint political advisers

More specifically, we asked ministers why *they* had, or had not, appointed a ministerial adviser(s). Support for ministerial advisers was not a given amongst ministers; more than a quarter (29%) of those we surveyed – each of whom had served in a conservative government – had not had recourse to political appointees. In the view of these ‘Westminster traditionalists’, nothing would be gained in so doing. One highly experienced minister who had served in centre-right governments across three decades put his position thus:

[A]dequate technical and policy advice was available from within the departments, although occasionally I employed specialist advisers on issues such as tax policy. I employed press officers on contract because of particular expertise. Political advice was available from within caucus. ... Ministers should seek political advice from their political colleagues. Specialist advisers seconded to ministers for policy reasons are O.K. Ministerial advisers appointed to ministerial offices have the potential to corrupt political processes (M2).

A second minister of long standing echoed this faith in classical Westminster politico-bureaucratic arrangements. He indicated that he:

always used a seconded staff member from the ministries for which, for the time being, I was responsible. I was always very clear about the particular attributes and qualifications

I was after, but inevitably had to leave the choice to the chief executive. At no stage did I entertain any paranoia that such seconded staff were anything other than fully motivated to assist me, whether in dealing with the public service or with the world beyond it. ... If I had a one line view on the matter I would, on balance, be inclined to the view that using seconded staff is a good way for ministers to force themselves to respect the neutrality and independence of the public service. That might seem paradoxical, but I suspect that more pressure is placed on political appointees to do things than might be asked of a public servant. I rather like the idea of a professional public service that provides free and frank advice, while elected people are left to apply their philosophical and ideological prisms to that advice.

The majority of respondents, however, had chosen (or been required by their prime minister) to supplement their own partisan prisms with those of ministerial advisers. Why that should be was clearly of interest to us. It is commonly held that ‘ministers’ perception[s] [that] civil servants lack loyalty is the main reason to recruit personal advisers’ (Pelgrim, 2005: 3).¹⁵ Four ministers in our sample reflected that orientation, including one who believed that ‘the department concerned was not fully supportive of the government’s policies’ (M17), and another for whom the partisan’s job was to ‘help to make sure there is not departmental capture of the minister’ (M21). There was one respondent, too, who was concerned to ‘ensure policy stakeholders’ views were properly reported to me’ (M40).

The value many ministers attach to the ministerial adviser’s role in conveying or clarifying their wishes for officials (see Table 3.1 below) also hints at a certain wariness of bureaucrats’ motives. One minister’s assessment was that her:

effectiveness tripled with the advent of an adviser and an experienced SPS [Senior Private Secretary]. Together we built a way of working that included the ministries – but we set the process. The role of reflecting together was also important. Before the officials came in we initially set the year’s/term’s work programme for each department. It gave me clarity, this process, and strength to see through the programmes. The ministerial adviser was the one person I could drop my guard with, and [with whom I could] express doubts about my performance or policy direction. And because he was an active party member, he kept me from being isolated by officials (M45).

However, the weight of evidence in our study was against Pelgrim’s assertion. Most incentives to appoint ministerial advisers clustered around three related dimensions of ministers’ work. First, respondents of all ideological persuasions valued advisers’ contribution to contestability. Importantly, this was contestability motivated not by a belief in bureaucratic instrumentality, but by ministers’ desire for robust policy debate. In this respect, ministerial advisers ‘acted as a check and balance on the advice I received and, where appropriate, would advise that I get another opinion’ (M21). Specific contributions included ‘bring[ing] independent

¹⁵ Eichbaum and Shaw (2007: 628) report empirical evidence from officials to this effect.

networks, and skills and prior experience with key policy areas' (M4), into the ministerial office.

A second set of motives flowed from the imperatives associated with MMP. There are significant challenges associated with governing under minority and/or multi-party conditions which, for many ministers, are the primary *raison d'être* for engaging hired help. In such contexts, there are good reasons for appointing a ministerial adviser 'to improve the communication flow from me to the department, and between coalition consultation ministers and ministers with an interest in my portfolios, and to consult the wider caucus and party' (M14). Virtually all (93%) ministers agreed or strongly agreed that ministerial advisers facilitate relations between coalition partners (Table 4.9), and only slightly fewer (87%) felt similarly about the adviser's role in smoothing the way between governments and their parliamentary support parties (Table 4.10). In short, the ministerial adviser's role as a 'political sherpa'¹⁶ is central to guiding ministers through the sometimes testing political passes of post-MMP government.

Finally, Maley (2011) and others (e.g. Laughrin, 2009) have charted the increasingly demanding nature of the ministerial function, and for our respondents, ministerial advisers constitute a valuable resource in coping with these demands (see also Hazell *et al.*, 2012). As one put it, 'my time was much more efficiently used on the more important policy issues as the advisor could negotiate out the trivia' (M21). Another minister explained that his adviser helped 'manage WPQs [written parliamentary questions], QoD [questions of the day], OIA [Official Information Act] requests, etc.' (M46). Echoing these sentiments, a third reflected that:

The paper work and other workload for ministers is enormous. Having an adviser checking, monitoring, evaluating, quality controlling, hurrying-up, etc. improves efficiency. Substandard work can be corrected (ministerials, early drafts of papers, etc.) before they reach your desk. Coordinating within the office of other staff can be a huge benefit. Otherwise, proper attention might not be given to crucial pieces of work, because you are bogged down by inefficient processes (M43).

2.4 What ministers look for in their ministerial advisers

All of which suggests that ministerial advisers require a substantial set of skills. We asked ministers to specify, and subsequently to rank the attributes they looked for in their ministerial staff (Table 1).

[Insert TABLE 1 about here]

Broadly speaking, the attributes which ministers most valued in a ministerial adviser were those associated with policy making. Above all else, they sought knowledge of the ins and outs of executive government (Table 1.8), and possession of the

¹⁶ The term is attributed to Sir John Elvidge, former permanent secretary of the Scottish Executive, in a recent online report on special advisers in the United Kingdom produced by the Civil Service Live Network. The report can be viewed at <http://network.civilservicelive.com/pg/pages/view/564279>.

procedural and substantive policy-related skills needed to work effectively within that environment. In particular, a premium was placed on competence in policy analysis and evaluation; the ability to work constructively alongside public servants was also valued (Table 1.6-10). Thus, for one minister ‘general intellectual and administrative skills [and a] broad problem-solving ability’ (M13) were of paramount importance; for another it was useful to have advisers who ‘helped to keep the work flowing and cleared log-jams, and also gave ministers comfort that they were hearing all the options’ (M21); for a third it simply ‘helps to have a second set of eyes looking over the fine detail’ (M43).

On the other hand (and with one exception), generic partisan or political skills were of less import to ministers. Perhaps a little surprisingly, in view of the received wisdom, some ministers were not greatly exercised by the importance of ideological symmetry between principal and agent (Table 1.4). Only one respondent listed that as the most important attribute in an adviser. Some did emphasise the importance of a ‘commitment to the government’s programme’ (M17) and of an understanding of ‘our policy intent’ (M17), but most did not attach a good deal of significance to the party political affiliation of their ministerial advisers (Table 1.5).

The exception is the store many ministers placed on political negotiations skills. In the New Zealand context, however, where non-majority government has been the rule since August 1998, it is likely that this refers to the capacity to broker agreement amongst other executive and legislative actors (see Table 4.8-10, below), rather than to the capacity to impose a partisan outcome on public servants.

2.5 What ministers ask of their ministerial advisers

Ministers were also invited to indicate the frequency with which ministerial advisers undertook certain tasks (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Of the several clusters into which they might be grouped, the tasks associated with ministers’ dealings with officials are amongst those for which ministers had most demand (Table 2.1-5). Two thirds of our respondents indicated that their ministerial advisers accompanied them to meetings with officials either frequently or very frequently, with a slightly greater tendency for this to be so for less experienced ministers. The same proportion reported that their political staff read officials’ advice before it reached their desk at least occasionally; again, there appears to be some association between this and length of years in the job, with newer ministers more likely than their more experienced colleagues to ask this of their advisers. One minister explained that ‘if the papers to come to my desk lacked the clarity, research and detail I required, they were sent back’ (M21), while another said that ‘having a good brain to bounce ideas off, which is also independent of the department, is also valuable’ (M61). As far as most of our respondents were concerned, not only was this perfectly reasonable, but it posed no great threat to the impartial status of public servants:

No, I don't think so. A minister serves at the pleasure of the prime minister and owes a duty to the policies of the elected government. To carry out that duty a minister is entitled to free and frank advice. The ministerial adviser helps to provide the minister with confidence that he is indeed receiving free and frank advice, but also that he is receiving all the advice necessary to make good decisions (M21).

Ministerial advisers also variously assist ministers' in their dealings within the political executive (Table 2.6-10). For one thing, they are active in the wider network of political staff: that 71% of respondents signalled that their advisers met regularly with staff from colleagues' offices (including the prime minister) is consistent with Maley's (2011) finding that ministerial advisers can aid their political principals by resolving policy disagreements before they erupt in cabinet committees or the full cabinet. On the other hand, only occasionally or not at all did ministers require their advisers to represent them at meetings with other ministers.

Ministers' parliamentary duties stem from their ministerial responsibilities, and from their obligations as elected representatives (particularly, in the New Zealand case, for those representing electorates) (Table 2.11-14). Regarding the former, the majority (62%) of our respondents received considerable assistance from ministerial advisers in preparing for parliamentary Question Time, and in crafting responses to questions from other parliamentarians requiring written answers. The management of the flow of requests for information concerning the activities of executive government was a second significant area of work for ministerial advisers.

Conversely, 10 of the 15 ministers who had used ministerial advisers only rarely or never tasked them with electorate issues. Similarly, their advisers engaged with party political matters and/or political communications functions relatively infrequently (Table 2.15-19). (Mindful of the caveat expressed in footnote 17 above, it may nonetheless be worth noting that ministers in centre-left governments were a little more inclined to deploy their ministerial advisers in party-related election matters than were their conservative counterparts.) The sense, then, is that the demand for advisers' capabilities is predominantly connected to ministers' responsibilities as members of the political executive. That resource is rather less important in their capacities as representatives of political parties and/or voters.

2.6 Assessing value

Table 3 illustrates the importance ministers attached to many of the distinctly policy-related functions ministerial advisers undertake.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Those activities stemming from the formal bifurcation of ministers' purchase and ownership roles were accorded relatively little importance (Table 3.5). Similarly ministers did not overly emphasise advisers' contributions to intra-executive negotiations on budget bids (Table 3.10).

However, consistent with the data reported in Table 1, ministers did attach importance to a raft of functions at the interface of the political and administrative executives (Table 3.1-4). Similarly (perhaps reflective of the quantum of service delivery undertaken by third sector agencies in contemporary differentiated polities), nearly all respondents nodded in the direction of a range of tasks encompassing non-executive actors in the policy process (Table 3.11-13). (In the New Zealand context, however, this may equally reflect the electoral imperatives of proportional representation.)

But respondents' assessments of the value of ministerial advisers also took a more expressly normative form (see Table 4). Some ministers clearly harboured concerns about this new buckle in belt of executive government. While the majority of ministers did not agree that ministerial advisers exercise undue influence on governments' policy agendas (Table 4.3) (with conservative ministers a little less likely to cleave to this position than those in centre-left governments), or that they typically seek to keep certain items off those agendas (Table 4.4) (ditto), there is nonetheless an awareness that advisers are more influential than they once were (Table 4.5). As one noted:

[t]he influence and role of these advisers is hugely under-rated. Liaison with media, support groups, party people, doing things on behalf of the minister so that the minister can say they weren't involved, research, new ideas - their contribution can be enormous (M19).

Some concerns reflected a sense that orthodox arrangements in which politics and administration are split between ministers and officials remain fit for purpose, and ought not be tinkered with. This case was made thus:

The [policy] process needs a lot of managing/housekeeping/analysis. But ministers and policy units in departments should drive policy, being open to views from outside sectors, but not captured by them. The minister, with cabinet colleagues, should deal with the politics, not the hired help. Partisan help is just that: very limited' (M26).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

In the main, however, ministers' normative assessments were relatively upbeat. We tested ministers' overall disposition towards ministerial advisers through a composite measure comprising 21 statements relating to various aspects of the ministerial adviser's role, and the relationships between ministers and advisers, and advisers and officials (Table 4).¹⁷ Items were coded (and, as necessary, reverse-coded) such that a high overall scale score out of 105 indicated a positive inclination towards ministerial advisers; a low score indicated that a respondent was negatively disposed towards advisers. The mean score of 74.9 suggests that, on the whole, our respondents were favourably disposed towards ministerial advisers. Indeed, only

¹⁷ Three items (4.6, 4.7 and 4.16) were dropped from the scale following tests for reliability.

15% of cases registered an aggregate score of 52/105 or less.

More specifically, some 80% agreed to varying degrees that ministerial advisers are now a legitimate feature of executive government (Table 4.6). There is also little support amongst ministers for the argument that ministerial advisers obstruct the work of public servants (although to the extent that there is, it tended to be concentrated amongst conservative ministers). Certainly they are mindful that the presence of an adviser may have an impact on relations between ministers and officials. As one of our respondents noted, ‘possibly it [the presence of ministerial advisers] has reduced the ease with which the ‘Sir Humphreys’ and ‘Bernards’ can manipulate ministers. But perhaps not’ (M61).

Ministers’ views, however, were generally that the *nature* of this impact was often benign, if not positive.¹⁸ For instance, they tended to disagree that ministerial advisers actively hinder access to ministers and prevent officials’ advice from reaching ministers’ tables (Table 4.12-13). Neither were they generally of the view that political advisers either temper officials’ advice (Table 4.14) or act to discourage the provision of free and frank advice to ministers (Table 4.15). And only 20% of ministers agreed that ministerial advisers sometimes exceed their authority (Table 4.17).¹⁹

In short, there was not much support amongst our respondents for the view that ministerial advisers routinely engage in the ‘funnelling’ behaviour described in parts of the literature. Instead, ministers’ assessments were that relations between the partisans and permanents were conducted on a professional basis, and usually to positive effect. Nearly three quarters (73%) agreed that relations between the two classes are generally positive (and not one disagreed) (Table 4.18). As one put it, ‘wise officials knew that the advisers would likely understand my stance on issues, and this could help officials make faster progress’ (M3). In a similar vein, another reflected that ‘a capable and knowledgeable adviser will force officials to lift their game and provide better (i.e. less departmental agenda) advice’ (M8).

Nearly all (93%) ministers agreed or strongly agreed that ministerial advisers make a positive contribution to the policy process (Table 4.1). Further, there was a view that political appointees enhance both technical and responsive competence. Regarding the former, it was observed that because political advisers ‘travel in different circles to officials they therefore have different inputs’ (M3); that advisers ‘improve it [policy] because they have technical knowledge and ability, and can challenge advice of this nature from officials’ (M8); and that ‘they help to produce

¹⁸ In response to a question regarding protocols governing contact between ministerial advisers and officials, only a quarter of ministers indicated that they had insisted on explicit protocols, while 57 % did not have any formal arrangements (three ministers were unsure where arrangements were in place or not!). This might be read as confirmation of the legitimacy of the concerns noted (above) in the wider literature regarding the importance of appropriate regulatory arrangements.

¹⁹ Conversely, in the United Kingdom Sir Robin Mountfield has ‘warned that many special advisers acted as “unaccountable junior ministers”’ (UK Parliament, 2010: 19). In the New Zealand case, our sense is that centre-right ministers expressed moderately more scepticism regarding the conduct of advisers than did those in centre-left administrations.

an environment of full transparency of all the options and their consequences before decisions are made' (M21).

As to the latter, advisers' appeal clearly lies in that they can be 'more aware/concerned for political ramifications. More forthright in their advice' (M14). They are also 'more likely [than officials] to understand the political context and pressures within which the minister is operating' (M39), and therefore able to 'link the politically neutral state sector to the partisanship of government-of-the-day' (M46).

3. Discussion

There is no scholarly consensus on the best means of making sense of data concerning ministerial advisers. However, core executive studies – recently described as the 'new orthodoxy' in research on British central government (Elgie, 2011: 64) – appeals as a compelling optic, particularly given its focus on relationships and resource exchanges within the executive branch. Yet, while there have recently been attempts to theorise the roles of ministerial advisers drawing on this literature (e.g. Eichbaum and Shaw, 2011; Maley, 2011), we are unaware of any equivalent focus on ministers' motives in appointing partisan staff.

3.1 Mutual resource dependencies

Ministers confront complex operating environments in which securing objectives rests on the exchange of resources with others in the core executive. Mutual dependence between ministers, including between prime ministers and their ministerial colleagues, is necessitated by personal and institutional constraints on any one minister's possession of the resources required to achieve his or her aims. Interdependencies are typically such that any one minister will require access to other colleagues' authority, influence, support bases, networks, and detailed policy knowledge and expertise (both personal and in the form of advice from departments he/she is responsible for). Increasingly, too, in the context of the 'hollowing out' (Rhodes, 2007) of the state via which implementation has been devolved beyond the core public service, for ministers concerned to deliver their policy the web of interdependencies extends to private and voluntary sector networks.

The intricacies of these arrangements create roles which ministerial advisers are well placed to fulfil – and correspondingly powerful incentives amongst political principals to appoint them. Ministerial advisers facilitate the exchange of resources: they constitute a resource both in and of themselves (insofar as they possess specialist expertise, knowledge of policy networks, and other forms of political capital), and in the sense that they can be strategically deployed to leverage resources located elsewhere within and beyond the core executive. What advisers have to offer has both endogenous and exogenous dimensions, and it is in the context of the latter – especially given the fragmented and relatively mutable architecture of executive government – that the core executive lens makes sense of ministers' motives in engaging them.

Certainly, our data suggest that ministers look to advisers to gather information and other resources out in the wider core executive to which they might not themselves have access: hence the premium ministers place on traits such as political negotiations skills and knowledge of executive government processes; and the frequency with which advisers attend meetings with departmental officials, staff in the Prime Minister's Office and other ministers' advisers. Regarding the latter two, Maley (2000; 2011) makes the point that advisers play a crucial part in facilitating their own minister's policy objectives by linking his or her initiatives with those of others, clearing political log jams, and resolving policy tensions between ministers (and, in the New Zealand case, between coalition partners, and between governments and parliamentary support parties).

3.2 Explaining heterogeneous motives

Ministerial advisers undertake each of these activities, and more (Connaughton, 2010; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2011; Maley, 2010, 2011). But the precise mix of activities and strategies demanded of advisers, and the associated motives shaping ministers' choices regarding these, varies from minister to minister and across time. That is, ministers' motives with regard to advisers are fluid, and reflect endowments that are context- and temporally specific and thus particular to individual ministers at specific junctures in time. Following Heffernan (2003), for whom the distribution of power within the core executive has both relational and locational facets, we might posit that the distribution of ministers' motives similarly reflects both relations and location.

The first of these, the relational dimensions of power, are consistent with Rhodes' differentiated polity model of the core executive (Bevir and Rhodes, 2008). In this account ministers' power is a function of the possession of resources, and in particular of the balance of power – the dependency relations – between executive actors. Specific resources include the money, authority, influence, support bases, networks and detailed policy knowledge and expertise upon which ministers can call in their dealings with others.

But to the extent that power is 'dependent on where actors are to be found within the core executive, and whether they are at the centre or the periphery of key core executive networks' (Heffernan, 2003: 348), resources are expressions of structural location. Elgie (1997: 230) puts it this way: 'the disproportionate authority of particular offices is not primarily a function of individual incumbents, but an inherent property which successive incumbents inherit.' Rendering visible the structural determinants of executive power requires 'an understanding of hierarchies within government' (Heffernan, 2003: 9). The relevant proxies would include formal Cabinet ranking, membership of cabinet committees (and responsibilities therein, including chairing committees), and the nature of portfolios held and departmental responsibilities.

As a preliminary excursion into the issue, our research did not capture data on these relational and structural dimensions of ministerial power. However, while we are unable to analyse in detail the influence of relational and/or locational

dimensions on minister's motives, one or two comments on such matters may be appropriate. Other things being equal, for instance, it seems reasonable to suggest that more senior or influential ministers might be motivated to appoint advisers with skills sets differing to those appointed by junior or less influential colleagues (and we appreciate that influence is not necessarily a function of experience), and to deploy them somewhat differently. We found some evidence to this effect: as noted above, senior ministers had less need of their advisers in meetings with officials than less experienced colleagues; similarly, newer ministers revealed a greater tendency to ask their advisers to read officials' advice than did longer serving ministers. It seems equally plausible that any one minister's motives will evolve over time as experience is gained and credibility is established, producing changes in the nature of the aggregate resource provided by advisers, and that something similar might occur as the relationship between a minister and his or her public service advisers matures.

Clearly, individual ministers' motives and reasoning are not the only determinants in the appointment of ministerial advisers. Given their responsibilities for the deployment of resources across the ministry, prime ministerial assessments of ministers' capacities and capabilities are likely to be a significant factor in determining the nature and mix of resources afforded to (or foisted on) a minister. In this we again follow Heffernan (2003) and other proponents of the asymmetrical power model (see Marsh *et al.*, 2003; Marsh 2011; Smith 1995, 1999), whose appreciation of prime ministerial predominance establishes that executive politics are not infinitely contingent.²⁰ Dependency relationships are not equal and, because power inheres in structures, location makes a difference, such that the prime minister – by virtue of possessing resources particular to the office (including the right to take a direct interest in the activities of colleagues) – can have a determining impact on the organisation and deployment of advisers (see Eichbaum and Shaw 2011).

Between 1999 and 2008, for instance, the horizontal network of relationships between ministerial advisers in New Zealand was coordinated and mandated from the centre (and at a time when the minority government-of-the-day was supported on confidence and supply by as many as three other parliamentary parties) (see Boston 2012). This was a function of a whole-of-government orientation to political and policy management, but it was also motivated by a strong desire on the part of the then Prime Minister, Helen Clark, to avoid 'surprises' by ensuring a measure of fit between ministers' and advisers' capabilities. In short, the Clark administrations (1999-2008) – in which the prime minister was a dominant political and policy presence – consciously used ministerial staff as a means of prime ministerial coordination and oversight.

Ministerial advisers, then, constitute both a ministerial and a prime ministerial

²⁰ Conversely, Rhodes (2007; 2011), and Bevir and Rhodes (2006a), take the view that power is wholly contingent and 'does not inhere in any institution, position, or structure' (Elgie 2011: 68). Indeed, Rhodes and Bevir find the very concept of structure 'unhelpfully vague' (2008: 730). Their differentiated polity model proposes that power within the core executive is relational, decentred and decoupled from formal structural arrangements. Rather, power is substantially a function of the exchange of the requisite resources, and in particular of the skill with which the 'court (or 'baronial') politics' of the executive are managed.

resource: there are both vertical (benefits accrue to the adviser's minister) and horizontal considerations (benefits accrue to the administration). Further, bargaining over resources is not restricted to bilateral exchanges. In both spatial and temporal terms any one minister's adviser(s) will be engaged in multiple initiatives involving other ministers' political staff, and the exchange of resources also occurs in collective contexts (as when multiple ministers engage on a single cross-cutting initiative). Accordingly, the mix of motives behind the appointment of ministerial advisers is correspondingly complex and variable, and reflects the extent to which 'the resolution of problems is dependent on co-operation among resource-dependent actors and institutions' (Heffernan, 2003: 348).

3.3 Motives and institutional arrangements

We suggested earlier that ministers' motives (and the specific skills they may look for in their political staff) are linked to the institutional configuration of the core executive. In part, those arrangements are a function of electoral rules – and in New Zealand, the advent of MMP has rendered executive arrangements more complex than they once were. The core executive here not only encompasses elements of the political and administrative executives, but also routinely includes legislative actors in parliamentary parties on which governments rely for support on confidence and supply.

These arrangements create particular demands for ministers. Our response rate perhaps limits the extent to which we can safely assert, as does Muller-Rommel (2008: 267), that the 'character of [political] staff is indeed to a large degree related to the type of party government'. But ministers' requirements of their political staff do reflect the structural attributes of the cabinet, and (in parliamentary democracies at any rate) the legislative position of the governing party or parties. Again, the specifics of the New Zealand case, in which political principals' incentives are closely linked with the exigencies of governing under minority and/or multi-party governments, illuminate the wider rule. In contexts in which the bargaining uncertainty (Dickinson, 2003) faced by prime ministers and ministers is amplified, the skills ministers most value in advisers (see Table 1) are consistent with this 'stretching' of the core to incorporate parliamentary support parties.²¹ Thus, knowledge of executive government processes is valued highly by ministers, as are political negotiation skills, while the facilitation of input from external interests into the policy process is felt by nearly all ministers to be an important function.

But core executive structures, and the resourcing demands attendant upon them, are not exclusively a function of the imperatives bequeathed by electoral systems. Our data also indicate that demands created through reforms in the wider administrative executive lie behind ministers' recourse to ministerial advisers. In New Zealand the institutionalised division of ministers' ownership and purchase roles, and of the purchase and provider functions, established a demand for non-

²¹ There is a compelling argument that partisans can also assist address issues of uncertainty under single-party majority conditions (see UK Parliament, 2002).

public service advice on ministers' purchase activities; in fulfilling this role, ministerial advisers have also become part of the institutional machinery via which the performance of officials is monitored on behalf of their principals. That role, and governments' recourse to political staff as an institutional response to its emergence, is also in evidence in other jurisdictions in which devolution, marketisation and privatisation have pared back the role of the centre (Christensen and Laegrid 2011).

Complementing that focus is a role for ministerial advisers in overseeing the delivery of ministers' policies. Core executive scholars have long drawn attention to the challenges the 'hollow crown' faces in co-ordinating policy implementation, in which context Peters *et al.* note the 'increased pressures for centralization as core executives confront the differentiation and pluralisation of government' (Peters *et al.* 2000: 6). In this respect political staff are integral to centripetal processes intended to refurbish core executive capability and capacity. Alongside the development of a central capacity to oversee the purchase of advice (noted above), ministerial advisers are a material manifestation of the desire to re-assert at least a measure of ministerial control over the operationalisation of policy decisions.

But the evidence also indicates that ministers want their advisers to play a part in policy-making that extends beyond the monitoring of departmental activities. To the extent that partisans are 'recruited because of their knowledge or experience of a particular issue of importance to the minister' (OECD, 2007: 10), they contribute to a government's aggregate policy capacity. One reading of this is the orthodox rational choice view that ministers require recourse to different sets of eyes given officials' proclivity for self-serving advice. A less sceptical position – and one supported by our data (see, for instance, Table 4.16) – is simply that exposing officials' advice to other points of view is consistent with rigorous policy-making. In this regard advisers test the validity of officials' advice and 'can triangulate the thinking of the minister [resulting in] a wider perspective around every issue and a productive interplay of ideas' (Connaughton, 2010: 366).

3.4 Home and away

Inasmuch as the Westminster label hides as much as it explains (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006b), an assessment of the degree to which our findings enjoy relevance beyond the New Zealand context is merited. The most obvious point to make in this respect concerns the second-order consequences of New Zealand's adoption of proportional representation in the mid-1990s. Contra arrangements in the United Kingdom (or, for that matter, at the national/federal level in Australia and Canada), non-single party majority government is now the norm in New Zealand. It has been eighteen years since New Zealand last experienced single party majority government. After six elections, a new institutional settlement has been effected under which ministers appoint political advisers to carry out roles that are substantially a function of multi-party and, in particular, minority government.

Multi-party governments, of course, are neither unique to New Zealand nor solely a consequence of proportionality. Ministers in the United Kingdom's coalition government may well share with their New Zealand counterparts the need for the sort

of assistance described in section 2 above. They do *not* have need of assistance in maintaining relationships with parliamentary parties whose support on matters of confidence and supply their government requires. This may go some way to explaining why, in the United Kingdom, ‘special advisers have not yet systematically taken on a role of this kind [interparty negotiation]’ (Hazell *et al.*, 2012); in New Zealand, on the other hand, that role is critical in an environment in which the boundaries between the executive and legislative branches can get a little blurred.

To some degree, too, the organisation of executive government in New Zealand may limit the wider applicability of our findings. Unlike arrangements at Westminster and Whitehall, New Zealand ministers are located in a purpose-built Executive Wing (fondly known as the Beehive), not in their departments. A minister’s office will usually include seconded officials, a Senior Private Secretary responsible for office administration, other administrative staff, at least one Press Secretary, and one or more ministerial advisers. Importantly, the latter are employed by the Department of Internal Affairs, not by the department(s) for which their minister has responsibility (as is the case for most special advisers in the United Kingdom (Fawcett and Gay, 2010)).

We cannot yet comment with authority on the extent to which such arrangements structure ministers’ incentives and motives. We would, however, hazard the observation that relationships between New Zealand ministers and ministerial advisers are to a degree decoupled from departmental imperatives. An important ramification of this is that ministers look for advisers whose competencies mirror their (the minister’s) responsibilities across departments and agencies: in a sense, New Zealand advisers are institutionally compelled to be genericists rather than policy specialists. In the United Kingdom, however, and in other contexts in which they are employed by their departments, there is scope for political advisers to develop expertise that is relevant to their particular department and, to an extent, independent of the responsibilities of their minister. Further, as Hazell *et al.* (2012) point out, in the United Kingdom departments are (slowly) adapting to having advisers from more than one governing party; that is not a feature of executive life in Wellington.

But if the Westminster world is characterized by institutional divergence, there is also evidence of convergence. For one thing, Peters *et al.* (2000) note an increase in the size of political leaders’ staffs across nations in parliamentary and presidential/semi-presidential systems as governments confront processes of devolution, regionalization and globalization. (They also note that the precise nature and distribution of the tasks those staffs carry out reflect countries’ historico-cultural particulars.) To the extent that they are one element in a wider executive strategy to maintain control in the face of institutional fragmentation and ministerial overload, ministerial recourse to political advisers is common to most developed nations (Hazell *et al.*, 2012; see also Eichbaum and Shaw, 2013).

More specifically, insofar as political staff carry out roles created by new public management reforms, New Zealand ministers’ motives for appointing such staff are likely also to apply in other jurisdictions with similar reform trajectories. For

instance, Lindquist (2006) discusses the acceleration of ‘unitization’ as governments arrange their oversight capacities in advisory units (which include political staff) that come together, fracture and reform in the endless search for influence over policy implementation. And in an age of outsourcing and devolution, ministers across jurisdictions deploy ministerial advisers in purchase and monitoring roles in the context of dealings with civil service departments and non-statutory agencies responsible for service delivery.

Similarly, the demise of the bilateral relationship between ministers and senior civil servants is common to many countries in which public sector reform has been pursued. New Zealand’s ministers are not the only ones turning to partisan advisers in the increasingly congested and contestable market for policy advice.

4. Conclusion

On the political theatre of Westminster a new actor – the ministerial adviser – has recently taken the stage. Ministers’ accounts of the reasons behind this entrance, and in particular of their motives for appointing partisan advisers, remain under-researched; the core purpose of this article, then, has been to throw some empirical light on such matters. The New Zealand experience confirms what might have been anticipated: that ministerial advisers are appointed to help ministers manage demanding workloads and to inject contestability into the policy process. That they are appointed as much (if not more) for their expert knowledge as for their ideological dispositions is perhaps less expected: on the whole New Zealand ministers are looking for advisers who can engage with and appropriately contest advice from officials, and who can assist in the navigation of complex governing conditions.

A second objective was to place empirical particulars in a theoretical context. The literature concerning the various consequences of the arrival of the ‘third element’ remains resolutely empirical (although see Gains and Stoker, 2011). Our view is that the core executive narrative of distributed decision-making and resource inter-dependencies holds considerable promise in this respect. Here, we have presented an initial attempt at making sense of ministers’ motives in appointing ministerial advisers drawing on that scholarship. Confronted by institutional fragmentation and exacting political environments ministers strive for a measure of control over policy-making in a differentiated polity in which the ‘court politics of the core executive’ has become the loci of decision-making (Rhodes, 2005: 41). In such conditions, ministers need help beyond that which public servants are able to provide.

The final purpose of the article was to step through the Westminster veil and to provide some markers for further comparative research. In this respect there is considerable potential in a comparative methodology built upon explicit measures of both the relational and structural bases of executive power, and which is directly informed by the core executive studies literature. We have already noted that this research did not include such measures. However, such an approach would significantly deepen and extend the boundaries of the research on trilateral core

executive relations, and facilitate its theorisation (which continues to lag somewhat behind the empirical work).

Finally, we would note that adopting a ministerial perspective forces us to reconsider certain things we thought we knew. In the New Zealand case, it transpires that most ministers do not see their ministerial advisers primarily as a bulwark against the predations of civil servants; neither are they overly concerned to ensure that advisers share their ideological positions. Rather, ministers want their advisers to contest others' ideas, to help them with their workload and to assist in negotiating the vagaries of governing under proportional representation. Clearly, more work is needed before it is established how far (at least the first two of) these findings extend beyond New Zealand. We look forward to the contributions of others as the interrogation of the shibboleths regarding political advisers continues.

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Table 1 Attributes of ministerial advisers (preferences and rankings)

No	Statement	Preferences		Rankings*				
				1	2	3	4	5
1.1	policy expertise	<i>n=9</i>	<i>9%</i>	14% (n=3)	10% (n=2)	0%	10% (n=2)	0%
1.2	political negotiation skills	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	19 (4)	10 (2)	14 (3)	5 (1)	10 (2)
1.3	communications/media expertise	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	0	5 (1)	5 (1)	0	14 (3)
1.4	same ideological preferences as yours	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	5 (1)	10 (2)	10 (2)	5 (1)	14 (3)
1.5	membership of same political party	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	0	0	0	5 (1)	5 (1)
1.6	ability to network with government departments	<i>13</i>	<i>13</i>	5 (1)	14 (3)	14 (3)	19 (4)	10 (2)
1.7	pre-existing links with the public service	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>	5 (1)	0	5 (1)	0	10 (2)
1.8	understanding executive government processes	<i>12</i>	<i>12</i>	0	33 (7)	14 (3)	5 (1)	0
1.9	skills in policy evaluation	<i>12</i>	<i>12</i>	24 (5)	0	0	10 (2)	5 (1)
1.10	policy research and/or policy analysis skills	<i>12</i>	<i>12</i>	14 (3)	5 (1)	29 (6)	10 (2)	0
1.11	pre-existing links with interest groups	<i>6</i>	<i>6</i>	0	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
1.12	speech-writing skill	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	0	5 (1)	5 (1)	0	0

N=21; missing=6

* Where 1=most important, 2=fairly important, 3=important; 4=not very important; 5=least important

Table 2 How ministerial advisers assist ministers

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
2.1	conveyed and/or clarified my wishes to officials	10% (n=2)	43% (n=9)	14% (n=3)	0%	0%
2.2	attended face-to-face meetings I had with officials	43 (9)	24 (5)	5 (1)	0	0
2.3	read officials' advice before it reached my desk	29 (6)	19 (4)	19 (4)	5 (1)	0
2.4	met with officials to develop and/or implement policy	5 (1)	33 (7)	29 (6)	5 (1)	0
2.5	helped me develop and/or implement accountability arrangements	0	24 (5)	24 (5)	24 (5)	0
2.6	met with staff in the PM's office, including the PM's chief of staff	0	33 (7)	29 (6)	5 (1)	0
2.7	met with ministerial advisers from other ministers' offices	10 (2)	33 (7)	29 (6)	0	0
2.8	represented me at meetings with my ministerial colleagues	0	5 (1)	24 (5)	29 (6)	14 (3)
2.9	assisted me with budget-related matters	45 (1)	29 (6)	38 (8)	0	0
2.10	assisted with coalition consultation and/or management	19 (4)	19 (4)	29 (6)	0	0
2.11	assisted with Questions in the House and answers to written parliamentary questions	24 (5)	29 (6)	10 (2)	10 (2)	0
2.12	assisted with responses to Official Information Act requests	19 (4)	19 (4)	29 (6)	5 (1)	0
2.13	attended meetings I had with interest groups	14 (3)	38 (8)	19 (4)	0	0
2.14	assisted me with electorate issues	0	10 (2)	14 (3)	24 (5)	24 (5)
2.15	met with my caucus colleagues	0	14 (3)	48 (10)	10 (2)	0
2.16	met with office-holders from my party	0	10 (2)	14 (3)	29 (6)	19 (4)
2.17	worked on my party's election manifesto and/or campaign	5 (1)	5 (1)	29 (6)	5 (1)	29 (6)
2.18	wrote speeches	0	14 (3)	19 (4)	24 (5)	14 (3)
2.19	worked on press statements and/or government publications	0	14 (3)	43 (9)	14 (3)	0

N=21; missing=6 (where 1=very frequently, 2= frequently, 3=occasionally; 4=rarely; 5=never)

Table 3 Assessments of the importance of ministerial advisers' functions

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
3.1	conveying/clarifying the minister's wishes for officials	33% (n=7)	29% (n=6)	0%	9.5% (n=2)	0%
3.2	scrutinising advice from officials	24 (5)	24 (5)	24 (5)	0	0
3.3	developing policy with officials	10 (2)	29 (6)	14 (3)	14 (3)	5 (1)
3.4	testing the political ramifications of advice from officials and others	24 (5)	24 (5)	14 (3)	10 (1)	5 (1)
3.5	assisting with development and/or implementation of accountability arrangements	0	5 (1)	24 (5)	38 (8)	5 (1)
3.6	contributing to development of policy on cross-cutting, inter-departmental issues	19 (4)	14 (3)	19 (4)	19 (4)	0
3.7	generating fresh policy ideas	14 (3)	14 (3)	24 (5)	19 (4)	0
3.8	developing new policy initiatives	19 (4)	10 (2)	19 (4)	19 (4)	0
3.9	liaising with officials on the development of budget bids	10 (2)	24 (5)	29 (6)	10 (2)	0
3.10	participating in meetings with other ministers and/or the finance minister on new budget initiatives	0	19 (4)	38 (8)	14 (3)	0
3.11	facilitating input from interest groups	10 (2)	19 (4)	33 (7)	10 (2)	0
3.12	monitoring policy implementation	14 (3)	29 (6)	24 (5)	5 (1)	0
3.13	evaluating policy implementation	14 (3)	24 (5)	24 (5)	10 (2)	0

N=21; missing=6 (where 1=very important, 2=fairly important, 3=important; 4=not very important; 5=irrelevant)

Table 4 Views on ministerial advisers' roles and accountabilities

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
4.1	advisers make a positive contribution to the policy process	53%	40%	7%	0%	0%
4.2	advisers facilitate interest group engagement with the policy process	13	60	27	0	0
4.3	advisers have too much influence in shaping the government's policy agenda	7	0	7	47	40
4.4	advisers try to keep certain items off the policy agenda	0	7	27	33	33
4.5	advisers are more influential than they used to be	7	47	33	7	7
4.6	advisers are a legitimate feature of executive government	47	33	20	0	0
4.7	it is best when advisers and their ministers share the same political views	40	27	33	0	0
4.8	advisers add value to the policy process under coalition and/or minority government conditions	33	53	6	7	0
4.9	advisers facilitate relations between coalition partners	27	67	7	0	0
4.10	advisers facilitate relations between governments and their parliamentary support parties	27	60	13	0	0
4.11	advisers have little or no bearing on officials' access to ministers	20	53	0	13	13
4.12	advisers hinder officials' access to ministers	0	7	0	60	33
4.13	advisers prevent departmental advice from reaching ministers	0	0	7	20	73
4.14	advisers dilute the advice officials offer to ministers	0	13	7	47	33
4.15	advisers do not encourage free and frank advice on the full range of policy options available to government	7	0	0	40	53
4.16	advisers help clarify the partisan and professional dimensions of policy advice	0	60	27	13	0
4.17	advisers sometimes exceed their delegated authority	0	20	33	27	20
4.18	relationships between advisers and public servants are generally positive	0	73	27	0	0
4.19	it is appropriate for advisers to be drawn from, and to return to, the public service	0	27	40	27	7
4.20	advisers, through their actions, constitute a risk to the political neutrality of the public service	7	0	13	40	40
4.21	there should be a limit placed on the overall number of advisers	13	27	20	33	7
4.22	Parliament should control the number of advisers	0	7	13	40	40
4.23	there should be a special code of conduct for advisers	0	13	53	33	0

4.24	a code of conduct for advisers should be provided for in statute	0	0	7	40	53
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N=21; missing=1 (where 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neither agree/disagree; 4=disagree; 5=strongly disagree)

