

## The third force – political advisers and political neutrality

Every election, public servants walk a narrow tightrope, balancing their democratic right to take part in elections with their ability to serve whatever government is elected. When, as happened last year, public services become the election issue, political neutrality comes under even closer scrutiny.

But for some public servants, political neutrality is not part of the job description. These are the ministerial advisers, more often referred to as political advisers, who are employed explicitly to assist their minister advance the government's political and policy agenda. They may have been chosen for their skills as political operators or for their expertise in a particular policy, or both.

This is in sharp contrast to the role of departmental public servants whose job is to give free and frank advice without getting involved in politics. A permanent public servant could work closely with successive ministers from different political parties but this could never be the case for ministerial advisers whose tenure is tied to that of their minister or portfolio.

As a group – and there are now about 25 of them employed by Ministerial Services – political advisers have been characterised as a “third element” in government and seen by some as a threat to the Westminster tradition of an independent and impartial public service.

Others, however, see them as a welcome addition to the political landscape, making it easier for permanent public servants to do their work without entering into the political fray.

This debate is at the heart of research by Dr Richard Shaw of Massey University and Dr Chris Eichbaum of Victoria University. Funded by the Royal Society through the Marsden Fund, their research will involve surveys and interviews with senior public servants, ministers and the political advisers themselves. In a paper presented last year to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, they report on a survey of senior public servants on the rise of the political adviser in New Zealand and what this means for our permanent public service.

In one sense political advisers are nothing new. Ministers have always had the option of seeking advice from outside the public service. But since the mid-1980s there has been a growing trend to have ‘in-house’ political or strategic advisers as part of the Beehive staff.

The research shows that in the early 1990s most senior public servants surveyed had little or no contact with political advisers. But since 1999 things have taken a striking turn; now over half of those surveyed reported frequent or very frequent contact.

Richard and Chris attribute this, in large part, to MMP. In multi-party arrangements, political advisers have a key role in managing relationships, brokering agreements and maintaining channels of communication between political parties and, indeed, with groups outside parliament – tasks that would not be seen by the State Services Commission as appropriate for permanent public servants.

The heavier demands and pressures placed on ministers have also contributed to the need for politically aligned advisers to turn to for support and advice. As one senior public servant put it:

*“The requirement on ministers to be well briefed, to a very detailed level, on a wide range of issues to allow them to respond quickly is widely acknowledged. They can't do this alone. Hence ministerial advisers [who ministers] can trust.”*

So where does this leave the concept of political neutrality? Certainly political advisers are not required to be neutral “but they need to be conscious of the Westminster principles” in their dealings with other public servants.

And, says Richard, the need to operate on a sound ethical basis is as important for political advisers as for other public servants.

“There is a common element between political advisers and public servants: both are employed by the public purse. They have a duty of service to the government of the day but also to citizens. And as a public official you may be called to account for your actions and to justify them before a representative of the public.” And that could be the front page of the *Dominion* or the *New Zealand Herald*.

There is no evidence of unethical behaviour in New Zealand, unlike in Australia where political advisers have been described as the “backyard dogs” of the political system and, according to a senate committee enquiry, were complicit in the public deception in which ministers claimed that asylum seekers were throwing their children into the sea.

The research shows that, by and large, the relationship between ministerial advisers and other public servants tends to be positive; indeed political advisers are generally seen as “adding value”.

“As the ministerial adviser may view it, the task will be to ensure the integrity of the electorate mandate,” says Chris. “In other words the government will do what it has promised to do in its manifesto which is a contract with citizens. So official advice needs to be within the mandate and sometimes officials may need to be reminded of that.

“At its best, the Westminster principles are not only about ensuring a non-partisan public service, they are also about ensuring responsive competence on the part of the public service to the government of the day. That can be a difficult balancing act.”

The survey shows a willingness on the part of those public servants surveyed to accommodate the “third force”. For some, the nature of the relationship has meant friction but in the main, public servants have accommodated political advisers while maintaining the best of the Westminster model – a professional apolitical public service tending free, frank and fearless advice.

“It’s been a significant innovation which hasn’t, to date at least, led to the repudiation of those core Westminster principles,” says Richard.

*Is Westminster dead in Wellington? Ministerial advisers in the New Zealand Executive.* A paper to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference 2005, by Dr Chris Eichbaum and Dr Richard Shaw. Available on the PSA website.

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