

## Chapter 7

THE INTER-EXECUTIVE ACTIVITY OF MINISTERIAL POLICY  
ADVISERS IN THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

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## INTRODUCTION

Ministerial political staffers are frequently discussed with respect to their “vertical” activities within the traditional bilateral relationship between ministers and permanent public servants and, in particular, whether, as contributors to “new political governance” (Aucoin 2012), they further public service politicization (Benoit 2006; Eichbaum and Shaw 2007a, 2007b; Tiernan 2007; Wilson 2016). However, while their relationship with the public service is important, it is not the whole story. Power within Westminster systems of government flows across a complex web of relationships in and around the core executive (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Rhodes 1995). Because of their shared political affinity and personal ties with ministers, political staffers are well placed to exercise influence within multiple networks that criss-cross government and politics. (Craft 2016; Gains and Stoker 2011; Eichbaum and Shaw 2010; Rhodes and Tiernan 2014; Yong and Hazell 2014; Zussman 2009). Examining this “horizontal” dimension (Connaughton 2010; Craft 2016; Maley 2000, 2011) illuminates the mechanisms of co-ordination and information transmission on the political side and provides insight into how decisions are shaped within the black box of ministerial offices.

It has long been recognized that political staffers actively work across departmental boundaries. For example, Lenoski observed how, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, “the political staff network contributes to the reinforcement of the solidarity in which, to survive, collective ministerial responsibility has to be firmly rooted” (1977, 172). Bakvis (1997, 119)

recognized how staffers act "...as a primary node in a network or more likely a number of networks of specialist advisers and contacts, channelling critical information to the key decision maker, the minister." However, Maria Maley first systematically documented this aspect of political policy staffers' work and identified distinctive policy roles which were "important in shaping policy outcomes" and which depended on advisers' privileged involvement "in a minister's overlapping relationships with other policy actors and [as] conduits for information within these relationships" (2000, 467-8). She further elaborated on the importance of ministerial staffers' informal networks and relationships which provide a vehicle for political and policy co-ordination across government (Maley 2011, 1484).

Other researchers identify similar themes. In New Zealand, Eichbaum and Shaw (2011, 596 ) find that staffers are "key actors" in core executive networks, connecting on behalf of their ministers across a range of executive relationships, brokering policy agreements and negotiating with legislators in the context of minority governments resulting from proportional representation. Connaughton (2010, 362-3) concludes that political policy advisers in the Republic of Ireland have "significant" duties on "cross-cutting issues that transcend departmental boundaries and include consensus building in complex policy networks". Jonathan Craft (2016) provides the fullest analysis of partisan policy advisers in Canada. He documents how they provide substantive and procedural brokerage and co-ordination across government, not only in first ministers' offices but throughout the executive, and uses this framework "to move beyond country-specific accounts...toward a more comparatively generalizable framework" applicable across and even outside the Westminster family (Craft 2015a, 136-7).

Such a broad perspective is necessary for theorizing the role of political staff in executive government, but must have a solid empirical foundation. Through evidence from a 2013 survey

as well as elite interviews, this chapter confirms the trajectory of recent literature, namely that political staffers use their networks of relationships to impact the policy process, through analysing the horizontal policy activity of ministerial policy advisers in Canada under the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015). Due to space constraints, it considers only relationships within the executive and parliamentary contexts and not those with outside stakeholders. Emphasis is given to the "deep structures" (Connaughton 2010, 366) of co-ordination and discussion between Canadian ministerial offices which augment and facilitate advisers' more relationship-based networking, and to the significance of such practices for policy development.

### *Methodology*

Using the Government of Canada's online Electronic Directory Services (GEDS) a total of 64 individuals were identified who served as senior level ministerial political policy advisers (in all but a few instances with the title of either director of policy or senior policy adviser) at some point during the period from October 2012 to June 2013.<sup>1</sup> These 64 staffers were invited by email to participate in a survey which consisted of both forced response and open-ended questions. Thirty-four responses were received back from individuals employed in a wide range of ministerial offices, including at central agencies, the Prime Minister's Office and the offices of ministers of state. The final survey response rate was 53 percent. Survey data were augmented by elite interviews (and one email exchange) with the following: 14 current (at the time) or former Conservative political staffers who had served under the Harper government; two Chrétien-era Liberal staffers; one long-serving deputy minister; and a currently-serving senior adviser from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office. The analysis also reflects the experience of

the author, who served as director of policy in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) from 2009 to 2011 and in the offices of three other federal ministers from 2006 to 2009.

*Political Staffers: The Canadian Context*

Contextually, it is important to stress from the outset that ministerial political staffers are a comparatively numerous group in Canada (Yong and Hazell 2014, 152). Appointed under section 128 of the *Public Service Employment Act* they are formally known as "exempt staff" because they are exempt from the usual public service rules for competitive hiring and non-partisanship. Hired directly by the minister, they serve at his or her pleasure and explicitly support the government's political agenda. As context for the period under consideration in this study, there were in total 558 full-time exempt staffers across the Canadian government on March 31, 2013 (Dawson 2013, 5). Ministerial *policy* advisers, a prominent species of the broader taxonomic genus of exempt staff, comprised about 20 percent of the entire ministerial staff community (Wilson 2015b).

The Privy Council Office (PCO) states that the *raison d'être* for ministerial exempt staff "is to provide Ministers with advisors and assistants who are not departmental public servants, who share their political commitment, and who can complement the professional, expert and non-partisan advice and support of the public service," and recognizes that this involves horizontal "liaising with other Ministers' offices and caucus" (Canada, Privy Council Office 2015, 46). In setting out generic job descriptions for staffers, the 2011 *Treasury Board Policy for Ministers' Offices* establishes that, among other things, a minister's director of policy "needs to work closely with the Prime Minister's Office and other ministers' offices in order to coordinate the development of policies and programs within the government" (Canada, Treasury

Board 2011, 66). The horizontal themes of co-ordination and networking with other ministerial offices, including PMO, are again clearly emphasized. These also emerge as prominent features from the survey.

## INTRA-GOVERNMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS: SURVEY FINDINGS

### *How Advisers See Their Role*

When asked what skills advisers felt were "most useful" to their position, the relational aspects of the job figured prominently. As Table 1 shows, 42% of respondents mentioned the importance of "interpersonal skill/relationship building/listening to others/respect." This was tied as the top response along with strong written communication skill. The latter reflects the strong—and perhaps idiosyncratic—culture of documented political advice characteristic of the Harper PMO and many ministers' offices (Craft 2016, 58; Wilson 2016 forthcoming). But the former demonstrates that staffers prize these relational skills well above other characteristics that might be commonly expected in a political policy role such as: political judgment (mentioned by 29% of respondents), political analysis (16%) and policy portfolio knowledge (13%). A further relationally-oriented category of "teamwork/networking" was also mentioned by 13 percent of respondents. This high emphasis upon interpersonal skill suggests that advisers recognize the importance of relationship building for their policy advisory work.

Table 2 lists the top 10 ways in which survey respondents described their job.

Unsurprisingly, policy advisers most commonly say that they advise the minister with respect to policy (58%) and politics (48%). But, given how so much attention is devoted to the relationship of political staff with public servants, it is noteworthy that meeting/working with officials (36%) ranks in fourth place, tied with the notion of collaborating and networking with other ministerial

offices, including PMO (36%). Respondents also recognize the importance of implementing and ensuring congruence with the government's policy objectives (26%) and co-ordinating and managing the policy and cabinet process (19%), both functions which could apply to working with departmental officials (vertical) and across political networks (horizontal).

### Table 1-Most Useful Skills

"What do you feel are the most useful skills for someone in your position?" (Top grouped responses by percentage of cases mentioned).

Rank	Response	%
1	Strong communications – writing	42
1	Interpersonal skill/ relationship building/ listen to others/ respect	42
3	Analyse/synthesize large amounts of information/ multiple issues	32
4	Political judgment	29
5	Time management/ work well under pressure/ remain calm	26
6	Knowledge of institutions/government/electoral systems	19
7	Strong communications – oral	16
7	Knowledge of politics/political context	16
7	Political analysis	16
10	Teamwork/networking	13
10	Portfolio/policy field knowledge	13

### Table 2-How Policy Advisers Describe their Job

"In one paragraph, please describe your job" (top 10 grouped responses by percentage of cases mentioned).

Rank	Response	%
1	Advise minister – policy	58
2	Advise minister – politics	48
3	Manage/work with stakeholders	39
4	Meet/work with officials	36
4	Collaborate/network with other ministerial offices, including PMO	36
6	Implement/ensure congruence with government policy objectives	26
7	Supervise/manage staff/assist Chief of Staff	23
8	Co-ordinate/manage policy/cabinet process	19
8	Oversee/challenge/monitor departmental policy/admin	19
10	Support/assist/defend minister	16

One adviser clearly articulated how different aspects of horizontal relationship- building come together in practice: “My job is to make the Minister look good. My colleagues are focused on him looking good in the media or in parliament - my role is more general in that he needs to have politically consistent policy content to discuss in those contexts and others. So, my job is to take the overarching narrative of the Government and apply it to items within my Minister's portfolio. I help him make decisions within this context. I help him make relationships. I help him speak to stakeholders, caucus, and cabinet in this context. I help him achieve his personal goals. I help him avoid problems and pursue successes" (Survey respondent 19). This sums up the horizontal dimension: developing relationships inside the executive (cabinet) and outside (stakeholders, parliamentary caucus) in order to advance the minister's policy agenda.

### *Relations With Other Ministers*

Policy staffers who work for one minister do not as a rule interact deeply with other ministers. As Table 3 shows, 50 percent of policy advisers will “occasionally” attend meetings between their own minister and other ministers, but only 6 percent will actively participate either very frequently (3%) or frequently (3%) in those meetings. It is even more uncommon for them to represent their own minister at meetings with other ministers: 9 percent did so occasionally, and only 3 percent did so very frequently. It was somewhat more common for them to mobilize support for their own minister's policies among other ministers, presumably on an informal basis: 25 percent did this either very frequently (9%) or frequently (16%), with a further 22 percent doing so occasionally. One adviser described how he regularly dealt with another political office on a joint file. “I actually got [name of policy adviser] to get me ten minutes to

brief [name of minister] on [topic of legislation under consideration] before officials got to him.... Once that relationship had been cultivated, the implementation of the [file] agenda moved much more smoothly” (adviser 9). Such meetings happened, though they were not typical.

### Table 3-Interaction with Cabinet and Other Ministerial Offices

"Thinking of your own work as a policy adviser in a minister's office, please rank the following activities on a scale of 1 to 5 according to how often you would engage in the activity, where 1 means 'very frequently,' 2 means 'frequently,' 3 means 'occasionally,' 4 means 'rarely,' and 5 means 'never.'"\*

		Respondents (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Attend meetings between minister and other ministers	9	25	50	16	0
2	Actively participate in meetings between minister and other ministers	3	3	61	27	6
3	Represent your minister at meetings with other ministers	3	0	9	50	38
4	Attend cabinet meetings (including cabinet committees)	22	9	41	19	9
5	Meet with political staff from PMO (non PMO only)	36	39	21	4	0
6	Meet informally with staff from other minister's offices	30	30	30	9	0
7	Mobilize support for your minister's policies among other ministers	9	16	22	38	16
8	Mobilize support for your minister's policies among political staff from other minister's offices	25	41	25	6	3

\*Questions taken or adapted from Eichbaum and Shaw 2007, 99 and/or Eichbaum and Shaw 2011, 587).

#### *Attending Cabinet*

PMO staffers have traditionally monitored and attended cabinet committee meetings (Campbell 1987, 130; Goldenberg 2006, 110) but until recently advisers to other ministers have not done so. This reduced their policy influence and placed them at a distinct disadvantage not only compared to PMO but also to senior departmental officials who either attend cabinet or will be debriefed by those who do (Savoie 1983, 518). The traditional rules for attendance continued in the early Harper years: advisers from PMO would attend cabinet committees and might (or might not)

provide political feedback to the ministerial staffers who were working on a file. Later on, however, PMO instructed PCO to permit ministers presenting items at cabinet committees to bring one political staffer (often but not necessarily a policy adviser) into the room to listen to the discussion (Canada. Privy Council Office 2012, 19). This practice is reflected in the survey. As Table 3 shows, 72 percent of respondents attend cabinet meetings at least occasionally. Such access permits the ministerial staffer involved on the file to hear the political discussion among ministers which is vital when follow-up policy work is required.

#### *Working with Members of Parliament*

According to Eichbaum and Shaw (2007c, 99-100), political advisers in New Zealand have an important role in working with Members of Parliament. They found that 88 percent of advisers at least occasionally had meetings with members of the government's parliamentary caucus (50% did so frequently or very frequently), and that 78 percent also met with MPs or advisers from other political parties (45% did so frequently or very frequently). Advisers in Ottawa also interact with MPs from the government caucus, although less often than those in Wellington. According to the survey (Table 4), 72 percent of Canadian policy advisers at least occasionally accompany their minister to meetings with caucus colleagues (30% frequently or very frequently) and 60 percent actively participated in such meetings (27% frequently or very frequently). This would include their role supporting Minister's Caucus Advisory Committees which Prime Minister Harper instituted to obtain input from backbench government MPs into policy proposals (Wilson 2015a, 236). Indeed, 72% of Canadian advisers at least occasionally meet government MPs without the minister being present, although only 21% do so frequently or very frequently. But meeting with MPs or staff from other political parties is much less common in Canada than in New Zealand, with only 22 percent of survey respondents doing so

occasionally. Perhaps this difference in approach is due to the challenge of governing with multi-party coalitions under New Zealand's system of proportional representation (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007a, 463). Or perhaps MP liaison including cross-party contact in Canada is, given role differentiation among political staffers, led by political staffers other than policy advisers (for example, parliamentary affairs advisers).

#### **Table 4- Activity with MPs**

"Thinking of your own work as a policy adviser in a minister's office, please rank the following activities on a scale of 1 to 5 according to how often you would engage in the activity, where 1 means 'very frequently,' 2 means 'frequently,' 3 means 'occasionally,' 4 means 'rarely,' and 5 means 'never.'"

		Respondents (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Accompany minister to meetings with caucus colleagues	9	21	42	24	3
2	Actively participate in meetings between minister and caucus colleagues	9	18	33	30	9
3	Meet with members of the government caucus without minister	6	15	51	24	3
4	Meet with MPs or staff from other parties	0	0	22	50	28

\*Questions taken or adapted from Eichbaum and Shaw 2007, 99 and/or Eichbaum and Shaw 2011, 587).

#### *Working with Other Ministerial Offices*

Not surprisingly, given how they view it as intrinsic to their job description, policy advisers report high levels of interaction with other ministerial offices. As shown in Table 3 above, 60% of respondents meet either very frequently (30%) or frequently (30%) on an informal basis with staff from other ministerial offices. Meeting with political staff from the Prime Minister's Office is even more common, with 75% of (non-PMO) policy advisers doing this very frequently (36%) or frequently (39%). This level of engagement with other political offices is expected based on

practice elsewhere. For example, Eichbaum and Shaw (2007c, 99) found that policy advisers in New Zealand met frequently or very frequently with both other ministerial advisers (78%) and with PMO (69%), while Connaughton (2010, 359) observed a similar pattern in Ireland (72% and 64% respectively).

Advisers consider good relationships across political networks to be "very important...because you never know when you'll need them. And offices don't do enough of this" (adviser 7). Adviser 11 explained how relationships gave him a conduit for discussions with other political staffers: "You got to know people in other ministers' offices because the idea was then if there's anything your boss ever needed from that other office you had somebody you knew who you could call there. Even if it wasn't their direct responsibility, they'd say to you 'that's so and so, call them and tell them I said you should call them.' And you could very quickly find out who the right person was and get into a discussion with them. So knowing people across government was quite helpful."

Such connections could be valuable for different reasons. In order to fully brief their own ministers, advisers might need either substantive information on a proposal or political intelligence on how their own proposal is being received. One former PMO policy adviser observed how frequently presenting ministers were surprised at Cabinet by other ministers' questions, and concluded "This is their staff's fault." (Adviser 7) Advisers do not only convey information. They are also active in mobilizing political support for their ministers' policies. Sometimes, as shown in Table 3, they do so with other ministers directly: 25 percent do so very frequently (9%) or frequently (16%), although this is notably less often than in New Zealand where 41 percent do so very frequently (19%) or frequently (22%) (Eichbaum and Shaw 2011, 593). On the other hand, Canadian staffers are more likely to mobilize support for their

ministers' policies among other advisers to other ministers. In Canada, 66 percent of policy staffers do so very frequently (25%) or frequently (41%), while only 9 percent do so rarely (6%) or never (3%). In New Zealand, by contrast, only 37 percent do so frequently/very frequently and 44 percent rarely/never (Eichbaum and Shaw 2011, 593).

Maley describes how Australian advisers have become the "executive-level negotiators within government" and hold delegated authority (if informally) from ministers to negotiate policy positions with other political offices in the expectation of ministers' approval (2000, 463). In Canada the mobilization function certainly involves political discussions between ministers' offices in response to disagreement between officials. As one adviser explained: "If departments had differing views then [political] staff needed to talk stuff out to resolve. Staff would negotiate and could work horizontally to develop a common position to present to their ministers which might hope to overcome the department gridlock." Another adviser was blunter: "We did the behind the scenes work below when the civil service would not listen....I would call it an end run around the civil service" (Adviser 3).

A former chief of staff explained that, on high level matters of conscience and general principle, ministers "were very much their own chief interlocutors. But, as issues descended into complexity, extreme levels of detail, and protracted discussion or conflict, ministers delegated more and more authority to issue area experts on the political staff" (Adviser 10). A PMO policy adviser agreed and talked about meetings "to try and bridge the gap and come to a consensus" (Adviser 7). Ministers simply could not dedicate the time needed to work through the minute details on a single file. Further, using staff for such "proxy conflicts" allowed ministers to act as "nominal peacemakers to close the deal" once the details had been thoroughly debated (Adviser 10). But, he explained, in such cases he always worked within the negotiating parameters set by

the minister in advance. Further, “humility and vigilance were key” so that he always delineated his minister’s express views from his own. Staffers who had a “very strong track record of anticipating the minister’s views and wishes correctly” had strong currency and would be treated, by officials and other offices, as a “direct proxy for the minister.” But the key was “never to overstep” since doing so even once seriously undermined a staffer’s reputation (Adviser 10).

Do negotiations become political horse-trading? Adviser 10 describes how, “shamefully,” he once committed to have the minister commission a study in his department in exchange for support from another minister for action on an unrelated but regionally significant file. “Not my finest moment,” he conceded, “but my minister was *in extremis*” (adviser 10). Another former staffer who had worked with several ministers and at PMO felt that such explicit bargaining was rare. Nevertheless, he did recall a time when, in order to advance an important file in provincial negotiation, his minister needed support from other federal ministers and he was “deployed to represent our political master in discussions with another minister’s office” (adviser 13). While not typical, staffers are on occasion involved in such *quid pro quo* negotiations.

While it is open to all policy advisers to network on an informal basis, geography hinders this since ministerial offices in Ottawa are political enclaves isolated (symbolically and physically) within their departmental headquarters. Consequently, ministerial staff have relatively easy access to public servants but must make a conscious effort to develop personal relationships with political colleagues. On the other hand, technology—in particular, email and direct messaging with Blackberry BBM (the ubiquitous tool within government), including group BBM chats—permits instant communication between political offices. But while informal networking has never been easier, not all advisers are equally well-placed to take advantage.

Some might lack the temperament or opportunity to make connections, while others might not succeed in escaping from their departmental officials' orbit. Political staffers "work within their own stovepipes," observed one policy director. It is possible to pick up the phone and work out issues directly with other ministerial offices or with PMO, "but I'm finding a lot of offices don't do this. If you are entrepreneurial this can be very useful" (adviser 2).

### *Cabinet Pre-Briefs*

In order to facilitate broader political engagement, the Harper PMO hosted formal meetings with senior policy advisers from all ministers' offices. The nature of these meetings evolved over time. Soon after the Harper government was elected in 2006, the PMO director of policy, Mark Cameron, began to convene regular meetings on a monthly to semi-annual basis in order to discuss implementation of the government's priorities and future agenda. Some PMO policy advisers also held meetings for policy staffers from the ministerial offices within their areas of responsibility; these focused on broad discussion of emerging issues, not on specific cabinet agenda items, and were held on a similarly occasional basis—sometimes monthly or more, sometimes less frequently.

By 2009, PMO policy advisers had regularized a system of weekly "cabinet pre-briefs" which continued in more or less the same form until the government's defeat in 2015. A few days prior to the weekly meeting of most cabinet committees, the responsible PMO policy adviser would chair a meeting at PMO for the directors of policy representing each of the ministers on that committee. The meetings had several purposes. First, PMO was acting as a "social convenor" (adviser 7) in bringing advisers together regularly from across government and assisting them to build personal relationships. Adviser 11, who (above) emphasized the

importance of personal relationships, recognized the importance of central convening, saying that "A good network of people across the government is very helpful. The policy director meetings at PMO were valuable even just for that reason alone."

Second, the pre-briefs permitted detailed political consideration of items on the upcoming agenda of each cabinet committee. Context is important. In Canada, the Privy Council Office (PCO) acts as the secretariat for all cabinet and cabinet committee meetings (except for Treasury Board) and prior to a meeting will circulate the agenda as well as one or more binders containing the formal cabinet submissions for consideration as signed by the sponsoring minister(s). At the time of the PMO pre-brief, ministers' staffers will usually have received and reviewed the materials (they are permitted to do so for most items); their ministers, however, likely will not yet have done so. Instead, ministers will usually review the binder closer to the meeting, along with a political memo prepared by their own office staff with political context and advice.

The meetings, therefore, have several important functions. They allow the lead office - whether the director of policy or the policy adviser working most closely on the file - to explain to the group his or her minister's policy position and political rationale. This is an important opportunity for information transfer, especially complex background or technical details, as well as for mobilizing support and saying "Here's our proposal, and here's why we think it is the best option" (adviser 12). Other advisers also have the opportunity to seek clarification in anticipation of writing briefing notes to their own ministers on the topic. The meetings also provide political intelligence. The presenting office will likely not hear the specific views of other ministers (who will not yet have read the proposal). However, a room full of political staff is a useful political sounding-board; questions and challenges indicate possible weak points and allow the minister to shore up his or her argument.

A senior PMO adviser lauded the pre-briefs, observing that "the efficiency of having everyone in the same room just can't be replicated" (adviser 12). All offices receive the same information from the expert staffer on the file and heard the same political discussion at the same time. Since all advisers would have to brief their own ministers in the next few days, the meetings helped them to prepare and lessen the time crunch. While the meetings provided opportunity for PMO to provide instruction on policy files, this was not their usual purpose. From the PMO's perspective, "We could function quite nicely without [them]....This was about getting other ministers' offices up to speed on the files" (adviser 12). The relevant PMO policy adviser would have been in ongoing communication with the sponsoring office, and so would already know the lead minister's views. Further, by this point the PMO would already have provided a memorandum to the prime minister with their view and sometimes received back his response. If he provided direction, they could pass it on (adviser 12) but they did not need the pre-briefs to do this.

#### *PMO and "Four Corners" Meetings*

While the cabinet pre-briefs may have been largely about information transmission for the benefit of other offices, another "deep structure" implemented under the Harper government, the "four corners" meeting, was very much (although not exclusively) for the benefit of the PMO. Involving departmental officials as well as other political offices, these meetings allowed the PMO to integrate vertical and horizontal networks in order to obtain expert information and exert central influence—if not sometimes direct control—over policy development in key areas. Craft noted the existence of these meetings (2016, 190) but, thinking them "rare" (272), underestimated their significance.

Normally in Canada the PMO advisers deal directly on a daily basis with PCO officials, but much less regularly with public servants in other departments. For their part, departmental officials take their direction from their own minister, subject to co-ordination by the PCO, and not from the PMO. This system has the advantage of clear lines of accountability, but there is also the potential for miscommunication. Of course, the PMO and the minister's office will try to maintain horizontal contact along political networks. And individual PMO advisers may (and should) have personal networks across government, including with deputy ministers and other senior officials (Goldenberg 2006). Sometimes, however, these are not sufficient.

In order to dialogue across the political-public service divide, the PMO instituted "four corners" meetings at which PMO and PCO personnel could meet together in one room for briefing and discussion on a single issue with the relevant departmental officials and the appropriate staff from their minister's office. Usually these meetings involved policy issues, although the tool could also be used for communications or issues management purposes. Ministers themselves did not attend.

In an email, Guy Giorno, who served as chief of staff to Ontario Premier Mike Harris as well as to Prime Minister Harper, explained that he first instituted "four corners" meetings in the Premier's Office at Queen's Park. From there the concept--and the name--were imported by the Harper PMO; this occurred, as advisor 11 recalls, "after we'd been in government a few years." In an interview a deputy minister confirms that they were, federally at least, an "innovation" of the Harper administration. "Absolutely. Sure. We never had four corners before." The innovation invited controversy.

From the PMO's perspective—often shared by the minister's office—the meetings were useful in three ways. First, information transfer. The meetings gave the PMO "access to the real

experts that we couldn't speak with otherwise" (adviser 12) and allowed everyone to hear the same answers at the same time, rather than having the expert information filtered through non experts, whether in the minister's office or at the PCO. Second, as a ministerial adviser said, four corners meetings served to "get everyone on the same page" in terms of direction. As he explained, "if ministerial staff wanted to drive forward on an issue but the public service had concerns," then they could be put on the table and resolved (adviser 11). Third, meetings helped to overcome delay. As the same ministerial adviser explained, "if stuff was held up, then it was a good way to get an issue moving. If a department was holding something up, then PMO could call the department in front of PCO who could then give them marching orders to get things going" (adviser 11). A chief of staff agreed that four corners meetings helped to "break the power of the 'telephone game' and various delay tactics, which is why I like them so much" (adviser 10). He added that in his experience "sometimes just suggesting a four corners can break the log jam."

From these comments it is clear that four corner meetings were not just useful to the PMO but also to ministerial offices in some circumstances. Meetings, however, did not always involve the two political offices ganging up on the public service. Some configurations might have PMO and PCO on the same page seeking information and responsiveness from the department and minister's office.

The downside of four corners meetings is the perception that the PMO could use them to issue direction to ministerial staff and to departmental officials, which only their own minister ought to do. Thus, according to the deputy minister interviewed, they represent "an insidious intrusion into the proper chains of accountability," potentially undermining ministers and their responsibility for actions taken in their departments. PMO policy advisers were conscious of this

problem. One senior PMO policy adviser explained: “I tried to be very careful about never giving direction. We weren’t authorized to give direction unless it came from the PM himself. And there were relatively few instances where that was the case.” (adviser 12). An experienced ministerial director of policy agreed that, from what he saw, the PMO did not use the meetings to give direction to departments or to minister’s offices. Rather, the PMO used them to call both minister’s offices and departments “to the principal’s office” if they weren’t moving a file quickly enough, and he didn’t see this as inappropriate (adviser 11).

Whether because of these accountability concerns or, as a PMO adviser suggested, PCO’s fear that they were losing control of the information flow to PMO (adviser 12)—or a combination of both—at one point PCO sought to restrict four corners meetings to items on the main agenda of the Priorities and Planning committee of cabinet. As a PMO senior adviser explained, the offices settled on a compromise whereby all requests for four corner meetings had to be submitted from the PMO chief of staff directly to the Clerk’s office, and could not be requested at lower levels. “This was not a huge impediment,” the adviser explained, but “we thought more about whether we really needed one before submitting the request,” and presumably PCO felt somewhat more comfortable about how they were being used (adviser 12).

### *Institutional Choices and Government Style*

Political offices everywhere are under the same pressures and so, quite independently, can develop similar solutions to similar problems. Connaughton (2010, 365) notes that Irish policy advisers met on a weekly basis under the auspices of the first minister’s office to discuss the weekly cabinet agenda. This resembles the Harper PMO. Sometimes practices are imported from elsewhere, just as four corners meetings derived from a previous Conservative government

in Ontario. Structured and centrally co-ordinated meetings for political policy staff were not unique to the Harper government; but neither had they been a prominent feature of previous Canadian federal governments. A former policy adviser under the Chrétien government recalls that, in her experience, structured meetings were rare, most conversations were ad hoc, and co-ordination across offices and with PMO occurred “through more informal mechanisms where social capital and personal networks played a big role” (Adviser 14). Eddie Goldenberg, long-time senior policy adviser and later chief of staff to Prime Minister Chrétien, agrees. “Before each [cabinet] committee there was nothing formal,” he explained in an interview. “The Economic policy person would get the agenda and may talk it over with her counterpart in the minister’s office....But we didn’t have any of the so-called four corners meetings or anything like that.” Different PMOs have different structures and processes depending on their style and needs. The Harper PMO developed a higher than usual institutional formality in terms of horizontal co-ordination, in part as a way to focus on the government's political agenda in the uncertainty of a minority parliament but also as a way to develop political staff networks as a counterweight to the public service.

Early indications are that the still relatively new Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (elected in October 2015) is maintaining some of the Harper government's practices in terms of central co-ordination. According to a senior adviser in the Trudeau PMO, four corners meetings continue and are "seen as regular course of practice." In cases where there is a "blockage or misunderstanding" they are "a way to get everyone around the table and identify what those issues are and solve them." The adviser considers the tone of the meetings to be "pretty positive," and he believes that PCO is of the same view. While the Trudeau PMO does not hold formal briefings on cabinet committee agenda items, the Trudeau adviser says that

PMO uses its "convening role" to hold a monthly meeting of ministerial policy directors in order to "co-operate and share best practices" and also to encourage "informal consultations" between offices.

As under all governments, the practices of the Trudeau PMO will evolve to meet its unique needs and operating style. For example, reports indicate political staffers being recruited from the public service to a much greater extent than under the Conservatives (Shane 2016) as well as extensively from the Liberal provincial government in Ontario (Taber 2015). The former practice will tend to create a different and less adversarial relationship between the political staff culture and officials; the latter means importing ready-made personal networks between advisers and suggests that perhaps the ministerial staff culture in Ottawa is more likely to resemble that under the provincial Liberal government at Queen's Park than the federal Liberal government under Jean Chrétien. The evolution of practice in the Trudeau government over time bears watching.

## CONCLUSIONS

While specifically examining a single point in time under the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, this analysis has revealed significant parallels in ministerial policy staffers' horizontal activities with documented practice elsewhere. At the same time, however, it suggests caution with respect to generalization. In important ways, practice in Canada differed under Harper from that under previous prime ministers; but there was even variation within the Conservatives' decade in power. Many factors, including the prime minister's personal style, the parliamentary context, the overall government culture and its relationship with the public service, impact the role of ministers and therefore the role of ministerial staff. While it can be predicted

that ministerial staff will use networks and relationships to pursue political goals, how they do so is very much context specific.

Advisers' political work is entirely appropriate for political staff supporting political decision-makers. However, as this chapter has shown, it is double-edged. With respect to the public service, by taking responsibility for supporting ministers with the political aspects of briefing and bargaining, policy staffers allow departmental officials to maintain an appropriate distance, thus reducing pressures towards inappropriate politicization. However, exempt staff can complement but never replace the need for professional advice from public servants to ministers, and relying only on political networks in an attempt to "end run" deputy ministers should be resisted. On the political side, the PMO has a positive role to play in facilitating relationships and information transfer between ministerial offices, and by co-ordinating discussions can strengthen the government's ability to pursue its agenda. But while the prime minister may direct ministers, his office holds no such power; therefore the PMO must (without explicit warrant) resist using horizontal levers, whether formal or informal, to lord it over ministerial offices. Nevertheless, political policy advisers play an essential role in supporting ministers and, in Canada as elsewhere, any account of cabinet decision-making is incomplete without recognizing their formal and informal inter-executive activity.

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#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> This is the third in a series of studies based on the same survey of ministerial policy staffers. The first established a demographic profile and examined their tenure in office (Wilson 2015b). The second considered staffers' "vertical" relationship with public servants (Wilson 2016).

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