

Research Note: A Profile of Ministerial Policy Staff in the Government of Canada

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Introduction¹

Ministerial political staff have grown in number and influence alongside ministers and public servants in many countries (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011). In Canada, there were, as of March 31, 2014, 561 full-time ministerial staff working within the federal government, including the Prime Minister's Office (Dawson, 2014: 5) who, on the basis of shared political commitment, provide personal support to ministers across a wide range of functions, typically including service and advice with respect to office administration, policy, communications, parliamentary affairs and issues management. Also known in Canada as exempt staff because they are exempt from the normal staffing provisions of the *Public Service Employment Act* (Canada. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2011), these political staffers have close (often daily) contact both with ministers and senior officials. Depending on their position and the practices of the office, they are privy to confidential information, including cabinet and, sometimes, budget materials; they can represent the minister in meetings, and sometimes speak for the minister on the public record; they may even communicate the minister's direction to public servants (although they may not direct public servants themselves nor act formally as the minister's delegates).

Yet the exact nature as well as the desirability of political staff influence is still debated. On the one hand, they may increase the day-to-day

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efficiency of ministers and their control over policy development, encourage greater responsiveness from public servants towards the government's values and agenda, help insulate public servants from partisan politics, spur public servants to improve the quality of their service to ministers and facilitate relationships and the exchange of resources within the core executive. On the other hand, by virtue of their personal connections with and direct access to ministers, they have the potential to displace expert, politically neutral officials and increase politicization within the public service, for example, by bringing inappropriate political pressure to bear with respect to program administration and implementation, by funnelling out politically unwanted advice from public servants and by influencing the appointment and tenure of senior officials.

Given their prominent position, surprisingly little attention has been given to establishing the personal background and profile of ministerial political advisors. This is especially true in Canada, where studies on political staffers generally (Jeffrey, 1978; Savoie, 1983; Tilley, 1977; Williams, 1980) or specifically on chiefs of staff (O'Connor, 1991; Plasse, 1994), are decades out of date. Recent research by Jonathan Craft (2012) is a notable exception; however, focusing on the policy activities of ministerial advisors, it does not address their demographic composition.

Mallory's memorable depiction of young staffers who, lacking in training and professional standards, "wield great power...with ludicrous ineptitude and in ways that are clearly tainted with political motives" (1967:32) continues to echo in popular wisdom that sees them as young and ambitious, with strong partisan attachments but little experience (Benoit, 2006; Dornan and Waddell, 2010). Yet there is no empirical foundation on which to assess the age, professional background or career trajectory of political staffers in Ottawa. According to Ian Brodie, a former chief of staff to Prime Minister Stephen Harper:

There are very few systematic studies of political aides in Canada... When I was chief of staff, the average age of a political aide was probably 30, maybe younger. I would guess that not many have much professional or work experience outside of politics, but I could be wrong. Many, but not all, get started by working on local political campaigns. Some start as parliamentary aides in the Ottawa office of a backbench MP, others start in the government caucus services office or party headquarters, and a number are hired into ministerial offices right out of university. Since a minister's office is pretty small, the presence of just one or two recent grads inevitably gives the place a very young feel, but I convey this portrait of the political aide anecdotally. We need some continuing, systematic research on political aides. (2012: 34)

Abstract. Although ministerial political advisors are prominent and influential actors within the core executive in Canada and elsewhere, information is scarce with respect to their personal and professional backgrounds and career trajectory. This article uses recent survey data and publicly available biographical information to analyse the demographic composition of senior ministerial policy advisors within the Government of Canada. It finds that, while ministerial policy staffers are young and politically committed, they are not so young nor so professionally inexperienced as sometimes thought. Nor are they always personally and tightly bound to their current ministers but often work for different ministers in different departments. This suggests that advisors are agents of the whole government as much as agents of their individual ministers and raises questions about the degree to which they are responsive to the Prime Minister's Office, thereby increasing centralization.

Résumé. Alors que les conseillers politiques des ministres exercent une influence à l'extérieur du "core executive" au Canada et ailleurs, l'information ayant trait à leur formation personnelle et professionnelle ainsi que leurs aspirations de carrière reste nébuleuse, voire inconnue. L'article suivant analyse la composition démographique des conseillers haut placés en politique oeuvrant au sein du Gouvernement du Canada en se basant sur des données d'enquêtes récentes et des informations biographiques disponibles au public. L'article soutient qu'alors que les conseillers en politique sont généralement perçus comme jeunes et engagés politiquement, en fait ils ne sont pas si jeunes et manquent d'expérience. De plus, ils ne sont pas toujours personnellement et étroitement liés à leurs ministres actuels mais travaillent souvent pour différents ministres dans divers ministères. Ceci suggère que les conseillers sont des agents de l'ensemble du gouvernement autant que des agents de leurs ministres individuels. Ceci soulève des questions quant à leur degré de réceptivité envers le Cabinet du Premier ministre et quant à l'augmentation de la centralisation.

In short, despite the fact that Canadian political staffers are influential players within the core executive, we know very little about who they are or how they see their jobs.

Based on results from a recent survey, this article begins to fill this gap by focusing on an important part of the political staff community: senior policy advisors within the offices of Canadian federal ministers. Overall, it finds that, while ministerial policy staffers are young and politically committed, they are not so young nor so professionally inexperienced as the "kids in short pants" sometimes depicted in the media. They bring credible educational backgrounds and some professional experience and, perhaps surprisingly, often have family responsibilities which mean they cannot live constantly in the parliamentary bubble. Importantly, they exhibit a high degree of mobility and do not typically have an exclusive relationship with one minister but, instead, often work for different ministers in different departments. This high degree of mobility raises questions about the influence of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) within ministerial offices and so speaks to the question of centralization. The article also identifies key themes for further research.

Methodology

Using the online federal Government Electronic Directory Service (GEDS),² 64 individuals were identified as holding senior policy positions (usually director of policy, senior policy advisor or, rarely, other related titles) in ministerial offices between October 12, 2012, and June 15, 2013. Comprising the senior tranche of ministerial policy advisors, this group represents a 64-person subset out of the entire exempt staff community. Questionnaires were emailed to these 64 individuals, and 34 completed questionnaires were received back between November 2012 and July 2013 for a response rate of 53 per cent. The survey asked a range of questions concerning age, gender and language; highest level of education; hours of work; marriage and family; and political activity. In addition, internet sources, principally the professional networking site LinkedIn, generated information about educational and professional background and tenure with ministers for up to 51 of the 64 staffers invited to complete the survey.³ While professional networking information is useful for profiling political staffers (Yong and Hazell, 2014), the data are self-disclosed and therefore open to possible inaccuracy or exaggeration. This is also the case for survey responses, with the exception that public data are open to public scrutiny and so disciplined by the potential risk of posting false claims. Finally, elite interviews consisting of semi-structured open-ended questions were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis with ten individuals who were currently serving or had previously served as senior staffers in ministerial offices (including PMO and central agencies) under the Harper government but who fell outside the ambit of the survey.

The limitation to senior staffers is justified because, while practice varies from office to office, senior policy staffers typically have the most influence with respect to the process and the content of political policy advice inside a minister's office. They often exercise supervisory control over junior policy staffers, determine (and sometimes monopolize) direct access to the minister on policy files, engage regularly with senior officials and speak for the office on policy matters during meetings with PMO and other political offices.

Demographic Profile of Ministerial Policy Staffers in 2013

Aggregate data from the survey reveal an unprecedented profile of Canadian political advisors across a range of key demographic categories.

A plurality of respondents—11 out of 34—were in the 30–34 age bracket, while exactly 50 per cent of respondents were in their 30s (17 out of 34). While 21 per cent (7) were in the 26–29 age bracket, there were no respondents under the age of 26, while 12 per cent (4) were in the 40–44 age

TABLE 1
Age, Gender and Language

<i>Age (percentage of survey respondents)</i>				
Under 26	0	40–44		18
26–29	21	45–49		0
30–34	32	50–54		12
35–39	18	Over 54		0
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	68	Female		32
<i>Language</i>				
First language	English	100	French	0
Additional language fluency	Yes	38	French	29
			Other	21
n = 34				

Source: Survey responses

bracket and 12 per cent (4) in the 50–54 age bracket. Survey respondents were 32 per cent female, which closely reflects the gender composition of the overall senior policy staff community during the time of the study (based on GEDS, 33% of the 64-person universe were female).

While nearly 30 per cent of respondents claimed fluency in French, English was the primary language for all the staffers who chose to respond to this survey. This could in part be attributable to the fact that the questionnaire was distributed in English only. However, since the Conservative party elected only five MPs from Quebec in the 41st Parliament, the political staff community reflects the reality that English is the predominant language within the caucus and in interaction among ministerial offices. In addition, an experienced chief of staff to a minister observed that, when it comes to human resource management, in many cases it is preferable to “stream” francophones, who are often the most smoothly bilingual staffers available, into “outward facing roles such as directors of communication and press secretaries because of their versatility in dealing with the media in both languages” (advisor 10, May 15, 2014 interview).

Lack of education and experience has been a common allegation against ministerial staffers. Benoit asserted that they are “often uneducated in the theory and operation of the machinery of government and regularly devoid of professional qualifications relevant to the ministries with which they are involved” (2006:146). In his 1983 survey, Savoie concluded that the education and work background of ministerial staffers was well below the level expected of public servants with policy responsibilities (514).

Publicly available information on the internet, principally from the professional networking site LinkedIn, provides information with respect to educational and employment background for many of the 64 senior policy

TABLE 2
Education: Degrees and Institutions

<i>Degrees obtained</i>		<i>% of staffers with degree</i>	
Law degree (LLB or JD)		18	
Master's		45	
Doctorate		6	
n = 49			
<i>Region</i>	<i>Institution of first degree</i>	<i>Staffers with first degree from institution (%)</i>	<i>Staffers with first degree in region (%)</i>
Ontario	Carleton	17	55%
	University of Toronto	11	
	Queen's	9	
	Univ. Western Ontario	4	
	Other Ontario (8 instit)	15	
Quebec	McGill	4	6%
	Other Quebec	2	
Atlantic	Univ. New Brunswick	6	19%
	Acadia	4	
	Other Atlantic	9	
West	University of Alberta	4	19%
	University of Calgary	4	
	University of Victoria	4	
	Other Western (4 instit)	6	
n = 47 (percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding)			

Source: LinkedIn profiles and online biographical data such as employer or university profiles (author's compilation).

staffers group. All of the 49 staffers for whom degree information is available hold bachelor's degrees and, as shown in table 2, many hold additional credentials, including either master's degrees (45%), doctorates (6%) or degrees in law (18%). By Savoie's standard of comparison, this approaches but does not meet the educational level of the senior federal public service: a recent survey shows that 66 per cent of deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers hold graduate degrees (Evans et al., 2014: 329).

The public profiles show a concentration in the social sciences and humanities. Politics (21%) was the most popular field of study, followed by law (16%), history (13%) and foreign/international relations (10%). Interestingly, journalism and communications are not commonly studied by policy advisors nor are sciences. Only one respondent had specialized in each of those fields.

Is academic specialization especially relevant to a staffer's office of employment? While in order to preserve respondents' anonymity, the survey did not ask them to identify their current minister or department, analysis of online information permits testing educational relevance for some high-profile offices. This reveals, for example, that on June 15, 2013 (the second date on which names for the survey were harvested

from GEDS), three of four senior policy advisors to the minister of foreign affairs had master's degrees relevant to international relations; both senior policy advisors to the president of the Treasury Board had master's degrees, one in economics and one in business administration; both senior policy advisors to the minister of justice had law degrees; and the single senior policy advisor to the minister of finance had a master's degree in history, a field not directly related to departmental business.

All other things being equal, relevant academic credentials are desirable, since they reduce the learning curve and increase an advisor's ability to assess information received from officials and outside stakeholders. However, no single academic credential could provide expertise across the entire range of issues that cross a minister's desk, let alone position a political advisor to rival the depth of expertise within the public service. All political staffers will be generalists much of the time. As we will see, the high degree of mobility evidenced by policy staffers suggests that matching experience to department is not always a consideration, and that the importance of specialist knowledge should not be overstated; nevertheless, the above examples demonstrate that some ministers, at least, hire advisors with backgrounds related to their departmental work.

In her analysis of ministerial chiefs of staff, Plasse found a link between regional background and university attended (1994:13). While the present survey did not ask about individuals' region of origin, online data showing the institutions where staffers have received their first degree is a useful proxy, given that only about 10 per cent of students in Canada study outside their home province (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2014: 3). As shown in table 2, over half (55%) of staffers received their first degree from a university in Ontario. More staffers had a first degree from Carleton University in Ottawa (17%) than anywhere else, with one additional student having a degree from the University of Ottawa. The prominence of Ottawa as a place of study for individuals with political motivation is not surprising due to the opportunities for practical involvement in and around federal politics. For example, the House of Commons page program is open to first-year university students in the National Capital Region, and some students choose to volunteer in the offices of MPs and senators in order to gain experience and connections. While few staffers (6%) had first degrees from Quebec universities, significantly more had studied in Atlantic Canada (19%) and Western Canada (19%). Again, while this does not confirm staffers' personal place of origin, it does suggest that they are being drawn to political office from across the country.

Table 3 shows the previous work history for 48 of the 64 senior policy staffers as constructed either from their LinkedIn profiles or through other internet sources such as employer or university sketches. It is interesting that the LinkedIn profiles for nine staffers (19%) list no experience prior

TABLE 3
Staffers' Previous Work/Professional Experience

Previous experience indicated	81%
No previous experience indicated	19%
Political staff work and other work	29%
Political staff work only	8%
Previous experience but not as political staff	44%
Practise law	19%
Non-governmental organization	15%
Think tank/research	13%
Teach university	10%
Political consulting	8%
Other private sector management	8%
Marketing/communications	8%
Military	6%
Private sector non-management and blue collar	6%
Business/banking/accounting	6%
Public service (federal or provincial)	6%
Journalism/media	4%
n = 48	

Source: LinkedIn profiles and online biographical data such as employer or university profiles (author's compilation).

to their beginning as ministerial staffers. While it is impossible to argue definitively from silence, in some cases the date of last degree suggests that they moved quickly from university into political staff life. Most staffers (81%) had some work experience prior to employment in a minister's office, with 38 per cent previously working outside of politics as well as working as political staff, either with a political party or with an elected member, either federally or provincially. Eight per cent had worked as political consultants and a further 8 per cent had previously worked *only* as political staff. Of work outside politics, 19 per cent had practised law; 15 per cent had worked with a nongovernmental organization and 13 per cent with a think tank or doing policy research; and 10 per cent had taught at the university level. Other private sector background includes work in business, banking and accounting (6%), other private sector management roles (8%), communications and media (6%) and blue collar occupations (6%). Public sector experience does not seem to be very common; only 3 respondents (6%) had worked previously at any level in a non-political public service capacity, either federally or provincially.

Personal life and political involvement

Ministerial staffers work long hours, on average just over 57 hours per week, ranging from a civilized 40 hours to an unsustainable 80 hours.

Many people noted on the survey, however, that they were not counting time on call or on Blackberry. One respondent wrote, “I say 60 hours, because that is the time spent in the office or working at home, but it does not include being on call and answering emails from about 6:30 am to 11:30 pm, seven days a week” (respondent 1). “Continuously on call,” wrote respondent 13. Respondent 16 explained that “It really depends on the week. There is a natural ebb and flow to the parliamentary cycle. A typical week is approximately 50 hours per week, not including being available by Blackberry outside of the office and working hours.” Maintaining such a pace would be personally challenging over the long term, and one wonders whether, over the course of years, the accumulated weight of the job risks impairing the quality of advice and service being provided to ministers.

In addition to long hours, the constant stress and grinding demands of political life are notoriously difficult on families. A 2013 Library of Parliament study, for example, found that 85 per cent of Canadian MPs are divorced, double the national average (Smyth, 2013). This is usually thought to apply to staffers also, and Benoit concludes that ministerial staff jobs were “rarely compatible” (2006: 172) with marriage or family commitments. Yet, despite the stresses and commitments of the job, many of the staffers surveyed are attempting to maintain a life outside of politics. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents are married or in a long term relationship. More surprisingly, 41 per cent have children living at home, although these latter staffers are older (mean age range is between 35–39), and more likely men than women (48 per cent of male respondents had children living at home, versus 27 per cent of female respondents). This finding invites more detailed investigation of political staffers from a gender perspective.

Does family status have implications for the job? Apart from the increased personal challenges of work-life balance, family responsibilities likely reduce outside the office social opportunities for building relationships and informal networking with other political aides (ministerial and parliamentary), stakeholders, lobbyists and journalists, which can be a useful counterbalance to the daytime influence of departmental officials. On the other hand, family commitments are likely to encourage discipline and focus, and, perhaps most importantly, provide advisors with a perspective on life that is wider than the parliamentary precinct and today’s headlines, contradicting the narrative that all staffers live in a political hot house environment 24/7. Perhaps more of such wider perspective would be positive for the political culture; however, a point-in-time snapshot does not prove that this is a trend.

The *raison d’être* for exempt staff is to provide ministers with partisan political support in ways which are not permissible for the non-partisan public service (Canada. Privy Council Office, 2011: 45). This partisan commitment

is apparent in the survey. For example, 100 per cent of respondents held a membership in the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), had donated money to the party in the last two years and had volunteered for it during an election campaign. Membership, donations and campaign volunteering seem to represent an expected threshold of commitment for individuals employed in political offices, something that was not always the case in previous governments (Jeffrey, 2010: 450–51).

Apart from these litmus test activities, however, political participation declines. Seventy-four per cent of respondents have volunteered for the CPC outside of an election campaign and 68 per cent have attended a CPC convention, but only 21 per cent have done so as official delegates. Only 33 per cent have served on a CPC constituency association board of directors, so respondents do not seem to be prominently engaged in the party at the local level. Only 3 individuals (9% of survey respondents) have held paid positions with the party, even on a short-term basis in the party's campaign war room. Only three respondents have themselves run for office—one with the CPC, one with an antecedent party (either Progressive Conservative or Canadian Alliance), and one at the provincial level—and none has ever been elected.

Given expectations for integration between the Conservative party members and activists and provincial parties, at least in Ontario (Pruysers, 2014: 18), it is somewhat surprising that only a core of respondents seems active in provincial or municipal politics. Only 38 per cent of survey respondents held a membership in a provincial party. While 44 per cent have volunteered during provincial elections and 21 per cent have volunteered during municipal elections, only 35 per cent have volunteered either provincially or municipally outside of campaigns. Thirty-eight per cent have attended provincial party conventions and 35 per cent have donated money to provincial parties, but fewer respondents have ever served on a provincial constituency association board of directors (21%), been an official provincial delegate (18%), held a paid position in a provincial party (3%) or donated money municipally (6%).

Taken altogether, this profile indicates that respondents participate widely in activities which might be taken as tests of loyalty and which can be quantified and tracked by party headquarters: holding a membership, donating money and election volunteer work. But more extensive participation is limited. Perhaps this is simply because they have no time for wider political involvement. But it could also be because the policy function is not closely integrated between federal and provincial branches of political parties (Esselment, 2010: 877), or because policy advisors are less interested in the partisan game than other activists. Comparative data from across the entire political staff community would show whether this profile is unique to policy advisors or applicable to staffers generally.

Tenure in ministerial offices

Job transitions for political staffers are a common occurrence in Canada, as a cursory glance at the weekly “Hill Climbers” section in *The Hill Times* would demonstrate, and Benoit attributed this “very high turnover rate” to their “hop scotching” up the career ladder (2006: 171). Data from LinkedIn and *The Hill Times* provide insight into ministerial staff tenure and corroborate the claim of frequent transitions, not only between job positions and departments but, more importantly, between ministers.⁴ This suggests a limited personal bond between minister and advisor and that political staffers are becoming agents of the government as a whole as much as agents of their particular ministers.

There are examples of long-term commitment between staffers and ministers. Twelve individuals (26%) had been with the same minister for their entire time in government, with the longest having served almost seven years. Of these, 11 had served with their minister in only one department (average time 2.8 years). As of July 14, 2013, six staffers had served more than four years with their current ministers in the same departments, although this says as much about their ministers’ staying power in the portfolio as their own.

While it is common in other countries for staffers to spend a career working with only one minister (Connaughton, 2010: 356; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2007b: 97; Yong and Hazell, 2014: 47), such continuity of service is not typical in Canada. Table 4 provides an overview of political policy staffers’ tenure in office. On average, they had each spent a total of 4.3 years working as ministerial advisors. Of this time, they averaged 2.3 years with their current ministers and slightly less time, 2.2 years, with their current ministers in their current departments. On average they each worked for more than two ministers in almost three government departments, spending a year-and-a-half with each minister and almost two years in each department. This suggests that ministerial policy advisors are not closely tied to specific ministers but rather seem to belong to the government as a whole as much as to their current employer.

What prompts staffers to move between ministers and departments? Using data from LinkedIn and *The Hill Times*, it is possible to pinpoint the context in which advisors’ employment changes occur, whether, for example, moves coincide with ministerial resignations or shuffles, whether they change ministers and/or change departments and whether, as a result of changes, they are promoted or demoted or leave government altogether. Table 4 lists the context for 79 distinct changes in employment by 47 of the 64 senior ministerial policy advisors surveyed. In some circumstances, exempt staffers must react to events. The Treasury Board’s *Policies for Ministers’ Offices* stipulates that the employment of exempt staffers ceases 30 days “after the minister ceases to be a minister of a given

TABLE 4
 Ministerial Staff Tenure and Context for Change

<i>Ministerial Staff Tenure as of July 2013</i>		
Time as ministerial staff (yrs)	4.3	
Total ministers served ^a	2.3	Time per minister (yrs)
Total government departments ^a	2.8	Time per department (yrs)
Time with current minister (yrs)	2.3	With current min. in current dept (yrs)
n = 47 ^a n = 51		
<i>Context for Staffer Change in Ministerial Office (% of all changes observed)</i>		
Minister shuffled to another department and remains a minister	Go with minister—promoted	7.6
	Go with minister—same position	10.1
	Stay in dept with new min—promoted	2.5
	Stay in dept with new min—same position	8.9
	Go to new minister in new dept—promoted	2.5
	Go to new min in new dept—same position	2.5
	Staffer leaves government	1.3
Minister ceases to be a minister	Stay in dept with new minister—promoted	1.3
	Stay in dept with new minister—same position	3.8
	Go to new minister in new dept—promoted	3.8
	Go to new minister in new dept—same position	7.6
Minister remains in place	Go to new minister in new dept—promoted	31.6
	Go to new minister in new dept—same position	5.1
	Go to new minister in new dept—lower position	5.1
	Staffer leaves government	6.3
n = 79		100%

Source: Author's analysis of 79 changes in employment (prior to July 14, 2013) by 47 senior ministerial policy advisors based on LinkedIn profiles and *Hill Times* reports.

portfolio” (Canada. Treasury Board of Canada 2011:8). This is equally true whether ministers are removed from cabinet or resign or whether they are shuffled to different portfolios. In the latter case, they can—and sometimes do—rehire their staff in their new ministry. This happened in 18 per cent of the observed instances of employment change, with staffers either being promoted to new positions, for example from policy advisor to senior policy advisor (8%) or keeping their old title (10%). Less common after a shuffle was for political staff either to stay in their current departments with the incoming ministers (11%) or to move to new ministers in new departments (5%). In cases where ministers leave office (whether due to removal from cabinet by the prime minister, resignation or retirement), their staffers must seek employment with a new office. This happened in 17 per cent of cases, with orphaned staffers moving to new departments (11%) somewhat more frequently than staying in their old departments with the incoming ministers (5%). Strikingly, however, nearly half of all employment changes occurred when staffers departed an office when their ministers remained in place (48%).

In 32 per cent of all cases, staffers left their ministers for promotions (judged, at least, by receiving a more senior title) with new ministers elsewhere. The fact that they are doing so outside the context of wider cabinet changes and in order to obtain promotion strongly suggests that staffers are able to market their services and exercise choice as to when and with whom they work.

Discussion

This relatively high degree of mobility, especially when it seems frequently to be at the initiative of the policy advisors themselves and not driven by events such as cabinet shuffles, suggests that ministers are often renters, not owners, when it comes to engaging their staff, most of whom had worked in other political offices previously and likely will do so again. One advisor with lengthy experience under several ministers in different departments described how, in his opinion, political policy staffers have an “attachment to the government” and its overall direction.

And so you’re supportive across a broad spectrum: this government stands for these three or four long-term policy goals and objectives. And I’m very comfortable working for that, and at the end of the day that’s going to trump everything else. So that’s a kind of fundamental loyalty. I may be helping out individual ministers in related or not so related portfolios, and I may like some more than others, and I’ll be more or less useful in the position. But I think to my mind that’s the fundamental part of it. (advisor 4, interviewed June 19, 2014)

Advisors see themselves as responsible for advancing the overall agenda of the government, not just the agenda of their own minister. “I work with departmental officials to ensure that policies and policy development are consistent with the minister’s objectives and the government’s overall mandate,” wrote one (respondent 2). According to respondent 9, the job is to “implement the policy directives of my minister and the PMO.” Such comments do not suggest that advisors ignore their ministers’ interests. They see themselves as loyal to their ministers, and to be effective they must retain the confidence of their ministers. But they also believe they are serving not only their ministers but the broader government agenda.

This has several implications. The first is for our understanding of the principal-agent relationship between ministers and their political advisors, whereby the advisor acts as an intermediate agent to ensure that his or her minister’s interests are advanced by the public service, who are also acting as the minister’s agents themselves (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2007a: 454). Esselment and colleagues (2014: 3) attribute the greater congruence between the interests of ministers and political staffers to their shared

political goals and the likelihood of long term personal relationships. The former is undoubtedly true, but the frequency of what approximate rental relationships suggests that the latter explanation needs to be further explored.

Second, the data bolster suggestions of nascent professionalization within the political policy staff community (Craft, 2012: 260; Fawcett and Gay, 2010), at least to the extent that individuals demonstrate mobility and, presumably, expertise and commitment, three criteria identified by Webb and Kolodny (2006: 338–39). The degree of professionalization, however, should not be exaggerated. Other criteria, such as autonomy and self-regulation, are absent. Further, not only are there are limited possibilities for job progression when in government, but wholesale turnover occurs when one's party loses power. This instability means that working as a political advisor can seldom be a long-term career choice. Professionalization also involves systematic training, and survey respondents found this to be lacking. Only 9 per cent agreed that "advisors are generally prepared for the job when they first join a minister's office," and nearly 60 per cent either disagreed (47%) or strongly disagreed (12%). Similarly, only 9 per cent agreed that "there is adequate training for new ministerial advisors," with even more in disagreement (50%) or strong disagreement (21%). Certainly there is work to be done in this respect.

Third, data suggesting temporary attachment also raise questions about increasing the already strong centralizing tendencies (Savoie, 1999) within Canadian government as in all Westminster countries (Rhodes et al., 2009: 84). PMO involvement in ministers' office staffing decisions is not new (Benoit, 2006: 172–74; Jeffrey, 2010: 449–50; O'Connor, 1991: 23), nor is it peculiar to Canada (Tiernan, 2007: 134–5; Yong and Hazell, 2014: 58–9, 185). But one former Harper-era chief of staff believes that the current PMO is increasingly involved in personnel decisions in other offices "so that they can weed out people they don't like or can promote people they've worked well with" (advisor 3, interviewed June 14, 2014). Another chief of staff agrees that "a veto system is definitely in place" which includes an "informal blacklist," though, outside of high profile or irregular appointments, he at least has experienced "very little interference from PMO in my hiring choices" (advisor 10, email, June 24, 2014). Of course, it is impossible to quantify such involvement. PMO has neither the inclination nor capacity to dictate all staff changes across government. Rather, their interest will vary according to factors such as the reputation and track record of the minister or the chief of staff, as well as the political significance of the department and its files. Regardless of how common it is, however, even the perception of heightened PMO vetting will tend to make exempt staffers (especially those with an eye to their next career move) more responsive to the centre. The extent to which this undermines the confidence that ministers must have in advisors to act as *their* agents in *their* interests bears watching.

Finally, it is impossible to discuss ministerial staff tenure without reference to the Harper government's 2006 *Federal Accountability Act* (S.C. 2006, c.9) which eliminated the entitlement for ministerial staffers with three years' experience to transfer on a priority basis into the public service and also introduced a five-year ban on lobbying by former designated public office holders, including ministerial staffers. Whatever their merits, these two measures significantly limit the ability of former staffers to move into either the public service or government relations work, historically two prime careers for those with political experience, and potentially impact both the recruitment and retention of political staff. The lobbying ban is certainly perceived to dissuade some qualified political practitioners from joining government (Doran, 2010: 24). One may hypothesize that limiting the supply of potential staffers creates downward pressure on the age and qualifications of political staff, and that restricting postemployment opportunities encourages staffers to stay in office longer since avenues for departure are fewer. This would create an environment where well-regarded advisors have leverage to seek professional advancement by moving between offices, whether to secure a higher title or compensation, or to work with a preferred minister or policy area. Thus, the *Federal Accountability Act* may have had the unintended consequence of undermining advisors' personal connection with ministers and reinforcing the culture of staff "rental."

Although this point in time study of senior ministerial policy staffers has provided unprecedented evidence of their demographic composition and career tenure, a series of important questions remain unanswered. Given the growing importance of exempt staffers within the core executive, future research should consider the entire exempt staff community in order to understand possible differences in background between, for example, staffers with a focus on policy and those who work in areas such as communications or issues management. Further, vital questions can only be answered with longitudinal data which would allow comparison of staff profiles at different points within a government's life cycle or even, ideally, between different political parties in government. Williams' implicit hypothesis (1980: 221) that, with distance from a party's ascension to power, political staff decline in influence and personal connection to their principal deserves further study. Better insight into these relationships is essential for understanding the nature of political staff engagement within the core executive.

Notes

- 1 The author served as a senior advisor for policy to three federal ministers in three departments between 2006 and 2009 and as director of policy in the Prime Minister's Office from February 2009 to June 2011.

- 2 GEDS provides a directory listing for most federal public servants, including exempt staff. It is found at <http://sage-geds.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/direct500/eng/TE?FN=index.html>. Although GEDS sometimes has trouble keeping up with staffing changes at times of high turnover (for example, around cabinet shuffles), it is the only publicly available reference listing ministerial office employees.
- 3 Forty-five of the 64 individuals originally invited to participate in the survey have LinkedIn profiles, although not all information (educational institutions attended, degrees obtained, previous employment and tenure in ministerial offices) is available for all individuals. In five cases, information on some or all of these aspects is available from biographical information on employer or university web sites. Information on ministerial office tenure can sometimes be traced through the “Hill Climbers” section published weekly in *The Hill Times* newspaper.
- 4 Information on ministers and departments of employment is available for 51 of the 64 senior policy staffer cohort. However, clear dates of employment are only available for 47 staffers. July 14, 2013, was selected as the end date for data analysis. This is consistent with the submission of final survey responses and is also the day before a major cabinet shuffle. Changes in staffer employment as a result of that shuffle are therefore not reflected.

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