

Canadian Partisan Advisers and Policy-Making: Currency in the Policy Process or a New  
Public Governance Bargain?\*

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**Abstract:**

Roles, activities, and impacts of partisan advisers within the traditionally bilateral relations of political and administrative actors remain understudied. This paper sets out a framework for analysis of these newly institutionalized actors. It begins by situating formal partisan advisers within the broader politico-administrative relations literature. Subsequently the paper elaborates a typology for assessing the policy-making and advice giving activities of partisan advisers. The paper concludes by reporting initial findings related to qualitative interviews with ministers deputy ministers, and senior political advisers in two Canadian provinces related to advisers policy related activity.

**Keywords:** political-administrative relations, partisan advisers, policy advice

## **Introduction:**

This small-n comparative study builds on a vast literature that has explored political-administrative relations. Its unique contribution relates specifically to assessing the role of institutionalized partisan advisors policy-making and advice activities in Canada. Through qualitative interviews with Canadian political elites (ministers, deputy ministers, and senior partisan advisers, n = 28) this paper reports on early findings from a comparative project exploring the role of partisan advisers within the policy-making process in two sub-national jurisdictions in Canada.

This paper is part of a larger research project driven by the following research questions: (1) what, if any, role do partisan advisers play within the policy-making process? (2) If involved, at what 'stage' of policy-making is the involvement of partisan advisers most pronounced (agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, or evaluation)? (3) If involved, to what extent is the participation of partisan advisers in the policy making process affecting political-administrative relations? (4) Are the roles of partisan advisers the same federally as provincially, and within central political offices versus ministers' offices? (5) Do partisan advisers provide effective contestability of traditional public service policy advice and is that growing due to a proliferation of advice inputs within the theorized shift to governance? The paper begins by situating partisan advisers within the broader context of politico-administrative relations driven by strains on the traditional public administration model and proposed alternatives rooted in modes of 'governance'. Subsequently a typology for assessing the typical policy-making and advising activities of partisan advisers is elaborated. The key argument presented is that theoretical and empirical investigations of partisan advisers must shift from 'role

profiles' approaches to models that investigate the policy making and advice activities of partisan advisors in relation to policy advice and policy making more generally. This paper advances a typology to accomplish this by accounting for the substantive type (partisan or administrative) as well as the procedural dimensions (vertical or horizontal) of policy advice activity. The paper concludes by reporting on initial findings from both cases related to the research questions set out above.

### **Situating Partisan Advisers: new actors in a fluid interface**

Partisan advisers represent a relatively new actor institutionalized into a longstanding bilateral relationship between ministers and their deputy ministers in Westminster systems. As such, they are breathing new life into fundamental questions related to political-administrative relations in Westminster based systems (Eichbaum, Shaw 2010). The entrenched orthodoxy has long presented political-administrative relations as a dichotomy, a functional division of labour between elected officials and civil servants (Aucoin, Savoie 2009). Essentially, the dichotomy sets out separate spheres of activity with democratically elected ministers deciding policy and subservient career civil servants providing fearless advice on policy matters and administering policy and programs apolitically. This relatively parsimonious approach has long been challenged theoretically and a growing body of empirical evidence suggests that the reality of governing consists of patterns of political-administrative interaction that are much more differentiated than suggested by the dichotomy model (Dogan 1975, Putnam, Aberbach & Rockman 1981, Page, Wright 2007, Peters, Rhodes & Wright 2000, Rhodes, Wanna & Weller 2010). There is no shortage of models that have emerged attempting to improve

upon this 'founding myth' (Svara 2001). Carboni (2010) recently presented three such models including Peters (1987) model of a spectrum of five ideal types ranging from the traditional Weberian separation and hierarchy to the 'administrative state' model characterized by dominant civil servants who marginalize elected politicians through experience and technocratic expertise. Secondly, she set out Alberbach et al (1981) well known 'four images' model elaborating potential configuration of political-administrative relations based on a large scale comparative research project examining the attitudes, values and patterns of behavior of western democratic elites. Thirdly, the most recent 'complimentarity' approach as set out by Svara (2001, 1999) emphasizes the overlapping or 'complementarity' nature of the two sets of actors functional roles based on the twin dimensions of political control and professional (civil service) independence. To Carboni's (2010) list we can add a fourth leading approach that of so-called 'public service bargains' which conceive of interactions between the two sets of actors in terms of reward, competency, and loyalty (Savoie 2003, Hood, Lodge 2006). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these various models in detail, two threads link them to the study of partisan advisers.

The first thread linking partisan advisers to larger questions related to political-administrative relations is the argued decay of the traditional relationship between the two sets of actors. Scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have argued that the traditional Westminster arrangement between politicians and senior civil servants is increasingly untenable if not completely broken (Savoie 2003, Foster 2005, Savoie 2008, Campbell, Wilson 1995). Partisan advisers are frequently cited as a manifestation of this, seen to be displacing functions traditionally dominated by the civil service, notably their monopoly

on policy advice (Peters, Rhodes & Wright 2000; Rhodes, Weller 2001:238).

Furthermore, partisan advisors are argued to be part of a larger shift taking place from traditional public administration towards 'court governance' or first-minister centered governance (Aucoin, Savoie 2009, Savoie 2008, Savoie 1999). While not unique to its Westminster companions, Canada is argued to be even more suited to analysis of a growing concentration of power due to the limited restrictions placed on Canadian executive actors (Savoie 1999, Aucoin 2010, Bakvis 2000). As increased attention has been placed on new policy actors at the centre of government, flags have been raised related to the roles, accountability, and influence of partisan advisers (Benoit 2006, Dutil 2006).

While not new, debates like those related to the 'centralization' or 'presidentialization' of executives in Westminster systems must increasingly confront theories flowing from the 'governance' perspectives. An argued shift is occurring from previous traditional Weberian decision-making systems based on hierarchy and command and control type relations and instruments to new 'governance' models characterized by greater interactivity in socio-political public policy-making (Kooiman 1993), and policy making through networks (Atkinson, Coleman 1992, Montpetit 2003, Rhodes 1996). In short, traditional models of governing are arguably being supplanted, if not entirely replaced, by governing through post-bureaucratic models of 'governance' (Chhotray, Stoker 2009, Kernaghan 2000, Kjaer 2004, Peters, Savoie 1995, Pierre, Peters 2000).

The combination of the purported shift towards 'governance' with an argued centralization of power in the Canadian executive, including a more pronounced role for

partisan advisers, has been coined the New Public Governance (NPG)<sup>1</sup> by one leading Canadian public management scholar (Aucoin 2006a, Aucoin 2008, Aucoin 2006b). The NPG approach has been advanced to capture the type of governing arrangement said to have emerged in the wake of the perceived unworkability of traditional public administration in Canada. Notably for the purposes of this paper, it represents the first attempt to include a more pronounced role for partisan advisers. Aucoin (2008) set out the following key features of NPG as including:

- The concentration of power under the prime minister and her or his court of a handful of few select Ministers, political aides, and public servants;
- The enhanced number, roles and influence of political staff
- The increased personal attention by the Prime Minister to the appointment of senior public servants where the Prime Minister has the power to appoint;
- The increased pressure on the public service to provide a pro-government spin on government communications; and
- The increased expectation that public servants demonstrate enthusiasm for the government's agenda

Thus, the NPG model represents yet another salvo fired in the direction of the 'traditional' model of public administration. Like many other theories rooted in the notion of 'governance', the NPG model lacks sufficient empirical investigation, particularly related to the first two points concerning partisan advisers. It is therefore to the activities, functions, and perceived influence of partisan staff that the remainder of this paper turns.

### **Partisan Advisers in Canada: What We Know**

Canadian partisan advisers, much like their Westminster counterparts, have swelled over the twentieth century and are increasingly perceived as influential policy

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<sup>1</sup> For another more elaborate approach to NPG as a management approach see Osbourne (2006).

actors (Savoie 1999, Aucoin 2010, Savoie 2004). Partisan advisers in Canada have been labeled statutory orphans (Benoit 2006) due to the lack of statutes covering their roles and activities. Like many of its Westminster cousins, Canadian studies have scrutinized the role of such actors subsequent to political scandal, or questionable activities and perceived influence over administrative officials (Benoit 2006, Blick 2004, Campbell 1987, Eichbaum, Shaw 2007, Maley 2000). This has led to a clear emphasis towards accountability and the effect of such new actors on traditional notions of ministerial accountability (Savoie 2008, Bakvis 2000, Smith 2008) or politicization of civil service systems (Savoie 2004).

The Canadian literature that focuses on partisan advisers' policy related activity is generally limited in empirical analysis, dated, and jurisdictionally specific (Aucoin 2010, Campbell 1987, D'Aquino 1971, Axworthy 1988, O'Connor 1991, Plasse 1994, Savoie 1983). There is a clear dearth of empirical inter-provincial Canadian comparative study, and a lack of comparative study regarding the institutional location of policy advisers within central and line department ministerial offices (Benoit 2006). The role of partisan advisers' remains contested within the literature. While oft cited references to their limited roles and influence persist (Bakvis 1997), others have argued that the smaller number of partisan advisers, especially in the offices of premiers and prime ministers play important policy advising roles (Goldenberg 2006, Doern 1971, Lalonde 1971). Moreover, evidence from the most recent and comprehensive overviews of Canadian federal political staff in general suggest significant potential for influence with respect to policy-making (Aucoin 2010, Benoit 2006).



The limited amount of empirical and scholarly research on exempt political staff generally, and partisan advisers in particular, has left unanswered the central Canadian normative debate (one that can aptly be said to apply in several Westminster countries) regarding the role of political staff. Launched with their institutionalization in the Canadian system during the 1960s, Mallory (1967) argued political staff should be limited to basic functions such as scheduling and communications leaving policy to public servants. In contrast, Tellier (1968) argued for an expanded role for political staff to assist ministers to ensure the implementation of their democratically elected agendas. Further empirical study is thus required to elucidate the policy specific roles of partisan advisers and how it may be shaping political-administrative relations more generally.

### **Towards an Improved Typology of Partisan Advisers Advice Activity**

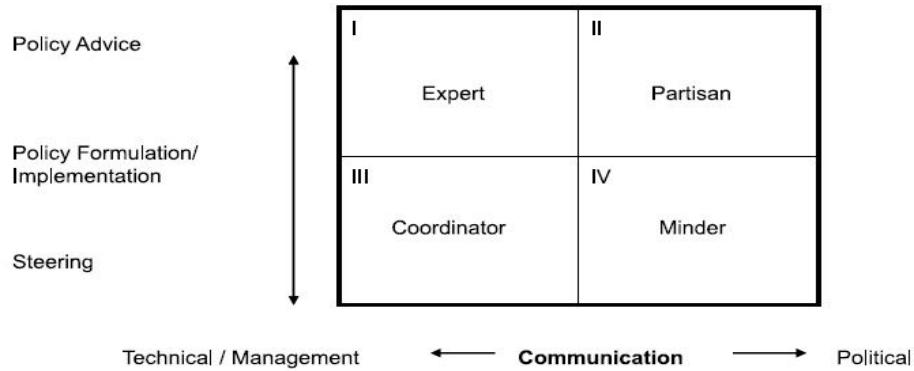
While recent Canadian studies specifically assessing partisan policy advisers' roles in policy-making may be limited, there is a growing Westminster literature that can be drawn on. The range of studies has confirmed that, in general, partisan advisers are seen as a complimentary feature of traditionally public service dominated policy-making by permanent administrators and can no longer be considered marginal players in policy advice giving (Blick 2004, Maley 2000, Anderson 2006, Dunn 1997, Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010).

Early efforts like Walter (1986) confirmed that while limited in general, Australian partisan advisers could extend policy options, 'pay attention' to the policy agenda, act as policy 'mobilizers' in the face of policy vacuum, or play a 'catalyst' role (Walter 1986:152-54). Dunn (1997:78-93) found that Australian advisers played a role in

shaping policy through overseeing the policy development process, providing direction, evaluation of policy proposals, and monitoring implementation. Furthermore, Dunn's research pointed to a horizontal policy role for partisan advisers, something not noted in previous research, with respect to coordination and brokerage of policy positions among ministerial offices (Dunn 1997). Summing up the existing Australian research, Maley (2000:453) elaborates on the various policy roles for partisan advisers that may exist in addition to their 'in house' policy work: "Dunn suggests an important brokering role within the executive; Ryan detects a significant role in setting policy agendas; Halligan and Power refer to advisers 'managing networks of political interaction". In her own study (2000:468) Maley assessed the role of 'active' policy advisers provided for a five part typology of partisan advisers' roles in policy making including "agenda-setting, linking ideas, interests and opportunities; mobilizing, bargaining; and 'delivering'.

More recently, Connaughton (2010a, 2010b) working from within the Irish context has offered a set of four 'role perceptions' – *Expert, Partisan, Coordinator and Minder* –for classifying adviser's policy roles. As per Figure 1 below, Connaughton (2010b) situates these potential roles based on two dimensions, policy formulation and implementation (from Policy advice or Policy steering) and communications dimension (Technical/Managerial or Political). Connaughton's approach moves the study of advisers forward by offering a means to conceptualize variance in the types of functions they perform. She explains that "Type I is the expert which embodies the role of adviser as an individual working in isolation or as part of the government machine assisting with, contesting and promoting policy advice in a specific sector"(p.351). Whereas Type II can be understood as a more partisan advisor who is appointed for their association with a

minister and in situations where political-administrative relations are tenuous, claiming “These advisers are responsive and are sometimes best placed to anticipate ministerial demands” (ibid).



**Figure 1.** Configuration of advisor roles  
*Source: Connaughton (2010b).*

Type III adviser’s are the ‘coordinator’ who is primarily involved in monitoring programs as well as liaising with government officials and stakeholder groups with the aim of facilitating the ministerial agenda. The final Type IV partisan advisor role is the ‘minder’ which is characterized by close minister-advisor relations. This role involves advisors playing protection function of ministers, guarding for potential political and reputation harm. Connaghton’s (2010b:366) research lead her to conclude that Irish advisers fall into the ‘minders’ category and she offers some general conclusions about the collective and individual roles and functions of partisan advisers:

It is asserted that the strength of their collective role lies in their efforts to coordinate and push the governmental agenda (coordinator role) while maintaining coalition relations (horizontal dimensions). In terms of an individual role their onus is on serving as ‘an extension of the minister’ in the government department (vertical dimensions).

While this approach represents a significant step forward, it has several key limitations related to how these ‘roles’ relate to advice and policy-making processes in

general. In her study, Connaughten (2010a:360, 2010b) captures important distinctions related to the location of policy-making and advice activity along so-called horizontal (collaborative, cross-cutting coordination) and vertical (political-administrative tasks within 'the department') dimensions. However, this distinction is lost in her 'roles' approach with the exception of a single 'role' type captured by the 'coordinator'. Moreover, the various roles set out are not mutually exclusive. Arguably, the expert could also be a partisan or the coordinator could be a minder and so on. This approach also combines policy formulation and implementation stages which may conflate or muddy activities as these have traditionally been understood as discreet 'stages' policymaking (Howlett, Perl & Ramesh 2009). Finally, while the model enriches the study of advisers by setting out a partisan versus technical (read administrative) dimensions, this differentiation is limited to communications as opposed to policy advisory activities more generally.

Connaughten (2010b) in addition to other studies (Eichbaum, Shaw 2007, Walter 2006) noted the importance of the institutional proximity of partisan advisers to the political decision maker with the latter finding evidence of a 'funneling effect' that essentially sees the number of policy alternative reduced to meet pre-existing ideological preferences. Eichbaum and Shaw (2007:456) explain funneling and its implications regarding political-administrative relations and Westminster style governance as:

The argument is that if ministerial advisers successfully constrain the capacity of public servants to contribute to debates about policy, aggregate capability will be reduced. By shielding ministers from the public service, for instance, or by privileging partisan imperatives in the crating of advice the introduction of ministerial adviser variable into the capacity equation may to some extent represent a failure to fully exploit and capture the benefits of core public service capacity. That would suggest a form of capacity displacement, or the non-realization of public service capacity, such that overall government (and governance) capability is compromised.

Their study found that while ‘funneling’ was a concern for approximately half of the respondents, public servants also highlighted the ‘positive’ role attributed to a policy ‘contestation’ function by partisan advisers. Their study found that advisers were perceived by public servants to play a role in “broadening the advice base, increasing ministers’ options, testing officials’ advice, and democratizing processes by providing an additional point of entry for external policy actors” (2007:457). Finally, the authors also list the coordination function played by ministerial advisers with respect to ‘whole of government operations’. The latter two activities, contestation and coordination, are presented as part of a ‘capacity’ provision function by partisan advisers (2007:461).

A first step towards a more systematic interpretation of partisan advisers’ policy activity can be accomplished by linking these activities to the discrete stages of the ‘policy cycles approach’ (see Howlett, Perl & Ramesh 2009). This can further specify at what stage(s) partisan advisers would appear to be most active. As per Table 1 below when existing studies are reviewed and partisan advisers activities plotted in conjunction to their respective ‘stage’ of the policy cycle, advisers policy related activity were found to vary.

<b>Table 1 – Partisan Advisers Activity and Stages of Policy-Making</b>		
<b>STAGES OF POLICY CYCLE</b>	<b>PARTISAN ADVISER POLICY ACTIVITY</b>	<b>STUDY REFERENCED</b>
Agenda setting <sup>i</sup>	X	(Aucoin 2010, Eichbaum, Shaw 2007, Maley 2000, Anderson 2006, Dunn 1997, Connaughton 2010a, Walter 2006, Klein, Lewis 1977, Ryan 1995, Walter 1992)

Policy Formulation <sup>ii</sup>	X	(Aucoin 2010, Eichbaum, Shaw 2007, Doern 1971, Doern 1971, Anderson 2006, Dunn 1997, Connaughton 2010b, Klein, Lewis 1977)
Decision Making <sup>iii</sup>	X	(Aucoin 2010, Doern 1971, Klein, Lewis 1977, Ryan 1995)
Implementation <sup>iv</sup>	X	(Dunn 1997)
Evaluation <sup>v</sup>	X	(Dunn 1997)

This initial step offers a means to assess comparatively (within and among countries) advisers activity related to the front end (agenda-setting and policy formulation) as well as the ‘back-end’ (implementation and evaluation) of policy-making. A further step can be taken towards greater specificity by examining the substantive versus procedural nature of advice giving and policy making activity. This is implicit in the Connaughten (2010a, 2010b) approach with her detailing of activities related to what she terms the ‘coordinator’ role. Furthermore, this differentiation was explicitly used by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) in their analysis of partisan advisers and the potential for politicization of officials in New Zealand. The authors introduce a substantive and procedural typology to differentiate between types of perceived politicization of policy-making and advising. Procedural politicization is explained as “intended to or has the effect of constraining the capacity of public servants to furnish ministers with advice in a free, frank, and fearless manner” (2008:343). It can be manifested either when “the adviser intervenes in the relationship between a minister and his or her officials. The second describes conduct by ministerial advisers which is intended to or which has the

effect of constraining the capacity of officials to tender frank, and fearless advice by intervening in the internal workings of a department” (ibid).

With respect to substantive politicization, the authors explain it deals specifically with “an action intended to, or having the effect of coloring the substance of officials advice with partisan considerations” (2008:343-44). This substantive/procedural differentiation it is argued here, not only captures the potential for politicization of public service officials, but can be extended to investigate the general advice giving activity of partisan advisers. Based on the review of the aforementioned literature partisan advisers can be seen to engage in a consistent variety of policy activities. As per Table 2 When such ‘typical’ policy related activities are classified along substantive and procedural dimensions we take a further step towards specifying partisan advisers policy related activity

<b>Table 2 – Typical Partisan Advisers Policy Activity</b>	
<b>PROCEEDURAL</b>	<b>SUBSTANTIVE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinating</li> <li>• Brokering</li> <li>• Mobilizing</li> <li>• Delivering</li> <li>• Monitoring</li> <li>• Funneling</li> <li>• Constraining</li> <li>• Intervening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precipitating</li> <li>• Coloring</li> <li>• Contesting</li> </ul>

This configuration while providing further detail and nuance to an activity based understanding of partisan advisers misses the ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ dimensions of partisan advisers policy activity that have been reported (Maley 2000, Dunn 1997, Connaughton 2010b). Such horizontal dimensions of partisan advisers’ activities related to the coordination, brokerage, and collaborative aspects of policy advice activity either on a political and/or political-administrative level (e.g. interdepartmental or line and central agency) would seem particularly germane to investigations of ‘governance’ as shifts from vertical (command and control) type of activities to those of a horizontal ‘steering’ nature. The vertical dimension of the procedural aspects of advice giving activities relates strictly to intradepartmental advice giving and or political-administrative policy advisory activities. As per Figure 2 below, in conjunction with the aforementioned ‘partisan’ and ‘technical’ dimensions of policy advising related to the substantive nature of policy-making we can now construct a typology that focuses less on the specific roles of partisan advisers per se, and more on ‘mapping’ of advice and policy activity along both substantive and procedural lines.

<b>Figure 2- Partisan Adviser Policy Advice Activity (Craft 2011)</b>		
<b>Procedural</b> (dimension of policy advice activity)	<b>Substantive</b> (nature of policy advice contribution)	
	ADMINISTRATIVE	PARTISAN
HORIZONTAL	Type I Administrative Horizontal	Type II Partisan Horizontal
VERTICAL	Type III Administrative Vertical	Type IV Partisan Vertical



The ‘technical’ rubric used by Connaughten (2010b) is replaced here with the ‘administrative’ category to capture general policy specific activity akin to traditional notions of policy analysis and advice giving<sup>2</sup> that may be undertaken by partisan staff in ministerial or first ministers’ offices. ‘Political’ is replaced with partisan to zero in on policy activity that is not just political, but more specifically partisan in nature. Such activities are less related to the public service aspects of policy making and more logically associated with the partisan aspects of political-administrative relations, electoral fortunes, and focused on short rather than long-term outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

### **Partisan advisers in Canada: Some initial findings related to advice giving**

Having now set out a more comprehensive typology for a systematic interpretation of partisan advisers’ policy advice activity let us return to the research questions advanced at the outset of this paper. The following are some initial findings flowing from qualitative interviews conducted with senior partisan advisers (N = 12), Ministers (N = 8) and deputy ministers (N = 8) in two jurisdictions. While the following initial findings are not based on a systematic content analysis of the interview transcriptions, they are generalizations that the author has formed based on completed interviews and subsequent review of interview transcriptions. In general, responses in both cases confirm that partisan advisers are perceived by both political and administrative elites as legitimate actors in the political-administrative interface. Virtually all respondents on both the

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<sup>2</sup> Administrative policy advice giving is used here to connote the traditional policy advisory contributions typically associated with rational, technical, and/or evidence based policy making (see Dobuzinskis et al, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Partisan policy advice is used here to connote the electoral, media, and public relations aspects as well as political-administrative aspects of policy advice giving, see Prasser (2006)

political and administrative sides underscored high frequencies of interactions between advisers and the ministers/deputy ministers. Partisan advisers were found to play a much more influential role in one case as opposed to the other, most likely due in large part to differences in institutional complexity and size. However, in both cases first minister's office advisers were found to play significant policy advisory roles related to both partisan and administrative policy. Procedural policy advice was more often found to be of the partisan variety for line department advisers in both cases, with procedural administrative advice more frequently reported by first minister's advisers as well as central agency advisers. In general, the initial findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Line department partisan advisers were found to generally play an active role in policy formulation activities in only one of the two cases. However, in both cases partisan advisers in all locations reported frequent vertical political advice giving activities.
2. In both cases, the first minister's office advisers were perceived by both political and administrative elites as playing a more influential role related to policy development and coordination. Engaging in both partisan and administrative policy advising and coordination.
3. Policy roles fluctuated significantly for partisan advisers in 'line ministries'. While in both cases respondents indicated partisan advisors played an advice giving role, the policy involvement tended to be most pronounced in policy files with lower levels of policy sophistication
4. Partisan adviser's advice activities were seen by both political and public service elites as consisting of a contestation and challenge function to the various streams of input. Generally, both ministers and deputy ministers saw this as a positive contribution to the overall policy making process.

The contributions most frequently cited related to the strategic 'horizontal' dimensions of policy formulation rather than the 'nuts and bolts' of policy development which was frequently seen from both political and administrative respondents as a function best left to the expertise of the civil service. Ministers in both cases frequently

cited their partisan advisers as the ‘bridge’ or ‘interface’ to the public service. As consumers of both streams of advice, ministers indicated the role of their advisers as complimentary, or supplementary, to the more formal sources of departmental advice, notably that of their deputies. Furthermore, ministers in both cases explained the role of partisan advisers as brokers of policy related information flowing both from the public service as well as external stakeholders. For example, one minister described his partisan adviser’s policy role as follows:

They will often look at or meet with an organization to talk about their specific issues, policy recommendations they may make, liaise with some departments to seek clarification, to obtain additional information. And I may say to one of them as a result of that, why don’t we find out from [specific ministry] what their doing in this area, are they moving this policy, is there an area they have under consideration, sort of to get the lay of the land so to speak. So we will have discussions on that and its puts me in a much better position to be better informed and whether we are looking at a change of policy or not ... on [policy issue]. [Partisan adviser] will do some of the ground work with departmental staff here and will have a series of questions and well have a meeting and see what we can find out from [official] or one of the other ADMs ... you know here’s a series of questions and let’s see if we can get answers to those questions. You know a lot of the information gathering is done through liaison work. (Personal interview, Minister 1)

Another Minister responding to the same question states:

Right, so the ministerial assistant is really the interface between the minister’s office and the ministry. That you know ... obviously there is an almost constant interaction between the minister and deputy ministers. But I think that were the ministerial assistant is invaluable is working a lot with the deputy minister but with other staff in the ministry as well. You know things where the ministry needs attention of the minister, it’s often through the ministerial assistant in terms of what the issue is, what the priority is, and it’s often the ministerial assistant who in turn will do some of that outreach to other stakeholder groups to bounce ideas off, or to try and gauge what a ... what reaction there might be to various government policy initiatives. (Personal Interview, Minister 5)

Partisan advisers were reported to be frequent advice givers from the ministerial perspective. Several ministers reported their advisers played essential contestation and challenge functions related to both political issues but also substantive policy files.

Several ministers in both cases referred to their partisan advisers as a ‘second set of ears’

in meetings or as playing ‘sounding board’ types of functions. For example, two ministers interviewed explain their adviser’s policy roles:

I think it’s constant. Political staff you know ... you wind up meeting with them on a regular basis. There often one’s that often bring forward new policy ideas, the bring notes, the decision notes that have to be signed off on. They will develop their own perspectives on it which his always helpful (Personal interview, Minister 5)

My expectation is that [partisan adviser] be on top of the files with me and that we will discuss them as peers, frankly. And we will challenge each other on different things and of course when you somebody who you strongly believe in, you think they’re very talented, and you have a lot of confidence in ... it’s pretty easy to have a relationship where you can challenge each other (Personal interview, Minister 6)

When asked to explain the types of advice they provided, one senior partisan adviser in a first minister’s office explained that “you can be the greatest policy person in the world but you have to have some stuff to put in the window” (Personal Interview, Partisan Adviser 1). Partisan advisers in both cases almost universally saw their role as applying a political lens to policy flowing from the department. Several advisers reported political advice giving in relation to both their minister’s policy files and political issues as the *sin qua non* of their roles.

I would say the most common tasks ... basically, advising the minister on ramifications on some of the policy advice that the bureaucrats want to do. Say if a policy decision ... or a policy initiative that the bureaucrats want to do won’t play well in either a riding ... or stakeholders (Personal Interview, Partisan Adviser 6)

When asked how their advice fits with that offered by the public service a central agency partisan adviser explained:

Yeah ... usually ... it is complimentary. I do push back sometimes. You get information up, this is what the program area thinks it should be. If I don’t think that answer is good then I’ll I push back with a question. If you say that then I say this, and what would your answer be. Usually we try to refine ... before I would go to the minister with what I think he should say I refine it with the program area (Personal interview with Partisan Adviser 5)

A final significant finding that emerged almost immediately across both cases was the variance related to the institutional location of partisan advisers. As expected, senior

partisan advisers in the offices of first minister's reported significantly greater levels of policy involvement in both cases, and particularly related to overall coordination of both political and policy related concerns. Referring to the former, one chief of staff to a first minister explained:

At the premier's office, I see my ... it's a team duty but its my duty to make sure that the all of the input that comes into the premier's office mostly from three ... three fronts. The legislature, the government majority or the legislature as a whole, the political party, and the executive of the government ... is ... I have to control the traffic around those three things (Personal Interview, Chief of Staff, P2)

Interestingly, multiple deputy ministers in both cases reported first minister's partisan advisers as key administrative policy coordinators in the system. One senior deputy minister explained:

I might call [first minister's senior adviser] and say look can we get together I want to bring a staff and explain something we're working on and see if you think its got a chance of going through. I don't want to go waste cabinet's time on something if you tell me my god [deputy] don't even darken the door with that thing right. Or it's pretty good but I want more information or whatever. I kind of grease the skids that way (Personal Interview, Deputy Minister 2)

## **Conclusion**

In sum, initial qualitative interview findings support that partisan advisers are playing active policy-making and advice roles. Echoing findings in other Westminster jurisdictions, notably Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) related to the potential positive role of contestation played by partisan advisers. Initial findings also support the typology advanced above as clear instances of 'partisan' and 'administrative' policy advising were reported. Moreover, these activities were found to vary related to their locus of activity along the vertical and horizontal dimensions with particularly strong horizontal roles for advisers in first ministers and central agency offices of both partisan and administrative nature. These are substantial findings that are important to how we conceive policy

advice use, conceptualize the overall systems of advice, and understand the linkages of policy advice to policy making more generally. In all, the question posed by the title of this paper remains to be answered. Without a doubt early findings indicate that partisan advisers do have currency in the policy process. However, that currency is contingent upon their location in the political system, expertise, and notably the need for advice on the part of ministers. The overall impression left on this researcher is that the Canadian case (at the sub-national level) is that partisan staff are seemingly seen as important sources of partisan and administrative policy advice. More importantly, they are seen by both political and administrative actors as brokers of policy advice in the procedural sense. Though only a report on initial findings, as it stand the current indication is that a fully formed 'new public governance bargain' has yet to arrive, but perhaps to echo Martin Lodge (2010:111) what we are witnessing in Canada is its development via a reconfiguration of existing arrangements within the 'ecology' of bargains.

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<sup>i</sup> Activity was noted with respect to policy actor's acting as 'catalysts', and 'mobilizers' (Walter, 1986), as well as with respect to 'agenda management' functions (Maley, 2000,452) and cited Ryan (1995:156) as finding advisers to be "the driving force" behind some initiatives and "setting policy agendas" (Maley, 2000,453). Advisers self-identified activity as "Raise new policy initiatives with minister" (Connaughton, 2010:359)

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<sup>ii</sup> Activity was referenced regarding the Dunn, D (1997) study as found regarding “directing departmental work” and “brokering positions among ministerial offices in case of policy overlap and policy conflict” (Maley, 2000,452); Cites Halligan and Power regarding network management of interest groups and stakeholders as does Klein and Lewis (1977); and Maley (2000, 454) also notes respondents in her study who claimed “significant role for policy advisers in policy formulation”; Aucoin notes the use of political advisers to “further the personal policy agenda of prime ministers” and finds that political advisers “often exercise considerable, albeit invariably undefined, influence by acting for their minister” (2010); Advisers self-identified as performing “Read & comment on official advice”, “Convey or clarify Minister’s wishes”, “Ask officials to provide papers”, “Assist with coalition management, and Assist with budgetary matters” types of activity (Connaughton, 2010:359)

<sup>iii</sup> Maley (2000,453) cites Ryan (1995, 155) regarding advisers “considerable influence on the policy process”; Doern (1971) noted a significant policy initiation and decision-making roles for political advisers in the Pearson and Trudeau Prime Minister’s offices; Aucoin (2010) notes a growing contestation role for political advisers as counterweights to public service advising at both ministerial and prime ministerial levels

<sup>iv</sup> Maley (2000, 452) cites Dunn, D (1997) regarding advisers role in shaping policy by “evaluating policy proposals, monitoring the implementation of policy and overseeing policy development”.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid