

SpAdcast: What is it really like to be a special adviser?

Episode 2: Relationships



As a new government gets up and running and scores of new SpAds get to grips with their roles, this special four-part series lifts the lid on what SpAds do, how they do it, and why they're indispensable to modern government.

In the second episode, we're focusing on how important relationships are to any SpAd's job. We start by discussing the importance of trust and understanding between SpAds and their secretary of state – how is this relationship built, and why is it so critical? And what about junior ministers – how do SpAds work with them?

The link between SpAds and the civil servants they work with is also vital. We look at their links with both the secretary of state's and their own private offices, as well as what they thought about the civil service overall, and whether anything frustrated them.

Emily Walch (EW): Vince was very often the first person I'd speak to in the morning, the last person I spoke to at night. It really felt like I was married to the job.

Wes Ball (WB): I felt a bit like an exotic specimen that had just been brought into a zoo – everyone wanted to see me!

Jack Worlidge (JW): Welcome to SpAdcast – a special Inside Briefing podcast from the Institute for Government, looking at the role of special advisers in government. I'm Jack Worlidge, senior researcher at the Institute for Government, and a former special adviser.

As a new government gets up and running, we're using this series to look at the crucial role of special advisers, or SpAds. In the last episode, we heard about how SpAds are recruited, what it's like entering government for the first time, and what the purpose of the role really is.

What starts to become clear is that doing the job effectively rests on relationships. So that's what we're looking at in this episode – SpAds' relationships with their ministers, and with civil servants.

We'll start with ministers. We heard in the last episode how important it is for a minister recruiting a SpAd to make sure they get on with them and can trust them.

Once you're in the job, this is really important. You need to know your minister inside out.

Aled Maclean-Jones (AMJ): You're sort of almost treated like a 'minister whisperer', you know what I mean?

JW: Aled Maclean-Jones was special adviser to Steve Barclay in the Treasury and the Cabinet Office.

AMJ: They always say this before you become a special adviser, 'you've got to know your minister inside out.' And if there's a bit of difference between you and your minister, then it'll be like hounds: civil servants will just come and kill you.

And so you're terrified then, because you're like, 'Well how do I know the mind of somebody? How do I get inside somebody's head?'

Hannah Guerin (HG): You do have to get to know the person.

JW: Hannah Guerin worked for Priti Patel in the Home Office.

HG: And I've been really fortunate that people I've worked with have always been very clear about their purpose and their direction of travel.

And I think that's really important for advisers, because the last thing you want to do is be confidently giving advice to the department and suddenly everyone realises that wasn't quite the right thing or the thing that the secretary of state wanted to be doing.

JW: That's why knowing your minister well is so important – the whole point of SpAds is that they can tell civil servants what their boss will think or how they'll react to something. And this makes civil servants' lives a lot easier.

Wes Ball worked for Hilary Benn in Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs], during the last Labour government.

WB: What you say carries great weight in the department. And so things that were obvious to me when people would come to me saying, 'What's his view on this?' and I'd say, 'Well, you know what he's like, this is what he thinks.' And you know, yeah, I felt very confident about that. Very clearly that wasn't how they [civil servants] felt – and so that obviously gives you confidence to speak when you can see that actually you do have some unique insight.

JW: But this kind of understanding doesn't come overnight. Emily Walch worked for Vince Cable in the coalition government.

EW: I think for me it took about nine to twelve months to really feel that I knew his mind. And what's really amazing – and this is why the departments and civil servants are such incredible people – is the department somehow has this sixth sense. They can sense when suddenly you are your master's voice and when really you know your boss well enough that you can really act as that delegated person, that delegated authority, which of course is a key role as a SpAd, because you've only got one secretary of state and they can only be in so many places in one time.

So a SpAd is a very useful sort of delegated authority to know that you're on the right track, but it does take time and there's no shortcut about it. You just have to, you know, spend time with your boss and also try not to overreach yourself.

So if you're not sure of how they will react or what their view will be on this, especially if you're talking to a journalist, but for that matter in the department as well, you don't, don't, don't blag it – because that will impact your reputation as somebody who can't be trusted, who doesn't really

know. So it's better to say, 'Well, I'll just need to check and come back to you on that rather than,' rather than sort of overstretching yourself in those early days.

JW: So how do you get to know someone's mind?

ED: It's definitely helpful that just the nature of your job as a special adviser, you end up spending a huge amount of time with these people.

JW: This is Emma Dean – she was one of Matt Hancock's SpAds as health secretary, and later worked in the Cabinet Office, No.10 and the Treasury.

ED: And so you get to know fairly quickly what their instincts are on things and not just their moral compass on issues, but sort of how they like to work, how they like work to be presented.

WB: I spent a lot of time with him early on.

JW: Wes Ball again.

WB: You know, the first two weeks, I think I pretty much just stuck beside him really and kind of saw how he was in meetings and he's pretty good at telling me what mattered to him. And the PPS [principal private secretary], you know, was quite simpatico.

So we collectively as a group really understood what we were trying to achieve. And I pretty religiously went through what was going into his box just to familiarise myself with the key issues in the department and what was important.

JW: It's not just sitting in meetings of course – it's the time spent in their ministerial car, at [party] conference, or other events that's really useful to get to know your boss.

This is why, Wes suggested, more modern working practices can't really apply to SpAds.

WB: The hybrid working environment has changed my life for the better immeasurably – [but] you can't do that as a special adviser, right? You've got to be in the car going to the speech with them because you're working on the speech as you go through it. You've got to be in the conversation about press cuttings at eight o'clock in the morning, because they'll tell you something, you know, like one of their cabinet colleagues has called them overnight or something like that.

You've got to go to their constituency from time to time, just to understand what's going on in that other part of their life that's nothing to do with you.

JW: Wes also mentioned earlier the importance of going through your minister's red box – this is another useful way to get to know what their priorities are, and how they think.

Aled Maclean-Jones again.

AMJ: If you think about the chief secretary's box, that's like a megabox. There's like 80 decisions, to be made a night or whatever. So then you can begin to pattern match, right. And you have to

read them and early days you're in receive mode. So you're reading them and you're kind of getting a sense for these steers, 'Oh, this is something that's really important to Steve.' And so you then begin to build it up by kind of reasoning and then you can be quite lazy at the end and just pattern match and be like, 'Oh, this is a bit like that sub[mission, a formal piece of advice or a request for the minister to make a decision] that came up three months ago. Well in that three months ago sub, Steve said X, so therefore it's likely he's going to say X again.'

JW: As we heard in the last episode, reviewing all the submissions that go into these boxes probably takes up most of a SpAd's time.

But it's only because you know your minister well, and what their preferences are, that you can add value to all this box work.

ED: I had some ministers who would want incredibly short pieces of advice and others who would want chapter and verse on how decisions were made.

JW: Emma Dean.

ED: Some who wanted to see every piece of data that was being presented to them, not just the sort of graphs that civil servants would put together.

You listen to the questions that they ask in meetings, again, as they're kind of going through presentations. So what is it that they zone in on and want to know more about or want to question?

And also trying to work out what is it that actually isn't ready to go to the secretary of state. So what is it that – and this only really comes with knowing your secretary of state well – what kind of questions are they going to ask for? What are they going to instinctively think is missing? What are they going to say they've already asked or seen opinion on several times before, so aren't going to accept what is in there or want further justification as to why they're coming back with sort of similar advice?

JW: But that doesn't mean you need to guess what they'll think about everything.

AMJ: So much of it was routine, you know what I mean?

JW: Aled again.

AMJ: Oh, we're buying six tugboats? All right. Well, I couldn't even draw you a tugboat. I'm never going to be able to give a good steer on whether they're buying good tugboats or whatever. And so that's 90% of the job in terms of like spending. I think often it was about highlighting and maybe having a chat with Steve when the box arrives and he sees it like, 'Okay, there are these three or four steps that we think are needle movers here – focus on those.'

JW: Working in such close proximity to your minister – having such a close and trusting relationship – is obviously important for the job. But it can also have a weird effect on your life.

WB: As a SpAd, you speak to your secretary of state more than you speak to your spouse. You know, first conversation in the morning, last conversation at night, all across the weekend. It is a very kind of constant conversation that you're having and I remember hearing stories of some of my colleagues who would literally climb to the top of a mountain to get reception on their phone, to pick up their messages. This was before everyone had like wi-fi and 5G and stuff like that. So, you know, that kind of dynamic of being the person that they would call to sort out everything I think is central to the relationship.

JW: You also find yourself worrying about things you never thought you would.

Emma Dean again.

ED: You're also there to make sure that the secretary of state, in a way, is able to do their job. And that ranges everything from carrying snacks in your handbag, because often they get quite hungry, having clean ties in your handbag, because often they spill things on their ties just before they're about to do a media interview.

EW: It really felt like I was married to the job.

JW: Emily Walch.

EW: I knew details that probably only his wife knew, you know: what's his favourite coffee; what does he like to drink; what's his, what's his favourite meal; what's his favourite sandwich? The collar size, the shoe size, you end up collecting this crazy encyclopaedia of facts about your boss.

JW: Now an upside to this kind of relationship is that it does make it easier to have some of the trickier conversations that SpAds need to have with their ministers.

Here's Wes again.

WB: And at the time we were going through expenses, the expenses scandal was going on at the same time. I didn't really break bad news on the expenses crisis, but we were talking about it from the moment it became obvious that it was going to come out. You know, there were these stories floating around Westminster about someone having some CDs that they were trying to sell to some papers and we were like, 'Crikey, what does that mean, what's it going to be like?' We were talking about that a long time before it came out and that was supporting each of my ministers in their particular expenses challenges. Trying to make sure the right thing happened. Some of those conversations were difficult, but again, conversations that only I could have with them, really.

ED: It's incredibly difficult those moments where you have to be the bearer of bad news that what they are asking for isn't going to happen.

JW: Emma Dean.

ED: Or say no and be the person to be, to actually kind of try and give them a bit of a reality check in terms of what the consequences that might fall from the things that they're asking for.

If you've got a good relationship with your minister, then that should also come with the fact that you can have those very open conversations. And I am really lucky that, for the most part, all of the ministers that I worked with and the special advisers I worked with, we had a very sort of flat hierarchical structure where we all were asked for opinions on big decisions. We could all walk into the room and close the door and go, 'Can I have two minutes because I'm really worried about what we're about to do or what you are asking for and here is why.'

JW: As Emma suggested there, these close working relationships with ministers do mean that SpAds can be influential. But there is a limit – they can't always change their minister's mind, no matter how much the civil service might want them to.

Wes Ball had a particularly memorable experience of this – over quite a niche issue.

WB: Hilary and I had a conversation about this over the weekend and it was quite funny. The one that I'd never foreseen would be an issue was a European Council meeting on bluefin tuna.

The UK government had come to a deal with colleagues across the European Union on a particular position about how we'd protect bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean – it was part of a wider deal. Hilary just didn't agree with it. He was just like, 'We're not going to do that. We're going to vote this way and we're not going to vote that way.' And, uh, we had an outcrop official representing Britain, and they didn't want to vote that way. No.10 didn't want them to vote that way. The European Commission didn't want them to vote that way, and the department didn't want him to vote that way. The PPS didn't want him to vote that way.

The only person that did was Hilary Benn, and Hilary was absolutely clear: this is what we're going to do because this is the right thing to do to protect bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean – it's a species under serious threat. And people came back with all sorts of stuff, 'Well, we can't do that. We've done the deal. We've got the duty of sincere co-operation,' blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he's like, 'No! We're going to do it!' No.10 was furious. It had the unique capacity to have No.10 angry with us, the European Union angry with us, and the European Commission angry with us and everyone was angry.

And it was all coming through my phone. And I kept saying to people, 'He's not going to change his mind.' And they were like, 'You must get him to change his mind.' And no one could explain to me why he should change his mind apart from because we'd done a deal. And I was like, 'He's not going to change his mind.' and they're like, 'It's your job!' and I was like, 'I can't change his mind! Ministers decide, advisers advise.'

JW: So that's the relationship with your secretary of state. But in every department there are several other ministers, usually called the junior ministers. SpAds have a lot to do with them too – but the extent of this can depend on the circumstances. In some cases, the secretary of state might not get on with one or more of the junior ministers, or might not trust them. Sometimes, secretaries of state can even see part of their SpAds role as keeping an eye on one or more of the junior ministers.

But as is probably obvious, departments work best when this isn't the case – and when the secretary of state's special advisers take an active role in supporting junior ministers as well.

Nicky Morgan (NM): When I moved to the Treasury it probably was the first time I'd worked with special advisers to the then chancellor George Osborne.

JW: Nicky Morgan was a junior minister in the Treasury under the coalition government. Her experience was of limited support from George Osborne's SpAds.

NM: Because I hadn't really worked in government before, I hadn't really come across special advisers in the same way as perhaps those who've already been part of Westminster. I think that probably the main takeaway for me, not having worked in Westminster before, is that they are there to make the secretary of state or in this case the chancellor's life easy, not the junior minister.

So yes, they'll support you if there's something that is particularly obviously of interest to the chancellor – it might be a press announcement or it might be a statement in the house. But ultimately in terms of assistance with navigating department or research and like that, it's very much down to the junior minister, to the private office – so the civil servants – to help you rather than special advisers. They weren't difficult or unhelpful, but just very focused on obviously their boss's needs and wants.

JW: She tried to do things a bit differently when she became a secretary of state.

NM: I would like to think that the ministers in [the Department for] Education would feel that they actually were able to have the support of the special advisers if they needed it.

I suspect they would probably say that they would have liked perhaps, you know, to have more support or more access or whatever it might be. But, I remember George definitely going off on, uh, certainly media rounds with the other ministers and supporting them. And if a minister had asked me, you know, 'Could I have some additional support, can I have some help?', then my instinct would be to say, 'Yes'. Because ultimately it all reflects on the department and the team and what we're achieving, and I think to sort of try to hog special adviser time unnecessarily isn't conducive to that.

WB: I took it as a really important part of my job to support the junior ministers because no one else was and they needed political support and political advice.

JW: When Wes Ball worked in Defra, he took an active decision to support the junior ministers.

WB: A good chunk of my week was working with them on issues that were important to them. Sitting beside them in meetings and kind of helping them drive their priorities. And I think that they valued that. It definitely had political benefits for our relationships with MPs and peers and helped us get legislation over the line and built up some political support within the parliamentary Labour Party, um, for the department and the department's work and for Hilary.

And also, I think some of them felt that they weren't super connected to Hilary as secretary of state and I think that I saw it as my job to bridge that gap and to make sure that he knew what was going on in their world and they knew what was going on in his world and there was a sort of unity of purpose behind our ministerial team and so they acted as a team.

JW: Fraser Raleigh had a similar experience when he worked for David Lidington.

Fraser Raleigh (FR): Partly because the minister I worked for had spent time as a junior minister during the Cameron government before they came into cabinet, I think they had an appreciation of the importance of being part of a team, bringing your junior ministers into decisions, having space for political discussions just as a group. And I, as a special adviser, particularly in the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Justice, always wanted to not be seen as the creature or the creation of the secretary of state because apart from anything else, you were dealing a lot with the day-to-day things that they were dealing with.

So if you were dealing with prisons, well you have a prisons minister who exclusively focuses on this. So if you start trying to go over their head or second guess them without talking to them, then you're just going to create resentment and that's ultimately going to come back around to you through the secretary of state.

So we would sit down on a sort of rolling basis once a week with one of our junior ministers, say 'Right, what's on your mind? What's annoying you? What is it that's maybe not serious enough for you to want to raise it with the secretary of state, but it's just niggling away at you and you just want someone to know about it?' And I felt that that contributed massively to ensuring that we never really had any serious problems with any of our junior ministers.

JW: So a SpAd's relationship with their minister is obviously critical.

The other important relationship for them to get right is with the civil service. If anything, SpAds are probably talking to officials more than their minister – and they're all working towards the same goal, so they need to work well together.

To start with, the relationship can take some getting used to.

WB: I felt a bit like an exotic specimen that had just been brought into a zoo.

JW: Wes Ball.

WB: Everyone wanted to see me and they could be from grade 7s [mid-ranking civil servants with significant policy responsibilities] who wanted to check my view before they put something into the box, through to directors general [senior civil servants who generally work closely with the department's ministers] who wanted my view on, you know, responses to the financial crisis.

I think at the time I was 30, I'd only ever worked for the party or for this local authority briefly. So I'm not equipped to cast a view on all of these things and I was learning on the job and I think just what surprised me was just the level of hunger for my view on everything.

That's what surprised me was just, the influence that you, the shadow, the long shadow you cast across the department as a special adviser.

JW: Part of the reason for this long shadow is that, if you're going to be effective, your minister needs to be pretty clear with the department about what your role is.

WB: The best thing that Hilary gave me to make a success of the job was he was absolutely clear that I was his voice in the department and that people should follow my lead on issues because I would be speaking on his behalf and I think that's the most important thing you need in the department. He was clear about that from day one.

JW: Once you've got this authority, it's also important to demonstrate why that's useful.

Aled Maclean-Jones.

AMJ: I think what is useful as a special adviser with the civil service is to prove your usefulness. So to be able to kind of like, okay, this person can actually solve problems and get things done.

JW: And at its best, this combines to form an effective partnership.

Fraser Raleigh.

FR: So most of the relationships that I had that worked well with civil servants were you kind of established a relationship and you established trust early on and you positioned yourself as someone who could help them explain what they wanted to advise the minister in the right way.

As long as you agreed with it, you may say 'That's absolutely not going to be something we're prepared to do.' But if you said, 'Okay, I see where you're coming from, the way that you're going to need to position this with the minister is this. They're not going to like it if you come at it from this angle.'

So building that relationship of trust where you're doing most of your engagement with the civil servants when you're not in the room with the minister. So you almost come together as a united team to convince the minister if they need convincing in a meeting to say, 'Look, we have talked about this, and we can answer your questions from both sides.'

JW: Of course one thing guaranteed to prevent this kind of relationship is special advisers falling into the classic caricature – of being loud, angry and aggressive.

Emily Walch.

EW: One of the things in terms of any advice I've always had for new SpAds is there is a sort of a myth of the special adviser, which I think to some extent you know, Alastair Campbell, who by all intents and purposes was an absolutely outstanding special adviser.

But the myth that sort of surrounds him and how he was, and actually other former Labour SpAds as well from that era, has sort of transmuted itself somehow into this perception, you know, that special advisers, in order to be effective, have to be shouty, they have to be scary, they have to be opinionated, loud, bolshie.

And that couldn't be further from the truth, actually. And if you are like that, you're not going to get the best out of your department, you're not going to be effective. A big part of your job is to figure out what the problems are before they become potentially public or they become a problem for the secretary of state. You need to have your network of civil servants who will trust you enough that it's safe for them to surface an issue that can be dealt with safely. And if you don't have those relationships, that won't happen.

JW: Hannah Guerin.

HG: If no one's persuaded of you, they're not going to do what you're asking and I think that's something that some advisers who I've seen do the job slightly differently have forgotten, or it's come back at a later point to haunt them.

JW: Having good relationships isn't only important for its own sake, or for making SpAds effective at their jobs. It also helps when there's a problem.

Nicky Morgan again.

NM: When problems arose, I mean, when the chips are down, when the problem arises, you want to have put enough investment in so that the civil servants will support you, find a way around the problem, help you to unravel it, whatever it might be. And obviously special advisers are a critical part of that.

JW: But Nicky Morgan also felt that, when she became education secretary in 2014, there was a specific context to this SpAd–civil service relationship.

NM: At the end of the day, I arrived in the Department of Education with the sort of instruction, if you like, which is 'take the temperature down, but carry on with the reform programme.' And so one of the things obviously to sort of build morale, both within the department and outside in the education profession.

And to be honest with you, I think he'd been gone for a little bit, but Dominic Cummings had been a previous special adviser to the department, so quite frankly, my special advisers could have done almost anything, and it would have been more, um, conducive probably to better relationships than people had seen before.

JW: Now, the Home Office is a good example of a department where problems do arise – regularly – and where relations between the political team and officials could easily become strained.

But Hannah Guerin told us that having good relationships with officials in the Home Office under Priti Patel helped when the Rwanda policy was first developed.

HG: Rwanda was, uh, a very complex policy and, you know, I always look back thinking, 'Gosh, how on earth did we manage to keep that under wraps for 18 months before it actually came to fruition?' One of the best kept secrets in government. No, I think if you have professional working relationships, which we definitely did in the Home Office, it becomes quite easy because when there are challenges, they're addressed head on.

JW: The permanent secretary in the Home Office issued a ministerial direction for the Rwanda policy – a process where the most senior official in a department publicly raises concerns around a spending proposal, and asks the secretary of state to instruct them to proceed. In this case, the Home Office permanent secretary said he couldn't guarantee the Rwanda scheme represented value for money.

HG: And, for example, the direction, actually, we had anticipated that and had a very adult conversation about it and actually it probably helped from the very beginning that we sort of had charted a path through and the policy was very well thought through from the get-go.

JW: So good relationships can really help to smooth over problems. But what about SpAds' overall view of the civil service and the officials they worked with? When we asked about this, our interviewees were overwhelmingly positive. Sometimes, the work of specific teams stuck in their mind. This is Hannah again.

HG: I think the best team in Whitehall in terms of expertise and ability to manoeuvre and move and get things done is the migration team in the Home Office. I say that because they are dealing with such complex policy and across a range of issues and they are able to explain that to other government departments and to new home secretaries and they have a huge programme of work to deliver and I think that they are pretty impressive.

AMJ: I found it a really good relationship.

JW: Aled also had positive memories of the Treasury – particularly of how the working environment stretched him.

AMJ: I think particularly the Treasury department is one that it's very hard to SpAd in, but it's also one you're very lucky to SpAd in because you are surrounded by, you know, extremely smart people who are very, very diligent. And yeah, if I think about some of the people who I was working with, particularly senior level, they were just very impressive.

I think that as well, the flip side of that is you kind of need to be on your toes a bit. I think that maybe what makes Treasury a little bit of a difficult department is that if you try and blag things, I think they're very good at seeing through that kind of stuff and it takes a bit of time to build that trust, right.

JW: He had particular praise for the health spending team.

AMJ: To watch that team in action was something very special, actually. They were really, really impressive at every kind of level in terms of being able to not only build a relationship with DHSC [Department of Health and Social Care], their counterparts there, in the middle of a global pandemic, but also have a really good read on the NHS [National Health Service] and what they wanted as well.

I think because they had that overall view and it's also such a big thing that No.10 can't really play in that field in the same way they perhaps could in a smaller department. Because you've only got a handful of people in the policy unit like, it's the entire NHS, and so it was very striking to me to watch that team in action because, uh, to have that kind of detail and knowledge over such a massive, massive area was like, 'okay, wow, that's really impressive.'

JW: SpAds work with civil servants across their department, from policy officials to the parliamentary team. But it's the minister's private office – and within that the SpAds own private office – that are really crucial.

ED: I was really lucky with my private offices.

JW: Emma Dean.

ED: I thought they were absolutely brilliant people, incredibly hardworking, incredibly smart, often very young, often sort of in their sort of mid-to-late-twenties, early thirties, but could command the respect and had brilliant relationships across the departments and with their ALBs [arm's length bodies] while having to juggle the wants and whims of their ministers and SpAds alongside everybody else that they're having to work with.

And I'm very lucky that I've stayed friends with a number of members of private office that I worked with across different departments. Probably only natural because we ended up spending a lot of time together over the course of the years that I was there. But it's a team that doesn't get talked about enough, I think, in terms of their power and influence and really critical role in government.

JW: Private secretaries aren't in the easiest position sometimes. In some ways, private office can be a hyper-political environment – after all, it's politics that's driving the minister and the SpAds, who they're working to.

As civil servants, they've got to maintain impartiality and ensure they don't do anything like helping SpAds with party political work. But it's still helpful for them to understand how politics works.

Fraser Raleigh.

FR: I always found that the really good private secretaries had a very good political mind – small 'p' – not being party political and still maintaining that impartiality, but they understood how politics work – they got it. And they understood how best to get things out of your network that they couldn't get out of their network on the civil service grapevine.

JW: As well as the minister's private office, there's the SpAds' private office. As a SpAd your private secretaries are essential, and serve as your interface with the rest of the department. They're filtering, organising – and sometimes fending off – the constant stream of stuff that the department want SpAds to look at.

WB: As I got more confident in the job, I realised that I needed a process to filter stuff out from the civil service.

JW: Wes Ball.

WB: So, I wouldn't just react to stuff coming to me, meeting requests from civil servants, or use our team PA [personal assistant], to push stuff back and bring it to me in a structured way.

HG: It is endless.

JW: Hannah Guerin.

HG: And I have to thank my office for that. So special advisers tend to have a dedicated office which sits alongside the private secretaries to help them and they are a filter as well.

But if I was sitting on something my private secretary would tell me and probably suggest I get a cup of tea and sit down for an hour to do this very important piece of paper.

JW: Without their private secretaries, SpAds would struggle to do their day-to-day jobs, including supporting their minister, effectively.

Emma Dean.

ED: Their role was diary management. Making sure that we were getting the secretary of state's papers as early as possible so we could go through them, and make sure that we'd sort of raise things that we thought we were missing or making sure that we were fully briefed so we could talk

to the secretary of state before meetings or whatever he's doing or she's doing in that day, to make sure that they're aware of what they need to be doing.

JW: They also end up supporting SpAds in other ways.

ED: They were also, I mean, in a lot of cases, they were there for our wellbeing as well. The number of times they realise you've not eaten, realise you've not had a chance to go to the loo, realise that you've probably not seen your loved ones for several days, you know, 'Are you alright and what do you need?'. Really lucky and I'm not quite sure what we would've done if they hadn't been there.

JW: So everyone we talked to for this was very positive about their experience with the civil service. But like any organisation, that doesn't mean there aren't occasionally frustrations.

Fraser again.

FR: Where I think you have a problem sometimes is where civil servants see their role to be a bit of a buffer sometimes, rather than being another part of the system.

So having the civil service say, 'No, you can't do this' rather than 'There are reasons why this hasn't been done in the past. Let's talk about it in a grown-up way.' That's where I think you get some politicians rubbed up the wrong way, when they think that they're being blocked because the civil service doesn't want to do something – rather than the civil service being there to have the institutional memory of knowing what was tried one year, two year, five years, ten years and why it might not work, but saying, 'But we will work constructively to see if there is a way of implementing this the way that you want.' I think it's common sense, but good civil servants try to go with the grain or at least give the impression of going with the grain and bad civil servants, I think, try to block.

JW: Another common frustration that you hear from ministers is that officials sometimes don't recognise how important parliament is to their work – and SpAds can feel this frustration too.

Wes Ball.

WB: I think just generally a lot of the civil servants I worked with, so the really effective ones knew just how important parliament was in an MP's life, in a minister's life. The basic function that you are judged as successful is by how you perform in parliament and you are ultimately accountable to not just the electorate in your constituency, but also to your colleagues. And they really got that, and they wanted their ministers to perform well in parliament because they knew that it would ultimately bear rewards for the policy agenda that those civil servants were working on.

And as I said, many civil servants understood that, not all of them did.

JW: In general, then, even though there can be frustrations, the relationship between SpAds and civil servants is a positive and constructive one.

And it needs to be – there's no point knowing your minister inside out if you don't have the connection with civil servants to make that useful.

That's it for this episode. You can listen to previous episodes in the series on our website – instituteforgovernment.org.uk – or on iTunes, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.

*And if you'd like to find out more about how SpAds can do their jobs effectively and support ministers, check out our website to see our **IfG Academy resources for special advisers**.*

Next time, we'll be looking at how SpAds work beyond their department – with the centre of government, other Whitehall departments, and those outside government.

We hope you can join us then, but for now, thanks for listening to SpAdcast.

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