1 | *Policy Advisory Systems*
An Introduction

High-quality policy advice remains essential for good governance in Westminster systems. However, the types of advice needed, who provides it, how and when have evolved dramatically in Canberra, Ottawa, Wellington and Whitehall. The public service role has been transformed as new advisory units have sprung up in and around government, while other long-standing units have been marginalised. Ministers have come under scrutiny for paying insufficient attention to their officials' best advice while focusing on the short term because of political and media pressures. In a contestable environment, public service advice can matter less and can be replaced by that of consultants, think tanks or political aides in ministers' offices. There are questions about public service capability and whether it is equipped to handle increasingly demanding contexts with fewer resources and ambivalent support. These are not easy questions to probe, and they are made more difficult by the considerable turbulence that has characterised the contemporary policy-making milieu. High-stakes trans-boundary policy challenges such as the global economic downturn, climate change, COVID-19, immigration and Brexit have commanded the attention of decision makers in addition to the enduring challenges of governing.

Policy advice is of course not only a matter of high-stakes policy issues but also an essential ingredient in more day-to-day policy matters at the heart of governing. Programs must be designed, regulations developed, services delivered, policy choices large and small made or postponed. These policy challenges are all unfolding in rather fluid, even chaotic political contexts. Stable two-party majoritarian governments have given way to more frequent coalition and minority governments in all four countries with implications for parliamentary exigencies and policy coalition building (Boston and Bullock, 2010; Hazell and Yong, 2012). The amplification of partisanship and the entrenchment of permanent campaigning have become common factors in the pathology of contemporary Westminster governments that

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no longer concentrate on governing after winning elections but function in continuous election mode (Aucoin, 2012; Marland et al., 2018; Diamond, 2019).

More broadly, pressures for transparency, disclosure and 'open government' have become mainstays and formal government policies. In some cases, this leads to paradoxical situations where citizens and policy stakeholders are promised greater consultation and opportunities for participatory engagement but experience dated processes that favour established powerful voices or the invocation of cabinet confidence or state secrecy to mask government activity.

There have always been tensions like these in democratic politics and public administration – as well as world wars, economic crises and policy issues du jour, which have tested the resolve and capacity of governments to govern effectively. Many observers suggest the pace of contemporary governance has increased, with responses required immediately, raising questions about how much space is left for measured consideration and who has the capacity to undertake the considering. Some worry that advice is increasingly restricted to the inner circles, perhaps an inner cabinet, or, worse, a coterie of sycophantic advisers serving an autocratic prime minister (Savoie, 1999, 2008). Yet, as the charges of centralisation of power continue to be made, prime ministers and those at the centre complain about the lack of effective levers for responding to issues and too little influence over a fragmented system that requires infinite coordination. Prime ministers and ministers struggle to cope, let alone advance their agendas, given the byzantine nature of modern policymaking and the rough-and-tumble requirements of politics in a Web-enabled era (Tiernan and Weller, 2010; Dahlstrom et al., 2011; Marrando and Craft, 2017).

Studying Policy Advice 'Systems'

Practitioners and researchers have long recognised the complex ecology of advice that circulates around government and adjusts to the context within which governments govern (Dror, 1984; Plowden, 1987; Peters and Barker, 1993). The notion of a system has more meaning than a structure to those working within it. The public policy system is seen as 'a vast repository of knowledge for policy' that 'covers the relationships and flows of policy relevant knowledge and information among people, organisations and institutions that have policymaking roles

and responsibilities . . . Public policy is the outcome of a complex set of interactions among actors in the system' (IPAA, 2012, 20). These actors include ministers, government departments and agencies, businesses and business organisations, charities and foundations, universities and research institutes, NGOs, consultants and individual citizens. Policymaking occurs within 'a system, rather than a structure, with policy makers acting more as stewards and less as top-down controllers of sharply defined processes' (IPAA, 2012, vi).

The policy advisory system (PAS) has been conceived of as an interlocking set of actors and organisations that provide recommendations for action to policymakers (Halligan, 1995; Craft and Howlett, 2012). This definition has been extensively used, as it captures the plurality of suppliers along with contextual contingencies that may influence how governments navigate the advisory waters.

There are also some important limitations with this definition, which became clear as interviews were conducted with elites inside and outside of government, and in seeking to make sense of the changes that were readily apparent in the composition and operation of these systems. There is a presumption that there is a 'fit' or congruence – and interlocking – of advisory units and practices between the various bodies that engage in advisory activity. This is not invariably the case, as some advisers and advisory practices are in conflict, producing tensions between actors. A healthy tension contributes to dynamism, but it is also a key source of broader conflicts between political and public service elites and between evidence-based policymaking and decision-making based on the interests and values of communities, stakeholders or partisan calculations.

An alternative conception of PAS is of interlocked actors that vary between contexts: sectors, jurisdictions and over time. The important point is the existence of an identifiable system of policy advising that, to a greater or lesser extent, has some coherence and core, secondary and peripheral actors who provide various types of advisory inputs. This notion of a policy advising system has been extensively used in anglophone and European countries because of its value in analysing change (Hustedt and Veit, 2017; Veit, Hustedt and Bach, 2017; OECD, 2017).

Lastly, the notion of systems conjures up a logical and ordered state, similar to the point already made about the interlocking nature of advisory units. Some have pointed out this is misleading and favour alternative terms such as a 'network of advisory bodies' (OECD, 2017).

This is, however, an overly narrow reading of the original intent, which was to eschew the confines of individual advisers and practices and think *systematically* about advice. PAS is therefore conceived as an assemblage of advisory units and practices that exist at a given time with which governments and other actors engage for policy purposes. This captures a wider set of policy advisory work that allows for going beyond the closed deliberations of bureaucrats or prime minister's courts to reflect the push and pull of the demand and supply mediation of advice through various contexts (Savoie, 1999; Rhodes and Tiernan, 2014b; Veselý, 2017; Prince, 2018).

Thinking about advisory systems also blossomed on the cusp of big debates about how much power and influence the state really has any more and the fact that governance, often by semi-autonomous networks, has supplanted the command and control mode of government. The effect has been the decoupling of advisory systems from the dominance of the public service as a unit of analysis (Craft and Wilder, 2017), and shifts from government to governance suggest that the processes of aggregating and brokering community and interest-group aspirations require a different skill set (Mulgan, 2014). Advisory work is about problem definition and framing for the broader policy world, not only for authorised decision makers. It is also about making policy happen, not just figuring out which options are available. There are greater expectations for advisers to position themselves on policy problems and highlight solutions to motivate behaviour from non-governmental actors – firms, citizens, markets, international agencies – or other parts of government. This is not to undervalue government and the public service in particular, but to underscore the environmental reality that government policymakers are not the only audience for policy advice and that broader information wars are a reality of contemporary 'post-truth' Westminster worlds. Disinformation and spin are not new tactics (Hood, 2010; Perl et al., 2018). Several studies involving the four Westminster systems have touched upon issues flagged here but have not drawn on in-depth analysis of policy advice (e.g. Bakvis, 1997; Savoie, 2008; Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009). This book seeks to extend the comparative analysis within a PAS framework to assess how Westminster policy advisory systems are adapting and how various advisers interact and seek to exert influence in policymaking and governance. The book builds on a range of recent developments in policy scholarship that

seek to understand actual patterns of policy analysis and influence and how they differ in jurisdictions with shared administrative traditions. The book is anchored by four key themes that guide the analysis:

1. The place of advisory work in the Westminster administrative tradition;
2. Structural and organisational trends in PAS;
3. Comparative analysis of advisory systems' stability and change over time;
4. Managing PAS and implications for policymaking and governance.

PAS and Westminster Traditions

While the previous section makes clear that government is not the only advisory game in town, there is still an important set of conditions and practices that shape how policy advice works in and around government. A first step in understanding context is to comprehend the governance arrangements that exist in a Westminster system. As detailed in Chapter 2, the Westminster administrative tradition is not a firm set of rules but rather a set of shared principles and practices, some more defined than others, which guide how politicians, public servants and others engage in advisory activity and exchanges. The examination of the four classic Westminster systems means that there are some important differences in how the PAS is organised and operates given broader choices about Westminster traditions and country-specific contexts and institutional designs.

The distinctive quality of the anglophone administrative tradition is that it both facilitates and constrains change, a combination that distinguishes it from other traditions and which has played an important role in the modernisation process. This tradition can both enable extensive reform and constrain change where it departs significantly from accepted understandings. The constraints derive from the Westminster model as well as routines and conventions that emerge from experiential learning, while the pragmatism has its origins in British administrative style. A significant trend during the reform era has been the apparent reification of the potential of instrumentalism and pragmatism as governments rose to new levels of reformism.

Managerialism (or new public management) has been most associated with anglophone countries because of their early experiments

and where this reform agenda reached its apogee. At the same time, the role of the political executive was being transformed, leading to a redistribution of roles and responsibilities, particularly for policy advice. Both developments were facilitated by the flexibilities in the anglophone administrative tradition (Halligan, 2015, 2020). The consequences of managerialism and politicisation are central to the provision of advice in the evolving policy advisory systems.

At this point it can be noted that the inner contradictions of the administrative tradition have exposed significant tensions and dilemmas with major implications for advisory systems (Pierre 1995; Marrando and Craft, 2017). On the one hand, the tradition has enabled unparalleled reform and flexibility, often centred on maximising further flexibilities and few constraints; but, on the other hand, core elements of both the tradition, and Westminster more generally, have been modified, and fluidity in understandings has fostered ambiguity. The consequences have been disruptive in both senses of the word: preventing progress and effectiveness; and facilitating innovation (Halligan, 2020).

Structure and Operational Trends in PAS

A major aim of this book is to better describe and analyse the state of play with the public service in the twenty-first century and other types of internal and external advisory categories, as well as to improve how they can be analysed and compared. The main actors and advisers' roles and relationship to government are provided in Table 1.1. The actors are generally identifiable because of their formal position or high profile. It has not been possible to cover all the different sources of advice, particularly those that are less tangible. For example, academics, chief science advisers and lobbyists are not examined in detail given data limitations and comparability issues. The inclusion of the relationship to government is not intended to promote the government as the central unit of analysis but rather to help underscore the significance of change with respect to both government organisation and operation and the broader PAS changes set out in the book.

Table 1.1 underscores the significant flexibilities that are prominent in Westminster traditions given the ambiguities and discretion noted earlier. Both structural aspects and operational considerations have characterised recent Westminster PAS. This book details, for instance,

Table 1.1 *Components of policy advisory systems and relationships and roles as policy advisers*

Component	Role	Relationship to government	Issues and questions
Prime minister	Strategic leadership & policy direction	Epitomises the government	Influence of PM's style
Ministers	Policy leadership	Dependent on PM's style	Results of interventions and policy priorities
Departments	Advice provider and organiser; implementation	Dependent and self-generating	Decline in policy role; processing other advice
Central agencies	Policy coordination	Prime minister's department central role	Variable central roles and relationships with PMO
Prime minister's office	Political control	Supports prime minister	Extent of policy role and influence
Ministerial advisers	Political advice and management	Agent and surrogate of employer (minister or government)	Extent of policy role and influence
Government inquiries	Advice to minister or government	Dependent on government for initiation & existence	Depends on what sort of inquiry and level of independence
Government authorities	Specialised advice	Independence depends on funding & referrals	Impact of newer agencies
Parliamentary committees & bodies	Independent advice; reports of inquiries	Depends on source of referrals	Variations in capacity, autonomy, policy impact
Consultants	External expert, specialist advice	Commissioned advice	Providing knowledge & legitimacy for policy
Think tanks	Ideas, analysis, advocacy	Usually independent if not funded	How to demonstrate impact
International bodies	Advice, binding international agreements; coordination and crisis management	Government membership/ signatories to agreements; dependence in times of crisis	How to register impact and implications of influence on domestic PAS actors and levers

clear structural changes to the size and composition of public services, the institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of some actors and advisory bodies, such as the addition of parliamentary budget offices, and the widespread increase in the number and influence of ministers' partisan advisers. Orthodox assumptions regarding the way advice is generated, circulated and consumed by decision makers is now in question, with developments that suggest departures in practice as well. The bilateralism of minister–senior-official relations is no longer exclusive with a range of other advisers on call or seeking or requiring attention. The public's expectations have evolved, and there have been attempts to open up policy processes through freedom of information regimes and more participatory and 'open' forms of policymaking. Pre-internet era advisory practices of pen and paper and briefing binders full of departmental advice are being replaced by tablets and e-briefing systems. Google searches and WhatsApp texting chains have moved into the executive suite, raising further implications for PAS.

Stability and Change to Advisory Systems over Time

The focus on policy advisory systems is helpful for recognising that a number of policy advisory components exist (e.g. types of policy advisers, advice and advisory practices) and that important distinctions can characterise their respective configurations and operation across jurisdictions and domains (Craft and Wilder, 2016; Craft and Halligan, 2017). Systems can be used to differentiate various dimensions for analysis, such as simple or complex, organised or disorganised (Snyder, 1993; Jervis, 1997). Policy advisory systems can be analysed over time and compared according to the degree to which they are closed or open, hierarchical or horizontal, centralised or decentralised, and considering the relative importance of the main units. In addition, advisory systems facilitate a dynamic and interactive frame for understanding how advisory components interact and how such systems may themselves change over time (Aberbach and Rockman, 1989; Craft and Howlett, 2013; van den Berg, 2017).

A primary focus in this book is providing a characterisation of each advisory system and comparison of the PAS of the four Westminster countries. This is undertaken for the main dimensions of PAS addressed as well as contextual features such as the administrative tradition. This study examines the similarities and differences that characterise

Westminster PAS, how they have evolved and the variations within the anglophone tradition. Where are Westminster principles the strongest, and where are they eroding from a policy advisory perspective? These four cases are often subject to anglophone stereotypes characterised by the primary change dynamics of externalisation from public service suppliers to external, namely consultant and think tank advisers, and by politicisation of PAS driven by ministers seeking greater congruence of advice with political and policy objectives, often secured by the increased use of partisan advisers working for ministers (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009; Craft and Howlett, 2013; Veselý, 2013). Evidence of this is apparent in the book, but it is qualified and nuanced. As detailed in the following chapters, closer inspection points to important variations in how these systems have evolved, when and why.

Managing PAS and Implications for Policymaking and Governance

The first of two questions concerns the extent to which, and in what ways, governments can manage PAS. It is unclear how often governments think strategically – or holistically – about an entity approximating PAS as opposed to significant components of it. Even then, decisions may reflect short-term political needs and choices about a ready means for achieving policy objectives rather than the consequences for the functioning of PAS. The reliance on one source rather than another has consequences, often unintended, which become apparent in the medium or long term (such as the rundown of internal capability or the budget blowout of external contracts). Governments can alter PAS through austerity programs, stymie open government and close down forms of public engagement. They can favour particular sources of advice to the relative exclusion of others, which can include bypassing public service advice. They can expand or contract greatly the use of partisan advisers, strengthen the centre of government for policy purposes or devolve roles to departments or beyond. It is also commonplace to govern on a 'whole-of-government' basis. Much depends on the myriad decisions made by ministers and departments about whether to source advice internally or to buy it.

The burgeoning PAS is a product of governments extending their advisory processes outward, but increasingly it concerns societal interests seeking to be part of the policymaking process. The discretion and

change that have been suggested earlier in this chapter raise important questions about how the PAS can be better organised and, in the face of less government control over its moving parts, how it can be managed. This raises implications for policymaking and governance of the different approaches to policy advisory systems. These can be quite profound, including a range of effects, such as problems with the supply of policy advice, the quality of advice and reconciling demand and supply.

Contestability has become pervasive and prevails, not only in terms of how modern Westminster systems are now set up but also between departments with specialised units and hierarchical chains of command, constant stakeholder and media scrutiny, and the centre's management of policy processes and strategic direction. Parliamentary committees, auditors general and the media have all seized on significant expenditures to 'external' advisers – and questioned the close links between governments and some policy think tanks.

These systems also require considerable coordination. The fragmentation of policy advice due to new suppliers and advisory needs means governments are now forced to reconcile a broader range of advice within and outside of government. The ensuing chapters detail different strategies and choices with respect to how coordination is sought and, similarly, how ministers and governments have sought to secure political control. There are also persistent questions about how much control government can actually exert any more, as policy and advisory activity often unfolds in arenas and networks less responsive to command and control approaches that may have once worked well. These developments have fueled official reviews and attempts to gain more perspective on how well these systems are serving the needs of contemporary Westminster governments (e.g. Scott, 2010; OECD, 2017) and what is – and can be – done to address their shortcomings.

Main Arguments

The main arguments advanced are linked to the key lenses of analysis set out in this chapter and engaged with throughout the book. Firstly, the policy advisory system is argued to be more dynamic and complex than is currently depicted in the PAS literature. The predominance of the public service as the unit of analysis in PAS research has led to a dominant focus on externalization and politicisation vis-à-vis the public service, at the expense of broader reflections on these dynamics