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The prime minister's chief-of-staff: a profile from Westminster countries

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Chiefs of Staff to heads of government are influential actors in Westminster countries and elsewhere. Despite their prominent position at the apex of political life, information with respect to their personal and professional backgrounds is scarce. To resolve this gap, we undertake a biographical analysis and present the most complete comparative dataset mapping 53 chiefs of staff to prime ministers in four Westminster family countries from 1990 to 2021: Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. Findings demonstrate that a typical chief of staff will be appointed around the age of 45, almost always male, hold a bachelor's degree at a top-tier university (and increasingly a post-graduate degree in more recent times), increasingly arriving in the role with prior professional experience in the media and as a political adviser (less so as a career civil servant), and will commonly leave the job when their prime minister leaves office. The findings have implications for theory. Of interest to future research, we build beyond this novel empirical foundation to propose a range of plausible hypotheses to explain how chiefs of staff may affect executive governance.

Key words: *chief-of-staff *ministerial advisers *biographical analysis *comparative public administration

INTRODUCTION

The increasing influence of chiefs of staff (hereafter CoS) to prime ministers and presidents in many countries has not gone unnoticed by political science scholars (Cohen, Hult, & Walcott, 2016; Dahlström, Peters, & Pierre, 2011; Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014). Sometimes labelled as the head of government's principal political administrator, adviser, alter ego, gatekeeper, guardian, manager-in-chief, and proxy, and all at once, the CoS role has evolved at varying tempos and levels of authority. Figuratively speaking, over time the most prominent partisan appointee has graduated from secretary to political prince, from background negotiator to front page personality. What we know is that chiefs of staff to prime ministers and presidents are the most influential of all advisers (Cohen et al., 2016; Craft & Halligan, 2020). From a basic spatial logic perspective, the closer the adviser is to government decision-makers, the more influence the adviser will have (Craft & Halligan, 2017, p. 49). However, our knowledge of the personalities in this powerful position is surprisingly patchy.

In the Westminster family countries,[1] Rhodes and Tiernan (2014) produced the most comprehensive study examining Australian CoS profiles from the 1970s to 2010s. Now quite outdated, Plasse (1994) examined the profiles of CoS to all Canadian federal cabinet ministers in 1990. Outside of the Westminster countries, but still within the Anglo-American tradition, literature on the CoS to the President of the United States is particularly rich (Cohen et al., 2016; Kernell, Popkin, & Neustadt, 1986; Pfiffner, 1993; Sullivan, 2004; Walcott, Warshaw, & Wayne, 2001); though even so, biographical analyses are few, often not systematic, and are more likely to extend to a wider entourage of presidential advisers (Tenpas, 2018). Further, none of these studies have endeavoured to compare CoS in two or more countries.[2]

Beyond these studies, biographical analyses in Westminster countries broadens more generally to studies sampling the wider ministerial and political adviser cohort (Forward, 1977; Goplerud, 2015; Sellers, 2014; Walter, 1986). Sporadic blurbs mentioning CoS or authored by former prime ministers (Howard, 2011; Thatcher, 2013) and political advisers (Fall, 2020; Goldenberg, 2006) can also be found in political biographies, but lack any systematic or substantial analysis. The limited biographical research also stands in stark contrast to what could be richer biographical analyses conducted on the other "two elements" in the Executive Triangle[3] – politicians (Carnes, 2018; Turner-Zwinkels & Mills, 2020) and senior civil servants (Theakston & Fry, 1989). In short, the little attention

[1] We acknowledge confusion within the literature when using the term 'Westminster' (Russell & Serban, 2020). We use Westminster as shorthand for the following Anglophone countries: Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. Britain is also sometimes used as shorthand with reference to the United Kingdom.

[2] We should say that Tiernan and Pfiffner (2014) produced a conference paper comparing CoS functions in the United States and Australia.

[3] The Executive Triangle is a concept recognising the relationship between executive politicians, top civil servants, and political advisers. Sometimes referred to as the tripartite relationship in which advisers constitute the 'third element'. Itself, an extension of what was previously viewed as the dual relationship between two actors—ministers and top civil servants.

devoted to systematically establishing CoS profiles and their professional background from a comparative and longitudinal perspective is surprising given their prominent position in the personal office of the head of government: the apex of political life.

While a significant part of ministerial and political adviser research is rightly devoted to the roles of senior political advisers and their effect on policy-making (Brans, de Visscher, Gouglas, & Jaspers, 2017; Craft, 2016; Esselment, Lees-Marshment, & Marland, 2014; Maley, 2015), it is at least equally important to know who gets the most coveted advisory role, what were the relevant contextual factors, and what qualifications and capacities he or she bring to the role. As former presidential adviser to John F. Kennedy, Theodore Sorensen, said, “a good White House staff can give a President that crucial margin of time, analysis, and judgment that makes an unmanageable problem more manageable” (1963, p. 71). Presumably, heads of government will hire the best and brightest people available to assist them. But do they?

To resolve this fundamental empirical gap, this study adopts a *biographical research approach* (Elgie, 2020; Walter, 2014) to map the profiles of 53 CoS to prime ministers in four Westminster family countries from 1990-2021: Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. This approach enables us to respond to Theakston’s (1999) efforts to draw attention to the lack of literature systematically mapping administrative and political elite groups, and more recent calls by Shaw and Eichbaum (2018, p. 198) for more spatial comparisons and Wilson (2015, p. 469) for more longitudinal data on ministerial advisers. Specifically, our research question simply asks:

What patterns and trends can be found from mapping the personal and professional profiles of former chiefs of staff to Westminster prime ministers?

This question aims to build an empirical portrait of these political actors, illustrating trends and patterns that then lead us to hypothesis generation. In addition, the results have broader implications to improve our understanding of two common trends observed in Westminster countries, including how the institutionalisation of ministerial staff vary across time and countries (Craft & Halligan, 2017), and whether the careers of ministerial staff have shifted from individuals with a civil servant background to individuals with political acumen (Dowding & Taflaga, 2020). These two trends strike at the heart of Westminster administrative traditions, which share principles including responsible government as defined by the fusion of the executive and parliament along with strong cabinet government, ministerial responsibility, and a permanent professional non-partisan bureaucracy (Rhodes, Wanna, & Weller, 2009).

The article proceeds as follows. The following section provides a brief overview to the origins of ministerial advisers and chiefs of staff in a Westminster context. Then, an outline of the method

and data collection process is explained. Following this, the empirical results are presented. Lastly, a discussion section provides conclusions and hypotheses that can be explored in future research.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF IN WESTMINSTER CONTEXTS

For contextual purposes it is prudent to begin by providing a brief history on the origins of political advisers and the introduction of the chief of staff title in Westminster countries. Generally speaking, Commonwealth-based scholars suggest the 1960s and 1970s is a notable period when the *ad hoc* "political advisers experiment" began (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010; H. Wilson, 1976, p. 202). The challenge for researchers is to pinpoint precise events and evidence to support this observation. This is because prime ministers have always had political advisers around them, though official records may not have formally detailed their existence. In the UK for example, the Civil Service Yearbook (a detailed repository of political information) did not recognise the political office--the institutional home of political advisers--as a distinctive element in the prime minister's office until 1983.

Table 1 provides an overview of when political staffers were generally permitted or received endorsement in four Westminster family countries, and when both the terminology transitioned from *principle private secretary* (sometimes political secretary or executive assistant) to *chief of staff* in a more routine manner. There are numerous caveats to this summary table, which would require a separate journal article, but for brevity we cannot detail here. In saying this, we can highlight some issues. For example, in the UK, Margaret Thatcher appointed David Wolfson as the first official UK chief of staff between 1979-1985. However, the chief of staff title generally remained un-used between 1985-1997, and the function of the role is considered less influential than the contemporary chief of staff role later formalised by Tony Blair in 1997. In Australia, Liberal Party leader and leader of the opposition between 1990-1994 John Hewson introduced the chief of staff title to his political adviser Duncan Fairweather. Though Hewson was not elected prime minister, his successor John Howard continued with the new tradition after winning the 1996 federal election by giving the chief of staff title to Nicole Feely.

Caveats aside, interestingly political advisers were introduced by (or at least coincided with) left party governments in all four countries. In contrast, the terminology transition with respect to the CoS role was made by (or at least coincided with) three conservative party governments; four if you include Thatcher.

Table 1. The origins of political advisers in Westminster ministers' offices and the introduction of the chief of staff title

	Introduction of political advisers	Introduction of chief of staff title	
	Foundation period permitting political advisers, notable reformer, and political party	*Terminology twist from principle private secretary to formal and influential chief of staff role, including name of CoS, notable reformer, and political party*	
Australia	1974 Prime Minister and Cabinet report; and 1976 Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration; Gough Whitlam (Labor)	1996	Nicole Feely, chief of staff to prime minister John Howard (Liberal)^
Canada	1962-63 Glassco Commission; Public Service Employment Act 1967; Pierre Trudeau (Liberal)	1987	Derek Burney, chief of staff to prime minister Brian Mulroney (Conservative)
New Zealand	1986 State Services Commission review of the prime minister's department; and 1989 State Service Commission review of the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office; David Lange (Labour)	1990	Rob Eaddy, chief of Staff to prime minister Jim Bolger (National)
United Kingdom	1968 Fulton Report; Harold Wilson's "Political Advisers Experiment" speech 1975; Harold Wilson (labour)	1997	Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to prime minister Tony Blair* (Labour)

Source. Author's own creation. Founding principle considered to be a key critical juncture exemplifying a notable 'endorsement' that enabled ministers to appoint partisan staff to their personal offices. Before this, the use of impartial staff was less common, but generally did occur in small numbers. See, (Boston, 1988; Craft, 2016; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018b; Walter, 1986; Yong & Hazell, 2014).

^ John Hewson in Australia, when Liberal Party leader and leader of the opposition between 1990-1994, introduced the chief of staff title to his political adviser Duncan Fairweather. Hewson's successor, John Howard, continued with the new tradition after winning the 1996 federal election.

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In this study, we use the term chief of staff throughout the 1990 to 2021 period under investigation. However, readers should be aware that while the chief of staff job title is now common in all the Westminster countries, other terms were used in previous eras, especially in the 1990s, including political secretary or executive assistant. Where the CoS job title was not formally used, we profile the most senior political adviser as the chief of staff. In the UK for example, Jonathan Hill's title was *Political Secretary* (between 1992-1993) and is thus labelled here as John Major's *chief of staff*. We define a chief of staff as *the most senior politically appointed adviser in a political executive's personal office, often responsible for leading and/or coordinating operations in the relevant office, providing advice, acting as a guardian, and proxy for their principal*.

To our knowledge, only two biographical studies have systematically examined CoS in Westminster countries. Research by Rhodes and Tiernan (2014) on Australian CoS from 1970 to 2013

is the most comprehensive study. Though evidently a single country study, it is nonetheless the most systematic account of the profiles of CoS to prime ministers, leading the authors to empirically demonstrate an institutional shift from CoS with a civil servant background to CoS with a political background; also known as the transition from the principal private secretary model to a political advisory model. The observation lends weight to the career de-separation thesis where “the source of policy advice for ministers has partly shifted from the professional public servant to political advisers lacking experience and with different career ambitions than public service” (Dowding & Taflaga, 2020, p. 116). Elsewhere, Plasse’s (1994) mapping exercise of 19 CoS to Canadian federal ministers employed in 1990 found most CoS had more than ten years working experience, were mostly male, had an average age of 38, well-educated with a minimum bachelor degree (often in the humanities and social sciences), and had some form of party affiliation (e.g. party membership) that led to their appointment. This useful contribution is now outdated and, while purely an exploratory study, offered little in the way of theoretical considerations.

Generally, the findings from these studies are varied. There are no definite career paths. Many have prior work experience as ministerial adviser and/or in the media, though some are distinguished public servants. The role commonly offers a career boost once they leave office, but sectors vary with some entering top civil service positions and others entering lucrative private sector roles, including lobbying and government affairs. Burn out factor is high with adviser tenure often no longer than three years (and evidently also contingent on the prime minister holding office). Considering these basic observations, the true value of this form of biographical analysis lies in its ability to dovetail into ongoing debates within public administration and political science literature. These include, but are not limited to, revolving door lobbyists (Lapira & Thomas, 2017), partisan policy professionals (Svallfors, 2020), individuals’ policy capacity (Howlett, 2015), stability of executive offices (Dickinson (Dickinson & Tenpas, 2002), determinants for promotion (Bach & Veit, 2017), organisational performance (Cohen, Vaughn, & Villalobos, 2012), and executive styles of governance (Bennister, 2012).

METHOD AND DATA

To map CoS profiles we adopted a biographical research approach which is a method of study that seeks to systematically identify personal characteristics of a common group of actors (Elgie, 2020; Walter, 2014). The individual information collected is of a personal and professional nature (e.g., age and gender, education, and employment). Biographical research examining political staff of executive politicians has a rich tradition in French-language literature (Rouban, 2012), and as a method is called

prosopography (Delpu, 2015), but is less common in English-language literature. Recently, however, biographical studies on political staff (also called ministerial advisers and special advisers) is experiencing somewhat of a renaissance, but still confined to single country studies (for example, (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2020; Blach-Ørsten, Mayerhöffer, & Willig, 2019; Goplerud, 2015; Krajňák, Staronova, & Pickering, 2020; Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014; Tenpas, 2018; R. P. Wilson, 2015).

At this stage we should also remind readers the focus here is to unpack biographical insights about *who chiefs of staff are* (an important mapping exercise); in contrast to other research that examines what chiefs of staff do (Walcott et al., 2001), whether political appointees make worse bureaucrats (Lewis, 2007), or how they have institutionalised (Cohen et al., 2016). We envisage our mapping exercise here will provide the empirical foundation that enables future research to explore these other salient questions.

The number of individual profiles collected in this study includes a total of 53 chiefs-of-staff from five Westminster derived countries: Australia (n=19), Britain (n=13), Canada (n=13), and New Zealand (n=8). The distribution of cases from a simple left-right political spectrum includes 22 individuals from left parties and 31 from right parties. Instead of sampling a portion of ministerial staff—as is commonly done (Connaughton, 2010; R. P. Wilson, 2015; Yong & Hazell, 2014), our CoS cohort is systematically presented as a complete group—(*Note for ECPR conference: at this point in time we are still collecting some missing information, especially from New Zealand*).

These countries—and by association the senior political advisers—are well-suited for spatial (cross-sectional) comparative research as they share similar administrative traditions and political appointment processes (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010). All four countries are often compared in ministerial adviser related research (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Esselment et al., 2014; Ng, 2018). The time-period from 1990 to 2021 also offers a longitudinal (cross-temporal) comparative perspective partly selected due to when the ‘chief-of-staff’ title generally became more normalised across all countries, and the role itself became more empowered.

Data was primarily retrieved from a wide variety of primary and secondary sources including official government reports, political biographies, advisers’ personal LinkedIn accounts (a professional social networking online platform), news articles, and books. This wide variety of sources is needed because collecting biographical data on advisers who ‘live in the dark’ has historically been less easily

retrievable than data on elected officials or senior civil servants which is often publicly reported (as other scholars have begrudgingly discovered, see (Blick, 2004; Tenpas, 2018; Tiernan, 2007).[4]

We too experienced limitations. As with any ambitious comparative study, we experienced data gaps when retrieving individual profiles from New Zealand where there is limited research, and from all individuals who worked in the 1990s where information is less easily retrievable than more contemporary eras. Also, as the LinkedIn site contains self-reporting information the accuracy of the information can be put into question. However, this is less of a concern for our high profile cohort as former CoS with active LinkedIn accounts are motivated to enter accurate information as any false information, on such a public profile, could lead to shaming and be harmful to one's professional image and career potential. To further resolve these limitations and improve accuracy of the data, we conducted 45-minute interviews with five former chiefs of staff—(*Note for ECPR conference: at this point in time we also have other interviews scheduled to be conducted*). We choose not to report the names of the interviewees here as, perhaps somewhat ironically for a biographical study, we preferred to make the interviews anonymous by default. This way, participants could feel freer to express any political sensitivities without fear of attribution.

As a micro-level approach to comparative research, this empirically driven study aims to inductively search for patterns and develop explanations for the patterns. The individual biographical data collected includes information on their name, age, gender, education, previous work experience, tenure, and reason for leaving the role.[5] For the data analysis, we simply tabulate the qualitative data as this is a common approach used (see, (Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014; R. P. Wilson, 2015)), and suitable for answering our mapping aims; though we should highlight that statistical methods are sometimes deployed depending on one's research aims, questions, data, and often with a large-N cohort (for example, (Askim et al., 2020; Goplerud, 2015)).

RESULTS: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES

Data from our systematic analysis reveals the most comprehensive profile of chiefs of staff to prime ministers in Westminster family countries across a range of demographic categories.

[4] For example, the literature is unclear on the percentage breakdown between insiders and outsiders in ministers' offices. A survey of ministerial advisers in New Zealand found 43.3% were employed in the private sector and 23.3% were employed in a government department (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007). In Canada, a survey of 64 senior policy advisers working for Canadian ministers found that only three had previously worked in the public service (R. P. Wilson, 2015). In Australia, around 20 per cent of the total number of ministerial staff cohort were public servants employed under the MOPS Act (Maley, 2017). In the UK, the most common career background of special advisers is party-political employment—a quarter of the sample (Yong & Hazell, 2014).

[5] Biographical data is sometimes called demographic data, with the former more focused on individual attributes and the latter more focused on the characteristics of the population.

Age and gender

Beginning with age, the median age at which a CoS was appointed across all countries is 45. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency and distribution at which age group the cohort was appointed. This age range is similar across most countries, with Australia and Canada averaging 45, and in Britain 44, and New Zealand 47 (see Figure 3). We should also say this data represents 49 of the 53 individuals as we could not source accurate ages for four individuals. As a percentage by decade, 22 per cent were aged in their 40s, and 18 per cent in their 30s (primarily late 30s). These were the two largest groups, which evidently reflects the seniority of the role and a demand for experienced individuals with a minimum of 15 years professional work experience. The remaining individuals appointed in their 50s represent 14 per cent of the cohort. When examining the average age by each of the three decades, Figure 2 illustrates the average age of the CoS is marginally increasing in Australia and the UK, remaining stable in New Zealand, and slightly decreasing slightly in Canada.

The youngest individual was Alister Jordan, appointed at age 29, who was CoS to Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd for two years up until Rudd was ousted in an internal party leadership spill in mid-2010. Jordan was also the only individual appointed aged in their 20s. The oldest individual was Edward Lister, appointed at age 71, who was CoS to British prime minister Boris Johnson; but was only acting as interim CoS for two months following the resignation of controversial *de facto* CoS Dominic Cummings. The oldest 'non-interim' CoS was Peter Woolcott, appointed at age 64, who was CoS to Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull for 12 months, and later appointed as the Public service Commissioner.

In relation to gender representation, women CoS accounted for 15 per cent of the cohort. There were three women CoS from Australia, two from Canada and Britain, and one from New Zealand. Unsurprisingly, this low number is consistent with existing literature on the under-representation of women political staff (Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018; Taflaga & Kerby, 2019; Tenpas, 2000). Aside from the numerical appointments, the timeline illustrated in Figure 4 shows that women have longer tenures in left party governments (averaging 61 months) compared to right party governments (averaging 14 months). The two longest-serving women were Heather Simpson (108 months) and Katie Telford (since 2015 and still in the office at the time of writing). The two longest-serving right party women CoS were Peta Credlin (24 months) and Judith Chaplin (15 months).

When viewing the appointment of women CoS by political party, governing major right parties have appointed more women than the major left parties: *5 Right* to *3 Left* respectively. However, this is distorted by the variable distribution of 31 right party and 22 left party cases, meaning left party cases would likely be higher had more left party governments been elected. Further, one might also

expect more left party CoS as almost all left party governments in this study have quota systems to support women in *elected roles*, while right parties generally do not (IDEA Gender Quota Database). Even though a quota system does not often exist for *adviser* roles, it is an expectation that an informal process exists as adviser roles can be a stepping-stone toward a career as an elected official.

Figure 1. Starting age of chief of staff

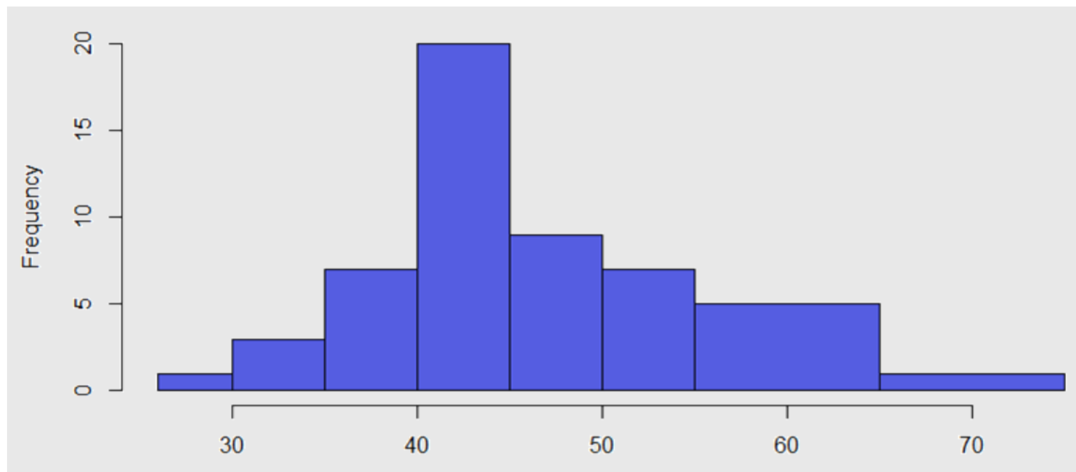


Figure 2. Starting age variation per decade and country

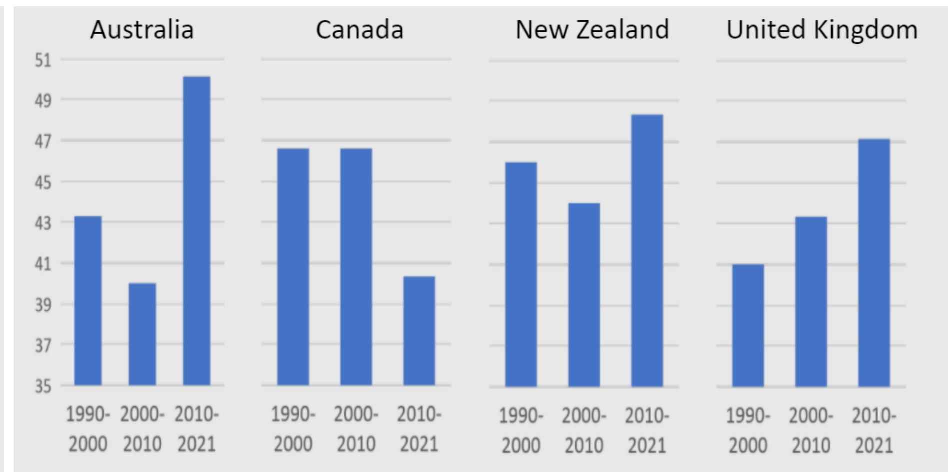


Figure 3. Starting age as chief of staff (logitudinal perspective)

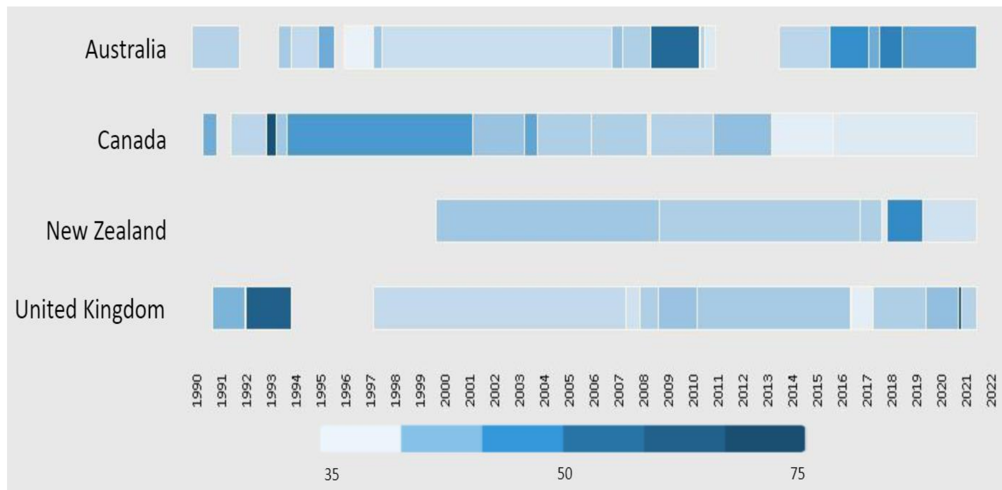
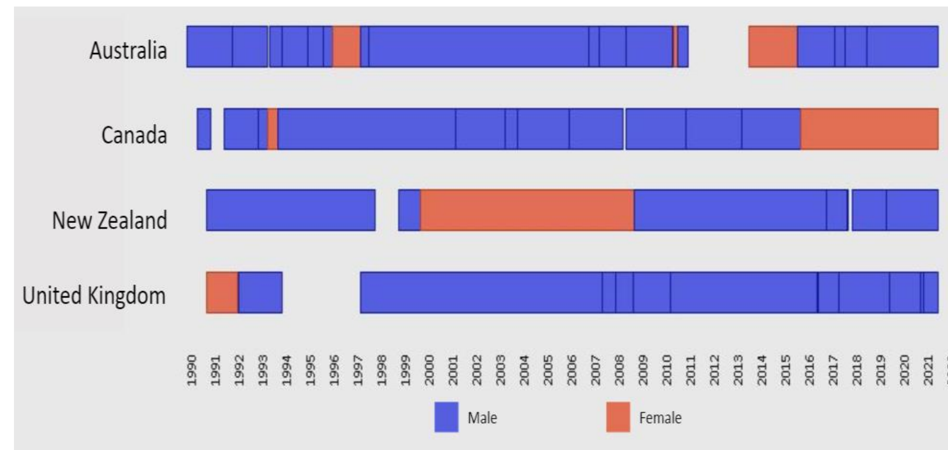


Figure 4. Representation by gender (logitudinal perspective)



Education, field of study and tertiary institutions

A general critique of ministerial advisers is that they lack educational qualifications relevant to understanding the machinery of government and the machinations of the ministries to which they are affiliated. A second critique suggests that when they do have tertiary degrees, they are often from the most elite universities in the country, which, on the one hand suggests perhaps encouragingly that individuals can rise to academic achievement, but on the other hand suggests an elitist group. But how do these critiques relate specifically to the CoS? Here we have data for 46 of the 53 individuals.

Figures 5 and 7 illustrate the highest degree obtained and variation across countries. Of the 46 CoS, 52 per cent held a bachelor's degree, a further 30 per cent a master's degree, and 11 per cent a doctorate. Just 7 per cent did not complete a university degree, instead completing secondary school or a journalism cadetship. Across countries, none of the British or New Zealanders completed a PhD. Three Australian and two Canadians completed a doctorate prior to being appointed CoS.

In addition, Figures 6 and 8 illustrates the fields of study and this variation across countries. The most common field was social and political sciences (commonly politics, history, and journalism) to which 52 per cent studied. This was followed by Law (11 per cent) and Business and Economics (11 per cent). Just two CoS studied the natural sciences (4 per cent). These findings are consistent with Plasse's (1994) study of Canadian CoS. There was little variation across countries. However, none of the Canadian cohort had a tertiary background in business and economics; though some had professional experience working in business (see further below).

When examining the universities attended, the CoS commonly studies at the top-tier institutions in each country. In the UK, the Oxbridge pathway was most common with four individuals having studied at Oxford and three at Cambridge, representing 54 per cent of the British cohort. Only one CoS attended a London university despite Whitehall being the centre of British political power and hosting numerous universities. Oddly, more Australians studied in London than British. In Australia, 37 per cent studied at the Australian National University in Canberra. It was similar in New Zealand, where the Victoria University in Wellington was overwhelmingly attended by most CoS. In Canada, the distribution was more widespread with four CoS studied at the two main Ottawa-based universities (Carleton and Ottawa), three from Toronto, Canada's largest city, and three from McGill in Montreal.

Moreover, seven CoS studied abroad. Consistent with the Anglosphere family, several Australians studied in the UK and the United States, several Canadians and one British CoS studied in the United States. None studied at a Continental European university (an important region for Britain and Ireland), nor did any study in Asia (an important region for Australia and New Zealand).

Figure 5. Highest degree obtained (logitudinal perspective)

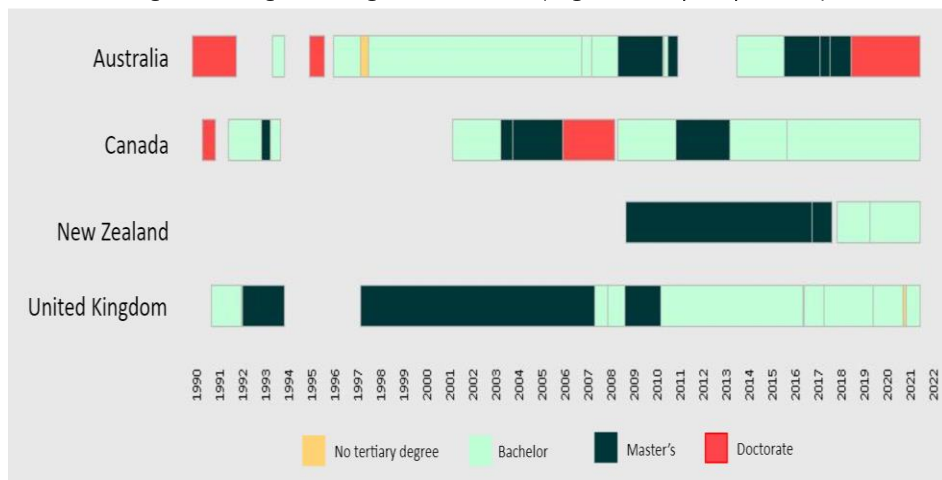


Figure 6. Field of study (logitudinal perspective)

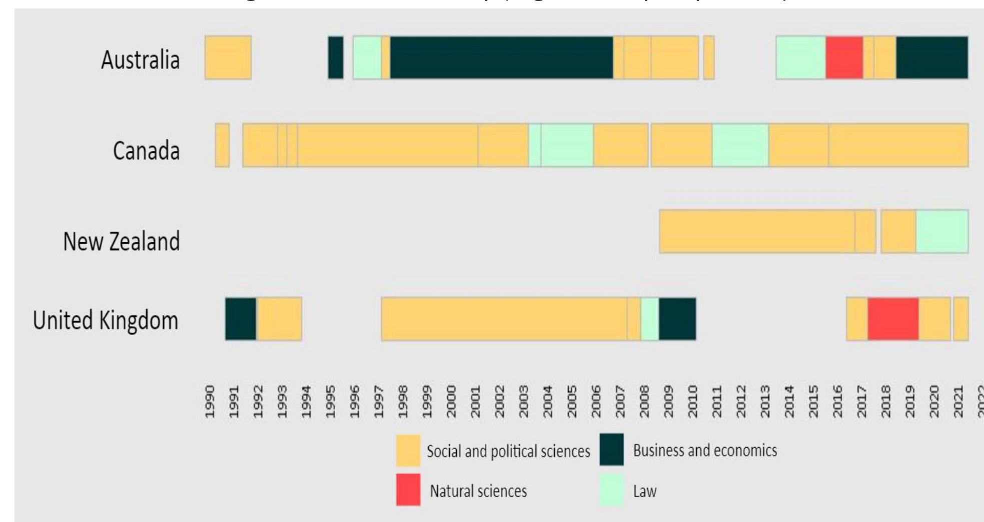
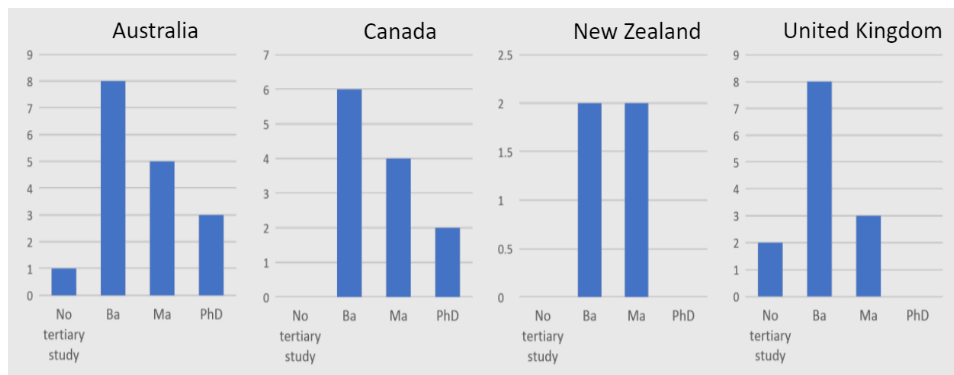
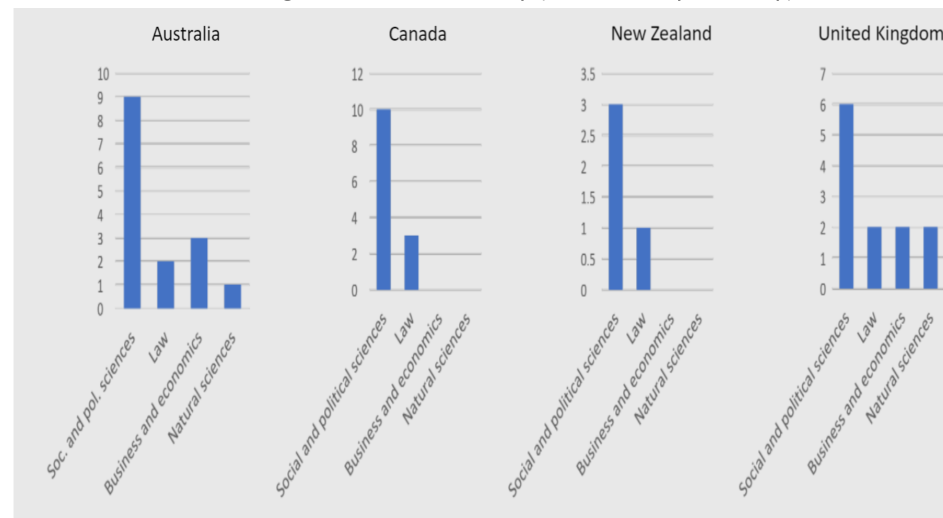


Figure 7. Highest degree obtained (variation by country)



Ba = bachelor's degree; Ma = Master's degree; PhD = Doctorate

Figure 8. Field of study (variation by country)



Tenure and reason for leaving

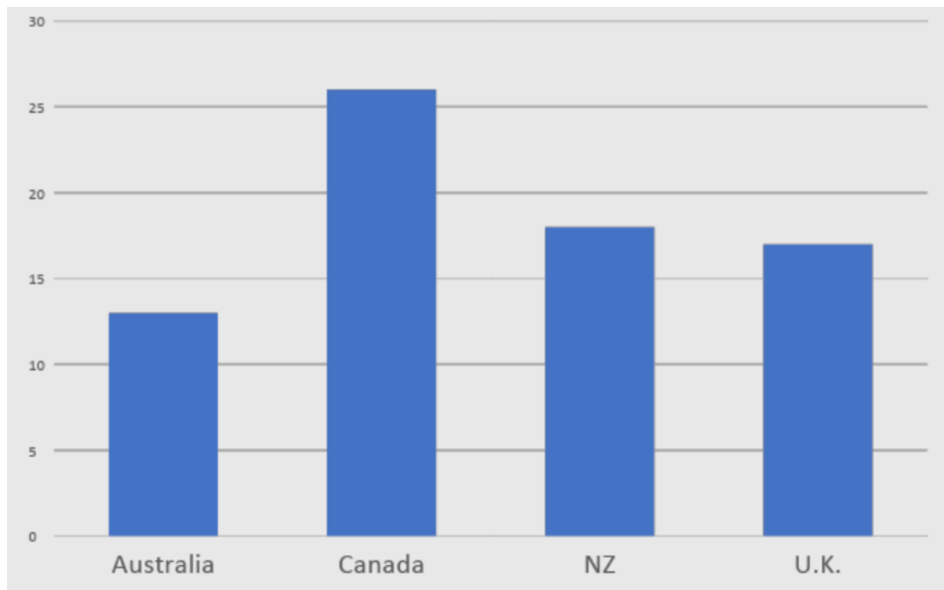
Examining the tenure of a senior political staffer can provide an insight into the health of an organisation; i.e. high turnover suggests an unhealthy organisation (Tenpas, 2018). Before introducing the data, however, a small caveat should be made. Turnover is also affected by the length of a parliamentary term, in which a prime minister and government can change, and by association so does the tenure of a CoS. Australia and New Zealand are outlier cases in democratic countries for having just three-year parliamentary terms, while the UK and Canada all have five-year parliamentary terms. In addition, Westminster conventions permit the head of government to call an early election. Thus, assuming the prime minister completes their full term, and their CoS choose to follow suit, it follows that the tenure of Australian and New Zealand CoS will be shorter than the other cases.

The median tenure is 17 months.[6] Around 36 per cent were employed for less than a year, 24 per cent for 1-2 years, another 24 per cent for 2-3 years and a smaller 16 per cent group for 3 years or more. Of all the individuals, the shortest tenure was less than a month, in which Clive Matheson was appointed CoS to Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in August 2018, which coincided with Turnbull being ousted in a leadership coup later that month. The longest tenure was 120 months (10 years) where Jonathan Hill served the entirety of British prime minister Tony Blair's premiership.

Across countries, CoS in New Zealand had the longest tenure averaging 47 months, and Australia had the shortest at 21 months. Despite both Australia and New Zealand having short three-year parliamentary terms, Australia has had more than double the number of New Zealand CoS over the same 30-year period (19 to 9 respectively). This can be partly explained by the frequent leadership changes in Australia which saw six prime ministers and five opposition leaders from 2007 to 2020. But also, frequent changes of CoS, with Keating, Howard, and Turnbull all employing four CoS during their time as prime minister, and also 8 CoS having been employed for 12 months or less. New Zealand has remained more stable with three long term CoS, Heather Simpson (108 months), Wayne Eagleson (105 months), and Rob Eaddy (85 months), comprising around 83 per cent of the period under examination. This invites interesting questions as to why the long-term NZ individuals chose not to transfer into more lucrative private sector or job security safe public sector roles after several years in the role; which, anecdotally, is common in other countries.

[6] We report median tenure as this is a more accurate representation rather than the average. The average tenure of a CoS across all cases is 27.12 months, but is distorted by an individual that, for example, worked just three weeks and another that worked for around 10 years.

Figure 9. Median tenure of chief of staff per country



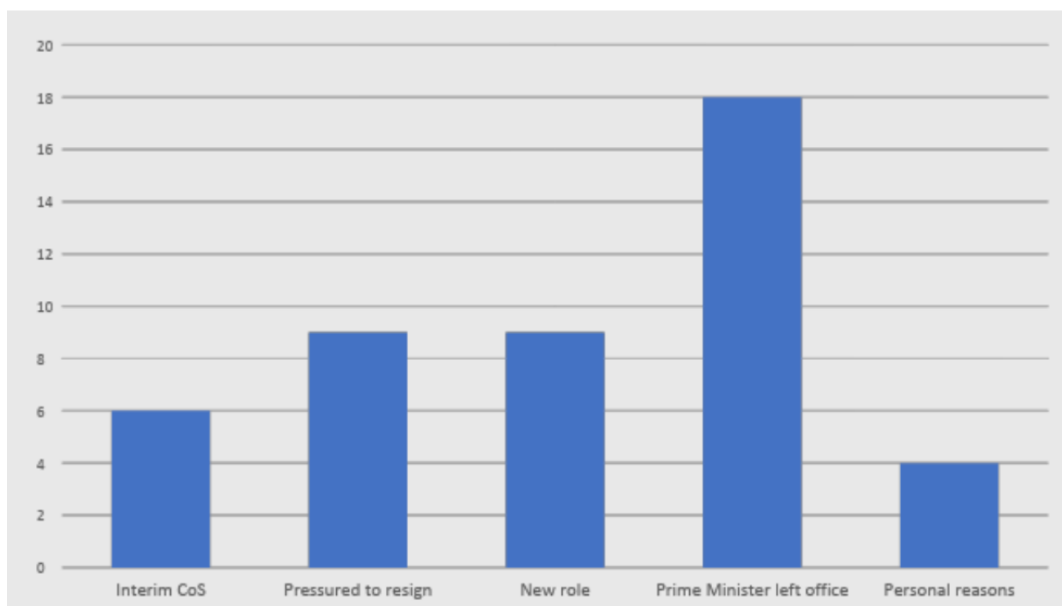
Also with New Zealand, we initially could not locate a CoS to former New Zealand prime minister Shipley after she had replaced her Bolger in late 1997. However, instead of a gap in the data, our interviewees confirmed that Shipley adopted a "spokes on the wheel" collegial approach whereby a small number of senior political advisers reported to her directly. Hence, there was no formal CoS. The model had been unsuccessfully tried by US President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s (Cohen et al., 2016), and after a 12-month experiment, Shipley also abandoned the approach and appointed Doug Martin as her CoS. Another unique case was British prime minister Theresa May's decision to adopt a dual-CoS approach whereby Nicholas Timothy and Fiona Hill shared duties. Both were pressured to resign after 11 months sharing the role following a poor campaign and result at the 2017 general election in which May called the snap election, almost three years early, seeking a stronger majority in part to help break the Brexit impasse, but ended in a minority government.

We did not trace the exact personal and professional connections between each CoS and the prime minister served. However, there were some notable cases worth highlighting. For example, former Australian CoS Drew Clarke worked as the highest-ranked public servant (locally called a Secretary) of the Department of Communications during the time Malcolm Turnbull was minister for Communications. When Turnbull defeated incumbent prime minister Abbott in an internal party leadership spill to become prime minister, Turnbull appointed his trusted Secretary of two years to the role as CoS, despite having an entourage of political advisers to choose from. An interviewee also confirmed that Turnbull expressly appointed a public servant to re-build trust with the public service, and as a clear message that he was 'de-politicising' the chief of staff role that had occurred under Abbott and his CoS Credlin.

Another rare case was Wayne Eagleson who served two New Zealand National prime ministers consecutively over a nine-year period, first to John Key (97 months) and then his successor Bill English (8 months). Eagleson was the only example of a CoS serving two prime ministers. His continuation provided English with institutional memory of the prime minister's office, and perhaps more importantly someone to aid in the 2017 general election, to which Eagleson had significant experience as a National party campaigner and long-term political staffer prior to becoming CoS. There was also one case where a CoS served two over two different time periods. Don Russel served as CoS for 17 months to Australian prime minister Paul Keating when Keating took office in 1991. Russel was then appointed Australian Ambassador to the United States, and upon completion of that posting, returned as CoS in 1995 for six months until Keating was defeated at the 1996 federal election.

What are the reasons CoS leave their role? Here Figure 10 illustrates five main categories that we identified to explain why CoS left their role. The results show 38 per cent left the role because the prime minister left office (e.g. lost an election, resigned, or ousted in a leadership coup), 19 per cent received a promotion to what we determine is a higher status job, 19 per cent were pressured to resign (e.g. due to scandals, poor performance, incompatibility), 12 per cent were only acting or interim CoS, and 9 per cent left for personal reasons (e.g. retirement, health reasons, family reasons). There was little variation in these results across countries. While most interim CoS worked for less than 8 months, two Australian 'interim' CoS, Drew Clarke and David Epstein worked for 18 and 19 months respectively—seemingly more than the intended interim period.

Figure 10. Reason for leaving the chief of staff role

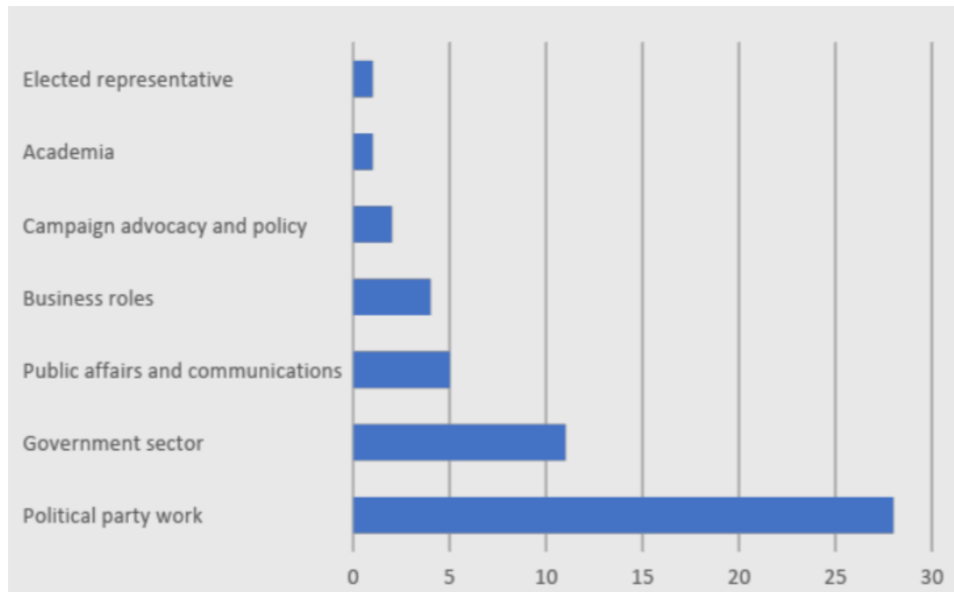


Previous and post-work experience

What jobs did the cohort perform before becoming a CoS and what did they do after? This question relates to employment pathways that can aid one's appointment. While the dataset lists numerous prior and post work experiences for every individual, sourcing the dates to which each person worked in those roles cannot feasibly be determined in a systematic manner, nor does it particularly add much analytical value examining one's entire career. Considering this, we opt to present the job each individual had immediately prior to becoming a CoS (see Figure 11) and the first job obtained after leaving the CoS role (see Figure 12). This is the most temporally critical period for each individual's connection into and out of the role, and is consistent with similar studies (see, (Plasse, 1994)).

Immediately prior to being appointed the CoS, most individuals were already working for their political party—most commonly as a ministerial adviser, and specifically as an adviser to the prime minister or opposition leader. The second most common group were civil servants, but which were just one-third of the political adviser group. We speculate that as the prime minister's office is the 'central political coordination' hub, more partisan experienced staffers are likely to inhabit this office. In contrast, experienced civil servants are more likely to be found in specific portfolio policy domains, to which they may have been seconded and offer technical expertise relevant to the portfolio.

Figure 11. Last position held before becoming chief of staff

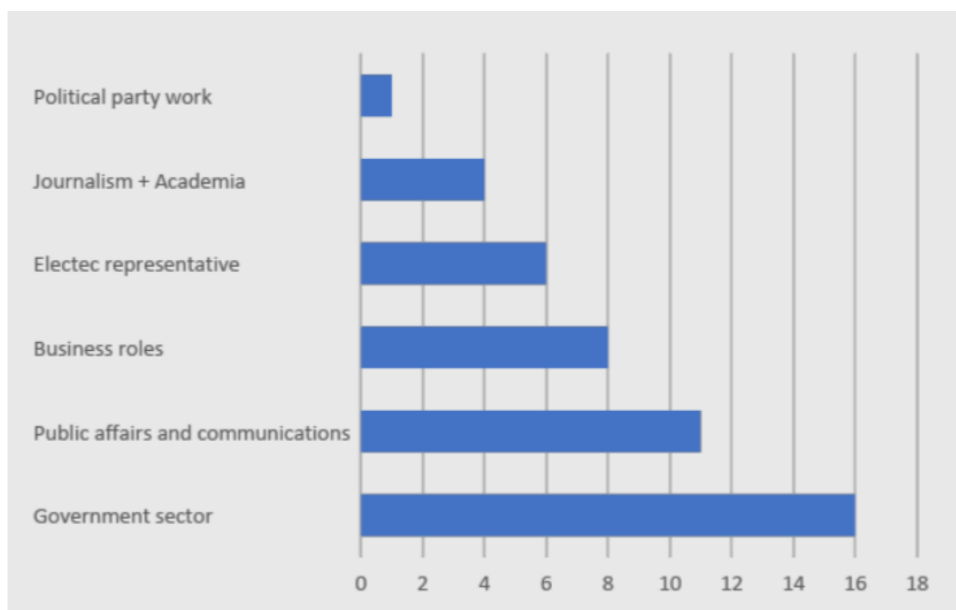


In addition, while Conservative parties may in theory describe themselves as being close to the private sector, few CoS worked in business (neither did the centre-Left parties for that matter). Lastly, there were also some outlier cases. Gavin Barwell was the only CoS to have been a member of

parliament. He had lost his seat at the 2017 UK general election called by Theresa May, and she subsequently appointed him CoS.

When the CoS left the roles, they most commonly 'landed' in government sector roles such as top civil servant positions, ambassadorial postings, and on government boards. This was followed by public affairs and communication roles with some setting up their own lobbying firm (e.g. GJ Thompson in New Zealand) and others joining existing firms. Another group entered the business sector (e.g. Jonathan Hill to the bank Morgan Stanley, Alister Jordan to Australian conglomerate Wesfarmers). In Canada and the UK, which both have an upper house consisting of appointed members, several individuals were appointed to their respective chambers: Canadian Senate (e.g. Hugh Segal, Percy Downe), UK House of Lords (e.g. Stephen Carter, Gavin Barwell). There were no cases from New Zealand as it has no upper house, nor from Australia which has an elected Senate. However, John Howard's long-term CoS, Arthur Sinodinos, was later elected senator after working several years at investment bank Goldman Sachs.

Figure 12. First position held after leaving the chief of staff role



Public servant or political adviser

We also aimed to examine the career de-separation argument from a basic empirical perspective. The basic empirical claim presented by Dowding and Taflaga (2020, p. 116), and particularly targeted to the Westminster family contexts, is that "the source of policy advice for ministers has shifted from the professional public servant to political advisers lacking experience and with different career ambitions than public service". Others have also noted, but not strictly systematically examined, that CoS in Westminster countries are increasingly individuals experienced

as political advisers rather than career public servants (Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014; Yong & Hazell, 2014). Though we do not strictly test the "source of policy advice", we do, however, examine the delineation between *public servants* and *political advisers*. To operationalise, we code each CoS as either a career public servant or political adviser based on their previous work experience and known political affiliations. This *simplistic* binary perspective may do a disservice to individuals that may have a hybrid career mix within the two sectors, and seemingly struggles to incorporate one's experience obtained in the business and academic worlds. Nonetheless, we view the argument as worth pursuing as it brings empirical validation to the discourse.

Of the 53 CoS, 75 per cent can be considered political advisers and 25 per cent career public servants. Across countries, from most to least 'politicised' CoS come from Canada (90%), New Zealand (89%), Britain (69%), and Australia (63%).

Table 2. Distribution of CoS by professional background

	Australia	Britain	Canada	New Zealand
Political background	12	9	11	8
Public servant background	7	4	1	1

Across time, the data confirms that CoS are, for the most part, increasingly political advisers in which career public servants are not being appointed. A notable exception to this was Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull (2015-2018) who appointed three distinguished public servants as his CoS: Drew Clarke, Greg Moriarty, and Peter Woolcott.

In addition, we notice a potential emerging observation in which the public servant appointees have shorter tenures than the political adviser appointees. Theoretically, we speculate that public servants are less ideologically invested in the political party aspect of the role, and therefore use the role as a stepping-stone to a higher-level public servant position (e.g. a diplomatic posting, head of government department/agency, government board role). In contrast, political advisers are likely to be more ideologically invested and would have stronger motivation to stay in the role to support the party and advance policy.

Lastly, two outlier cases are worth highlighting to illustrate where prime ministers chose to either ignore or were not pressured by 'potential prior-partisan conflicts' when appointing their CoS. For example, British civil servant Jeremy Heywood was a rare case of someone that worked as adviser to both left and right party ministers. Early in his career, Heywood worked as Principal Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer then Norman Lamont (Conservative), then later to Labour party leaders Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. In another case from Australia, career public servant Drew

Clarke was appointed Secretary to the Department of Communications by Labor prime minister Julia Gillard in 2013, then later appointed CoS to centre-right prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in 2015.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study of the professional characteristics of chiefs of staff to prime ministers shows both variations and similarities within and across countries, and across time. A summative perspective could view one's profile as the following:

> A chief of staff will be appointed around the age of 45, almost always male, hold a bachelor's degree at a top-tier university (and increasingly a post-graduate degree in more recent times), increasingly arriving in the role with prior professional experience in the media and as a political adviser (less so as a career civil servant), and will commonly leave the job when their prime minister leaves office.

Beyond mapping profiles, the empirical foundation we have presented now offers unique opportunities for future research to further interrogate the trends and patterns. Thus, we present a list of hypotheses inspired from the above evidence that requires in-depth interrogation in future case studies and explanatory analyses—not just in CoS studies, but also in broader ministerial adviser cohorts:

1. Age to stable government: individuals with 20 years of professional experience will result in a longer tenure and thus provide for a more stable government.
2. Education to stable government: Individuals with an advanced tertiary qualification (MA or PhD) have longer tenures and, thus, provide for a more stable government.
3. Family pressures: Considering it is well known that a CoS role requires long working hours, individuals with few or no family commitments may be appointed 1) more often and 2) have longer tenures than individuals with family commitments. This can apply to both men and women but is particularly consistent with the unequal gender distribution of labour in political offices. (The gender findings also say nothing about one's sexuality, with anecdotally at least three of the 53 CoS known to identify with the LGTBIQ community.)
4. Negating the scandal: Following a scandal or controversy involving the sacking or resignation of a CoS, a prime minister will appoint a new CoS with a background contra to the previous CoS (e.g. from Peta Credlin to Drew Clarke; from Dominic Cummings to Daniel Rosenfield).

5. Partisan-loyalty-dividend: Individuals with a political background (e.g. party and media) will be loyal to their party and thus have longer tenures compared to career public servants that lack or have minimal loyalty to a party, preferring to use the CoS as a stepping-stone to a senior public service role. From a stable government perspective, where turnover is viewed as unhealthy, political CoS could be more beneficial than appointing distinguished public servants.

6. Ineffective spokes: Spokes-of-the-wheel collegial arrangements create poor information flows and enhance demands on a prime minister compared to formalistic arrangements in which a single CoS holds administrative primacy. This is a similar topic but contrarian position to what Pfiffner (1993) explored. Cases worth exploring include Theresa May's dual-CoS model or Shipley's 'troika-like-model'—both of which could be considered unsuccessful experiments having lasted no longer than 12 months.

Another indicator not explored here are the socio-economic divisions. Particularly related to whether individuals from a working-class background can rise to become CoS, and what it means for executive governance; a topic raised by Carnes (2018) in relation to factors stymieing working-class individuals from running for elected office.

In addition, future research could examine CoS appointments through a typology of patronage roles (Panizza, Peters, & Ramos Larraburu, 2019); split between the nature of trust (partisan or non-partisan) and the type of skills (professional or political) required from the appointees.

A logical follow up from this study would be to examine how the role varies and has been institutionalised across countries. That is, one could assess how the role may be more influential in one country than another, and how and when the role became more formalised and to what extent over time (the latter of which US scholars have explored, see (Cohen et al., 2016)). Finally, an exploratory replication of this study in other democratic political systems (including in the United States, across Europe, and elsewhere) would provide comparative insights across new cases.

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APPENDIX

Supplementary table and figure information on previous and subsequent employment.

Previous employment / subsequent employment

Previous \ Subsequent	Government sector	Public Affairs and Communications	Legislator	Business Roles	Journalist and Media
Political party work	**8**	**5**	3	4	2
Government sector	**6**	2		2	
Public Affairs and Communications		3			
Legislator	1		2		
Campaign advocacy and policy	1				
Business roles		1	1	2	

* The three largest values of the entire table are put in bold
** The top-row always holds the largest value for that column (subsequent employment)

Previous employment / subsequent employment