



# ACCA Guide to Parliament

## Special Advisors (SpAd)

### Context

SpAds are employed to help Ministers on matters where the work of Government and the work of the Government Party overlap and where it would be inappropriate for permanent civil servants to become involved. They are an additional resource for the Minister, providing assistance from a standpoint that is more politically committed and politically aware than would be available to a Minister from the permanent Civil Service.

Special advisers provide assistance to Ministers on the development of Government policy and its presentation and, together with Private Office staff, they are the main points of access to the Minister. They are also the 'eyes and ears' of the Minister in the Department and the rest of Government and, like Private Secretaries, can be an excellent source of advice about Ministers' policy instincts and priorities. It is for these reasons that SpAds are key people for organisations such as ACCA to build relations with.

The number of special advisers, used to develop policy and media strategy, has more than doubled under the Labour government, although there are fewer under Gordon Brown than there were under Tony Blair. Examples of famous SpAds include Alistair Campbell, Ed Balls and David Miliband.

### The role of a SpAd

Key points to note regarding SpAds are that:

- At the last full reporting the government had 73 SpAds, 23 of whom worked in 10 Downing Street.
- SpAds are linked to particular Ministers. They are employed on a special kind of short-term civil service contract and have little job security. When the Minister is sacked, or reshuffled, the SpAd may lose his/her job. If they follow their Minister or remain with the Department, their employment ends at the end of the administration which appointed them.

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- They are not paid according to civil service pay-grades etc. (but are entitled to civil service pensions).
- A SpAd is a personal appointment and the relationship is heavily based on trust. The life of a SpAd is dictated by the temperament of the Minister. Ideally, the Minister should lead, should give clarity of direction and should give the SpAd a mandate to operate on his/her behalf.
- There are 3 types of SpAd;
  - Policy SpAds
  - Communications/media SpAds
  - 'Political fixer' SpAds.

There are also specialist advisors and generalists.

- Cabinet Ministers are allowed two SpAds each, however that rule is bent and broken where possible. Various Ministers, for example, the Climate Change Minister, are also entitled to a SpAd. In addition to these, there are others in No. 10 and the Treasury, such as those who make up the Council of Economic Advisers.
- SpAds have to have a background in the Party, but, depending on their skills, to varying degrees. They are often recruited from think tanks, especially the IPPR (for the Labour Government), or from the PR/media world.
- The SpAd has a very close relationship with the Private Office of the Secretary of State. These are part of the civil service and are passed on from Minister to Minister. Any difficulty in relationship between the SpAd and the Private Office prevents the Minister from operating effectively.
- Much of the role is about negotiating with counterparts, senior officials in other Departments and with No. 10.
- A SpAd has to keep up with all of the issues the Department is working on, as the Minister will expect to be able to ask a question and be given the response immediately. Any policy or other advice given is always given in a political context, so it is vital that he/she keeps up to date with all of the intrigue and gossip in the Party and in Parliament. It is also usual for SpAds to sit down with their Minister and discuss how he/she can improve their image or climb the ladder etc.
- SpAds often work about 16 hours a day and are often copied in on the emails of the whole department. They sit in the office next to the Ministers (or as close as the building allows) and spend about 50% of their day attending meetings

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with the Minister. Even when they are not together, the Minister and the SpAd are in constant contact by Blackberry/phone.

- Once a week the SpAds will sit down and have a specific 2 hour SpAd/Minister meeting to discuss current issues of importance and upcoming events/speeches etc.
- A SpAd also has his/her own relationship with the external organisations which have a stake/interest in the relevant field.
- SpAds occasionally get to initiate policy, though more often, their role is to steer it.
- SpAds have to draft/contribute to keynote speeches on a regular basis. If a speech is being given to a political audience, then civil servants are not allowed to draft them so the SpAd has to.
- Given that Secretaries of State like to have something fresh to say in speeches to key audiences, they often look to SpAds to come up with new, catchy policy announcements which can be slipped into these speeches. This leads to a speech-led policy development process which can annoy civil servants. Often, these policies come to nothing – they may have a group set up within the Department to examine their viability, but essentially, the purpose of the announcement is to make the Secretary of State look as if he/she is ‘thinking’ and is at the cutting edge of policy.
- All of the SpAds across Government meet as a group once every two weeks on a Friday at No. 10. This is hosted by the PM’s Chief Political Advisor. The aim of these meetings is to build relations and to facilitate discussion between Departments.

### ACCA’s involvement

ACCA engages with the Special Advisers to the Government departments that are key to our work, including the Treasury, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), the Department for Work and Pensions, and others. We are in close touch with SpAds on issues which are likely to be of interest, for example, our work on fair tax, where we met Alistair Darling’s SpAd.

### PAMR

ACCA’s Public Affairs and Media Relations (PAMR) department is based in the UK, co-ordinating with colleagues in local offices. We also have an office in Brussels and a permanent staff member in Ukraine, focussed on Central and Eastern Europe.

The PAMR team aims to ensure that the views of our global membership are reflected in the world's media, and that issues of concern to finance professionals and the

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wider business community are raised with governments and regulators in order to protect and enhance ACCA's reputation and to increase our influence.

The Public Affairs team exists to protect and enhance the reputation of ACCA with government, policy advisers, key civil servants and other political and business stakeholders. It aims to build positive relationships with key decision makers, and to influence and inform legislation and policy ensuring the best possible outcomes for ACCA's work. We lead on all engagement with Parliament, monitoring Parliamentary activity and providing advice to colleagues.

The Media Relations team works to provide timely and useful comment to the world's media on key issues affecting not only the accounting profession, but business and personal finances. Our global network of offices engaged in communications ensures that every day of the year ACCA is offering wide ranging responsible advice or commentary on key issues on every continent.

**For further Information, please contact:**

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