Ministerial staff relationships form part of the networks within the core executive. This article uses data from a comprehensive empirical study of Australian ministerial staff to explore advisers’ horizontal relationships with each other. It finds that the interactions between Australian ministerial advisers are a key part of their role, are highly valued by ministers and public servants, and are an important element of the cabinet system. The informal links and networks between partisan advisers are underpinned by commonly understood norms of behaviour and a clear power structure. This partisan arena of the core executive has become important to ministers and the collective functioning of government.

One of the most significant examples of institutional innovation within Westminster political systems has been the introduction of partisan ministerial advisers into the core executive. Most commentary focuses on the impact of partisan advisers on political-bureaucratic relationships, in particular on whether advisers cause the public service to become politicized (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007; Fawcett and Rhodes 2007; Richards 2007; Eichbaum and Shaw 2008, 2010). Partisan advisers are generally viewed within a vertical perspective: in their relationships with their ministers and their relationships with senior public servants (Rhodes 2005; Richards 2007), often as interlopers within the core vertical relationships between ministers and senior public servants. This article argues they also have important horizontal relationships, with other partisan staff. Yet little is known about how partisan advisers work with each other; and how the work they do together affects the government. The links between partisan staff rarely feature in the literature on networks within the core executive (Marsh et al. 2001; Fawcett and Rhodes 2007).

Australia has gone further than many other Westminster nations in developing an extensive partisan advisory structure, which is now entrenched in its political system. The sheer number of partisans now working in the offices of Australian federal ministers and parliamentary secretaries is distinctive: in 2010 they numbered 403, of whom 287 are ministerial advisers, 29 are media advisers and 87 are administrative staff (Senate Estimates 19 October 2010). There are in addition 17 unallocated, unfilled positions, making the potential total 420. Equally distinctive is their status as a cadre separate from the public service. Australian ministerial staff are employed under special legislation which defines them as partisan, temporarily disengaging any public servants in these roles from their status as public servants. An office may also have one or two Departmental Liaison Officers, sent over from the department to perform administrative tasks, who are not seen as ministerial staff. That Australian ministerial offices are an almost exclusively partisan arena is an institutional choice not made in the UK, New Zealand or Ireland, where ministers are served by a mix of some partisan staff and many permanent civil servants (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010).

Before 1972 Australian ministerial offices were staffed by public servants seconded from the department. When Labor came to power after 23 years in Opposition, partisan staff
were part of its wide-ranging plan to modernize government and overcome the expected bureaucratic resistance to its new ideas. Labor lost power after three tumultuous years and judged that its experiment with partisan staff had had only modest success: there were too few of them, and most had been resisted, circumvented or co-opted by the public service (Wilenski 1979). Labor returned to power in 1983 with a determination to gain political control over the bureaucracy and saw partisan staff as crucial to gaining this control (Commonwealth of Australia 1983, pp. 21–3). It established a new expanded system of ministerial offices in which ministerial staff were no longer in public service positions and had a distinct type of employment which was defined as partisan and personal. The ministerial office was now almost exclusively staffed by partisans; departmental staff were few in number and their roles were limited to liaison with the department rather than advising. This institutional innovation – which separated political staff from the public service and took departments out of ministerial offices (as advisers) – persists to this day.

This institutional design has affected the role and behaviour of ministerial staff as well as executive relationships. Since 1983, Australian ministerial offices have been composed of partisan advisers who can play important policy roles, have considerable administrative authority over departments, and act as the conduits for ministers to communicate with their departments (Maley 2010). Yet while Australia represents an extreme elaboration of the role of partisan staff, it may serve as an indicator of the future for nations where the number and importance of partisan advisers is rapidly increasing.

British studies of the core executive tend to focus on describing how a mix of partisan and non-partisan elements within the core executive operates, particularly within the Prime Minister’s Office (see, for example, Lee et al. 1998; Kavanagh and Seldon 1999; Smith 2000; Marsh et al. 2001; Blick 2004; Burch and Holliday 2004; Fawcett and Rhodes 2007; Richards 2007). However, unlike the UK, the core executive of the Australian federal government has a distinct partisan arena in which ministerial advisers interact with each other, with little involvement of public servants. Ministers and their staff work in adjoining offices in the ministerial wing of Parliament House, high on Capital Hill, far from the departments they work with. Ministers and their staff inhabit a single physical space, separate from their departments; senior officials must travel to see their ministers and enter as outsiders. This intensely partisan milieu is an arena within the core executive that has not yet been explored or conceptualized. The workings of this world are rarely glimpsed publicly and generally not recorded on paper. Yet these horizontal relationships form part of the networks within the core executive and are important in the functioning of the Australian cabinet system.

The article asks: what is the nature of the relationships and interactions amongst Australian ministerial advisers? Analysis is drawn from an empirical study of the Keating government (1991–96), based on 65 qualitative interviews with ministers, their ministerial advisers and the senior public servants they worked with, conducted in the final year of the government (1995–1996) (Maley 2002b). Since anonymity was important, subjects are referred to by number (for example, P06 = Public Servant no.6; A04 = Adviser no. 4) or in the case of ministers, a colour.

The study is the most recent in a series of empirical studies of Australian ministerial staff (Forward 1975, 1977; Smith 1977; Walter 1986) which, unfortunately, were not replicated under the subsequent Coalition government (1996–2007), because of its culture of secrecy, which limited access. The only study of the Coalition staff (Tiernan 2007) suggested their work was ‘broadly similar’ to that of the Keating government advisers (2007, p. 219).

However, it is not a systematic empirical investigation of their work and behaviour;
it focuses on case analysis and explores broader issues of accountability, institutional development and employment frameworks.

The comprehensiveness of the Keating study is unusual (covering advisers in 20 of 30 offices, working for senior and junior ministers, of all ranks and across 28 portfolios) and makes it possible to analyse advisers as a group, their range of behaviours, and the relationships between them. The study is valuable in its depth and capture of multiple perspectives on the behaviour of a group of advisers. While the case is historical, it provides a rare opportunity to analyse a previously unexplored element of core-executive activity. While we lack similar empirical evidence of the behaviour of advisers to the subsequent Coalition government, there has been structural continuity (with some elaboration, discussed below) and there has been a deliberate move back to the office formation that existed in 1996. In 2007 the new Labor government reverted to the same number and configuration of staff that had existed in 1996 when Labor last held government (Maley 2010). In 2009 these numbers were slightly increased following an independent review (Henderson 2009) and they rose again in 2010 after the election of a minority Labor government which, it was argued, represented more difficult governing conditions, requiring more staff resources. Today, senior ministers typically have 7–10 ministerial advisers (plus one media adviser and two administrative staff); junior ministers have 4–6 ministerial advisers (plus one media adviser and two administrative staff) and parliamentary secretaries have 2–3 ministerial advisers (plus one administrative staff member) (Senate Estimates 19 October 2010).

‘NETWORKING’

The term advisers used for their work with other advisers was ‘networking’. This work was seen as important by advisers, ministers and public servants in the study. It was a critical part of what advisers were expected to do. Advisers defined ‘networking’ as forming and maintaining relationships, and using those relationships to transmit information, consult, lobby and negotiate policy decisions. As Hay and Richards note, networks and ‘networking’ are important lay and practitioner concepts, frequently used by the political elite in referring to their work in the policy-making process (2000, p. 3). Rhodes (2002) argues that different actors have different understandings of their networks and networking. Advisers used the term ‘networking’, but while they formed some networks, much of the work they did together is better described as the strategic use of informal personal contacts.

The policy-network literature explores networks as a governance structure, and defines networks as ‘strategic alliances forged around common agendas of mutual advantage through collective action’ (Hay and Richards 2000, p. 13), usually involving ministers, public servants, advisers and insider interest groups. Networks are seen as having important consequences for the political system and the policy decisions that emerge from it (Burch and Holliday 1996). Marsh et al. (2001), in their study of the British core executive over 20 years, stressed the difficulty of applying network theory to relationships within the core executive (2001, pp. 235–6). They describe these relationships as ‘a series of interdependencies based on resource exchange’, in which some have more power than others (2001, p. 68). They found a striking absence of formal structures within the core executive. Yet despite the fluid nature of these informal relationships, they were ‘structured by culture and rules of the game’ (2001, pp. 41, 127). Burch and Holliday map eight separate policy networks which ‘oversee the major business flows’ within the British cabinet system (1996, pp. 81–106). They stress the importance of the informal aspects of
the cabinet system, which comprise ‘personal contacts that develop between individuals engaged in . . . activities taking place in formal and semi-formal structures’ (1996, p. 65). They argue these ‘facilitative links’ are important in the functioning of the cabinet system, being ‘central elements in the informal context within which the handling of business . . . takes place’ (1996, p. 68).

In this exploration of the relationships between Australian ministerial advisers, they are seen to form some semi-formal networks. Their relationships also share some characteristics of networks that are important in network governance; relationships are based on understood rules of behaviour, and trust is critically important (see Rhodes 1988; Hindmoor 1998, p. 40). However, they rarely operate collectively, and their links are often animated only by specific issues. These informal connections are better described as a series of personal contacts or relationships that are used strategically by individual advisers in negotiation and bargaining, and by central players for communication and coordination. Advisers describe an accepted pattern of relationships and power amongst ministerial staff and clearly understood ‘rules’ of behaviour in their interactions (see Heclo and Wildavsky 1974). Before exploring these relationships in detail, the importance of advisers’ ‘networking’ to individual ministers and to the government as a whole, must be understood.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVISER ‘NETWORKING’

Cabinet government and collective decision making have a strong tradition in Australia (Weller 2007). Yet alongside the formal processes of cabinet much consultation and bargaining occur informally between ministers. In the Keating period, ministers had little direct contact with each other outside cabinet, and this consultation and bargaining were largely undertaken by advisers acting on behalf of their principals.

Changes to the operation of cabinet in the Hawke-Keating period (1983–1996) also increased the significance of the work advisers did together. In 1987 there was a major reorganization of government in which 28 departments were reduced to 18 (Campbell and Halligan 1992, p. 177). Each new ‘mega department’ had a cabinet minister, one or two junior ministers and one or two parliamentary secretaries, who each took responsibility for different parts of the portfolio. This change resulted in a marked decline in the volume of cabinet business (Page 1997), with ‘a counterpoint increase in the extent to which ministers take decisions themselves, either singly or in a collective fashion through more informal consultation with colleagues’ (Codd 1990, p. 14). According to two advisers of long standing in this study, in the Keating period there was little social contact between staff, but more deliberate ‘networking’, compared with the previous Hawke period. The far greater number of staff also meant advisers had more time for making such contact (Maley 2000b).

All ministers interviewed highly valued the networking of their advisers. They saw inter-office relationships as ‘exceptionally important’ as Minister Purple commented:

The networking advisers do for you is crucial . . . They’ve got to know each other and be able to work easily together . . . They had to have a minister who could network. Working this place is as important as working the bureaucracy.

Minister Orange described the networking of advisers as ‘part of the bread and butter of this place really, very much’. He felt it benefited ministers in their relationships with each other:

It gives ministers the chance to not have their relationships clogged up with minutiae . . . They . . . make sure the crap [is] dealt with at an adviser level and sorted out there as
best as possible, rather than becoming an issue of contention and arm wrestling or ego bashing between ministers.

Senior public servants saw the value in the networking of advisers, and it was part of their expectation of what advisers would do. It was ‘one of the things they’ve got to do’ (P06; original emphasis). It was useful to help them gain access to information, as a senior Finance official, Public Servant 5, remarked:

Advisers play a really important role within Parliament House. The linkages between minister’s offices are important for the ministry, to keep them across what’s going on. It’s really important for departments … because we can’t go to another minister’s office and find out what they’re thinking. Our minister’s office can go and talk to them and provide feedback to us about what’s going on and then we can provide a better service because we know what’s happening… It’s just keeping the communication open so the whole of government is moving in one direction. It’s a coordination role.

The informality of advisers’ interactions could speed up the processes of government, as Public Servant 4 explained:

It was a way of accelerating the processes, and a way of managing the processes so that there was a shared understanding of the priority of particular issues…. If there are good relationships between ministerial offices … then an enormous amount can be achieved quickly that would otherwise take a much longer period of time, through much more formal processes. … And that was unquestionably advantageous to the departments, because it means you could get coordinated responses without necessarily having to go through a full cabinet process.

The advisers’ network was used to resolve log jams and difficult policy issues that departments could not handle. Public Servant 2 was strongly of the view that this was a role for advisers:

Warring departments should not waste the time of ministers, and advisers should settle issues between themselves. Now that’s, in my view, highly appropriate. If it is a contest of wills between ‘I can convince my minister to write to your minister and say do so and so’, and then someone on the other side of the fence says ‘I can convince my minister to write back saying get stuffed’, the problem with that is that no one’s actually debated the issue and got an outcome, so if it can’t be done by departments then it could and should be done by ministerial advisers.

Advisers in the study saw working with staff from other ministerial offices as a important part of the job of adviser. Adviser 26 commented: ‘that’s really where the advisers earn their keep’. To be effective in this work, advisers needed to build relationships with other staff. Adviser 2 said: ‘without them you don’t get business done’. Typical of the high value advisers placed on networking were the comments of Adviser 15:

Your networks with other advisers are critical - at the end of the day they are critical in getting big things through cabinet. … You are more effective the greater degree of closeness you have with the people you are dealing with.

Adviser 4, who worked for two junior ministers in spending portfolios, stressed: ‘You’d do a lot of work forming strategic alliances with other ministers’ staff. This was very,
very important’. For most advisers, relationships were functional and suited the needs of the portfolio. Their main contact was with adjacent and conflicting portfolios and with the three central offices (Prime Minister’s office, Treasurer’s office and Finance Minister’s office). For a smaller group, networking was a conscious part of their style as advisers and they cultivated as wide a group of contacts as possible. These people were known as ‘networkers’.

Networking was particularly important to staff who worked for ministers who were isolated factionally or who were not good networkers themselves. It was an important role for staffers of ministers who were not powerful in cabinet, those whose portfolios were the targets of spending cuts (and therefore were often fighting battles in cabinet) and those whose portfolios involved a lack of clear authority, who needed the support of other ministers to achieve policy outcomes (for example, the Environment minister or Aboriginal Affairs minister). Minister Orange, a junior minister in a spending portfolio who had a weak status in cabinet, relied heavily on his advisers’ relationships with other staff. He recalled how one of his staff, who was ‘an exceptional talent’, cultivated a trusting relationship with a key adviser in the Prime Minister’s office, Adviser 38. Through the advocacy of Adviser 38 Minister Orange secured funding for a major new policy initiative which neither he nor his department were powerful enough to win. For such ministers the relationships their staff had with other offices were a crucial resource. Prime Ministerial Adviser 38 commented:

Advisers can be exceptionally talented but their ministers might be low status or pretty awful. Often those people . . . would come to me and we’d get the ideas up by another route. The good advisers [were] . . . the ones who understood how within their strengths and weaknesses of their position they could use other people and network and make it happen.

In this way a minister, who might not have had the political strength to succeed in a cabinet contest, might have an adviser with the skills to win in an adviser-level contest. The detrimental effect of poor networking was noted. One adviser complained his department received only a small share of the new spending in a large policy announcement: ‘better networking would have got us more of the money’ (A15).

How well an individual adviser networked was vital to the success of the minister and useful for departments. Yet how the advisers worked together as a group was also important for the cohesion and harmony of the government. Minister Yellow stressed this networking was important for the government as a whole, saying ‘the whole of government depends on those links being strong and easy’, and to the extent that they were not, ‘then government becomes dysfunctional’.

MAPPING ADVISERS’ NETWORKS

Advisers were asked to describe their communication networks by listing which offices they had most contact with. There were a few formal networks. There was a parliamentary tactics group, which had a core of five advisers: one from the office of the Leader of Government Business in the House, one from the office of the Leader of Government Business in the Senate, one from the Treasurer’s office, one of the Prime Minister’s political advisers and the director of the Ministerial Media Group. Other advisers were drawn in when needed. One member, Adviser 26, explained: ‘Overall strategy was set by the big chiefs – attack, defend, whatever – and then we work out the best way to do that’.
There was a wider question time group where all offices were represented, which met after the Whip’s meeting on parliamentary sitting days to exchange political information. There were also meetings of senior advisers from all offices, chaired by one of the Prime Minister’s advisers, which discussed tactics and reported on the main action of the week.

There was a formal network of women policy advisers from most offices, which was brought together to collate information about what Labor was doing for women across all policy areas and to create policy ideas. This group, meeting several times between 1993 and 1996, cut across the major policy and political divisions between advisers. Some women said it was the first time they had made contact with advisers on the other side of the social/economic policy divide and worked for ministers from other factions.

Apart from these formal groups there was a range of informal networks associated with policy issues. Most of the advisers reported being part of networks which comprised advisers in adjacent or linked portfolios; the senior or junior minister’s office; and the three central offices (the Prime Minister’s office, the Treasurer’s office and the Finance Minister’s office).

The social policy network and economic policy network were distinct: a chasm within government, with the advisers in these networks rarely having anything to do with each other. Adviser 32, who worked in an economic portfolio, revealed the depth of this divide in recounting a story about a friend who worked in a social policy portfolio:

I was on the phone to an old friend and I said ‘where do you work?’ and he said ‘I work for Minister Lilac’. Which is the next door office. He was on the other side of the wall from me as I spoke to him! I was horrified to discover he had worked there for the whole three years I had worked in Minister Amber’s office and I had never met him. … That’s sad.

There was also a network of advisers which met to discuss environmental issues, chaired by the Prime Minister’s environment adviser.

Apart from these highly functional networks there were factional networks which were basically loose alliances, as Adviser 1 explained:

You know the parliamentarians who are in your faction and they know you… You know their staff. There’s things you’ll say to them because they are in the same faction that you won’t share with other offices. There’s a closeness and camaraderie between offices in the same faction and similarly there’s suspicion between offices from different factions.

Advisers had personal networks based on people who socialized together, who had worked together in minister’s offices or departments in the past or who knew each other through their activities within the ALP. These advisers generally wanted ‘to facilitate good outcomes for each other’. Some experienced advisers had good links with others who had ‘been around for a while’. One long time adviser commented: ‘The longer you’ve been around the more extensive your networks are’ (A15).

The importance of the three central offices (Prime Minister’s office, Finance Minister’s office and Treasurer’s office) cannot be overstated. Their presence in virtually all the communication networks indicates their importance within the advisers’ community, and their role as central coordinators. Also notable is the general functionality of the links between advisers, which explains why advisers in dissimilar portfolios might have virtually no contact with each other. This pattern echoes studies of the British core
executive which stress its functional fragmentation (see, for example, James 1994; Burch and Holliday 1996), with only a small number of players involved in all networks.

THE POWER STRUCTURE AMONGST ADVISERS

There was a well-understood power structure which underlay advisers’ relationships, with a small group of advisers having considerable authority over other advisers. This power structure meant that adviser networks could be used for more than communication and consultation: they could be used to negotiate outcomes and to settle disputes.

Advisers were asked about their perceptions of the pattern of influence amongst advisers in the ministerial wing. They were asked: ‘who are the most influential advisers in Parliament House?’ This question was followed by a general discussion of the pattern of influence amongst advisers. Respondents were asked to explain what they meant by ‘influential’; and what these individuals were able to do that demonstrated their influence. Advisers were conscious of the relative weight and influence of individuals they dealt with, because so much of their work revolved around contests with others. There were 25 responses.

The question explores advisers’ influence within the advisers’ group rather than their influence per se. Interviewees were quick to point out that an adviser’s influence within his/her own sphere was difficult for others to detect. It depended on how influential they were with their own minister, and how responsive the department was to their directions. The question referred to their perception of the pattern of influence in the interactions between ministerial offices.

There was a high level of agreement amongst advisers about the pattern of power within the ministerial wing. They described two groups of influential people: those who were influential in political strategy; and those who were influential over policy. Outside this highly concentrated group of powerful advisers there was a spread of influential individuals ‘dotted around the place’, whose influence was defined in relation to the core group. There was also an important power differential between advisers in senior and junior minister’s offices within the same portfolio.

Political strategists

A group of seven advisers were nominated as influential on political strategy for the government as a whole. They were important in shaping the political agenda, ‘getting our message out publicly’ and managing the media for the government. Table 1 lists them in order of the number of nominations each received. This group comprised key individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>No. of nominations</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>(PMO – Principal adviser)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox</td>
<td>(TO – Principal adviser)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watson</td>
<td>(PMO – Speechwriter/consultant)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Callaghan</td>
<td>(FMO – Senior adviser Parliamentary)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowtell</td>
<td>(PMO – Senior adviser Political)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowan</td>
<td>(PMO – Senior adviser Political)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epstein</td>
<td>(Director – Ministerial Media Group)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 25; PMO = Prime Minister’s office; TO = Treasurer’s office; FMO = Finance Minister’s office.
in the Prime Minister’s office (Don Russell and Don Watson and the Prime Minister’s two political advisers). It included key political advisers in the Treasurer’s office and the Finance Minister’s office, as well as the Director of the Ministerial Media Group (David Epstein). Adviser 2 described this group as ‘a coterie – very, very powerful. They devise the question time strategy and create the politics of the day’. Adviser 1 described them as:

a conscious group of people who are a real tight core and they run the show in the interests of the Labor government. They are very bright people and formidable people… They see themselves as political warriors, in the Labor party for the long haul.

While most advisers described their influence as being limited to political strategy, some felt that it could have implications for the policy sphere, as Adviser 25 explained:

They are not that important in getting policy decisions taken but … very important in getting tactical or strategic decisions taken which can often be crucial in getting policy decisions taken, if you know what I mean.

Don Russell was nominated by all the respondents and was clearly seen as the most influential of the advisers, partly because of his position as head of the Prime Minister’s office, but also because of his close, trusting relationship with the Prime Minister. According to Watson, Keating and Russell decided ‘jointly what to say, what not to say, what the tone and volume should be’ (2002, p. 215). Russell had an ‘intimate, mutually reinforcing relationship with Keating … [and an] unequalled capacity to influence the Prime Minister’ (Watson 2002, pp. 385–6). David Cox (later MP for Kingston 1998–2004) was considered extremely influential. According to Adviser 40, he and Russell were ‘the two bright stars who dazzled you’ and were ‘exceptional’ compared with other advisers.

Policy heavyweights

There were 11 people perceived as most influential within the advisers’ group on policy (see table 2). These advisers were exclusively located in the Prime Minister’s office, Treasurer’s office and Finance minister’s office, and included all of the Prime Minister’s senior policy advisers. The Prime Minister’s office was clearly influential on policy, but there were differences in the scope of influence. Alan Gyngell, Sam Mostyn and Mark

TABLE 2 Influential advisers: policy, 1995–96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Policy sphere</th>
<th>No. of nominations</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>PMO Principal adviser</td>
<td>All areas</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox</td>
<td>TO Principal adviser</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Loughlin</td>
<td>PMO Senior adviser social policy</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simes</td>
<td>PMO Senior adviser economic</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapman</td>
<td>PMO Consultant</td>
<td>Economic/social</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gyngell</td>
<td>PMO Senior adviser international affairs</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hickman</td>
<td>FMO Principal adviser</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostyn</td>
<td>PMO Senior adviser communications</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Neill</td>
<td>PMO Senior adviser environment</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angley</td>
<td>FMO Consultant</td>
<td>Economic/social</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livesey</td>
<td>TO Consultant</td>
<td>Economic/social</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 25; PMO = Prime Minister’s office; TO = Treasurer’s office; FMO = Finance Minister’s office.
O’Neill had a more limited scope of influence, though within their specialized policy areas they were considered powerful. Mary Ann O’Loughlin’s position on social policy was considered decisive. Ric Simes, Barbara Livesey and John Angley were influential because of their key roles in the Budget process. Don Russell, David Cox and Syd Hickman were said to have the broadest scope of influence in their input to economic policy generally.

Putting tables 1 and 2 together (Russell and Cox appeared in both lists), there were 16 people nominated as most influential in adviser interactions. Considering that the number of policy-oriented ministerial advisers (that is, excluding media and administrative staff) was around 172 at this time, this pattern represents a highly concentrated influence structure. The dominance of the Prime Minister’s staff was clear when asked which advisers were most influential in Parliament House:

Unquestionably each of the senior advisers in the Prime Minister’s office. Unquestionably. There can be no doubt about it. And following that the advisers in the office for the Minister for Finance who control the purse strings…. But in terms of policy development easily the most important people are the people in the Prime Minister’s office. (A41)

Interactions were focused on the inner circle, and other advisers were judged by their influence on the inner group. Three senior advisers to senior economic ministers (the Minister for Primary Industry and Energy; the Minister for Industrial Relations and Transport; and the Minister for Industry Science and Technology) were mentioned as powerful in relation to the inner circle. They were all advisers of long standing, whose experience, reputations and networks were significant.

THE MEANING OF INFLUENCE

Advisers tended to be consistent in their understanding of what it meant to be ‘influential’ amongst the adviser group. It had three aspects. The first was the power to support, obstruct, or veto policy proposals. This aspect particularly applied to the inner circle of policy heavyweights. The second aspect of being influential was being able to ‘win’ and ‘get your way’, as Adviser 15 explained:

When I name them as powerful, I mean they can get their way. The powerful advisers are who wins and gets their way…. A lot of decisions are made between ministers, corporately. The advisers who are the powerful players are those who can get the corporation to move the way they want, who can get the big ship to turn one way.

The third aspect of being an influential adviser was being involved in key decisions and having access to decision makers. Adviser 17 said Ashley Mason (senior adviser to the Minister for Industrial Relations and Transport) was influential, because: ‘he is very much involved in negotiating the Accord. He gets into the Prime Minister’s office, he has guaranteed access. He gets his phone calls returned’. Access generally was a highly prized commodity and could be difficult to gain without contacts or a good reputation. Adviser 20, a member of the inner circle, commented ‘if you’re not up to it people will ignore you and you won’t be invited to the meeting’.

CULTURE: RULES OF OPERATION

Network theorists stress the importance of understood norms of behaviour – ‘operating codes’, ‘underlying philosophies’ and ‘rules of the game’ (Rhodes 1988, pp. 42–3) – which
enable exchange and trust between network members. Such norms enable behaviour to be governed, with sanctions applied where norms are not adhered to (Hindmoor 1998; Hay and Richards 2000). Advisers in this study expressed some common perceptions about what was ‘done’ and ‘not done’ in working with other advisers. To understand these informal ‘rules’ it is first important to understand the context in which advisers worked: the milieu of the ministerial wing.

The milieu of the ministerial wing: cut-throat, hostile and competitive
Positive and trusting relationships with other advisers were important to operate within what was often described as a cut-throat environment. Advisers were generally suspicious and competitive, as Adviser 1 commented: ‘People are so suspicious of one another…. The longer you are there the more closed you become and careful and paranoid’. Adviser 19 had a cynical view of other advisers:

The dynamics of Parliament House are not based on camaraderie. Advisers are generally self-interested, opportunistic and into information manipulation. By self-interested I mean obsessed with their minister’s cause…. I don’t look for friendships but I am courteous. Some are more altruistic in their motives, but all are opportunistic. I have a low level of trust and that’s out of seeing what they do.

One senior adviser found it ‘a particularly vicious environment’. On his second day in the job he inadvertently cut into a telephone conversation between two advisers who were talking about him:

I was being shafted, based on rumours and untruths. I was very shocked. People seek to undermine you even before they’ve met you. …. You can’t afford to be a shrinking violet here or you’ll get rolled over. …. It is very competitive…. You have to carve out your sense of what you’re prepared to put up with and build alliances. (A07)

This example indicates that intense rivalry existed not only between offices, but sometimes within offices. Adviser 19 commented that: ‘Some [advisers] are good, friendly and trustworthy, some aren’t. Some are very ruthless’. This milieu is typical of highly charged political arenas, which require political toughness and ‘street fighting’ skills (see Heclo 1977, p. 112). It is also a product of the structural divisions between advisers: they represent portfolio interests, often institutionally opposed and in competition.

Getting access to other advisers could be difficult. Often they did not return phone calls. Adviser 6, an assistant adviser to a beleaguered junior minister, explained the importance of good personal connections in getting access to other offices:

If you don’t know other advisers they can be incredibly hostile when you approach them at first. It’s all about the ethos of protecting your minister and not giving anything away. Good personal connections can get you over that and get you into the loop very quickly. …. It means you are taken seriously and not fucked around at the gate.

Because of the general lack of trust between advisers, it was important to communicate through known contacts. One senior adviser stressed: ‘Always make the initial approach through a contact in the office’ (A28). This ensured access, which was otherwise not guaranteed. Advisers usually had a contact in every office they dealt with; they worked through that contact. They could find out nuances and agendas, or get an idea of how best to approach the person they had to deal with. For instance, they might be told that: ‘so and so is dealing with that but just be aware of this’ (A22). The friendly contact may
then pass on the message to their colleague that you were to be trusted. This could be useful if you were relatively junior or from another faction.

Advisers had a clear idea of how to operate in this environment. Contact was informal and oral, and involved phone calls, dropping in to see people, meeting over coffee, perhaps dropping off a piece of paper for someone to look at. Things were kept short; it was not done to waste people's time or to harass them more than was necessary. There was no time to put much on paper even if they wanted to (which they usually did not). Reciprocity was important. Advisers worked hard to build up a rapport with important people.

THREE ‘RULES’ OR NORMS OF BEHAVIOUR

The first rule was ‘keep talking’. Advisers stressed that relationships must remain amicable, even when you disagreed, when you did not like or respect the other adviser, and even when you lost a battle. If advisers had a falling out over a policy decision they had to ‘get over it and go around the next day and ask them about something else’ (A28).

Some advisers consciously worked to keep their relationships operating in difficult times. Adviser 4, who worked for a junior minister constantly fighting off cuts, deliberately used humour to relieve the intensity of her conversations with the Finance minister’s adviser: ‘I’d try to make our discussions enjoyable. She did not laugh much but I tried to keep it lighthearted, because it was so very serious’. An adviser to the Prime Minister explained: ‘You can get very angry with people and say “right that’s it!” But . . . in the end you always have to get over those differences and keep the communication channels open’ (A38). Another Prime Ministerial adviser stressed how difficult it could be because ‘often they’re people you just don’t like . . . If you never see them again you could be happy’ (A36).

To be effective, advisers had to be able to work with the minister’s opponents. Adviser 18 recalled when he had to work with several hostile ministers’ offices about a submission his minister was putting forward. For the minister to have any chance of succeeding in cabinet, the adviser had to be able to sit down with advisers from hostile offices, find out their positions and deal with them. He explained the process:

It was just consultation, consultation, consultation. That’s taken three months, but it was worthwhile. . . . We got them down to one remaining issue, from one department, we solved all the other departments’ problems, not because we had to compromise anything but because we had to make clear to people why their concerns were not real concerns. You sort it out one on one usually. . . . What you’re trying to do is to take away the substance of their criticisms.

The consultation described above was happening simultaneously between departments. It was seen as crucial to ‘keep talking when ministers were not’. Advisers had to keep their relationships ‘open and operating’ when their ministers were in conflict or when relations had broken down between ministers. It was vital that the advisers kept channels of communication open. Several advisers stressed this rule as the most important. Adviser 24 said:

If you have disagreements over policy issues you don’t let that spill over into some sort of personal conflict. And it always helps to have another issue that you can agree
on very quickly together. I think it’s absolutely crucial that you keep the relationships open and operating.

Adviser 6 felt that if two ministers had a bad relationship it was vital that their advisers had a good one:

A good relationship between advisers can be used to get around a bad relationship between two ministers. It’s a way of keeping the lines of communication open and carrying on doing business.

Keeping talking was especially important where senior ministers and junior ministers in the same portfolio did not get on, or did not speak to each other. Advisers referred to ‘tension, resentment and bad blood’ between some senior and junior minister’s offices (A27). It was particularly difficult in one case where the senior minister, junior minister and parliamentary secretary were from three different factions. Adviser 5 recalled how there were ‘major confrontations’ between his senior minister and the junior minister:

I saw it as my job with Minister Olive’s senior adviser to manage that. . . . We had to ensure we managed the relationship in a way that was productive or at least minimally counter-productive.

The second rule was to ‘play it straight’ in policy fights, especially at Budget time, or at least to be seen to do so. This meant doing what you agreed to do, and not taking outside of the cabinet the fights going on between ministers, by leaking to interest groups, the back bench or the media. Ministers had to be seen as team players. When such tactics were thought necessary, it was important ‘not to leave your fingerprints on anything’ (A15).

Third, while advisers were expected to fight for their minister’s interests and agenda, it was seen as vital they also ‘take a whole of government perspective’. It was expressed as being able to see ‘what’s best for everyone’ (A24). An important part was accepting as authoritative the rulings of powerful advisers and ministers. Adviser 27 expressed the ‘correct’ view:

You have to know when you’ve lost and it’s time to roll over. That is very important. Some minister’s offices just don’t know when the point has come to give up. They pretty soon get a label in the key offices and that label says ‘pest’. I try never to reach that point, because it makes you ineffective as an adviser. Once the Prime Minister’s office has decided I try and deliver it for them, because I believe in a corporate approach to government. I believe we should behave like public servants should with us - we have a right to put the argument, but we should know when to stop and accept the decision.

This rule points to one of the critical tensions in the system. Advisers were employed individually by ministers and saw their minister’s agenda as paramount. One adviser described his job as ‘to advance the minister’s interests, as simple as that’ (A35). It could be difficult to see the broader interest, particularly if it meant a loss for the minister and the portfolio. Only the Prime Minister’s advisers were positioned, and tasked, to advance a whole of government perspective. One of the Prime Minister’s advisers gave an interesting insight into these problems when she described the ‘good’ advisers as ‘people who I genuinely believed cared: one, about their minister, but two, about the government’ (A38). She contrasted these advisers with many others in minister’s offices ‘who care: one, about themselves, two, about their ministers and three, not about anything else’ (A38).
MANAGING BEHAVIOUR: ‘TRYING TO MAKE THE WHOLE THING RUN WELL’

While advisers generally accepted the first rule and saw it as an important part of their job to ensure communication flow within the ministry, adherence to the second and third rule was highly contingent. Because of the extremely expedient nature of political actors, their short-term focus and strong loyalty to their own minister, some were prepared to break those rules where necessary to achieve a goal or win a battle. Adviser 35 recalled how he had to ‘do the dirty’ on an adviser who had been an ally, as ‘it wasn’t in the interests of my minister or the government that what he was pushing should happen’. He felt his own reputation and rapport with other advisers could be ‘traded in’ at key times ‘for getting your minister’s interests done’.

A long-time adviser, Adviser 33, saw people who broke these rules as dangerous, and a minority:

There were those who you couldn’t trust. Thankfully there weren’t many of them, but there were some who were lazy and would not consult, or they’d tell you one thing and they would turn around and do the opposite. They were quite dangerous from a government perspective, they took on their traditional constituents’ view [that is, the view of interest groups linked to the portfolio] or were lazy, dishonest and incompetent.

The incentive for advisers to adhere to the norms of behaviour was to maintain a good reputation and a good relationship with the powerful advisers in the three central offices. The authority of these advisers, particularly the Prime Minister’s office, was thus critical in managing advisers’ interactions with each other. One of the Prime Minister’s key advisers explained:

I think you get to know very clearly – because you work so closely together with people – who the good people were. So I was extremely influenced by people who had very good judgement, very good policy nous, were reliable. (A38)

Adviser 1 felt that such advisers could destroy your reputation:

They could certainly put you on the outer to the point where nobody touched you. . . . You know who is not favoured in the ministerial wing, you know who has made a big mistake really quickly.

The Prime Minister’s office was seen as responsible for managing how advisers worked together. Minister Blue, a senior cabinet minister, saw them as responsible for ‘bashing heads together’ and supervising and ‘closely overseeing’ ministerial offices that were in conflict. One prime ministerial adviser felt that: ‘our responsibilities were quite significant in trying to make the whole thing run well’ (A38). Yet the control the Prime Minister’s staff exercised was reliant on interpersonal relationships and informal power.

There were examples of advisers being disempowered by destructive behaviour, such as a well-positioned adviser who, it was said, could not achieve things ‘without a blood bath’:

He had the potential to become one of the key advisers, because of his position, but he didn’t. Why? His nickname says it all: Big Foot. He was arrogant, harsh. It’s about knowing when to crush and when to laugh. It’s about knowing when to let someone have a win. It’s the style with which you inflict a loss. . . . A44 was nasty. (A04)
Nevertheless, there were advisors who profited from such a style, such as Adviser 51: ‘He gets his own way all the time by rat f**king everyone. I’ve been a great admirer of his for some time now!’ [laughs] (A15). Often they worked for ministers with the same style. Minister Orange cited two senior ministers who ‘had staffs full of soulless, rude, arrogant, nasty people who enjoyed causing pain. This reflects the minister’s personality’.

The vulnerability of a system reliant on the informal authority and skills of the Prime Minister’s staff was seen in a politically disastrous decision on the granting of woodchip export licences made in 1994 (Watson 2002, pp. 537–40). After the decision there were massive demonstrations, a blockade of Parliament House and one Senator resigned from the ALP. Watson described it as ‘a fiasco that left the government wounded for the rest of its life’ (2002, p. 537). The junior Minister for Resources had the power to grant woodchip export licences, but was required under legislation to take into consideration the Environment Minister’s advice on the environmental impact of the decision. The decision had previously been discussed in cabinet each year, but in 1994 it was deliberately sent outside cabinet. The role cabinet had previously played in mediating the conflict between the two ministers and deciding where the balance was struck was not formally given to anyone. Informally it was understood that overseeing the decision process was the responsibility of the Prime Minister’s environment adviser, Adviser 56. It was a case of warring ministers, whose staff had stopped talking to each other, and a lack of attention by the Prime Minister’s adviser, who ‘took his eye off the ball’ because he was busy with other problems (Maley 2002b, pp. 265–71). The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet felt powerless to coordinate the decision, as one senior officer commented:

We had difficulty convincing the Prime Minister’s adviser that it was a major issue requiring the Prime Minister’s focus. His judgement at the time was that it wasn’t. . . . The Prime Minister’s Office is critical because we can coordinate all we like down here but unless we actually carry the authority of the Prime Minister to do it, departments and ministers tend to ignore you.

Such strong ministerial conflicts are best managed in formal cabinet processes (which is what occurred after this incident). Putting responsibility for managing such critical issues in the hands of individual members of the Prime Minister’s staff is risky. However one experienced public servant stressed:

This is an example of a monumental failure and it’s atypical. . . . PMO staff . . . are marvellous people. . . . Look it doesn’t happen with these guys. . . . They played very very strong roles and I mean it makes the failures all the more remarkable. . . . I can’t think of too many others.

The responsibility given to the Prime Minister’s office to exercise some control or management of ministerial staff as a group can be seen as one of the drivers behind a strengthening of the centre by the Coalition government (1996–2007) and Labor government which followed (2007–present). These governments allocated far more staff in the Prime Minister’s office, proportional to the total staff, than did the Keating government (Stewart and Maley 2007; Tiernan 2007). The Coalition government also introduced some formal structures, such as the Cabinet Policy Unit, which specified clear roles to some Prime Ministerial staff in policy coordination. Both governments also established Government Staffing Committees, which are a central locus of authority over ministerial staff, apart from the individual employment relationships advisors have with their ministers. These developments can be
seen as attempts to boost and formalize the authority of the central advisers in their role of managing the behaviour of advisers as a group.

NETWORKING AS COORDINATION

The networking between ministerial advisers played an important part in the cabinet decision-making process. It was a way of ‘predigesting’ cabinet matters, which ensured that everyone understood the issues and the positions of key players, and resolved as much as possible before the meeting. According to one prime-ministerial adviser, by the time most submissions came to cabinet ‘nine out of ten issues are decided, but on one out of ten there is still some talking necessary’. Where proposals involved a broad range of portfolios, the networking that advisers did before a submission went to cabinet was even more important; it enabled issues to be thrashed out, and political agreement to be delivered. A prime ministerial adviser described the process:

There is quite a bit of that argy-bargy between ministers’ offices to resolve something and then you get the tick of the ministers… So when they [go] to cabinet the fight has been had already…. We already had the big argument and knocked this off, we didn’t do that, and put this forward. … At the ministerial office level we’d thrashed things out enough so that we could advise our ministers that we were pretty happy with what is happening. (A38)

CONCLUSION

The interaction between ministerial advisers and the quality of their relationships with each other are important to Australian ministers and the government as a whole. In the Keating period much business was conducted through informal links between staff. Their relationships were an important arena for collective, cabinet government. Advisers formed some semi-formal networks which were used for communication and coordination, which were highly functional and segmented, and which always included staff from the three key offices: Prime Minister’s office, Treasurer’s office and Finance Minister’s office. These advisers played a critical role in coordinating the work of advisers and pursuing a central, whole-of-government position, to counter the strong centrifugal forces of individual ministers’ interests.

Similar to other studies of core executive relationships (Heclo and Wildavsky 1974; Smith 1999; Marsh et al. 2001) the Australian advisers’ world is characterized by informal, highly personal links, cultivated and used for strategic purposes, and underpinned by shared understandings of norms of behaviour. However the partisan milieu of the ministerial advisers in this study differed from that of the civil servants in such studies who abided by unwritten rules of behaviour because their relationships were historically, socially and personally ‘embedded’ (Hindmoor 1998, p. 35).

In his classic study of executive politics in Washington, A Government of Strangers, Heclo contrasts the worlds of the career bureaucrat and the partisan appointee within departments. While the career bureaucrat’s networks are ‘dense, multiple and enduring’, the partisan executive’s are ‘thin, transient and single stranded’ (1977, p. 112), with few unifying ties and a lack of enduring interdependence. It meant ‘there is little need to worry about any joint action to enforce community norms because there is no community’ (1977, p. 112); political executives acted as ‘strangers’ to each other.

Australian ministerial advisers in the Keating period were more of a group than Heclo’s partisans; they worked closely and frequently together, in the separate, exclusive world
of the ministerial wing, and were interdependent. Yet their relationships were largely
transient and expedient; short-term objectives challenged normal behaviour codes and
interaction could be combative and ruthless. Adherence to norms of behaviour was highly
contingent for some advisers, and not socially enforced by network style (Hindmoor
1998; Hay and Richards 2000) or community style ‘embedded’ relationships (Heclo and
Wildavsky 1974). There was a strong drive to create positive trusting relationships because
of the general distrust and uncertainty in this world.

The authority of the inner group of advisers, especially the Prime Minister’s office, could
manage or contain the behaviour of advisers. Yet their ability to control advisers was
informal and relatively weak; ultimately advisers were answerable only to their ministers.
This vulnerability can be seen as one of the drivers behind later institutional innovations
aimed at strengthening the partisan centre and formalizing its authority. It also lies behind
the disproportionate increase in Prime Ministerial staff in subsequent governments:
Keating’s staff of 30 represented 9 per cent of overall staff numbers, compared to PM
Gillard’s office of 50 staff, which employs 12 per cent of the government’s ministerial staff
(Senate Estimates 19 October 2010).

Despite their own use of the term ‘networking’, network theory does not easily
describe how Australian ministerial advisers interact as a group. They represent different,
and competing, policy networks in their work together. In this study, an inner group
of advisers struggled to create coherence, and grind out consensus and a whole-of-
government approach amongst the strong centrifugal forces of ministers’ interests. This
challenge faces many cabinet systems (James 1994; Burch and Holliday 1996; Weller 2007)
and it is played out intensely in the partisan arena in which Australian ministerial staff
work together.

This arena of central government has been neglected so far in research, yet it appears
to play a key role in the Australian cabinet system. Ministerial staff, interacting as agents,
are critical in communication and coordination amongst ministers. They enable busy
ministers to conduct business together, especially during times of conflict, and thus play a
positive role in the functioning of a collective cabinet. Alongside bureaucratic bargaining
their informal work supports the operation of cabinet and must be seen as part of the
evolution of the cabinet system in Australia. Ministerial office networks constitute an
arena in Australia’s collective cabinet government. This empirical study of the Keating
period reveals a group of ministers engaged in intense deliberation and negotiation over
decisions, managed by an inner group of powerful ministers and their staff. It suggests a
robust collective cabinet system, with a need for underpinning central coordination.

The work Australian ministerial staff do together can be seen as supplementing, rather
than subverting, traditional forms of coordination. Negotiation and bargaining occurred
at the bureaucratic level as well as the ministerial office level, with much interplay
between them. Often an adviser and senior officials in the department were fighting the
same battle, but in different arenas; they were in constant contact and fed information to
each other about the agendas of their opponents. It is true that matters which previously
may have been resolved between departments were being drawn up to the ministerial
office level to resolve. It was partly a recognition that it was appropriate for conflicts to be
resolved by ministers, but also an acknowledgement of the reality that any deal done by
departments might later be reopened or renegotiated by advisers.

The networking of advisers in this study can be seen as an expansion of the coordination
work traditionally done by ministers. These networks are one of a set of arenas in which
ministers fight for influence, which collectively constitute the cabinet system. Ministers
were generally too busy to find time to meet in person, but they also did not see it as appropriate: their job was to resolve directly only those issues that could not be agreed by their advisers. It is a sign of the changing nature of the work of ministers in Australia: increasingly, ministers delegate much of the work of communicating with other ministers and with departments to their advisers, who act as their agents.

Does the work Australian ministerial staff do together draw decision making away from ministers? The study suggests this was not the case. Advisers to line ministers were usually in constant consultation with their ministers, acting only as agents, and deals were done only with their minister’s agreement. In this sense the advisers expanded their minister’s ability to communicate with colleagues, gather information and work through decisions. Advisers to the Prime Minister, Finance Minister and Treasurer, however, did act more autonomously and exercised considerable delegated authority. Part of their job was to resolve matters without involving their ministers, and to keep things away from them. This work, while useful, raises concerns about the influence these advisers had over ministers. It reflects the enormous power their ministers, and their departments, had within government.

While the Prime Minister’s advisers had considerable authority over the time period of the study, the study does not reveal the monocratic decision making that would suggest a prime ministerial form of government. While they had the ability to intervene, they did not necessarily do so, as one prime ministerial adviser explained: ‘Where ministers are good, of which there were many, then I . . . let . . . the minister run the agenda and . . . just make sure I understand what’s going on. . . . If there are strengths [my job is to] get the hell out of the way’ (A38). They had a responsibility to monitor and manage, but their power was limited in the ways the then Prime Minister Keating’s own power was constrained: by the need to keep powerful ministers on side and to reach agreement with the Finance Minister and Treasurer (Watson 2002). The comparative vulnerability of Australian Prime Ministers (who can be easily removed by a vote of the parliamentary party) has tended to produce a more collective cabinet system than in the UK (Weller 2007). Australian Prime Ministers need to manage relationships with senior ministers carefully. This reality was illustrated by the sudden removal of PM Rudd in June 2010, partly because he had not managed these relationships well.

The networks described in this study are a product of Australia’s distinctive advisory system, in which ministers and their advisers inhabit a single physical space from which departments are (largely) absent. This system was designed to ensure political control over decision making. It expanded the partisan space around ministers. It is different from countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Ireland, where both permanent civil servants and partisan advisers occupy ministers’ offices (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010). Despite its importance, the world described in this study is private and hidden. In 2008, the Labor Government introduced a code of conduct for ministerial staff, mandatory induction training and, for the first time, an annual report which documents ministerial staff positions and salary levels (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). However, the names of ministerial staff are not public. Within the Australian political system they are seen purely as agents, and their identity is subsumed within that of their ministers. Advisers are directly accountable only in private forums: to their own minister and to the Prime Minister, through the Government Staffing Committee (a small party committee of senior ministers and senior advisers).

Rhodes argues that ‘we need a political anthropology of the executive’s court politics’ to enable us to ‘see executive governance afresh’ (2007, p. 1256). This review of a
comprehensive empirical case study provides a rare and intimate window into the behaviour and relationships of Australian ministerial staff, and sets a new agenda for research and analysis. It reveals the importance of the horizontal relationships that partisan advisers have with each other, in policy-making and in executive coordination. These relationships are a critical part of the role of the ministerial adviser in Australia. The networking between partisan staff is an arena in Australia’s evolving cabinet system, which supports ministers’ collective deliberations and decision making. This arena has not yet been recognized in the literature on the Australian cabinet.

The horizontal perspective complements the vertical dimension in which partisan advisers are usually seen. In the context of an emerging international literature on the role of partisan advisers (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010), it represents a new way of thinking about the role and relationships of ministerial staff and an important area for further enquiry.

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