



Australian Government
Australian Public Service Commission

The Operating Environment of a Ministerial Office

Strengthening Partnerships

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The purpose of this guidance is to provide an overview of the operating environment of a Ministerial office. It is intended for members of the Australian Public Service (APS).

This guidance is general in nature.

Introduction

The operating environment of a Ministerial office is unique. It is fast paced, constantly changing, always busy and presents a daily set of competing and often complex priorities. Working in a Ministerial office can be challenging and stressful and, at the same time, it can be exhilarating and extremely rewarding. It is a privilege to work for a Minister in the Australian Government in the service of the Australian community.

Ministerial staff support their Ministers in their Ministerial role, but also support their non-portfolio functions, such as party political, House or Senate business and constituency work. Ministers and Ministerial staff have multiple competing demands on their time and strict deadlines to resolve issues.

The Composition of a Ministerial Office

Ministerial staff are employed under the [Members of Parliament \(Staff\) Act 1984](#). The Act regulates the employment of staff by all Senators and Members of the House of Representatives.

The Prime Minister decides the number of staff allocated to Ministers and Assistant Ministers, including Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs), and approves the employment of Ministerial staff. The Prime Minister, in consultation with their staff and the Special Minister of State, also sets standards for Ministerial staff, selection processes and employment levels for Ministerial staff. The Special Minister of State administers the [Statement of Standards for Ministerial Staff](#) which provides standards of behaviour to Ministerial staff.

A Cabinet Minister's office will include a Chief of Staff, Senior Advisers, Media Advisers, Advisers, Assistant Advisers and administrative staff. Staff will also include DLOs and electorate staff. A Minister's Chief of Staff will have around 12-18 direct reports, depending on how the office is structured. Ministerial staff can be based in Canberra, in Commonwealth Parliament Offices in capital cities across Australia or in the Minister's electorate office.

Who are Ministerial Staff?

Each Minister has their own style and approach and every Ministerial office has a different staff profile. This is based on the Minister's needs and preferences, portfolio responsibilities, and seniority.

Ministerial advisers have a close proximity to the decision maker. This characteristic sets them apart from other roles in government.

Ministerial staff come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and a typical office will include a mix of skillsets and personalities. Ministerial staff range from “generalists” to political or policy experts. Some staff may come from the APS. Others may have worked for the Minister in opposition or when the Minister was a backbencher. Some staff may have backgrounds in the Minister’s political party. Some may have backgrounds in the private sector, may have worked in policy roles or may have worked for non-government organisations, such as university or research institutes, community groups, trade unions or employer organisations. The Minister determines their suitability for the Ministerial office and the role they will occupy.

Some offices may not have any Ministerial staff with APS experience. In these cases, the APS should be aware that some support relating to government procedures may be required. The APS can provide this assistance directly or through the DLO.

A Day in the Life of a Ministerial Adviser

The work of a Ministerial adviser is fast paced and each day is different. While driven in part, by the annual calendar of Government and Parliamentary business, their activity is directed by the priorities of the cycle, the day or even the moment. A Parliamentary sitting day is a cacophony of ringing bells, back-to-back meetings, media interviews or requests for information, multiple phone calls and emails, ensuring the Minister is where they need to be when required and managing time pressures. A Ministerial adviser will have competing and changing priorities and will also have many individuals seeking their attention, including the Minister, APS officials, other advisers, party officials and other stakeholders. This is all in addition to the adviser’s normal work of engaging with the APS and providing written and verbal advice to the Minister.

It is important to remember that compared to work in APS departments, a Ministerial office has a much smaller staff and is generally under much greater pressure to perform and deliver in a timely fashion, especially when Parliament sits.

How does a Minister’s staff work with the APS?

The principal role of a Ministerial adviser is to advise the Minister. Advisers work in a political environment, providing political context and advice to aid a Minister’s decision making on policy matters. The fundamentally political nature of advisers’ roles sets advisers apart from the APS but also enables and protects the political impartiality of the APS.

Ministerial staff form an integral part of Government. They work in conjunction with the APS to deliver the Government’s priorities. They assist Ministers on matters where politics is an issue, which is outside the scope of the apolitical APS. They advise and assist on policy matters, including policy development and implementation. They ensure the Minister is aware of stakeholders’ views and support the Minister in almost all aspects of their role.

To provide advice, Ministerial advisers draw on APS knowledge and experience, amongst other sources. The partnership between Ministerial staff and the APS is therefore critical for effective public administration.

When engaging with Ministerial staff, the APS should be conscious of the [APS Values](#) and the [APS Code of Conduct](#). While all APS Values are equal, it is particularly important to remember the value: *The APS is apolitical and provides the Government with advice that is frank, honest, timely and based on the best available evidence.*

The provision of advice to a Minister takes place in a competitive and contestable environment, and is not the sole preserve of the APS. Ministers receive advice from a variety of sources, such as research institutions, non-government organisations, business organisations, community groups and other stakeholders. Ministers and their staff have contacts that are close to the issues. APS advice must therefore be well informed and of high quality – relevant, accurate and current – and it must address the issues.

The contestability of advice has grown over time and the APS needs to be attuned to this. It is critically important that APS advice is both high quality and contestable. The APS enjoys a privileged position in that the APS has a direct, formal channel of communication to the Minister to propose or inform the Minister’s decision making.

From time to time, Ministerial staff may have alternative views to APS advice on a particular issue. Ministers generally receive advice from both the APS and from their staff, as well as from colleagues and other stakeholders. A difference in opinions will be apparent to the Minister and ultimately, it will be the Minister who makes the final decision. This demonstrates the need for APS advice to be persuasive, current, evidence based and of excellent quality.

When working with Ministerial offices, it is important to always understand the underlying political context. APS impartiality is fundamental and the APS should not become part of the politics. However, APS staff need to understand Ministers and governments operate in a political environment and need to be aware of the political context to their work. Ministerial advisers provide political and policy advice, enabling the APS to remain apolitical.

It is important to consider the balance between process and outcomes. A Minister will often be focussed on solutions to problems and so the APS needs to craft advice to provide the Minister with the best process in order to achieve a desired outcome. Processes should be well considered and implementable, however not so burdensome as to cloud the outcome. There sometimes can be a sense in Ministerial offices that in some APS advice, process is prioritised over fixing the problem. APS advice should recognise, address and seek to overcome and change this. It is important to find a balance between process and outcomes and note that process sometimes has other drivers.

The influence of Ministerial staff derives from their position of trust with their Ministers and proximity to their Ministers. Ministerial staff cannot direct APS employees in their own right and APS employees are not subject to their direction. If an APS employee ever has a concern about with their engagement with Ministerial staff, they should raise it immediately with their manager, who in turn should discuss the matter with the Minister’s Chief of Staff.

Governance

Ministerial staff are employed under the framework established by the [Members of Parliament \(Staff\) Act 1984](#). They are also required to operate under the [Statement of Standards for Ministerial Staff](#). Section 8 of the Statement of Standards for Ministerial Staff requires Ministerial staff to “make themselves aware of the APS Values and Code of Conduct”¹. This will assist in building realistic expectations of the nature and extent of advice they will receive from the APS. Ministerial staff should also be aware of [The Cabinet Handbook](#) and [The Legislation Handbook](#).

How does a Minister’s office work with other offices?

A Minister is a member of the Executive Government, led by the Prime Minister. Ministers can be Cabinet Ministers, can be in the Outer Ministry or can be Assistant Ministers (formerly known as Parliamentary Secretaries).

The Government operates within a Cabinet framework. As part of this framework, Ministers consult with their colleagues, take decisions collectively and may be called to participate in Cabinet committees, such as the Expenditure Review Committee, the Service Delivery and Coordination Committee or the Cabinet Office Policy Committee.

Ministers work closely with other Ministers to progress Government priorities. For example, to progress a Budget submission, a Minister’s Office would usually work closely with the offices of the Prime Minister, Finance Minister, Treasurer and other ministers, including Assistant Ministers in the same portfolio, whose interests intersect with the issues in the submission.

Interactions and negotiations between Ministers, where not led directly by Ministers, are normally led and carried out by Ministerial staff. For example, Ministerial staff engage with colleagues in other Ministerial offices to consult on policy matters, establish a common position and address any challenges or differences. This engagement informs Ministers, who then agree on a final position on a matter.

For Parliamentary matters, the Minister works with the offices of the Leader of the House in the House of Representatives and the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Ministers work with the office of the Cabinet Secretary for Cabinet matters. The Cabinet Office is supported by the Cabinet Division of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The APS is often called upon to provide briefing to support these interactions. The APS assists in this process by working with other departments to inform views, provide background information, support objectives and identify and resolve any issues. To do this, the APS must have a clear understanding of the Minister’s position and this can be achieved through a strong relationship and regular engagement with the Minister and their staff. Factual and relevant briefings are appropriate in these situations. Ministerial staff will draw

¹ Special Minister of State 2021, Australian Government, accessed 12 November 2021. <https://www.smoss.gov.au/statement-standards-ministerial-staff>

on the experience and advice of the APS to understand and meet the requirements of Cabinet and other government processes.

Interaction with Parliament and Parliamentary Processes

Ministers have a range of Parliamentary responsibilities. This includes answering questions in Parliament (for their own portfolio and also representing Ministers in the other Chamber), providing briefings to and appearing before Parliamentary Committees and ensuring the passage of legislation through the Parliament. Ministers who are Senators appear before Senate Estimates hearings, both for their own portfolio and also representing portfolios of other Ministers in the House of Representatives (including the Prime Minister). Ministers are also responsible for briefing their own Party Room on upcoming legislation.

The APS provides briefing and logistical assistance to support the Minister's parliamentary responsibilities. However, the APS does not provide explicit briefing for Party Room or Party Policy Committee briefings. These briefings are prepared by Ministerial staff and normally delivered by the Minister.

Parliamentary Party and Political Party Processes

A Minister holds their position as a result of being a Member of Parliament who is part of the Parliamentary Party able to form a government. This necessitates membership of a political party, but on occasion Governments may include an independent Member of Parliament.

A Minister's activity with their parliamentary colleagues may include briefing and responding to requests from backbenchers and engaging in Party Room activities. Ministers also carry out Party Room briefings on specific legislation or topics of interest to their political party.

The APS remains impartial and does not participate directly in the Minister's Parliamentary Party activities but may provide factual briefings for these activities. For example, if a Minister meets with a backbencher in their capacity as Minister, on a portfolio related matter, participation from the APS in a factual briefing is appropriate. Similarly, the Minister may ask the APS to brief the Opposition or crossbench to support Parliament's consideration of legislation.

These activities are critical in supporting the Minister in their parliamentary responsibilities.

However, it is important to remain aware that a Minister has a political role and has commitments to their political party and members of its organisational wing.

Where Ministers require briefings or information for a party conference, a political branch meeting or a discussion with a policy committee of the organisational wing, the Minister's staff should provide the information for the Minister.

Given the APS values and the requirement to be impartial, it is important the APS maintains separation from the activities of the organisational wings of political parties

Role of the Media

The media is an important part of Australia's parliamentary democracy. Ministerial engagement with the media and media practices are both important for the APS to understand.

Over 250 journalists, photographers, editors, camera operators and other support staff work in the media at Parliament House². Collectively, they are known as the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery. Their role is to report on a wide range of Government and non-Government activities in Parliament House and on Members of Parliament more generally.

Members of the Press Gallery often have interactions with Ministers and their offices. Normally, the Minister's media adviser facilitates these interactions.

The 24-hour media cycle, the rapid uptake of social media and a constant need for content means journalists are always on the lookout for a story, or in colloquial terms, a "yarn". The APS should be proactive and adopt a "no surprises" approach with Ministers and their staff, bringing potential issues to their attention early.

While the Minister's office is typically responsible for the direct relationship between the Minister and the media, the APS also supports this relationship. APS departments have media teams to support their Ministers, including drafting speeches, talking points media alerts and media releases.

Changes in the Operating Environment since 1984

In 1984, Parliament passed the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*, to set the parameters for Members of Parliament to employ personal staff. Since that time, the operating environment of a Ministerial office has changed significantly.

For example, in the 1980s there was a diversified media in Australia, with a variety of distinct and separate media outlets. Australia now has a concentrated media model, with 24 hour news channels, electronic media and social media all providing news and content in a crowded and competitive media marketplace. This is in addition to traditional media outlets, which still exist. There has been an increased focus on the work of the Government, Ministers and their staff. This has increased the pressure on Ministers and their staff. To support the government of the day, the APS must be conscious of the media landscape and the media's interest in government.

Since the 1980s, lobbyists have also grown in number and activity. A lobbyist is any person, company or organisation who conducts lobbying activities on behalf of a third-party client. Lobbyists help individuals and organisations communicate their views to the Government. In 2008, the Government introduced the [Lobbying Code of Conduct](#) and established the [Register of Lobbyists](#). Both Ministerial staff and the APS need to be aware of lobbyists and the role they play. Ministerial staff also have obligations under the Code.

² Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, accessed 12 November 2021.
<https://pressgallery.net.au/about-us/>

Another change in the operating environment of a Ministerial office is the professionalisation of the role of Ministerial staff. Over the last twenty years, there has been a significant growth in the numbers of Ministerial staff. In the past, working in a Minister's office was often seen as a secondment or a temporary placement. People now make careers as a Ministerial staff member, and will often work for a Member of Parliament in both Opposition and Government. While this will not impact the relationship between Ministerial staff and the APS, it is nonetheless a factor to consider.

The speed at which issues move is another change since the introduction of the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*. This is a key feature of the current operating environment of a ministerial office. The APS should appreciate the speed of the development of issues and be agile in its response, particularly when providing information to a Minister on fast moving matters.

Social media is now a significant feature of the Australian political landscape. Some Ministers engage frequently with social media, whilst others do not have any social media presence. The APS needs to be aware of social media and the impact it has on politics and the agenda of the day.

Conclusion

Ministers normally hold their office for a relatively short time, and during that time Ministers want to achieve outcomes for the Australian community. To achieve outcomes and enable a strong partnership between the APS and Ministers and their offices, the APS needs to be aware of the operating environment of a Minister's office, be alert to their unique pressures and nuances and be proactive in their engagement.

Understanding the operating environment of a Minister's office is a good foundation on which the APS can build a partnership to deliver good policy outcomes for the Australian community.