

Too Many or Too Few? The Increase in Federal Ministerial Advisers 1972–1999

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This paper examines recently published figures that show the increase in ministerial staff between 1972 and 1996 (Dunn 1997). A careful examination of the table in Dunn's book reveals it gives a misleading impression of the number of ministerial staff; the number of advisory staff to ministers; and the growth in advisory resources over the Hawke–Keating period. By re-analysing the figures the paper reveals the reality of the growth in advisory staff to ministers in 1972–1999. It provides an account of the number of staff providing policy and political advice to ministers in ministerial offices, rather than total staff numbers. It reveals advisory resources to ministers have grown significantly since the introduction of ministerial advisers in 1972. However, the growth in adviser numbers over the Hawke–Keating period was more modest than is suggested by Dunn's table. The paper provides the base data needed for a discussion of the increase in ministerial staff and whether there are too few or too many federal ministerial advisers.

In recent years some commentators have expressed concern about the growth of ministerial staff to Australian federal ministers. They refer to the 'enormous growth of the ministerial office' (Waterford 1995) and 'the swollen ranks of ministerial advisers' (Tingle 1995). The sense that there has been an explosion in the numbers of partisan staff since their first introduction by Whitlam in 1972 (and particularly over the Hawke–Keating period) is associated with concern about their apparent growing influence in government. Some link their growth in numbers to a decline in the traditional policy-advising role of the public service (Fitzgerald 1996). However, at the same time some have suggested that there is a need to increase the size of ministerial offices (for example, Hollway 1996).

When the Howard government was elected in 1996 it reduced the number of ministerial staff and this was applauded by some, as in this newspaper editorial:

The cut in ministerial staffers is ... justifiable. The wonder is that the ministry still needs 379 people. It was astounding that it had increased to 455 under the Keating

government. That money would be better used in service delivery. Governments have public servants to advise them. They should not employ a duplicate set (The Canberra Times 18 April 1996).

But while there are claims of a burgeoning army of ministerial advisers within government, it is rare that the actual number of staff is examined. This article analyses raw data of the number of ministerial staff over the last 25 years and asks: What is the real extent of the growth in ministerial advisers since 1972? How accurate are recently published figures?

The most recent book about ministerial staff in Australia is Delmer Dunn's *Politics and Administration at the Top* (1997). In this book Dunn provides a table which shows the growth in ministerial advisers between 1972 and 1996 (1997:10). The table is reproduced below (Table 1). It takes data from several studies that have been conducted on ministerial advisers since their introduction (Forward 1975, 1977; Walter 1986).

This table suggests that over the Hawke–Keating period staff numbers grew by 115 percent. It suggests the Keating staff represent

Table 1: Ministerial Staff in Australia 1972–1996

	Coalition McMahon ^a 1972	Labor Whitlam ^a 1974	Coalition Fraser ^a 1976	Coalition Fraser ^b 1981 ^d	Labor Hawke ^b 1983	Labor Keating ^c 1995	Coalition Howard ^c 1996
Total Staff	155	227 ^e	138	217	224	481	423

- a from Forward (1977:160) figures include principal/senior private secretaries, private secretaries, ministerial officers, advisers, research officers, press secretaries, departmental liaison officers, assistant private secretaries, typists and clerical staff. No electorate staff were included in the totals;
- b from Walter (1986:115) figures include all staff of ministers (but do not include staff of the parliamentary secretaries that existed in the Fraser government). Total includes principal private secretaries, senior private secretaries, private secretaries, assistant private secretaries, ministerial officers, consultants, journalists, press secretaries, principal advisers, senior advisers and advisers; as well as clerical staff (personal secretaries, assistant personal secretaries, steno-secretaries, typists, telephonists) and electorate staff (electorate secretaries and electorate assistants). There were no departmental liaison officers listed in the staff schedules at either time;
- c from Dunn (1997:10) figures include all staff to ministers and parliamentary secretaries including electorate officers;
- e this was misprinted as 207 in Dunn (1997:10);
- d this was misprinted as 1983 in Dunn (1997:10).

a 112 percent increase on the number employed by Whitlam. It shows a 12 percent reduction in staff numbers by Howard when he took office in 1996. This supports the idea of an ‘explosion’ in ministerial staff over the Labor years and suggests that the resources available to the first Hawke ministers were the same as those available to ministers in the Whitlam government.

That there could be currently over 400 staff advising ministers (equivalent to the size of some departments) may seem alarming. However, there are several problems with the table, which may lead to misconceptions about the number of ministerial staff and the increase in ministerial staff over time.

First, Table 1 compares data from different studies which do not all count the same types of staff. While departmental liaison officers were included in the figures for 1974 and 1995 and 1996, they did not appear in other years. Electorate staff were counted in the figures for 1981, 1983, 1995 and 1996 but did not appear in lists for 1972, 1974 and 1976.

Second, the figures in this table count ministers’ personal staff rather than their ministerial staff. There is a strong argument for excluding electorate staff from the numbers of ministerial staff. A minister’s electorate staff are not located in the Canberra office and only rarely

visit Canberra. There is a strong and important distinction between the resources ministers have for their electorate work and their ministerial work. This has its basis in the difference between work for the party and work for the government. Ministers are strictly accountable for their use of resources, with separate financial accounts for their allocation as an MP or senator and their allocation as a minister. It is rare that electorate staff would undertake any ministerial work (stretching the rules is more likely to occur in the other direction). Therefore to count electorate staff in the number of ministerial staff is misleading, and Table 2 shows how the figures can be adjusted to reflect more accurately ministerial resources.

Table 2 indicates that the increase in ministerial staff over the Hawke–Keating period was higher than Dunn’s table suggests — 127 percent. However, the increase between the Whitlam and Keating periods was lower — 65 percent. A further complicating factor is that Dunn included staff to 10 parliamentary secretaries as well as ministers in his Keating and Howard figures, while staff to parliamentary secretaries were excluded from Walter’s 1981 figures (they did not exist in other years). The table can be further revised, taking out the staff to parliamentary secretaries to make the figures comparable (Table 3).

Table 2: Ministerial Staff Numbers 1972–1996

	McMahon ^a 1972	Whitlam ^a 1974	Fraser ^a 1976	Fraser ^b 1981	Hawke ^b 1983	Keating ^c 1995	Howard ^c 1996
Total Staff	155	227	138	217	224	481	423
No of Electorate Staff included in Total Ministerial Staff (not including Electorate Staff)	0	0	0	52	59	106	93
	155	227	138	165	165	375	330

- a From Forward (1977:160) CPD H of R 27 April 1972 :2182–85; CPD H of R 5 December 1974:4844–50; CPD Senate 16 March 1976:526–7; CPD Senate 18 May*1976:1690–93 (* misprinted in Forward 1977 as March).
- b From Walter (1986:115) CPD Senate 19 August 1981:99–103; CPD Senate 13 September 1983:610–613.
- c From Dunn (1997:10) Ministerial Directory October 1995; Ministerial Directory July 1996 (misprinted as June in Dunn).

Table 3: Ministerial Staff to Ministers Only 1972–1996

	McMahon ^a 1972	Whitlam ^a 1974	Fraser ^a 1976	Fraser ^b 1981	Hawke ^b 1983	Keating ^c 1995	Howard ^c 1996
No of Ministers	27	27	24	26	27	30	28
Ministerial Staff (not including Electorate Staff)	155	227	138	165	165	338	289

- a From Forward (1977:160) CPD H of R 27 April 1972:2182–85; CPD H of R 5 December 1974:4844–50; CPD Senate 16 March 1976:526–7; CPD Senate 18 May 1976:1690–93.
- b From Walter (1986:115) CPD Senate 19 August 1981:99–103; CPD Senate 13 September 1983:610–13.
- c From Dunn (1997:10) Ministerial Directory October 1995; Ministerial Directory July 1996.

Table 3 also indicates the number of ministers in each government which enables the proportional increase in staff to be calculated. While the total increase in ministerial staff over the Hawke–Keating period is 105 percent, the proportional increase is 85 percent (and 34 percent between the Whitlam and Keating periods).

Ministerial Staff or Ministerial Advisers?

While these figures show the number of ministerial staff, they do not indicate the advisory resources that different governments

had. The ministerial staff figures include many types of staff who do not engage in advising work (such as secretaries and clerical staff) and who are not commonly referred to as ministerial advisers. It is the number of staff involved in policy advising which concerns most critics. By re-analysing the staff lists used by Dunn, it is possible to construct another table (Table 4) that focuses more closely on the increase in the type of staff who provide partisan policy advice (the new type of adviser first introduced by Whitlam).

The figures include principal private secretaries, senior private secretaries, private secretaries, ministerial officers, consultants,

Table 4: Advisory Staff to Ministers 1972–1996

	McMahon ^a 1972	Whitlam ^a 1974	Fraser ^a 1976	Fraser ^b 1981	Hawke ^b 1983	Keating ^c 1995	Howard ^c 1996
No of Ministers	27	27	24	26	27	30	28
Total Advisory Staff	29	68	55	96	95	172	131

a From data used by Forward (1977) CPD H of R 27 April 1972:2182–85; CPD H of R 5 December 1974:4844–50; CPD Senate 16 March 1976:526–7 and 18 May 1976:1690–93.

b From data used by Walter (1986) CPD Senate 13 September 1983:610–13; CPD Senate 19 August 1981:99–103.

c From data used by Dunn (1997:10) Ministerial Directory October 1995; Ministerial Directory July 1996.

principal advisers, senior advisers, advisers and assistant advisers.¹ They exclude the staff excluded by Walter (1986) in his study of ministerial advisers. These were media staff (journalists, press secretaries and media advisers); clerical staff (personal secretaries, assistant personal secretaries, steno-secretaries, typists, telephonists); departmental liaison officers and electorate staff (electorate secretaries and electorate assistants).²

The revised Table 4 shows an increase in advisory staff of 81 percent between the early days of the Hawke government and the end of the second Keating government. If the number of ministers is taken into account the proportional increase is lower — 63 percent. Comparing this with the Whitlam figures, there was a total increase of 153 percent in advisory staff by the Keating period, and a proportional increase of 127 percent. This indicates that there has been a major increase in ministers' advisory resources since the time advisers were first introduced by Whitlam.

There was an 18 percent proportional decrease in advisory staff between the Keating and first Howard governments. This can be entirely accounted for by the absence of ministerial consultants in Howard ministerial offices. Half of the 63 percent increase in advisory staff between the first Hawke government and the second Keating government is accounted for by the introduction of ministerial consultants in 1984.³

In summary, by reanalysing the data presented by Dunn it is possible to correct misleading impressions that may arise from it. The increase in ministerial advisers over the Hawke–Keating period was far less than Dunn's

table suggests (it was 63 percent rather than 115 percent) while the increase in advisory resources between the Whitlam and Keating years was greater than Dunn suggests (it was 127 percent rather than 112 percent). Howard's 1996 reduction in advisory staff was slightly greater than Dunn suggests (it was 18 percent rather than 12 percent). This reduction is entirely accounted for by the disappearance of ministerial consultants from Howard ministerial offices.

Howard Government 1996–1999

Despite its initial reduction of ministerial staff, the Howard government has since increased staff numbers. These crept up gradually over 1996, 1997 and 1998 (CPD Senate 16 September 1996:4342; CPD Senate 16 June 1997:4294; CPD Senate 28 November 1997:9827; CPD Senate 8 March 1999:2428). In September 1999 the total number of ministerial staff was 328, a significant increase on 1996 figures.⁴ However, the ministry had also grown to 30 by this time.

Counting advisory resources only (Table 6), there were 152 ministerial advisers to ministers in September 1999. As in Table 4, this figure excludes media staff, secretarial staff, departmental liaison officers and electorate staff.⁵ Thus advisory resources grew considerably between 1996 and 1999, but have not quite reached the levels of the Keating government in 1995.

An index derived from the ratio of the number of staff to the number of ministers makes these figures more comparable (Table 7).⁶ There have been other developments during the Howard years which are not evident in these tables. The Federal Opposition claims there has

Table 5: Ministerial Staff to Ministers Only 1983–1999

	Hawke ^a 1983	Keating ^b 1995	Howard ^b 1996	Howard ^c 1999
No of Ministers	27	30	28	30
Total Staff (not including Electorate Staff)	165	338	289	328

a From Walter (1986:115) CPD Senate 19 August 1981:99–103; CPD Senate 13 September 1983:610–13.

b From Dunn (1997:10) Ministerial Directory October 1995; Ministerial Directory July 1996.

c Ministerial Directory September 1999; CPD Senate 8 March 1999:2428.

Table 6: Advisory Staff to Ministers 1983–1999

	Hawke ^a 1983	Keating ^b 1995	Howard ^b 1996	Howard ^c 1999
No of Ministers	27	30	28	30
Total Advisory Staff	95	172	131	152

a From data used by Walter (1986) CPD Senate 13 September 1983:610–13; CPD Senate 19 August 1981:99–103.

b From data used by Dunn (1997:10) Ministerial Directory October 1995; Ministerial Directory July 1996.

c Ministerial Directory September 1999; CPD Senate 8 March 1999:2428.

Table 7: Index of Number of Staff per Minister 1983–1999

	Hawke 1983	Keating 1995	Howard 1996	Howard 1999
Total Ministerial Staff ^a	6.1	11.3	10.3	10.9
Advisory Staff only ^b	3.5	5.7	4.7	5.1

a These figures are derived from Table 5, by dividing the number of staff by the number of ministers.

b These figures are derived from Table 6, by dividing the number of staff by the number of ministers.

been a large increase in the number of departmental liaison officers in ministerial offices over the Howard years and a growth of staff employed at the senior adviser level, as well as a movement of consultants onto the departmental, rather than ministerial, payroll (Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 8 February 2000). They see these practices as designed to expand resources in ministers' offices without expanding staff numbers, which keeps Opposition staff numbers down. (Opposition staff entitlements are pegged at a percentage of those employed by the government under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984).

Too Many Staff?

That there were 131 staff providing policy and political advice to Howard ministers in 1996 is less alarming than Dunn's figure of 423, as is the most recent figure of 152 advisers in September 1999. That this represents five advisory staff per minister belies the image of 'swollen ranks' of ministerial advisers. It makes more plausible Hollway's call for an increase in staff to free up more time for advisers to give 'the calm attention to alternatives and options which is needed' and which would help departments in collaborating with them (1996:146).

Whether there are too many or too few ministerial advisers depends on what role they are being asked to play in government, which cannot be answered in this research note. However, it provides the base data needed for such a discussion. It also shows the need to consider carefully published figures about the increase in ministerial staff over time.

Notes

- * The research on which this paper is based was supported by a grant from the Institute of Public Administration Australia/University of Canberra Public Administration Research Trust Fund.
1. Assistant private secretaries were not counted in the 1972, 1974 and 1976 samples. This is because Forward did not class them as advisory staff, but rather as clerical staff (1977:160). However, in 1981 and 1983 Walter did consider assistant private secretaries to be advisory staff (1986:208, note 13) and thus they are counted in the 1981 and 1983 samples. It is likely that the role had changed over time. The 65 percent proportional increase in advisory staff between 1976 and 1981 in the Fraser government can be accounted for by the fact that assistant private secretaries were counted as advisory staff in the 1981 figures, while they were not counted in 1976. Thus even though total staff numbers did not grow markedly, advisory resources did.
 2. The exclusion of media staff and departmental liaison officers may cause advisory resources to be slightly understated, as it was true at least in the Keating period that some of these staff were at times involved in policy advising. However, they appear to have been in the minority and departmental liaison officers were usually more restricted in the roles they played than ministerial advisers.
 3. 31 of the Keating advisers were ministerial consultants. On the introduction of ministerial consultants see Walter (1986:96); also Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984 part II.
 4. Ministerial Directory September 1999. This includes all staff except electorate staff and includes four staff in the Cabinet Policy Unit nominally attached to the PM's office. It includes only staff to ministers and therefore not staff to parliamentary secretaries or the Government Members' Secretariat (which employed 9 staff at

December 1998). Neither the Cabinet Policy Unit nor the Government Members' Secretariat existed in the Keating government. (Figures for staff in these two units is at 1 December 1998 (CPD Senate 8 March 1999:2428)).

5. It includes three advisers in the Cabinet Policy Unit, nominally attached to the PM's office, but does not include eight advisers in the Government Members' Secretariat.
6. While the index presents an overall figure, it should be noted that cabinet and non-cabinet ministers had different staff allocations. In September 1999 cabinet ministers had an average of six advisers while non-cabinet ministers had on average three advisers. While the Keating ministry had an average of 5.7 advisers per minister in October 1995 this equated to an average of 7 for cabinet ministers and 3.5 for non-cabinet ministers. (These figures are calculated without the inclusion of the Prime Minister and his staff).

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