Debate: Tsars—are they the ‘experts’ now?

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As well as ministers, prominent people in particular fields have been employed as government ‘tsars’ or ‘champions’, to lead on or promote particular government policies. There needs to be greater transparency around these posts, so that their effectiveness can be effectively scrutinized.

So wrote the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) nearly two years ago (House of Commons, PASC, 2010a). PASC recommended that the Cabinet Office maintain a list of such appointments and issue guidelines to clarify how far ‘tsars’* speak for themselves or the government; that a minister should inform the appropriate select committee about such appointees, their responsibilities and the support to be provided by the department; and that departmental annual reports should include an account of their work. The (new) government responded in October 2010 rejecting the committee’s recommendations although it would ‘seek to ensure that such appointments are announced publicly, and select committees can be expected to examine their work’. The PASC found this a ‘disappointing’ response which it felt was ‘inadequate and devoid of merit’ (House of Commons, PASC, 2010b).

There are ever more tsars

The UK’s New Labour governments appointed over 100 variously titled outside experts between 1997 and 2010, finding more of them in the later years. As well as making individual appointments, they invented whole new categories. For example, from the late 1990s the Department of Health appointed ‘national clinical directors’ for different specialties and today there are 26 of them. Since the 2010 general election, the pace of these appointments has quickened—New Labour’s were made during 13 years; the Coalition government is not yet two years old, and we have identified well over 50 more appointments, only some of them renewals of Labour’s appointments. Among them are Tory MP Charlotte Leslie and charity chief executive Shaun Bailey as Big Society ambassadors.

UK governments are not alone in adopting this practice; Presidents Bush and Obama made extensive use of policy ‘czars’ (the preferred spelling in the USA).

Varieties of tsar

There is clearly a question of definition here. The title ‘tsar’ is sometimes formally conferred on such posts, though it is more widely used informally by the media. Other official titles include ‘adviser’, ‘independent reviewer’, ‘commissioner’, ‘ambassador’, ‘envoy’, ‘champion’ and even ‘voice’. What they all signify is that an outside individual is identified and engaged by government to contribute to policy thinking, and sometimes also to influence policy implementation and professional practice. The remit may be to analyse a policy issue and make recommendations for action (as, for example, Lord Turner, chair of the three-person Pensions Commission from 2002 to 2006 or Professor John Hills’ independent Fuel Poverty Review, commenced in March 2011), or to articulate and advocate to policymakers on behalf of particular interests (like Dame Joan Bakewell as Voice of Older People from 2008 to 2010 or Louise Casey as Victims’ Commissioner from 2011), or to help promote effective ways of putting policies into effect (such as Wayne McGregor as Youth Dance Champion in 2008–2010 and Martha Lane Fox as Digital Champion from 2009).

The common characteristic is that they agree to use their knowledge, experience, networks and authority in the service of a particular strand of public policy. In short, they are a source of expertise for the government. Of course, there are many other sources of expertise available to ministers: inside their own departments they can call on analysts, technical advisers and specialists, and generalist administrators; outside they can set up expert committees or commission work from researchers and consultants. Although this still goes on, over the past 10 to 15 years those conventional ways of tapping expertise have been supplemented by, maybe in some instances even supplanted by, the appointment of tsars.

What do tsars contribute?

Therefore it is important to ask whether and how policy development and professional practice benefit from this use of tsars. To answer that we need some straightforward facts:

• What appointments have been made (we are currently assembling an inventory)?
• How are the individuals selected (rarely...
through open competition apparently)?

- From which backgrounds they have come (many from business, some from the public sector, universities and the third sector)?
- Are some government departments or ministers more inclined to seek help in this way (our inventory will reveal this)?
- What payment do tsars receive (many, but not all, are unpaid)?
- What analytical or administrative support are tsars given (such as a secretariat and researchers)?
- What outputs they have provided (including ongoing advice or advocacy, web pages, a blog, interim documents and final reports)?

Beyond those facts there are also subtler questions to address. How much independence of thought and action is each tsar allowed? Are their terms of reference negotiable? What say do they have over their team and their staffing? What access do they have to their ministerial client? How free are they to challenge or criticise other policies or practices as they go about their work? Is there something about the inventiveness, imagination or force of personality of an individual tsar that makes change more likely? Have they sliced through former barriers to progress? Above all, what tangible and sustainable difference to the resolution of particularly persistent or difficult problems in society have tsars produced? And, in doing so, do they add value to more established sources of expertise?

References

House of Commons, PASC (2010b), *Government Responses to the Committee’s Eighth and Ninth Reports of Session 2009–10* (see www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/150/15002.htm).

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