

## Political Scientists as Consultants and Advisors: Stefano Sacchi

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### **IPS: Can you briefly describe your typical tasks and working day?**

I have to distinguish the period when I was advisor of the Labor Minister from the current activity as special commissioner of ISFOL and advisor to the PM's Office. When I was at the Labor Ministry I used to go to the ministry, where I had an office, or to INPS (National Social Security Institute) where I met with the institute's statisticians for working out how to estimate the financial impact of the reforms I had planned, as well as discussing with those who manage and administer the social programs. I spent large portions of time, either in meetings or on the phone, discussing with the General Accounting Office, as well as ministerial legislative offices and chiefs of ministerial staff at the Labor ministry and the Treasury, on aspects concerning the policy content and design, as well as decision making. I met with representatives of the social partners and stakeholders on behalf of the Minister. I was also often in Parliament where I kept made contact with influential legislators, the Committee Chairs and the rapporteurs of the pieces of legislation I had drafted. In other words, I interacted with all actors who were involved in the decision making by moving between the ministry, Palazzo Chigi (namely the PM's office), INPS, and the Parliament. The working day started at six a.m. and was very long; it was during the very special period of the approvals, first of the Jobs Act, and then of the Stability Act (budgetary law).

With reference to the Jobs Act you should remember that it was a delegating law that provided a framework and bestowed upon the government the powers of enacting legislative decrees that, on their turn, required the compulsory opinion of the

parliamentary committees. Indeed, the opinions were often negotiated. We (government “actors”) suggested in several cases that parliamentary committees should ask the government for clarifications or changes of aspects that we had not fully figured out when we introduced the draft pieces of legislation, or that it was politically more appropriate that the Parliament should ask and the government introduce in response.

The ISFOL typical day is very different. I work at my office between 8 am and 10 pm, then send emails and WhatsApp messages about next day’s tasks with my general manager well into the night, as well as preparation for next day’s meetings. I have much contact with other authorities, with the minister, the chief of ministerial staff, the PM’s office. Personally or via my spokesman I establish relationships with the press, and I personally take care of relationships with the trade unions. A profound reorganization of ISFOL is taking place. It involves the transfer of some resources and staff to the new agency ANPAL; the introduction of a new statute and reinvigorating the Institute also through a new mission; new focused recruitments. These issues oblige me to very intense and continuous interactions with the general manager and the human resources manager and to keep in contact with other administrations such as, for example, the state general accounting office and the Ministry of Public Service. Sometimes, much less often than I would like I hold meetings with the researchers to steer the research carried out by ISFOL and to collect information on what they are already doing. Then there are the conferences in which I participate not only in my academic role, but also in my capacity as special commissioner of ISFOL. Finally, I participate both in the ISFOL delegation, and in the delegation of the ministry of labor, to meetings with representatives of international and supranational institutions (European Commission, OECD etc.) during their regular fact-finding missions. I also continue, but at a lower intensity, my work as advisor, now at the Prime Minister’s office on pensions, income transfers, and social safety nets.

**IPS: Are you happy with this mix of activities?**

Now less than before. As a policy advisor I enjoyed my time a lot. I was at the heart of policymaking. The reform of unemployment benefits was a policy that I had planned for several years; implementing it was fulfilling a dream. The reform of short-time work (*cassa integrazione*) was much more difficult and I cannot yet believe we were able to achieve it. Being ISFOL Commissioner is not a fun job. It is a service that I fulfill, a duty. ISFOL is an agency that would have great potential but is held back by many problems. It is my mandate to overcome these problems and change it, but it is a lot of “dirty,” tough work, including many unpleasant interactions: something between the work of a diplomat and that of a chief executive officer of a large company, with strained industrial relations. Being policy advisor of the PM’s Office is still fun but it is a marginal activity compared to in the past. I am no longer at the heart of the policy process.

**IPS: Is your job the result of a tenaciously pursued project, or rather of an opportunity you seized?**

I leave it to the policy results to ascertain whether there is “*virtù*,” but certainly there is a lot of “*fortuna*,” to borrow from Machiavelli.

I was working for a while on a very informal basis with the Democratic Party. Above all, after the publication in 2009 of a book of mine on “flex-insecurity” that con-

tained concrete proposals about the labor market policies, the parliamentary group started inviting me to give presentations and seminars on labor and welfare policies. When Renzi, whom I did not know, became leader of the Democratic Party, he appointed a secretariat and he assigned the Labor department to Marianna Madia (current Minister of Public Service), whom I knew. Marianna asked me to prepare a reform of work-related income transfers (*ammortizzatori sociali*), as part of the more general reform of the labor market that Renzi had intended to provide to the Letta government as the Party's contribution, the so-called Jobs Act. I designed the reform, especially the reform of unemployment benefits, with the help also of research assistants in Collegio Carlo Alberto to assess its financial impact, while that of *cassa integrazione* was left at the level of general principles. When Renzi becomes prime minister, this reform enters the overall package of the labor market reform and will be introduced in parliament for approval of the delegation law. After a period abroad, as a visiting scholar at Cornell University, while the law is getting close to final adoption I am formally appointed by the Minister of Labor, Poletti, as his chief policy advisor.

Previously, during the Letta Government, I was a member of an advisory panel on the "minimum income scheme," with other (more senior) academics. Nevertheless, that experience has been overall marginal and it has not led to concrete results in policy terms.

In sum a new secretary of the ruling party who little later will become premier, brings with him to the secretariat and then to the PM's office a group of young people who in turn call peers they know, people who have researched and published on public policies in which they are interested, proposing reforms they are sympathetic with. Here the leaders of the group were Filippo Taddei at the Party and Tommaso Nannicini (now Undersecretary of State at the PM's Office) as the chief economic advisor to Renzi. We were seen as "barbarians" by high-ranked civil servants, brought by Renzi from academia into the public administration because he knew that with the administration's forces alone it would not be possible to produce the change he had in mind. A change that he figured out in general terms, while for crucial details he relied upon trustworthy experts.

**IPS: Had you planned this type of career while you were studying because you were attracted by it, or rather is it the result of a later choice?**

Honestly the possibility to carry out these tasks has not ever crossed my mind during my university training. But, nevertheless, I always thought that whoever studies social sciences wants to change the world, or more modestly to ameliorate the existing one. In my field, they want to affect public policies, and to improve them according to their system of values. In the public action the anchorage to a system of values is very important, as obviously you often have to come to big compromises. Having opportunities to intervene with concrete proposals in policymaking is perhaps easier for those who study public policies. But these opportunities are not entirely precluded also for other specialists, as for example the experts in electoral systems or in public administration or scholars who study the judicial systems. I truly believe that Political Science can be very useful for policymaking. Following Lindblom and Cohen, you can provide "usable knowledge" to improve policies.

**IPS: Did studying Political Science matter?**

I think it mattered. Unfortunately, those of us (political scientists) involved in policymaking are very, very few. Political science is an empirical science that inspires the taste for the knowledge of processes, the knowledge of “how” things take place. This is an advantage over, for example, economists and lawyers. We are on one hand more aware of the constraints on the action and on the other hand we focus more on the real consequences of policies and not on what is desirable in an ideal world or on what “logically” should come down from the institutional design. The majority of academics involved in policymaking are economists who, during policymaking, realize what we as political scientists know before the process starts: the reality is much more complicated than the models.

We suffer, particularly compared to the economists of a reputational disadvantage, not so much with civil servants in the public administration but with other actors in the policy networks. They are in fact mostly economists, and the economists tend, at least initially, only to consider other economists. Afterwards, sometimes, they change their minds. Ultimately, it is their problem.

**IPS: Is there anything not written in textbooks that you have learned thanks to your work experience, and that you would recommend should be taught to politics and policy students?**

In fact, I did not learn new things in general terms, but I have observed at first hand the strength of some descriptions and explanations that are already well known among scholars. First, the very limited rationality of policy processes. Sometimes they are really the “garbage can” type; often they are incremental. In all cases, to borrow from Krasner, policy processes are “non-ergodic”: random events may lead the decision making toward unwanted and costly paths that are very difficult to abandon and reverse, no matter how many good arguments and empirical evidence you can show.

Often the policy actors have little time, they do not have sufficient knowledge, they have a busy schedule and they want to consider as addressed and resolved as many issues as possible, as soon as possible, even if they are not. Moreover, even when you can resort to authority resources, of course I do not speak of my own authority, when for example you may appeal directly to the support of a prime minister, it is very hard to shake a recently reached equilibrium, even if such an equilibrium is a bad equilibrium.

A connected aspect, that Hecló mentioned and I found crucial, is the importance of presiding over all meetings. If you are not present, then decisions you dislike may be made and it is very difficult to change them later. Not only the physical presence but also mental brightness is important, and after several long, exhausting meetings in a single day you cannot take it for granted. Moreover, you have to know very well the files, the details of what you are discussing, to be able to lead the discussion in the preferred direction from the beginning, with arguments that are convincing both with respect to the policy goals and with regard to the political convenience of the actors who are involved in the decision-making process. You have to show the ultimate decision makers that the losers are few and the winners are many, and that they can explain this to the public opinion in simple and effective terms.

**IPS: Can you identify who has an academic background similar to yours on the basis of their approach to problem setting and problem solving? Or rather do you think that other differences/similarities (e.g., personality, political orientation, other peculiarities) matter more than academic background?**

I did not interact with other political scientists. However, I interacted with some economists with keen sensitivity for political science and the reciprocal understanding was immediate and profitable. Then of course also other aspects matter as, for example, being from the same generation and living a very similar experience, understanding that this was a unique opportunity to introduce long-awaited reforms.

**IPS: How would you re-organize (if needed) courses in political science (including its sub-disciplines) in order to structure a curriculum that could naturally lead to your current job?**

I think policy actors should be more often involved to provide testimonies of the strategies, the efforts and the tools that they use to push through a policy decision. At the same time these testimonies should always be filtered by instructors who subsume the first hand information under an analytical framework. There is always the risk of over-involvement, even when you are a scholar as I am. Currently I do suffer from over-involvement—sometimes I am not sufficiently detached from the flow of processes and every policy detail seems to me important.

In particular, for master and PhD students, internships at institutions (Parliament, the PM's office, ministries) would be very useful for realizing how and when decisions occur.

**IPS: Should Political Science scholars “get their hands dirty,” i.e., intervene more in politics and policy making, so that they gain in relevance?**

It is a choice to be left to the individual scholar and to their inclinations. As I said before, for me to be a social scientist means not only describing and understanding phenomena but also using this knowledge to intervene. But I do not want to impose this view on other social scientists.

**IPS: As far as your activity domain is concerned, is it possible and necessary to distinguish between technical knowledge on the one hand, and political values and policy preferences on the other?**

I do not believe it is possible, let alone necessary. That said, often in politics you do things you do not approve of. I sometimes found myself helping, even drafting provisions on which I disagreed. I did not want them designed that way, or I did not want them at all. It is part of the “getting your hands dirty with politics.” You are doing things that you, as scholar, do not approve of even if you understand the meaning and sometimes the utility in the political game. However, an anchorage to a value system must be present. Otherwise it is only sheer cynicism, action that pursues short-term benefits, the thrill of victory over the opponent, devoid of any value content.

**IPS: Did you find it easier to research or to be policy advisor? And why?**

Now I appreciate research activity even more. It is certainly tiring, at least for me. It usually takes me a long time before starting writing, in the preliminary phase when

I organize the evidence I collected and build the argument, then I am very quick at actual writing, but it all takes time and focus and now I lack both. Still, now, when I manage to have a couple days in a row to get back to some unfinished matters and papers, I confess that I am even happier than I was before. The job as policy advisor, under the conditions in which I play this role, is pure adrenaline. Participating in the decision-making process that led to the Stability Act was an extreme experience—exhausting but also exciting. Everything happens very quickly and you have to be there. I was in the office into the night and early morning, I was consulted while decisions were being taken at the highest level. The risk is that this sort of inebriation takes over, a frequent phenomenon among politicians, and that the effects and nature of the provisions you carry through, the policy contents, matter less, and less compared to winning political battles. It is the kind of cynicism I mentioned above. You can defeat it by preserving a framework of values that allows you to put in the right perspective what you do, what you can do and what it is appropriate to reach or to oppose.

**IPS: Did you have the opportunity to compare your experience with that of other academic experts, political scientists from other European countries in a condition similar to yours? Do you think the policy process and your role, for example, during the approval of the Italian Stability Act, are also detectable in other European experiences?**

I have not had yet the chance to meet other similar experts from other countries. Let me say that my experience as a consultant has been very peculiar. I found myself imposed on the administration by a prime minister who wanted to make changes. He was aware that those changes would not have come if he had relied upon that structure. It is hard to repeat such an experience. Indeed, the ministerial administrations are taking up the leeway, the room for maneuver they had initially lost. Perhaps the role that I played in those days would no longer be possible.