

Foreword

When Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Singapore in January 1971, Mr. Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, suggested that Commonwealth leaders should discuss techniques of government within the Commonwealth and exchange views on the institutions and the methods they had developed to meet the complex challenges of contemporary government.

It was agreed that Heads of Government would take up this subject at their next meeting. Meanwhile, I was asked to convene a meeting of Commonwealth Senior Officials to prepare the groundwork for the discussion of this subject by Commonwealth leaders.

The Senior Officials' Meeting was held in Ottawa in October 1972. The officials were either Cabinet Secretaries or the official heads of the Offices of Presidents or Prime Ministers. They agreed on various aspects of the subject that required to be considered at the highest political level by Heads of Government, and themselves discussed in detail some aspects of government of special concern to the principal permanent officials in national administrations.

These discussions broke new ground in the wide-ranging processes of Commonwealth consultation and exchange of ideas and experiences. Principal officials from 29 countries took a thoughtful look at the way they organised the support processes for the central decision-making apparatus of their governments, how duties were allocated between ministries and how their activities were co-ordinated, how the administrative machine was geared to the development process, and to effective communication with the people, and on personnel policy at the seniormost level. Innovative approaches adopted by various countries, ranging from a "think tank" in one or a Conference of Secretaries in another, were discussed.

As Prime Minister Trudeau pointed out at Singapore, the Commonwealth provides a particularly favourable setting for discussions of this nature. Though political systems or administrative structures may differ, there are conventions, many administrative habits, and a vocabulary with which all are familiar, added to the particular ambience of Commonwealth gatherings.

The initiative taken at Singapore has not by any means been exhausted by the discussions at the Senior Officials' Meeting and later at the Heads of Government Meeting in Ottawa in August 1973. Discussion of other aspects of this multi-dimensional question of techniques of government will continue at such forums: it is significant that the Commonwealth now favours two-yearly meetings of Senior Officials alternating with those of Heads of Government. Other action includes a study by the Secretariat of financial control and forward planning, for the consideration of governments, and consultations, now in progress, on the establishment of a programme to provide new opportunities for study and exchange of experience among senior officials from the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth governments have agreed that material for the discussions at the Senior Officials' Meeting on the role of principal permanent officials should be made available to a wider public than its issue as an inter-government document would ensure. Hence this publication, which I hope will contribute to further discussion of a subject of substantial importance to all Commonwealth countries.

In its preparation, the Commonwealth Secretariat has had the help of Mr. M. J. Lee of Birkbeck College and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, the University of London, to whom I express my thanks.

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