

Introduction

1. This report summarizes the discussion on comparative techniques of government which formed part of the agenda for the meeting of Senior Commonwealth Officials in Ottawa from 16 to 19 October 1972. It also includes material taken from the papers circulated by six member governments.
2. The meeting considered a number of topics of common interest to the participants. It sought to identify the problems which it would be useful to discuss on future occasions. The following two chapters summarize the substances of the discussion on the five topics to which the most time was devoted. The concluding chapter covers two further areas of interest to which the main discussions were related, and suggests which aspects of the subject might appear on future agendas.
3. The section on financial procedures deals briefly with a topic on which senior officials have asked for further information; that on senior personnel policy takes points from different parts of the principal discussions, because this topic, although intended for consideration, was never formally taken.

I Different Titles - Comparable Roles

4. The institutions which provide a common pattern of administrative procedures throughout the Commonwealth do not by themselves provide an adequate framework in which internal political problems can be discussed on a pan-Commonwealth basis. The Commonwealth contains so many different internal political styles. Accordingly any discussion of specific political problems has to be related to the particular contexts in which those problems occur.
5. But Principal Permanent officials in Commonwealth countries play roles which each recognizes in the other. There are a number of situations which seem familiar when they are translated into the terms which have been developed within the Commonwealth idiom. The principal patterns of administration developed in the Commonwealth provide administrations with a common terminology as well as mutual understanding of each other's conventions. High-ranking civil servants can easily appreciate the judgement required in different situations to handle the machinery of government.

6. The most important element in this experience of mutual recognition is that the management of the administrative machine can never be wholly divorced from tendering advice on the use of administrative procedures and institutions for political purposes. The Principal Permanent official requires a certain sensitivity to the political climate in which he works. He cannot afford to hold a view of politics which is too rationalistic. So much of the business of government is about the maintenance of authority and order, and not just "the delivery of services to the people". The most senior civil servant cannot always but be closely involved with the identity of the regime in power.

7. Although the term, Principal Permanent official, covers a number of different titles*, it is possible to compare and contrast the different roles involved. The expansion in size of the Commonwealth has transformed the character of the senior officials' meeting. The older dominions were originally represented by Cabinet Secretaries who all seemed to hold strictly comparable posts. Co-operation between Cabinets during the Second World War depended partly on this fact. But in the modern system of Commonwealth consultation, the person designated as Cabinet Secretary is not necessarily the most senior career official. The Republican style of government has introduced fresh innovations. The differences in size between Commonwealth countries means that each Head of the Civil Service works according to the scope of his responsibilities.

8. In the majority of Commonwealth countries, the idea that a career civil servant should occupy a certain pride of place at the centre of government owes more to the administrative centralisation associated with the Chief Secretary in the pre-independence government than to any conscious decision by Ministers that the management of their agenda and decisions requires a full-time paid official. Two traditions seem to have been fused together. The tradition based on a distinction between the secretariat and field administration co-exists with the tradition of departmental independence and ministerial accountability to parliament. The first emphasizes responsibility for managing the careers of senior administrators and the creation of a "political service"; the second

*See Appendix P.36.

emphasizes departmental seniority rules in promotion and a technical ministerial responsibility for all administrative actions. The designation and function of the Principal official is an expression of the particular combination which his country has followed. Commonwealth countries have moved away from British practice and British colonial procedures in adapting their institutional inheritance to their own political needs.

9. The way in which the two traditions have been combined affects the field of recruitment for senior advisers. There is some ambivalence in handling the system of appointment. In the old-fashioned cabinet tradition, only the Cabinet Secretary remained in his post for a number of years; the staff of the cabinet office were recruited from other departments and served a short term on secondment from another job. This convention was never wholly transferred to the colonial secretariat, although secretariat officers and field administrators tended to follow different careers. Similarly, the size of the country affects the kind of machine which it maintains. There is a tendency for small countries to retain a centralized office on the lines of the old secretariat, with a series of technical departments undertaking the day-to-day executive work. The constitution also affects the designation of public offices which can be held by civil servants, and probably reflects in many cases the authority of individual politicians.

10. But whatever variations in designation of title and formal position, the role of the Principal official can be studied in three dimensions which reflect the political development of his country. These dimensions were revealed in the course of the conference discussions.

11. First, the Principal official is affected by the degree to which the government is dependent upon one central administrative machinery of which he is head. There seems to be a number of positions along a general spectrum which ranges from the work of a Cabinet Secretary at one end, responsible to a collective body of Ministers, to the work of a Private Secretary at the other end, who is regarded as an official handling the work of only the chief executive Minister. This spectrum is in some measure related to the parliamentary tradition. Where the Cabinet is primarily conscious of the need to organise a collective front in the management

of a parliamentary majority, the senior official is much less likely to identify with the leader of government.

12. Second, the Principal official is also affected by the degree of centralisation. The development of Federal structures in the Commonwealth, as well as various kinds of decentralisation, have transformed the highly centralised style of the British system. Several Commonwealth countries now have provincial ministers, or provincial civil servants of Permanent Secretary rank. The machinery of central government has therefore had to accommodate some special treatment of central-local relations.

13. Third, responsibility for the promotion and posting of senior administrators does not always lie in the hands of the chief policy adviser. Britain itself separated the office of the head of the civil service from that of Cabinet Secretary. There are many permutations in the transformation of the public service commissions which were established at independence to supervise the management of the public service. Permanent Secretaries of departments may still exercise considerable influence over the selection of personnel, but the Principal official is not always associated with decisions taken on the promotion of his colleagues. In those Commonwealth countries which have established one-party traditions of government, the line between a senior administrator and a senior politician is sometimes difficult to draw.

14. All three dimensions represent changes in constitutional convention, rather than fundamental revisions of the constitution. In fact, it is still rare for a Commonwealth country to depart radically from the general range of possibilities within the Commonwealth tradition. For example, few governments run a dual executive, with the two offices of President and Prime Minister on the lines of the French Fifth Republic. Recent changes in Sierra Leone are an exception. The normal Commonwealth convention is for a President to replace a non-executive Governor-General, while the Prime Minister retains the main executive authority; or alternatively to abolish the post of Prime Minister when the office of an executive President is created. Nor have there been any significant attempts to develop the office of Deputy Prime Minister.

15. The most marked change in constitutional organization has been in those countries with military regimes. Far from diminishing

the importance of senior administrators in managing the machinery of government, a military regime appears to emphasize the value of a strong administrative frame. In Nigeria, for example, civil servants have continued to tender advice to the military government as they did to the earlier civilian administration, and have not become substitute Ministers. Each of the twelve states has a military governor (a civilian Administrator in one state) and an executive council nominated by the governor, as in the federal executive council. The Supreme Military Council is made up of state governors and the heads of the arms of the defence forces. In Uganda, however, civil servants have themselves in some cases taken on Ministerial roles under the military regime.

16. Whatever the pattern of arrangements, the scope and nature of the responsibilities of the Principal officials are identified by a rather unique combination of roles. They bring together the management of the machinery of government in its purely administrative aspects with the tendering of advice on how that machinery might be used for national political ends. The shape of this conference report follows these two different aspects of the work of Principal officials.

17. Chapter II deals with two items with which the conference was particularly concerned, the "Support System" for the central decision-making, and the problems of administrative co-ordination. These items cover procedural instruments which try to ensure that what has been decided is implemented. The Principal official presides over the machinery of government as a "transmission system". This often means evaluating the consequences of particular decisions.

18. Chapter III deals with three areas of administrative expertise which are vitally important in giving the machine a sense of political direction. The allocation of functions between different government agencies illustrates the general orientation of the regime and the problems which it would like to tackle. Effective financial procedures are vital to any mobilisation of resources. The relationship between government agencies and the people determines the success or failure of many policies. On all these questions, the Principal official has to bring his technical expertise to the service of the regime in power.

19. The final chapter deals with areas where the Principal officials' tasks in administrative management join his work in furthering political programmes. Economic planning is a major concern of all governments, whether they are part of the "developing world" or not. Senior personnel policy is the area in which par excellence the Principal officials' influence is felt.

20. The Ottawa meeting established that Principal officials, whatever their formal designation, have a degree of mutual understanding based on the obligation to look at organisation from both an administrative and a political point of view. The political content in their work may or may not be regarded as partisan. The scope and nature of their responsibilities involve interesting questions of judgement about the strategies which it is appropriate for full-time permanent officials to advocate. A central interest of the conference was to develop an appreciation of the judgement which Principal officials display in choosing between the options available.

II Managing the Machinery of Government

21. The first rule of the Principal official is to manage the machinery of government in the purely technical sense of ensuring that the arrangements which have been made can carry the load placed upon them. Because that load is largely an expression of political judgement, it is not always easy to separate this role from the second role of tendering advice on how the machine might be given a direction, but if the technical aspect is discussion first and separately, it makes it possible to isolate more clearly how Principal officials work.

Support for Central Decision-Making

22. The role of the Principal official has most frequently been associated with the post of Cabinet Secretary or Secretary to the Executive Head of Government. The management of the central arena of decision-making has called for the most skilled administrative advice from senior officials. The Commonwealth contains many different "support systems" at the centre of government. Their character varies according to the style of planning which is being pursued, and to the basic pattern of institutions. Principal