

THE MANAGEMENT OF CABINET AGENDA ITEMS

The number and type of items on the Cabinet agenda can vary. Either, Cabinet can have a few main agenda items that require detailed discussion and a number of brief supplementary items, or a Cabinet can have a long agenda with many main items for discussion and few, if any, secondary components.

If it is accepted that there are practical limits to the number of submissions that can be absorbed, then some system is needed to ensure that the significant issues are the ones that come to Cabinet.

Two obvious solutions are: the delegation of less important issues to cabinet committees; or the division into full agenda items and information notes that are not normally discussed.

An efficient method would be to have between four and six main agenda items which require real deliberation and debate by Cabinet before a decision is taken, and a number of supplementary items which only require ratification with little or no discussion by Cabinet. Contentious or sensitive matters which the policy committees cannot resolve could also be presented to Cabinet as main agenda items. Often at the end of the year, a huge volume of business is submitted at the last minute and Cabinet submissions may not then follow the set procedure.

A significant innovation in the management of agenda items has taken place in Botswana where a system which screens out issues before they become Cabinet memoranda is in place. This shortens both the length of meetings as well as the total time the government machinery spends on processing memoranda.

Cabinet Memoranda

Usually, five to seven memoranda are considered at each meeting.

Information Notes

Information notes inform the Cabinet about an action a minister would like to take that requires Cabinet responsibility, but does not usually need to be discussed formally. This system enables the ministries to circumvent the lengthy process of submitting a Cabinet memoranda. For example, a minister may inform his colleagues that he wants to set up a crime squad, an action that is within his power, but which should receive the assent of the Cabinet.

Other Business

About three Information Notes are submitted and read at each Cabinet meeting, but they are usually not discussed. However, if the Note is controversial when presented in Cabinet, it is noted that the contents need to be discussed later.

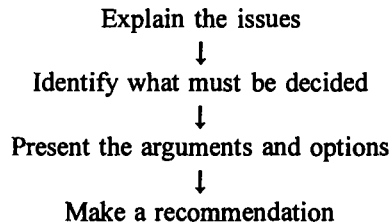
In Australia, the Prime Minister's permission to raise particular matters in Cabinet "under the line" may be sought:

- when procedural (not policy) matters are urgent;
- when urgent policy matters are sufficiently straightforward not to require a Cabinet submission and which cannot be resolved in another way; and
- when appointments are being made.

PREPARATION OF CABINET MEMORANDA/SUBMISSIONS

An integral part of successful policy development and co-ordination is definitely stated and easily understood Cabinet submissions. Most Commonwealth countries have strict rules and guidelines for the preparation of Cabinet submissions and a number have created lucid guidelines set out in a manual.

There need be no mystique about how Cabinet should work. These rules should determine what needs to come to Cabinet, how it should be presented and who should be consulted in the preparation of proposals. Submissions should be designed to:



All Cabinet submissions should be designed to provide clear, succinct summaries that identify the issue that needs to be decided, explain the options and recommend action. A common format, flexibly imposed from the centre, means that ministers know where to look for specific parts of the analysis.

In Britain, preparation of Cabinet memoranda is explained in detail in *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*. In brief, there are two types of memoranda that may be submitted to Cabinet:

- Agenda memoranda which contain matters requiring discussion and decision by the Cabinet; and
- information memoranda which contain matters that do not require a collective decision, but about which the Prime Minister and other ministers should be informed. These types of memoranda are useful for advising Cabinet about important action taken by a minister in his or her ministry. Sometimes, Cabinet may discuss issues that are contained in information memoranda.

Memoranda are required to be as concise and as clearly worded as possible. Both agenda and information memoranda should state briefly in the first paragraph the specific recommendation for action in dealing with the policy issue. All memoranda should contain in succeeding paragraphs the following:

- the minister's specific recommendation on how to deal with the issue;
- the considerations upon which the recommendations have been based, including any specialist advice which supports the recommendations;
- the views and comments of other ministers;
- counter-arguments, if any, by the originating minister to any views of dissent by other ministers; and
- an invitation to the Cabinet or Cabinet committee.

When a policy issue requires a lengthy and involving memorandum, ministers are advised to include a summary of the main points of the paper.

In Australia, almost all matters which are brought before Cabinet or its committees are in the form of proposals by ministers. Occasionally, the Prime Minister may have some matter to raise or report to make to the Cabinet. Ministers are urged to consider very carefully whether it is essential to bring any particular matter to Cabinet or whether consultation and agreement with interested colleagues would suffice. The *Cabinet Handbook* asks ministers to bear in mind the need to keep the volume of Cabinet business contained.

What are called "Cabinet memoranda" in other Commonwealth countries are referred to as "Cabinet submissions" in Australia. "Cabinet memoranda" in Australia are prepared in response to Cabinet or by committees for the development of options and, unlike Cabinet memoranda elsewhere, they do not contain recommendations. In response to ministers' significant workload, the format of Cabinet submissions has been standardised to meet four objectives:

- presentation in a format that facilitates consideration and, through its familiarity, enables ministers to turn readily to particular sections during discussions;
- agreement on a set of facts upon which discussion can proceed;
- succinct and clear identification of the essential issues; and
- indication of realistic policy options and their implications.

For each submission, the departments must complete the "Implications of proposals" section which includes consideration of the following matters:

Economic: Submissions involving proposals affecting the Consumer Price Index (CPI) must include CPI impact assessments.

Women: Impact of proposals on women should be noted.

Administrative: Proposals must note any staffing implications or proposed new administrative procedures.

Other: The implications for those groups not listed but which may be affected, including the disabled, Aboriginal, migrants, youth, the aged, etc. should be noted.

In Canada, Cabinet submissions normally originate within the staff of a ministry in response to a public concern or a policy initiative of the Government. After scrutiny and deliberation by the policy committees, the minister responsible places the memorandum before Cabinet. Each Cabinet memorandum must have two parts:

- the main policy decision in brief (less than three pages); and
- the analysis which contains a much more detailed rationale for the policy (less than 25 pages). All Cabinet mem- oranda must meet these length restrictions. Memoranda present background material, assess the main issues, and give a "bottom line" recommendation to the Committee Chairperson.

In Malaysia, civil servants staffing the ministries first draft Cabinet papers. Before submission to the Cabinet, the Ministry of Finance, as well as any other departments involved in the proposed policy, review and comment on the draft. The initiating Ministry then takes into account the input from other departments and submits a final draft at least one week before Cabinet meets to discuss the issue. Cabinet papers are sent to ministers on the Saturday before the Wednesday meeting.

Any Cabinet papers dealing directly with cognate subjects may be jointly presented by the relevant ministries. Policies are co-ordinated and differences between ministries over cabinet papers are resolved at the regular meetings of the Secretaries General.

The Department proposing the Cabinet memoranda is responsible for inter-departmental co-ordination on the issue under consideration. The staff of the Secretariats also try to harmonise differences between ministries in the process of advising them on preparation of Cabinet memoranda.

The Economic and Social Development Policy Secretariats assist ministry staff in preparing memoranda for submission to the Cabinet.

In Zambia, in the past, the quality of Memoranda submitted to the Cabinet by ministers was very poor. Part of the problem is that ministries have felt pressure to produce a high quantity of Cabinet proposals rather than high quality memoranda. PAC is working to redress this problem by assisting line ministry staff in preparing thoughtful, well-articulated, first drafts of policy proposals.

Towards the goal of higher quality memoranda, technical advisers recently put together a *Guide to Drafting Memoranda* for line ministry and PAC staff.

PAC took an important step towards the improvement of Cabinet memoranda recently when it developed a new format for all memoranda, a hybrid of the Canadian and Australian Cabinet memoranda.

Three major changes were:

- A new section to the Cabinet memoranda format addresses the *implications of the policy proposal for certain groups in society*, such as women, the unemployed, and the urban and rural poor. This important addition will ensure that line ministries integrate an assessment of the social, political, and economic impact – both positive and negative – of the policy into the memoranda preparation process.
- PAC also added a *Financial Implications* section to the format which will encourage initiating ministries to attach a price tag to their proposed policy, including direct and indirect costs, as well as off-setting savings. PAC will urge line ministry officials to consult with the Ministry of Finance early in the drafting process about the proposed policy's budgetary implications. In the future, ministry analysts will identify the proposed source of funds, a necessary step they have often tried to avoid in the past.
- The new format also required that an *Implementation Plan* be included with each memorandum which will explain how the proposal would be

In Singapore, the policy formulation process has been top down: most public policies are formulated by the Cabinet. When the Prime Minister first identifies a policy problem, he tells the appropriate minister to instruct his permanent secretary to investigate the issue. The permanent secretary then delegates the task of drafting a Cabinet memorandum on the subject to his professional staff.

Highly-qualified technocrats who serve in the elite wing of Singapore's Civil Service, called Administrative Service Officers (ASOs), conduct the policy analysis and prepare the Cabinet memorandum for submission to the Cabinet. Each Ministry is staffed with 25 to 40 of these well-trained ASOs, who are supported by 'Executive Officers', who collect data and assist with analysis.

implemented, demonstrate to Cabinet that the proposal has been well thought through, and guide ministries in following through with the actual implementation of Cabinet decisions. This plan should outline *who* does *what* by *when* to implement the proposal and, in doing so, demonstrate to Cabinet members the practicality of the proposal before them.

In all cases, the essential purpose of Cabinet submissions is to present an issue in a form that explains the issues, identifies what must be decided, presents the arguments and options and makes a recommendation, all in a form that is sufficiently accurate and succinct to assist busy ministers in making informed decisions.

FORECASTS OF CABINET SUBMISSIONS

One very helpful development in Australia has been the introduction of a forecasting procedure. To assist in the programming and co-ordination of Cabinet business, ministers provide the Secretary to Cabinet each quarter with forecasts of all submissions or memoranda they intend to lodge for consideration by Cabinet during the next six months. Departmental Cabinet Liaison Officers update these forecasts weekly by fax to the Cabinet Office. If there is no change a "no change to forecast" fax is sent. When a submission or memorandum is required as a result of a Cabinet decision, a forecast concerning that item is included in the next weekly telex to be sent, following receipt of the decision by the department concerned. Forecasts must be specific, in order to facilitate efficient management of Cabinet business; indeterminate forecasts such as ASAP, TBA, or forecasts with a two-month range – for example, December to January – are unacceptable. However, one former Cabinet Office official pointed out that half of the papers submitted had not appeared on the list of forthcoming business.

The Cabinet Office maintains a schedule of forward forecasts of Cabinet business which shows:

- forecast submitted each week;
- Submissions and memoranda required by Cabinet but not yet lodged; and
- the relation between a department's forecasts and actual performance (showing when a submission was first forecast, whether the forecast date slipped forward – and, if so, how often and by how much – and when the submission or memorandum was lodged).

Copies of these records as they relate to any department are provided regularly to that department's Cabinet Liaison Officer as an aid to comprehensive and accurate forecasting and as a management aid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: The Commonwealth Portfolio, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of Canada, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 1, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1994.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of the United Kingdom, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 2, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of Malaysia, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 3, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of Trinidad & Tobago, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 4, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of New Zealand, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 5, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of Malta, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 6, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995.

Current Good Practices and New Developments in Public Service Management: A Profile of the Public Service of Zimbabwe, The Public Service Country Profile Series No. 6, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997.

From Problem to Solution: Commonwealth Strategies for Reform, Managing the Public Service: Strategies for Improvement Series No. 1, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996.

Redrawing the Lines: Service Commissions and the Delegation of Personnel Management, Managing the Public Service: Strategies for Improvement Series No. 2, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996.

Working Towards Results: Managing Individual Performance in the Public Service, Managing the Public Service: Strategies for Improvement Series No. 3, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996.

Fourth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada, Jocelyne Bourgon, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet, Canada, 1997.

The Chief Secretary to the Government of Malaysia, Ahmad Sarji, Malaysia, August 1996.

Ministerial Symposium on the Future of Public Services, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Public Management Service, Paris, March, 1996.

The Australian Public Service: The View from the Top, Coopers & Lybrand and University of Canberra, Australia, 1996.

Canadian Public Administration, Volume 39, No. 4, Toronto, 1996.

The Management and Training Services Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat
(MTSD)

Managing for success

For managers in developing Commonwealth countries facing challenges ranging from public sector to enterprise turnaround, MTSD provides practical advice and rapid assistance through tailored packages of consultancy and strategic training. It assists with public service modernisation, organisational reform and restructuring, commercialisation, business planning, management development and the introduction of appropriate management and financial information systems.

Training for excellence

MTSD can assist in identifying training needs at sectoral, organisational or business unit levels. It provides top level training for senior staff and helps develop national and regional centres of excellence in priority areas. MTSD draws on the expertise of specialists within the Commonwealth Secretariat and can call on an extensive network of international experts to develop leading edge training programmes in strategic management, information systems, environmental management and enterprise development.

Building on strengths

All MTSD assistance programmes are sensitive to local needs and build on the strengths of existing staff and institutions. MTSD provides particular opportunities for women in the public and private sectors to develop their management skills.

Initial enquiries and requests for assistance can be made to:

The Director
The Management and Training Services Division
Commonwealth Secretariat
Marlborough House
Pall Mall
London SW1Y 5HX

Telephone: (+44) 171 839 3411
Facsimile: (+44) 171 747 6335

Cover design by Ashlyn Amichan