

Managing the Cabinet Process

**Notes for Remarks
to
Commonwealth Senior Officials**

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Ottawa

June 24, 1999

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Introduction

I am delighted that Peter Larson asked me to speak this morning on the subject of “managing the Cabinet process”, because this issue has been a preoccupation here in Ottawa over many years.

It’s an issue on which Canadians have both written and experimented. It is an issue on which Prime Ministers and senior officials have held very different views over the years, and on which views differ widely today. It is an issue on which we now have a body of experience in Canada going back at least thirty years.

I want to talk this morning about our experience at the federal level in Canada -- not because I think that our experience offers any instruction on the right way to do things but rather because I think it may offer some insights into a question that is central to the effective management of any Cabinet process, namely, “*what is the proper role of the centre of government in the Westminster system?*”

In talking about this issue, today, I will be drawing on my experience in talking with senior officials from many other countries over many years, and especially those from Westminster jurisdictions. That experience has shown me that, whatever the differences in the circumstances of our respective countries, we actually have a great deal in common. The issues and forces at work in Westminster government are remarkably similar from one jurisdiction to another.

What is it that is common to all our jurisdictions?

- government by a collective executive, headed by a Prime Minister (by whatever name) whose job it is to bring unity and direction to the Ministry
- Ministers, who make up that collective executive
- a legislature to which that executive is accountable
- a public whose interests are the responsibility and constant preoccupation of the government and which constitutes the “playing field”, as it were, of public policy.
- and in most if not all of our countries, a permanent civil service, whose duty it is to support the elected government by providing professional advice and support on both administration and policy.

These are the cardinal features of life for senior officials in Westminster jurisdictions. They remind us, I hope, of how much we have in common, and why it is such a pleasure to get together with colleagues from around the world on occasions such as this.

It is not only the grand architecture of Westminster government that we have in common, but also some of the many smaller frustrations of working in support of Minister.

I am reminded of a visit to the Privy Council Office some years ago by a group of officials from the Nigerian Cabinet Office. We were to spend a few days with them talking about what we did, how we managed Cabinet business and the like.

At first our conversations were a bit stiff – it was as if we were meeting distant cousins with whom we were trying to figure out some common ground for interaction. At a certain point, as we say here in Canada, the ice broke – one of our visitors asked me whether we had problems with Ministries sending in their Cabinet documents late. (This was a special problem for them because at that time, for security reasons, they typed all the copies of their Memoranda to Cabinet).

When I admitted that this was a constant problem for us too, and that like them, we had to stay late on Friday evenings to prepare the documents for Cabinet and the related briefing materials for the Prime Minister, my Nigerian visitor and his colleagues suddenly warmed to us and we to them. The stories began to flow on both sides as we realized that, despite the significant differences in our countries and our specific political systems, we faced common problems.

Two Forces

I believe that one of the central dynamics of Westminster government, and one that is crucial to understanding any Cabinet system, is the tension between two opposing forces that are present in both governance and policy-making. You might think of them as analogous to the centrifugal and centripetal forces of physics.

The centrifugal or “outward” force is the Westminster principle that every policy issue (with very rare exceptions) belongs to a Minister.

Normally, the assignment of duties in the Ministry fills all the available space in the domain of policy and administration– the difference is simply how many different ways you choose to divide a single “pie” of responsibilities. There is no “best” way. And how the pie is divided in any country can vary from time to time, or from one Prime Minister to another.

Comparing how we divide the pie in Canada with how you divide it in India, or in Mauritius or Zimbabwe can be interesting and often instructive. We in Canada have learned much from the experience of our Commonwealth counterparts, especially the Australians.

But what's really important here is not the details but the fact that under our system – the Westminster system that all of us share – there is a principle that issues belong to Ministers because it is Ministers who are individually responsible for exercising the powers of the state that have been entrusted to them by the legislature. It is Ministers' responsibility to deal with those issues before the legislature and before the public.

This principle that, in general, every issue belongs to a Minister is not just a matter of the efficient allocation of work. It also is essential to the Prime Minister's capacity to lead – he cannot carry responsibility for every issue because he cannot afford to carry all the blame. If there is a problem, it needs to be seen to belong, in the first instance at least, to someone else – someone who can take the heat or carry the can.

This, we might say, is the first principle of Westminster government – individual policy issues belong to Ministers, not to the centre¹.

By contrast, the job of central agencies is to help the Prime Minister ensure that the individual policies being brought forward by Ministers are supportive of the Government's overall agenda -- in short, to bring about "policy coherence" within the government.

This, in my view, is the second principle of Westminster government, and again one, which is analogous to the centripetal force of physics. It is the principle that, because of the Prime Minister's responsibility for the government as a whole, the centre has an interest in every policy issue, with the result that issues tend naturally to be drawn in to the centre.

When these two forces are in proper balance, government works well – the centre works from the assumption that issues belong in the first instance to Ministers, but Ministers respect the interest of the centre and the right of the Prime Minister to become involved or to shape policy as he or she sees necessary to ensure the success of the government's agenda and the survival of the government itself.

When these two forces are not in proper balance, it is the result of either of two circumstances:

¹ I should make clear that by the term "centre" I am referring to the central institutions of government that are responsible for supporting the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Normally the centre includes the Cabinet Office, a central "political" office of some sort, and in many countries the Finance Ministry, the Treasury Board or a Planning Ministry. Some, including some in Canada, would also include the Foreign Ministry among the list of "central agencies".

- the centre can be too weak, with the result that too much is done by Ministers acting without proper heed to the interests and direction of the government as a whole

OR

- the centre may be too strong, with the result that:
 - too many issues are managed from the centre
 - the Prime Minister becomes overloaded
 - the government does not benefit from the ideas and energies of the line ministries

What is the “right” balance between the centre and line in policy terms? There is no single answer to this question. That is for every jurisdiction to determine itself. But I challenge each of you to ask him or herself whether, in your country, the balance is appropriate.

Is too much being done at the centre in your country? If so, is it because:

- the PM is trying to do too much?
- Ministers are trying to “upload” their problems on the PM?
- there is too much policy capacity at the centre, and not enough in the line ministries?

Or, is it perhaps that too little being done at the centre?

- are the central agencies in your country too weak?
- do they lack the people and skills to bring about the requisite degree of policy coherence?
- do they insist on adequate consultation before issues are brought forward?
- are they capable of designing major initiatives and harnessing the resources of the system behind them?

Are Ministers too independent? Is the government’s agenda just the totality of their individual agendas? Are there mechanisms in place – structural mechanisms rather than simply declaratory or ad hoc ones – that enable the PM to exercise the requisite degree of control over the Ministry (such as the prerogative to appoint Permanent Secretaries)?

These are questions, I suggest, that all our countries have in common. Each of us will answer them in a different way. But I believe that the dynamics at work in all our

jurisdictions are essentially the same. And I also believe that we share an interest in achieving the proper balance between the role of the centre (i.e., Prime Minister and central agencies) and the role of the line (i.e., Ministers and their departments).

In this context, let me set out seven specific points that are relevant to a discussion of this issue of balance:

1. The appropriate balance between centre and line on policy matters will vary depending on the particular circumstances of a given country:
 - size
 - history
 - current challenges facing the society and the government
 - whether the country is a federal state, and in that context, the nature of the relationship between the federal and provincial governments
 - policy and other capacities in the government
 - the particular style, preferences and objectives of the Prime Minister

1. Some policy work must be done at the centre:
 - fiscal and budgetary planning
 - major foreign policy
 - government organization
 - the development, articulation and refinement of the government's overall agenda

1. The temptation is always to do too much at the centre, especially when:
 - the government is facing major challenges or problems
 - there is limited policy capacity in the civil service
 - a Prime Minister is insecure (or, by the same token, when a Prime Minister is very experienced)

1. Setting and Maintaining the proper balance between centre and line is not just a matter of the Prime Minister saying the right thing on the right occasion. Rather, it requires:
 - infrastructure to encourage and sustain policy-making (and policy coherence)

- recognition within the system of who has which powers, and a readiness on the part of the various political bureaucratic players to use their powers (e.g., the power to appoint, or to recommend appointments)
1. It also requires constant attention. It means “adjusting the course” as required, just as if one were sailing a small boat.
 2. It is important to pay careful attention to the issue of policy capacity. If the capacity of the centre declines, it can take a very long time to build it up again. Correspondingly, if the centre has become too powerful, it may be necessary to adjust the balance by moving veterans out to line ministries and replacing them with fresh talent.

With these remarks as a framework, I very much look forward to hearing your views.

Thank you.