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The official history of the cabinet secretaries

Ian Beesley (Oxford: Routledge; 2017; ISBN: 978-1-138188-61-7; 722 pp; £110)

The cabinet office, 1916–2016: The birth of modern government

Anthony Seldon & Jonathan Meakin (London: Biteback Publishing; 2016; ISBN: 978-1-785901-73-7; 384 pp; £25)

All democracies struggle with the challenge of ensuring that the exercise of power by governments fully respects constraints which are designed to protect the state and the citizen. A separation of powers and the rule of law are critical to this end. So too is a system of administration which in its values, practices and culture embodies the proper constraints on government and guides political leaders to exercise power with a strong sense of the common good.

An impartial civil service, recruited and promoted on merit and insulated from pressures which might inhibit its willingness to speak truth to power, has been at the heart of the British constitutional settlement. The Whitehall model, quite as much as the Westminster model, has been a British legacy to its former colonies across the world. British civil service and parliamentary structures have shaped values and practices in Ireland, no less than elsewhere, even if common origins and nomenclature belie radical divergences.

Within that broad framework, however, there are potentially many ways to structure the machinery of government to provide both coherence and legitimacy. How is good-quality political decision-making to be supported by the machinery of government? How are the headline goals of political ambition to be secured through coherent thinking and consistent action across the institutions of government?

Beesley and Seldon & Meakin go a considerable way to illuminating how this has been done in the British system. The twin institutions of cabinet secretary and cabinet office have been the human and institutional focal points for the teasing out of answers to

these questions over the last hundred years. Seldon & Meakin survey with pace the full period, from the appointment of Maurice Hankey in 1916 to bring clear direction to the British war effort under a war cabinet. Agendas and minutes had been alien to the loose political process which was the cabinet over many decades. The heartfelt plea of a private secretary, writing in 1882 to a minister, that 'my chief has told me to ask you what the devil was decided, for he be damned if he knows' may well strike a chord with more recent members of cabinet.

The eleven men who have held the position of cabinet secretary in London have faced similar challenges in very different political, economic and administrative contexts. Tensions in the role and the traps for the unwary have remained constant as specific functions and priorities have changed. There is, in the first instance, the question of the relationship with the prime minister and with members of cabinet as a whole. Effectiveness in the service to one requires the confidence of the other. A cabinet secretary who is deaf to the concerns, anxieties and misgivings of individual ministers is unlikely to be effective in guiding a prime minister in his/her leadership role. Equally, a cabinet secretary who is focused on the quality of ministerial participation in the preparation and discussion of political questions to the neglect of the outcome required by the prime minister is unlikely to serve coherent cabinet government.

There is, then, the question of the personal relationship with the prime minister. A close personal rapport may be an aid to trust and effective collaboration. It may also, however, inhibit the exercise of independent judgement about the limits of what will run in the administrative system, or fly in the political. Both publications are rich in examples of the hazards of personal relationships which ran too hot or too cold. The evidence that the British cabinet functions as an instrument of collective responsibility, rather than collective decision-making, is striking.

A particular responsibility of the cabinet secretary is to prepare and manage the transition from one government to another, whether with a change of political complexion or not. The capacity to offer frank, rigorous and disinterested analysis and advice to an incoming prime minister may be negated by the perception of an undue allegiance to the previous incumbent. The significance of this risk is amply illustrated by the material presented here.

A further dilemma is the range of functions with which a prime minister should be directly associated. The separation of the Downing Street staff structure from the cabinet office has provided some

wriggle room in the configuration of responsibilities at the centre of government. Functions such as intelligence coordination and analysis, EU coordination, emergency preparation and management, and policy review functions have developed within the cabinet office without entailing the prime minister's accountability for them to parliament. However, the Downing Street operation has grown as prime ministers have felt the need to have more direct, personal support in monitoring the implementation of government policy and intervening to give it impetus and direction. Over the years, activist prime ministers, notably Blair, considered the establishment of a full prime minister's department, in recognition of the more presidential style of government which political campaigning and media coverage have tended to promote. Richard Wilson, whose stormy relationship with Blair is clear from Beesley's account, declined the offer to become the head of such a department, believing that it would damage the capacity to sustain cabinet government when a less sceptical prime minister came to office. The Irish experience suggests that the formal administrative framework within which support to a prime minister and government is housed is less significant than how the functions are organised and actually delivered.

A recurring issue dealt with in both books is the responsibility of the cabinet secretary for the overall direction of the civil service, reflected in the title of head of the civil service. The substance of the role has been seen differently by those who occupied it as cabinet secretary. For some, it extended primarily to shaping the relationship with other heads of departments and providing a basis for authoritative intervention in appointments and promotions. For others, in more recent years, it has responded to the political focus on the quality of the delivery of public services and the efficiency of civil service management. This included a responsibility to speak for the civil service, especially in the context of negative political and media commentary and its inevitable impact on morale. Public and media appearances, visits to public service locations around the country, and direct engagement in training and development activities have created a severe pressure on the time of incumbents. However, when the title was held by others, whether in the Treasury or the short-lived Civil Service Department, the results were regarded as disappointing as the authority of the holder was unclear. As Seldon observed, it is difficult to match the benefits of the daily contact between the official head of the civil service and the political head of the executive. Perhaps the Irish tradition of avoiding the use of the title is a wise practice that

enables leadership functions at the centre to be exercised flexibly, as circumstances require.

In the past the cabinet secretary has played a key role as the personal representative of the prime minister with commonwealth countries, with key US interlocutors such as Kissinger and with key European figures both at bilateral and institutional levels. It is in this context that the enduring and fruitful direct relationship between Robert Armstrong and the late Dermot Nally should be seen. It was of a piece with the authoritative diplomacy operated when the personal authority of the prime minister and the need to ensure definitive and direct advice on the most sensitive of topics have been entrusted to the cabinet secretary. In more recent years this external representational role has diminished, largely as a result of the pressure on the limited time of cabinet secretaries and the increasing sophistication of the international landscape. It is instructive, nonetheless, to review the material presented on the role of the cabinet secretary in the conduct of negotiations for entry to the then EEC, on key European issues, including the rebate, and on the conduct of the earlier referendum on membership.

Relationships with colleagues across the administrative system remain critical to the effective discharge of the role of cabinet secretary. The hazards of 'biting with the Prime Minister's teeth' were well understood by cabinet secretaries. While prime ministers might expect the cabinet office to act as a central management office for the entire civil service, the political and administrative consequences of coming between a department head and its minister required a different approach. Clarity regarding the expectations of cabinet and the opinions of the prime minister, and the creation of supportive structures and processes, both at political and administrative levels, were the preferred tools of this particular trade. The downside of this approach is the complexity of ever-expanding cross-departmental and ministerial committees and working groups. The constant refrain from prime ministers of all political complexions was the need to reduce the number of committees and streamline the mechanisms of government. The resistance to doing this, other than cosmetically, and the readiness to propose more committees as the appropriate response to every question are striking.

The sensitivity of relations at the centre of government is illustrated repeatedly. Relations with the Treasury and the Foreign Office are particularly sensitive. Structural arrangements take second place to the quality of the personal relationships between those occupying the

key leadership positions. A Treasury background was not always a guarantee of an amenable disposition in the cabinet secretary. Political differences between the prime minister and his/her key colleagues, notably between Blair and Brown, can cast very long shadows over even the most enlightened and efficient administrative processes. Nonetheless, there are many illustrations of the ultimate power of proximity, as a cabinet secretary sitting at the right of the prime minister exercises an unparalleled influence. The continuing reality of Britain as a security state, shaped by its tradition of international military and intelligence engagement and its perception of their centrality to its international relations, is strongly demonstrated by the pattern of actions and concerns portrayed here.

The detail of the rise and fall of cabinet committees and interdepartmental working groups provided by Beesley is not for the faint-hearted (and the reader's enjoyment would be greater if annoying misspellings and typographical errors had been more robustly edited), but the insight into how public policy is shaped and the difficulty of meeting contemporary expectations of public service delivery is profoundly enriched by this publication.

Across both books, the judgement of the authors on the holders of the position of cabinet secretary may at times seem rather facile. Beesley's account concludes in 2002. Some of the treatment by Seldon & Meakin of the subsequent years suggests that this was a wise decision. In any event, readers will gain a sharp insight into, and will struggle to resist an empathy for, those who held the demanding position of cabinet secretary. They will be impressed by the evidence of their intellectual capacity, their grasp of public policy, their commitment to public service and the 'eternal verities' of the civil service, and their sheer stamina in meeting the demands of the role. Their collective effort is testimony to the importance of the institutions of government, especially at the centre, in turning political challenges into policy options, just as much as in communicating the objectives of the government of the day and the measures being taken to achieve them.

Henry Kissinger described Burke Trend, cabinet secretary from 1963 to 1973, as 'imperturbable, well-informed, discreet, tactful and quite charming'. Beesley concludes that personal qualities need to be honed with an appropriate career path if a successful appointment as cabinet secretary is to be made, to include private office experience with a senior minister, at least one senior position in a large department under stress, a spell in the Treasury and, ideally, press

secretary experience also with a senior minister. Whatever the combination of experience and personal characteristics, it is unlikely that future cabinet secretaries will escape Seldon's characterisation of their predecessors, that 'ultimately it is impossible to discern with exactitude their influence'.

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