4 The 1970s: A Time of Consolidation

THE BACKGROUND ATMOSPHERE

This decade, if adjusted by a few months at its start and end, conveniently spans two administrations: the Conservative one under Mr Edward Heath from 1970 to 1974, and the Labour one under Mr Harold Wilson, succeeded by Mr James Callaghan, from 1974 to 1979. Lord Carrington was Secretary of State for all but a few weeks of the Conservative Government – Mr Ian Gilmour being in the post only for the first few weeks of 1974 – and Mr Roy Mason and Mr Fred Mulley shared the period of the Labour Government.

Organisationally, it was a time essentially of evolution and consolidation in the basic structure of the Ministry, with the very important exception of the fundamental changes of principle and approach in the procurement area. But even after leaving on one side the major study under Mr Derek Rayner of Marks and Spencer which led to the creation of the Procurement Executive within the Ministry of Defence, it was still a time of extensive and continuing review of the organisation of the Ministry. Two major committees reported: the Headquarters Organisation Committee in a report spanning three parts and over the period of 1969–72, and the Management Review in one document spanning 1975–6. Their method of conduct had much in common. Their working approach involved an extensive look at all areas of the Ministry and not just the seemingly more glamorous defence policy areas. They were each headed by the PUS of the day (Sir James Dunnett for the first, and Sir Michael Cary succeeded by Sir Frank Cooper for the second), with predominantly an in-house membership, though with one or two influential outsiders. They were both spread out over a lengthy period with much of the spadework being done by a full-time, mixed civilian and military secretariat. Other lasting features of the decade were the continuing pressures on two aspects of the Ministry’s work: the drive
for economies in the staffing both of the Ministry itself and of the command Headquarters; and the search for and conflicting beliefs in the scale of further savings that might flow from greater rationalisation.

THE 1970 CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT

In the previous chapter the setting-up of the Headquarters Organisation Committee (HOC) has been described. Its terms of reference and detailed method of working were, it was recognised, going to result in an extended period of working. Its initial report on the top structure was received before the change in Government. As described in Chapter 3, some recommendations were implemented forthwith. The one which favoured a further change in ministerial structure, away from single-Service affiliations, was viewed favourably by the Labour Government. It was not implemented at the time, avowedly because it was maintained that by the end of the year the Committee would have been able to work out the detailed changes in the sub-structures required to support the new ministerial arrangements. But it is highly likely that the avoidance of a ministerial shuffle shortly before the inevitable election was also taken into account. In any event the outcome was that this recommendation was not implemented. The perceptions of the new Conservative Government, and particularly of its back-bench members in Parliament, still favoured direct ministerial representation of each of the Services, and three single-Service Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State were appointed, though, temporarily, under one Minister of State. The new administration also did not follow up another recommendation of the Committee which was linked, in part, with the abolition of the single-Service ministerial structure. This recommendation envisaged a tighter top structure with a small Defence Board (perhaps as small as four members: the Secretary of State, the Minister of State, the CDS and the PUS) giving policy directions to the Department, with, at the next level, Service Executive Committees under the chairmanship of their respective Chief of Staff instead of the Service Board with the single-Service Minister in the chair.

More generally the new administration set its aims and tone in two major statements in October 1970. The first, a supplementary statement on defence (Cmnd 4521), announced various changes of