7 Ministers, Councils and Boards

EARLY PRACTICES

Control over the Armed Forces by ministers, and associated with them though sometimes in jealous opposition to them, by Parliament, has had a long tradition in the United Kingdom. During the nineteenth century, the prestigious offices of First Lord of the Admiralty and Secretary of State for War together with the posts of Foreign Secretary, Colonial Secretary and Secretary of State for India, not to mention the Prime Minister, meant that a significant proportionate effort of the Cabinet was directly involved in defence or overseas defence-related questions.

During the first half of the twentieth century, different, and to some extent opposing, influences were brought to bear on this representation. Social and economic interests were playing a steadily increasing part in the Government's business, and led to pressures for representation and possibly an increase in the size of the Cabinet and a consequent questioning of the scale of the defence presence. Moreover the creation of the Royal Air Force and then of the Air Ministry under its own Secretary of State added to the numbers in Cabinet. On the other hand two world wars gave a vital role to the Armed Forces and to the national effort to support them. Each war saw the creation of special supply departments: the Ministry of Munitions in the First World War, and the Ministry of Aircraft Production and then the Ministry of Supply in the Second World War. Both wars also saw the setting-up of small key ministerial committees: a War Cabinet was formed in 1916 and was re-established in 1939 to be followed by a modified structure under Mr Winston Churchill's administration. In 1940 a Defence Committee (Operations) was formed consisting of the Prime Minister (who also became Minister of Defence on the abandonment of the 1936 post of Minister for Coordination of Defence), the Deputy Prime

E. Broadbent, The Military and Government
© Royal United Services Institute 1988
Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Minister of Production and the three Service Ministers, with the Chiefs of Staff in attendance. A parallel body, the Defence Committee (Supply), handled the production programmes. The Service Departments exercised their continuing responsibility for day-to-day administration of their Services through their well-established Boards or Councils.

The first major modification of the ministerial structure occurred in 1946 with the creation of the Ministry of Defence under its own Minister. One important consequence was that he became the sole full member of the Cabinet representing defence interests. The Service Ministers could thereafter attend only on invitation for specially relevant items, and it was a privilege more often sought after than achieved. They did, however, retain their responsibility to Parliament for the administration of their Services, in accordance with Cabinet policy and within the resources allocated to them. They were made members of the Defence Committee which was formally set up to operate in peacetime under the Prime Minister’s chairmanship and with the Minister of Defence as its Deputy Chairman. Once again the Chiefs of Staff were to be in attendance. The 1946 White Paper specifically provided that though the Chiefs of Staff would normally discuss major strategic issues with the Minister of Defence before submission to the Defence Committee, the Chiefs of Staff could go direct and the Minister would not be acting as their mouthpiece at the meeting.

With the aim of providing ministerial coordination for handling administrative matters of common interest to the three Services, the Minister of Defence established a Standing Committee of the three Service Ministers meeting under his chairmanship and supported by the appropriate military Board members. A parallel Committee was set up to handle supply matters in the form of a Ministerial Production Committee, again under the Minister of Defence’s chairmanship and including the Service Ministers, the Minister of Supply and the Minister of Labour. Neither was very effective.

The period from 1946 to 1963 which saw the moves towards a unitary Ministry of Defence was an uneasy time for ministerial relationships. For the Service Ministers there was a gradual erosion of their position although they still remained heads of their own, separate departments. The anomaly was clearly perceived by Mr Macmillan in 1957 when he commented that although his directive had given his Minister of Defence power to give decisions on all matters of policy, at the same time the Secretaries of State and the