8 The Chiefs of Staff

THEIR NATIONAL STATUS

Of all the major parts of the Ministry there can be no doubt that the one surrounding the Chiefs of Staff has commanded, and still commands, most public and political interest and scrutiny whenever changes are mooted. A ministerial reorganisation may produce a temporary political ripple and some discussion almost academic in tone by commentators, but it pales into insignificance when contrasted with the degree of interest in any issue concerning the Chiefs of Staff. In such a context the generic term ‘Chiefs of Staff’ should be taken to cover the spectrum from the concept of any form of tri-Service adviser or ‘Supremo’ – be he a Chief Staff Officer, a Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee or a Chief of Defence Staff – through the three single-Service Chiefs of Staff, to the range of policy staffs primarily in the planning, operational, intelligence and operational requirements fields who work directly for one, or three, or all four of the members of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

Why is there such a keen interest? Its primary cause must be the special position of the single-Service Chiefs of Staff. Traditionally the holder of such an appointment is regarded as the head of his Service. (It is interesting to note that this is so even if the Chief of Defence Staff who is his senior comes from his own Service.) As the head of his Service he is more than its executive leader. He is genuinely accountable to the Service. He is regarded publicly as the symbol of the Service and, as such, a preserver of its heritage and a custodian of its future. The shades of his predecessors, dead and living – and if living, often very vocal – are watching how he discharges those responsibilities. And, more widely, the nation too is conscious of the very special place the Armed Forces do or may occupy in preserving the way of life of the nation and indeed their own individual lives.

This sense of the continuum places the Chief of Staff, or more accurately tends to force him, willingly or unwillingly, into a corner
in the ring where he may be regarded as being somewhat apart from politics or at least the Government of the day. Governments may come and go and obviously have the right and duty to impose their own defence policy. But the country, so the argument may run, will always need the Armed Forces and may sometimes have to call on them unexpectedly and notwithstanding all the endeavours of the Government. Therefore the Chief of Staff has an obligation to watch the interests and well-being of his Service over a longer time-scale and in a somewhat different framework from that of his political masters.

This is a difficult and possibly a dangerous line of argument. It could be explored in much greater depth through constitutional arguments spreading over into the prerogative and the position of the monarch. But for these purposes it is sufficient to note that the pressures are there. It is therefore a significant factor influencing and introducing an element of uneasiness into the relationship which exists between defence ministers and the Chiefs of Staff. It accounts in part for the real and symbolic importance attached to the right of direct access of the Chiefs of Staff to the Prime Minister. Such access reflects not only the Prime Minister’s ultimate responsibility for defence but also the special position of the Armed Forces in the national structure, and is regarded by senior officers as being a significant symbol.

THE POLITICO-MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS

In formulating their policies ministers are faced with a degree of tension in their relationships with the Chiefs of Staff. If the defence capabilities of the country are to be exploited to the full, ministers need to have confidence in the heads of the Services whom they appoint. They are their senior professional advisers. That they disagree from time to time is normal and healthy, and there is no absence of documentation of lively exchanges between people who are necessarily strong-willed in their respective professions. But if ministers do not accept, or, worse still, do not respect, and basically distrust, the professional advice they are given, a potentially serious gap and crisis of confidence will arise. There were signs of this in 1957–8, and again in 1981. The degree of seriousness varies with the nature of the subject. It is at its most acute in operational matters. It is probably least important if it concerns what might be termed