In the four decades following World War II, more than 2000 men and women have been cabinet ministers in the fourteen Western European countries which have been continuously parliamentary, an average of roughly 150 ministers per country. This suggests that the political elite is very small, although, given that cabinets have around 20 members, most ministers remained in office four or five years only and those who stayed in the government for ten years or more are a small minority. The turnover is thus fairly rapid, even if ministerial duration is shorter in most Third-World countries and is longer only in traditional states and in Communist countries (and indeed only before the upheavals of the late 1980s) (Blondel, 1985).

We shall examine in the coming chapters the characteristics of the careers of ministers: but, to begin with, it is worth looking a little at the background of these men and women. We know that they are, by and large, members of a party or are appointed to the government through a party: in the post-1945 period, 33 per cent belonged to socialist parties, 23 per cent belonged to christian democracy, 16 per cent to conservative parties and 12 per cent to liberal parties, while 10 per cent were distributed among other parties (agrarians, autonomists or nationalists, communists). Only 4.5 per cent were not party affiliated (officially at least).

Party affiliation makes ministers politically representative: but it is interesting to see how far they are also socially representative, that is to say, whether they constitute a broad cross-section of the population of which they are the rulers. To answer this question, one can look at four background characteristics which are particularly important – occupations, education, age and gender. In Western Europe, the majority of the population is composed of industrial and white-collar workers, about 10 per cent have been to university, over half are under 40 years of age, and slightly over half are women. Western European ministers turn out to be very different in all four of these
characteristics: 95 per cent are men, half are 50 years of age or more, three-quarters are university graduates, and half are lawyers, teachers or civil servants.

The contrast is therefore remarkable. Yet, even if it does not come altogether as a surprise, the proportions may not have been altogether expected. It is surely not surprising that the majority of cabinet ministers should be men – but it is somewhat surprising that the proportion of women should be so minute; one does not expect ministers to be very young, but it is perhaps surprising that so many should begin their career at 50; one expects ministers to be drawn from the middle class and to have had the type of education which leads to middle-class jobs: but the existence of socialist parties in parliament, as well as the presence of trade unionists in other parties might have suggested a somewhat larger proportion of members of government coming from the working class.

It is therefore valuable to look a little closer at these characteristics and examine how far, behind the averages, substantial variations can be found. Do parties affect significantly the distribution among the various social groups? Do background differences have an effect on the type of portfolios which cabinet members eventually come to have? These are the general aspects which need to be examined before one can assess whether background differences to a substantial extent stem from and result in differences in political characteristics; but one also needs to consider another potential source of variations, more specific and likely to result from traditions and culture, namely the extent to which the background of ministers differs appreciably from country to country.

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND GENERAL POLITICAL VARIATIONS

Gender Differences

Overall, women constitute only 6.2 per cent of all ministers. The preponderance of men exists in all parties, but it is less marked among socialist ministers (who include nearly half the women ministers while they constitute under a third of all cabinet members): this is largely the result of the substantial presence of women in the governments of the nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland), in turn mainly because the socialist parties of these