The Cabinet Office and Coordination, 1979–87

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Introduction

This chapter examines the role and work of the Cabinet Office (CO) during the first two terms of the Conservative government, from 1979 to 1987. As the study ends at the general election in June 1987, the past tense will be used throughout, although inevitably many of the procedures and bodies described below continue. The title of the chapter speaks of the 'Cabinet Office', but most of it will focus on the work of just one part of that Office, namely the cabinet secretariat. In addition, the CO contained (in 1979) the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and a small historical section.

The chapter sets out to describe how the Cabinet secretariat operated during 1979–87. No full study expressly on this subject has appeared in print before, yet the CO lies at the heart of British government. The chapter examines the principal organisational changes to the CO in the period; the function of the six secretariats within the cabinet secretariat; appointment and service of the CO staff; the office’s role in coordinating and planning government business; the role that full cabinet and cabinet committees played during the period, and the support offered them by the CO; the work of CO officials with regard to agenda preparation, briefing chairmen and minutes; and, finally, it focuses on the role of the official at the apex of the office, the cabinet secretary.

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Many difficulties were encountered in writing the chapter. Their existence no doubt explains the dearth of literature on this important subject. However imperfect the finished product and tentative the conclusions, the author felt it better to publish, and to put an account of the CO’s operation, which he believes to be substantially accurate, on the record. The first and most obvious difficulty concerned secrecy. Researching any branch of the contemporary civil service brings one up against official secrecy, especially when tackling as sensitive a subject as the CO. Extracting information was complicated further by the lack of published information about the operation of the system. No organisational chart is published, and only four standing cabinet committees have been officially identified. The fullest and most accurate account to date of the operation of the system appears in Hennessy’s *Cabinet* (1986) whose principal findings have been corroborated as substantially accurate by a number of independent officials who worked in or near the CO. But Hennessy had, of necessity, to rely upon the scarcely satisfactory resort of covert information gathering, hushed telephone calls and so on to build his picture of, as he describes it, ‘the engine room of Whitehall’.

Second, one necessarily had to rely on interviews, with all their imperfections, as a source (Seldon and Pappworth, 1983). One could not cross-check the accuracy of what was said owing to the lack of written material. Evidence varied greatly, depending on whether one was interviewing a minister or an official, serving or retired, senior or junior, and the period of involvement with the CO. Often those interviewed only saw the system in operation for part of the time and/or only saw parts of the system. Only one senior official (Robert Armstrong) and a handful of senior ministers (Margaret Thatcher, Lord Hailsham, William Whitelaw and Geoffrey Howe) saw the system in operation throughout the eight-year period. Readers of this chapter cannot see where the author is referring to particular interviews, because, being confidential, they cannot be included in references. Not even the number or identity of interviewees can be mentioned. The author endeavoured to interview witnesses who saw the system from a variety of different perspectives, but he is well aware of the possibilities of having been overinfluenced by interviewees expressing one particular viewpoint. The facts and opinions in this chapter must, inevitably, be substantially conditioned by the principal source. Interviews can be the kiss of death to objectivity. Ministers were, for the most part, poor interviewees. During the course of the research for this chapter, the author frequently had reason to wonder whether some former ministers had served in the same administration, so at variance were their accounts of the way that coordination took place at the heart of Whitehall.