2 The Office of Secretary-General

The progressive view of international organization holds that international interactions are malleable and susceptible to the development of procedural norms. As the potential embodiment of this liberal internationalism stands the entity of the Secretary-General. Pérez de Cuéllar pictured the Office in the wider context: '[t]o understand correctly the role of the Secretary-General is to appreciate the whole mission of the United Nations. And that, in turn, is central to the way international life is organized.'¹ Years ago Schwebel wrote: 'it is apparent that the future, if there is to be one, belongs to international organization; that the primary international organization of the present is the United Nations; and that the chief permanent officer of that organization necessarily occupies a unique and strategic position …'² Cox even suggested that 'the executive head may be the explanatory key to the emergence of a new kind of autonomous actor in the international system'.³

However, there is little agreement concerning the Office of Secretary-General – or a specific Secretary-General – as a measurable quantity. One recalls the words of one commentator, bemoaning the absence of a systemic explanation of the behaviour of the Office and calling for 'conceptual tools for empirical analysis'.⁴ Yet the extent to which it is possible to devise a thorough-going formula in regard to the role and influence of the executive head of an international organization is doubtful, for it surely alludes to a subjective methodological debate.

It is, however, possible to identify the main factors which determine the role of the United Nation’s Secretary-General, and to identify changes in this role in relation to major political trends in international relations.

The concept of the Secretary-General is often avoided by scholars of international organization because it is not easy to employ the established organizational theories, and in
recent years the individual has not been a popular focus of historians or political scientists. The personality factor is an unknown quantity which, on methodological grounds, complicates any analysis of the Office in relation to international politics. Nevertheless, the main theme here is that one can think in terms of a ‘development’ of the Secretaryship-General – either during one tenure or from one office-holder to the next – as an entity with expanding and contracting influence or scope for performance.

THE INTERWAR YEARS

The League of Nations was in large measure an exercise in experimentation. It was also fatally embroiled in the miscalculation and lack of will of its sponsors, and undermined by the struggle between revisionist and status quo forces which characterized the deterioration of international relations in this period. These traits ran through the experiences of the Secretaries-General, and for a number of historians the whole Organization was a symbolic and insignificant contribution to the ‘illusion of peace’. 5

The internationalist appraisal of the creation of the League held that: ‘the time had come to commence the construction of a rational and ethical world order in which relationships among states would be influenced and shaped, if not governed, by cooperative international institutions.’ 6 Certainly, the League represented the culmination of a growth and tide of internationalist thought and practice, and latterly a reaction to the tragedy of the Great War. For some, it represented ‘international social progress’. 7 The Secretary-General, however, along with the whole Secretariat, was the product of compromise and varying aspirations. The League Covenant provided only the barest of details, so that it was left to the first Secretary-General, Eric Drummond, to impose his impression upon the development of the Office in accordance with what was feasible in the pervading political environment. This impression was one of quiet, behind-the-scenes service. Many observers feel that Drummond did not exploit the opportunities at his disposal. He often has been branded as the epitome of the