Cf for filing AH

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

covering
SENIOR STAFF IN CONFIDENCE

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

The Prime Minister discussed with you this afternoon a number of matters concerning organisation and appointments, and this minute summarises the outcome.

....

Future of the Rayner Unit

The Prime Minister said that, since Sir Derek Rayner preferred Option 2 in his recent letter, she was inclined to take his advice. You said that the removal of the Rayner unit from the MPO would be a major blow to that Department and to the Lord Privy Seal. You suggested that we should, if necessary, proceed with the announcement of Sir Derek Rayner's withdrawal in advance of settling this matter.

EXTRACTS

Future role and staffing of the CPRS

The Prime Minister said that she was concerned that the CPRS was not producing work which she found useful. Her present thought was that in the long run it would be preferable to abolish the CPRS and increase the No 10 policy unit by three or four people. In the short run, she was inclined to run down the numbers of the CPRS and confine it to a group of people under Mr Sparrow with particular areas of expertise on the basis of which they could give advice on proposals coming forward from departments. You pointed out that Mr Sparrow would still need a senior person as his deputy with experience of Whitehall, like Mr Caines for whom such an appointment would also provide good experience; and the Prime Minister was inclined to accept this. Before a firm decision was made, you said that you would give further thought to the role of the CPRS and to a plan for its future staffing which would be consistent with this role.

....

22 November 1982

sgd
F.E.R.B.

AH

Mr Butler

Weekend box

PM file
with proposal about
creation of a P.M.'s Dept.

With Compliments

Copies also sent to Sir John Hoskyns and Ray Whitney OBE MP

The PM
will no doubt
wish to be aware
of this

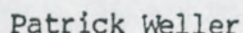
J.C.

Centre for Policy Studies

8 Wilfred Street · London SW1E 6PL · Telephone 01-828 1176

Do Prime Minister's Departments Really Create Problems?

Patrick Weller



In the ongoing debates on the growth of the prime minister's power, G.W. Jones has consistently argued that the claims about prime ministerial government are exaggerated. In a series of detailed and careful articles and reviews, he has described the development of those organizations that support prime ministers and explained how they work (Jones 1973, 1976, 1978, 1979). There is no doubt from these articles that Jones believes that the present system works well and provides prime ministers with the right type of support, primarily because it operates with considerable flexibility.

Indeed Jones has argued stridently at the end of some of his analyses of prime ministerial support that Britain does not need, and should not attempt to establish, a prime minister's department. At various times he has suggested six reasons for his opposition to such a proposal.

1. 'A prime minister cannot help cabinet colleagues arrive at a unified decision if he is the protagonist of a particular line' (Jones 1981, 219). 'A department might, especially if large, develop a view and momentum of its own' (Jones 1976, 37), and 'put up to the Prime Minister a certain line' (Jones 1979, 20).

2. The prime minister's 'role is to help forge politically acceptable solutions, and to relate policies together in an order of priorities by providing a coherent theme, tone or philosophy. His contribution is not to be a substitute for his ministers, but a supplement' (Jones 1981, 220).

3. A prime minister's department 'can never be as informed about any policy and its consequences as the department with responsibility for its implementation. ... Its intervention will be regarded as naive and meddlesome, and its policy prescriptions as ignorant and damaging' (Jones 1981, 220).

4. A department 'will generate a large amount of paper, which the Prime Minister will find difficult to master' (Jones 1979, 20); 'his gaze will be distracted away from considering the problems of government as a whole towards what worried his department' (Jones 1981, 220).

5. 'The establishment of a Prime Minister's department, formal, structured, bureaucratized, might diminish the personal power of a Prime Minister to draw help from many sources and in many ways... A disorderly, ad hoc, personalized system serves only him' (Jones 1973, 375; see also 1976, 37; 1978, 121, 123).

6. 'There is a danger in having a single head... Everything might be channelled through that one person. The present system enables the Prime Minister to be in charge, not a single subordinate' (Jones 1979, 20).

Jones (1978, 123) has suggested that if a prime minister's department were created, a prime minister 'might have to acquire a further set of private secretaries and political aides' to control it. Obviously Jones's opinions are important: they represent the orthodox vision in Whitehall and represent the views of many ministers and senior officials.(1) They have received an explicit seal of approval from Harold Wilson (1976, 106-7), even though he had earlier stated the need for a strong but small prime minister's department (Jones 1973, 375).

But two points need to be made. First, Jones has strong views on the role that prime ministers should play, which includes, implicitly at least, the idea that they should keep out of detailed policy. These normative assumptions however are no more than that. What if prime ministers decide they want to become deeply involved in some policy areas where they are sceptical of the policy direction which the minister is proposing that the government should follow. The recent record shows Callaghan and Thatcher involved in very specific policy areas. Can they intervene effectively? Even if it is accepted that there are things prime ministers must do, that those effectively structure most of their time (Rose 1980), and that therefore their scope for action is severely limited, it remains true that it is not entirely constrained. If prime ministers choose to undertake other tasks, do they have the support capacity?

This point is made more important because the precise boundaries of Jones's target prime minister's department are not spelt out. He discusses approvingly the flexible interaction of the partisan and non-partisan components of the

staff at No 1Ø, and then criticises the concept of a prime minister's department (Jones 1978; 1979). Presumably such a department would include the CPRS, the Cabinet Office, the private secretaries in No 1Ø and such outfits as the European Unit. Whether the partisan components like the policy unit are inside or outside is not stated, although it seems probable that the distinctions between the political and non-political would remain.

Second, Jones's comments can be no more than informed speculation. It is true that in anticipating the problems, he is talking only about Britain, but in practice the problems might have far wide applicability. They are directed at the problem of supporting the leader in a collective government. If they are true for Britain, they should be true for any Western parliamentary democracy. But are they? If the problems are assessed in relation to two similar systems - Canada and Australia - where the prime minister has substantial bureaucratic support, it can be shown that the dangers he posits are not the inevitable outcomes of prime minister's departments. Indeed they are often not a problem at all. In this article, therefore, after summarising the main structures created to support the prime ministers in Canada and Australia, each of the dangers that Jones has proposed can be assessed against available empirical evidence. That at least ought to take the debate one step further than informed speculation.

Jones's view of course is by no means the only response in Britain to the proposal that a prime minister needs a department. Reactions can be divided into three groups. First, there are those like Jones who consider the current situation to be working smoothly, primarily because of the flexibility it contains. As Jones has put it: 'there is a prime minister's department, and it operates effectively - largely because it is not cast in a bureaucratic mould' (Jones 1978, 121). Constellations of offices like the Policy Unit, the European Unit and the CPRS can be moved in and out to suit the personality of the incumbent.

Second are those who agree that the prime minister needs greater support but are uneasy about the creation of a prime minister's department. If nothing else, one person argued, it would bring the reality rather closer to the public image. In an incisive paper on collective responsibility Edmund Dell (1980, 44) has argued for the need to strengthen the prime minister's position. Yet even so he baulked at the prospect of creating a prime minister's department. Others

believed that, even though the prime minister needed greater support, the bureaucratic and political costs - in terms of civil service opposition and ministerial suspicion - would outweigh the immediate advantages.

The third group, many of whom have worked closely with No. 1Ø, argue for an increased capacity for giving the prime minister policy advice. Lord Armstrong emphasised the need for a group of people who could examine policy problems from the prime minister's perspective, so that they understood the peculiar pressure that prime ministers face. Joe Haines (1977, 39) has written of the need for ministers to have several sources of expert advice, at least one of which should be non-official. Sir Kenneth Berrill has stated:

> What in my view is at issue is whether a Prime Minister should have a support system with time to work on problems in some depth across the width of government activities. At present the advice is given and very presentably too, but the depth is invariably patchy (Berrill 198Ø, 14).(2)

The emphasis is added because it really is the central point.

Other arguments used by ministers and officials to make the case for increased prime ministerial support pointed to the fact that they were not well served in terms of early warning systems, that it was surprising how much they do not know, that it was difficult for them to become involved in policy items in an informed way, and that it was difficult for them to know what advice they needed. But much of the argument came back to one major point. Should prime ministers play additional roles? Should they act as the central policy link in the political context and hence do they need a policy analytic and partisan political support capacity?

Implicit throughout the debate is the question of how the prime minister's job is categorised conceptually so that the types of necessary support can be deduced. Several alternatives have been suggested. Peter Bailey (1974) has argued that the prime minister's two main roles are acting as team leader and

being the inspiration and initiator of policy for government. Such an approach distinguishes between the policy role and the cabinet role of the prime minister. A second approach considers the content of advice that a prime minister might receive - whether it is on procedural matters, on policy content or on partisan political matters. This is not to suggest that these three are clearly distinct or ever could be; no one would seriously argue that. But in practice organisational arrangements are based on the assumption that some bodies are primarily involved in one of these arenas, even if they must at times wander into the others. A third approach is to base an analysis on the interests of the prime ministers themselves. Thus the Privy Council Office (PCO) in Canada distinguishes between the prime minister's prerogatives and the prime minister's priorities. The former category relates to those functions that he has to fulfill, the duties that are part of the position; the latter are those areas to which he gives high priority and wants to devote his energy. Any discussion of supporting structures can therefore concentrate on the prime minister's roles, on the types of advice needed or on the prime minister's interests.

Supporting the Australian Prime Minister

In Australia the prime minister's main bureaucratic support is the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) (see PMC 1979; Mediansky and Nockels 1975, 1981; Yeend 1979; Hawker, Smith and Weller 1979, ch 4; Weller and Grattan 1981, ch 9). The department had on 30 June 1981 a total of 432 staff. It was then organised into eight divisions. Two of these - the Cabinet Office (with thirty-five staff) and the Parliamentary and Government Division (with thirty-six) service the prime minister as team leader. The Cabinet Office provides the secretariat for cabinet and cabinet committees and ensure their smooth programming; that is a major task since in the July 1980-June 1981 year there were 82 meetings of cabinet, 276 meetings of cabinet committees and a total of 3661 decisions of cabinet or its committees to record and circulate (PMC 1981, 11-13). The Parliamentary and General Division's responsibilities include a variety of legal areas, relations with parliamentary and party committees, all machinery of government and ministerial arrangements, and senior appointments, although primary carriage of the last three items lies with the Public Service Board which also reports to the prime minister. The large operations division includes the office of ceremonial and hospitality, provides

support staff for the other divisions and deals with the prime minister's voluminous correspondence.

Five divisions are functionally organised to cover all areas of government activity - the Economic Division, which also deals with resources policy; the Communications Division, which includes industrial relations, cultural activities and federal-state relations; the International Division; the Trade and Industries Division and the Welfare Division. These divisions contain between seventeen and thirty-three people each. They provide the prime minister a brief on any item that may be coming to cabinet or on any other question that is of interest to him. Again that task is substantial. In 1980-81 alone 1664 submissions or memorandums were submitted to cabinet. Since June 1981 parts of the department have been reorganised, but the basic structures are still on the lines outlined above. Members of PMC also have played a leading role in coordinating policy and acting as chairmen of major task forces. In 1975 a member of PMC acted as chairman of the official committee that provided data for the expenditure review committee which tried to slow the expansion of public expenditure of the then Labor government. In 1981 another member was the chairman of the officials' committee that supported the massive review of commonwealth functions. The permanent head of the department chairs four of the official committees that provide backing to the standing committees of cabinet.

The growth in the policy capacity of PMC has been comparatively recent. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the department in practice filled a role similar to that of the Cabinet Office in Britain. It serviced cabinet and its committees, circulated the minutes and was primarily a post-box. Then for a time the two main functions were divided. From 1968 to 1971 the Cabinet Office and the Department of the Prime Minister were actually separated. The reasons were political, not organisational. The incoming prime minister, John Gorton, wanted his own policy adviser and chose the abrasive Lenox Hewitt to head the Department of the Prime Minister; but he also had to find a position for the then secretary of PMC, Sir John Bunting, who has been head of the department since 1958. Therefore the cabinet-servicing function was divided from that of advising the prime minister. The split did not work well, partly because of the personalities involved, but primarily because the prime minister's principal adviser was not in cabinet and therefore was less able to understand all that

was going on, while the secretary to cabinet did not have a major advisory role. The two halves were reunited under Bunting after Gorton's fall.

Later, under Whitlam and even more under Fraser, the department developed a greater policy capacity. In 1974 Whitlam replaced Bunting with John Menadue, who had once been Whitlam's private secretary and who more recently had been an executive in the Murdoch organisation. Whitlam wanted an activist department that could give him policy advice on a wide range of issues. As a result the department increased its ability to advise on particular functional problems, particularly in the economic arena, because both Whitlam and Fraser were suspicious of the Treasury and argued that they needed a second opinion. Given the monolithic nature of the Treasury and its recognised obstinacy, it was a reasonable position.

The policy advisers were not intended to initiate alternative solutions, or to provide unexpected information with which the prime minister could gain the upper hand in cabinet. 'It is not our business to have ministers surprised in the Cabinet Room with questions they have not anticipated, or be faced in the Cabinet Room with propositions they have not considered' said a secretary of the department (Yeend 1979, 143). Nevertheless on a range of issues, PMC is far more than a simple coordinator of government initiatives. It plays an activist role and is prepared to acknowledge it: 'We do not feel inhibited in what some might interpret as the role of second opinion. Our branches have built up an understanding of policy issues and an expertise in coordination; our officers are sought out for their advice and assistance. We have scope for probing and proposing' (Yeend 1979, 143). On occasions, such as the publication of a green paper on energy, PMC did much of the drafting because the relevant department had been unable to deliver at the right time and there were political pressures for quick action.

Yeend (1979, 146) has commented: 'A Prime Minister's Department is a tool of government that can be used in a very direct and telling way in re-assuring that government policies are got underway, that changes in direction are made, that there is a responsiveness by the public service as a whole to new

instructions and changes of style'. He acknowledged that these powers had to be used sensitively to ensure its coordinating capacity was not threatened, but saw no contradiction between the two functions.

The prime minister receives further support from his own private office. One or two of its members are on secondment from PMC; the others are political appointments. The growth of the office too has substantially been a development of the last decade. When Whitlam gained office in 1972, he relied at first on his personal staff for alternative advice to that provided by the public service; it was made particularly necessary by the limited capacity of PMC. The office was highly partisan, concerned to ensure that the party's platform was implemented and that the Labor government had a good chance of being reelected. The involvement was varied and hectic, although the office remained small. At times members of the office had a major impact on details of policy, not always successfully. Gradually, however, the importance of the office declined as the role of PMC expanded under John Menadue. By the time of November 1975, when Whitlam was dismissed by the governor-general, the office was only a shadow of its original role. Its policy impact had declined; its leading figures had moved on.

Under Fraser the office has gone through several forms. Several people have headed it, the most notable being David Kemp, a professor of political science. By 1981 it consisted of around thirty people. In part it is responsible for administering the prime minister's needs - making appointments etc., but it has also developed a capacity for policy input. After the 1980 election it included four senior academics on secondment, and with ready access to a fifth who was nominally attached to the department of Foreign Affairs.

The business of the office is the business of the prime minister, that is, everything that goes across his desk - foreign affairs, economics and his particular interests of the moment. The members of the office may sit in on official committees for information or to suggest political factors that may need consideration; they do not attend meetings of cabinet. Their purpose is to aid the prime minister and the cabinet (in that order) to maintain coherence;

to help integrate the philosophy and policy of the government; and to assist the prime minister by adding an alternative voice to that of his bureaucrats. In other words the office is responsible for a 'political input' - a role that can be played far more readily there than in PMC, even if it is extraordinarily difficult to determine exactly what that political component is. The office can, by asking the right questions, ensure that all the political implications of proposals are worked out. Usually of course the contact between PMC and the office is close; ideas initiatted in the office will be tested with PMC, and often with other departments. But its functions and institutional interests are different from those of PMC and all other departments. It is the one group whose institutional interests are identical to those of the office holder. That is possibly why it is better that the prime minister's office is staffed primarily from outside the public service. It is the place where party and bureaucracy intersect. Even so, its capacity to be fully involved must be limited by the sheer range of the prime minister's responsibilities. The office has always maintained a low profile in Australia; with the exception of some rather overwrought performances by the press staff, its activities have seldom been noted. There is not a single press interview given by a member of the office since 1975. But that should not be taken to understate its impact.

Supporting The Canadian Prime Minister

The Canadian prime minister is supported by the Privy Council Office (PCO), the Federal-Provincial Relations Office and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The first two are staffed by career civil servants, the third by political appointees.

The most important sections of the PCO are the operations and plans divisions. They have around seventy operational and seventy support staff. The operations division is structured around the highly formalised cabinet committee structure. Each cabinet committee is serviced by a small secretariat, organised by subject matter. The PCO also has sections dealing with the coordination and scheduling of cabinet business and the distribution of cabinet documents. The plans division contains secretariats for those committees which the prime minister chairs, or is heavily involved in. As an official PCO submission has

stated:

> To a degree it is helpful to think of the operations division in terms of support to Cabinet and the Plans division in terms of support to the Prime Minister (PCO 1979, 4-12).

The Plans division therefore services the cabinet committees on which the prime minister has particular interests, such as machinery of government, or assists him in other areas of interest. Trudeau has recently been primarily interested in bilingualism, foreign affairs and constitutional affairs. In many other areas he allowed the normal processes to occur as proposals were considered primarily in the context of cabinet committees. The decisions of these committees are usually accepted without further discussion by full cabinet.

PCO officials are always likely to be involved in the preparation of cabinet memoranda; they will ask whether the proposals are timely, coherent, comprehensive and accurate, how they relate to other proposals and whether they give genuine choices to ministers. The basic belief is that the prime minister should be protected from receiving advice from only one institutionalised source (PCO 1979, 4-30). The PCO ensures that adequate analysis and coordination of policies and policy proposals are carried out (Doern 1979, 44). As it has increased its control over the rules of cabinet, so it has added to its capacity to monitor the content of policy (Mallory 1977, 15).

Under Trudeau the PCO developed a highly sophisticated planning system, drawing on many theories of organisational behaviour. It tried to develop coherence in the government programming. 'The unique contribution of the PCO as a central agency is through the process of policy consideration - in terms of relationships between new proposals, existing policies and the government's overall objectives' (PCO 1979, 4-32). It tends to be 'the main source of overall governmental and strategic organisational advice' (Doern 1979, 43-44). The PCO therefore developed a planning system that was concerned first with priority setting, second with priority problems and third with policy review. The policy problems were often those broad topics which did not fall easily into

any single portfolio.

The process of priority setting at times was highly ambitious. In 1974 and 1975, following the return of the Trudeau government with a newly regained majority, the PCO undertook a massive exercise to determine the priorities the government should adopt. Departments were asked to express their own priorities so that all could be related. The idea was that the final list of five to ten priorities would guide the speech from the throne in the fall of 1975. In practice the completed document was too late, too long and too general to be useful; economic circumstances already dictated priorities, even though 'the veneer of technocratic sophistication seemed almost to deny their essential and overriding realities' (French 1980, 79). Indeed the whole exercise illustrated the tremendous difficulties faced by any policy coordinating unit. Priorities in government are often so broad as to be meaningless, or so narrow as to be highly debatable. But what the exercise illustrated above all was that the PCO saw itself taking a highly activist role in its service to cabinet as a whole and in shaping the directions which the government chose to take.

The Federal-Provincial Relations Office, established in 1974, has the responsibility for maintaining a general overview of the government's relations with the provinces and for becoming deeply involved in some areas of policy where relations with provincial premiers play a key role. Its first head, Gordon Robertson, had previously been the clerk of the Privy Council Office; while he remained in the FPRO he retained responsibility for senior civil service appointments. He and his successor always had direct access to the prime minister. The staff of the FPRO was always small, but it provided advice from a perspective of considerable importance to the prime minister. As long as it existed it ensured too that there was a second senior official to to whom the prime minister could turn.

Further in Canada the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is large. It is entirely politically appointed, serving during the pleasure of the prime minister. The loyalty of its members is directed to the prime minister personally. The role of the office is pervasive. It organises the prime

minister's schedule, answers his correspondence, links him to the party apparatus, interacts with the media and briefs him for his appearances in Question Time. It also has a policy and personnel input. Its members provide advice on senior appointments, and on major issues of policy and priorities (French 1979, 385).

The actual role has changed at times with the interests of the principal private secretary. Lalonde and Austin were deeply interested in policy, while more recently Coutts has stressed the switchboard role. In part this may be because the growing bond between Trudeau and Pitfield, head of the PCO, means that a counterweight to the bureaucracy is not regarded as necessary. The PMO has also adapted its functions to suit political demands. When the government was in a minority - as it was in 1972-74 - immediate political tactics were more important than many of the technocratic programming debates that had been undertaken beforehand. Members of the PMO, in the Canadian tradition, can attend both official meetings and cabinet committees, even though one adviser thought it wrong for a member of the PMO to go to a committee and then have the last word with the prime minister. But their role was often high profile and active, both because of their size and range of functions.

Before Joe Clark became prime minister in 1979, he had attacked the size of PMO. In fact, although he reduced its budget, he actually increased its staff. They were divided into five units - personal services, communications, administration (including all correspondence), human resources (advice on all appointments) and policy (a group of four close advisers). The policy group concentrated on a few key items like energy and budgetary changes. The easy transfer of a similar structure from Trudeau to Clark suggests that the growth of the PMO has now become established as essential and that the large politically sensitive body is seen as an integral part of the Canadian prime ministerial structure.

Nevertheless there are perceived limits on what the PMO can do. For a time its staff carried responsibilities for overseeing the party progress in individual provinces, a function which had previously been undertaken by the

senior ministers from each province. This function was seen as usurping ministerial prerogatives and dropped. Nor much of the time does it have the capacity to undertake deep policy analysis. One adviser in foreign policy occassionally acted as a Trudeau's emissary. That was exceptional. On the whole there was too much to do solving immediate problems to usurp the role of departments. On the other hand, by dealing with correspondence and appointments, it undertook the more blatantly political functions that civil servants are somewhat loath to be seen to be doing.

There was no clear distinction between the PMO and the PCO in most policy debates. The rearrangement that occurred in 1980 required the head of the PCO, Michael Pitfield, to be involved with the prime minister's 'interests', to be his principal adviser in those areas of government with which the prime minister was personally concerned. His deputy was responsible for the areas covered by the prime minister's prerogatives. The main difference, according to one account, was that the PCO was non-partisan, operationally active and politically sensitive, while the PMO was partisan, politically active and operationally sensitive (Lalonde 1971). In practice, they work closely together. Each morning there is a meeting in which the prime minister canvasses the main problems of the day and his likely timetable with his main advisers from both the PCO and the PMO. Their interests, in serving the prime minister, are very similar.

Comparisons and Criticisms

This brief survey of the activities of prime ministers' bureaux is not intended to suggest they always work well or that they provide easy models to follow. It illustrates simply that institutions follow different lines of development, even when meeting similar pressures. Some of the distinctions between Canadian, British and Australian experience can be explained in part by constitutional factors. In Australia and Canada prime ministers have to deal with state and provincial premiers and, from the very beginnings of the prime minister's office in Australia in 1901, the centralising and routing of correspondence to the states was one of its primary functions (PMC 1979, 29). In Canada the importance of this function is illustrated by the creation of the Federal-Provincial Relations Office. The development of prime ministerial diplomacy has shown how necessary it is to draw together the threads of office in a central agency in all three countries; federalism, to a lesser degree, had a similar impact in Australia, even if not initially to the same degree in Canada (Robertson 1973, 446-447).

In part differences can be explained by the distribution of portfolios. With a few brief exceptions, all Australian prime ministers before 1949 held other substantial portfolios, often being attorney general or minister for external affairs and, in wartime, minister for defence. When Liberal-Country party coalitions were in power between 1922 and 1958 the Country party monopolised the treasury but at least one Labor prime minister was also treasurer. In 1949 Menzies became the first prime minister to hold no other ministerial position. In Canada prior to 1957 some prime ministers held other portfolios too (Matheson 1977, 53); they used those departments for advice. A few only held the official position of president of the Privy Council. The institutional links which the British prime minister developed as first lord of the Treasury were replaced by ties with constantly changing departments. When they did hold no position except that of prime minister they needed bureaucratic support.

Nevertheless the development of PMC and PCO as forceful bodies was still slow. Before 1939 the Australian prime minister's department fulfilled a continuously variable range of functions, and only provided the rudiments of a cabinet support system (PMC 1979, 29-35); the Canadian PCO was primarily a registry for decisions (Hodgetts 1973, 93). Both increased their capacity as the need for greater formalisation of cabinet proceedings became more obvious under the pressures of war and the growth of government functions. Their origins as important coordinating agencies can therefore be traced back to the bureaucratic leadership of Strahan in Australia and Heeney in Canada in the early 1940s. The development of a policy analytic capacity, as we have seen, came much later still. Therefore although the PMC and PCO have had a long formal existence, bolstered at times by constitutional requirements, their influence as coordinating and policy instruments does not predate that of the Britain's Cabinet Office. Indeed changes in central management were mutually reinforcing. The Australians certainly looked to British developments as possible precedents.

Since the influence of PCO and PMC developed contemporaneously with the British Cabinet Office, and in a similar parliamentary system, the empirical evidence provided by an examination of these two agencies can be used to see whether Jones's criticisms, which are presented as the inevitable consequences of a prime minister's department, are justified. If the problems do not develop - or at least do not develop too much - in these other countries, there is no reason to accept Jones's fears. At least then, if arguments against a prime minister's department are to be mounted, they need to be redeveloped on lines that are more firmly grounded in empirical evidence.

1. Prime Ministers will argue their department's line and become protagonists of it. This will hinder the process of getting a consensus. It is difficult to get evidence for an argument of this kind one way or the other. Whether a prime minister supports the recommendation his department proposes because it is their recommendation, because it has already taken account of his predilections or because cabinet agrees with it is likely to become a circular question. In cabinet it is difficult to trace the source of many ideas. But some general impressions are possible.

In Australia PMC provides a brief to the prime minister on every item that comes before cabinet. The brief will include a recommendation on the course of action the department regards as desirable. It is exclusively given to the prime minister. In cabinet, ministers acknowledge that the prime minister is fully briefed, both on likely divisions of opinion and on the implications of possible amendments. Far from making it difficult to help cabinet reach a unified decision, it often keeps ministers on their mettle. PMC's officers are also involved in the inter-departmental committees which may be required to thrash out the problem in a proposal. In those committees they may initially be cautious in expressing views; but they do play two roles. First, they become aware of the alternative views that are discussed and, second, they have the capacity to suggest that individual questions should be seen in the broad perspective of government strategy. Officials in PMC argue that they do not often attempt to initiate proposals or present total alternatives. They are also cautious about invoking the prime minister's name, but they will point out the contradictory policy implications.

It is seldom that the prime minister's views are sought while proposals are being formulated; he is far too busy. In practice many of the questions raised by PMC may lead to a proposal being sent back for further consideration. Whether the prime minister then accepts their recommendation is obviously a matter for him. There is no evidence from interviews with ministers to suggest that Australian prime ministers have felt constrained to support the department, or obliged to accept a line of argument presented. But ministers agree that for him to be conscious of the implications of likely amendments is important. Nor does the department feel obliged to press its views if ignored.

When PMC officials head task forces they are acting to general instructions and providing advice - usually on expenditure cuts - to cabinet committees. In this their behaviour is similar to that of the PCO in Canada. There the PCO is intent on opening out options; departments are warned of likely objections. On some occasions a prime minister may accept a compromise thrashed out by the PCO, if he has no strong views, for in Canada most routine items are directed through the cabinet committee system. The prime minister is briefed mainly on those items of particular interest to him; his views there are well-known and it seems unlikely that he will be limited by what his officials propose.

Indeed, it does seem rather strange to suggest that prime ministers would not be able easily to ignore departmental advice for they, more than their colleagues, have a broad view. The available evidence - admittedly qualitative - suggests that prime ministers are not so constrained. Also their departments are generally careful not to pre-empt decisions by suggesting it is 'the prime minister's view', except in those cases where that view has been clearly expressed. And whatever the bureaucratic framework, any central network is likely to be good enough to get those messages across.

2. Prime Ministers should be concerned with politically acceptable solutions and establish coherent priorities. They should be a supplement, not a substitute for their ministers. The sentiment is unexceptionable; but it is difficult to understand how the existence of prime minister's departments may frustrate that objective. Indeed both Australian and Canadian prime ministers might well ask how they could be expected to undertake those tasks without their existing bureaucratic support.

The PCO is explicit in its desire to set priorities; the 1974-75 priorities exercise and the set of procedures called the 'Cabinet Planning System' (French 1980, 41-58) are evidence of that desire. They attempted to draw together the threads of policy, to identify those sensitive areas that might fall between two departments and to create some coherence. The difficulties that they had as a department merely illustrate the immense complexity of the process. The PMO is concerned with the politically acceptable. Acting as a link between the party and the bureaucracy, it can raise thorny problems without fearing whether it is within its proper jurisdiction. Both PCO and PMO are concerned with political solutions; they work for and with the prime minister to achieve them.

PMC has never undertaken as grandiose a task as the PCO's priorities exercise of 1975-76. In part this may be because Australian central agencies have always been sceptical of management techniques. It may also be because PMC started to develop its broader capacities only since 1974 - a time when, as the PCO discovered, economic conditions forced priorities onto governments. To a large extent it has been concerned with setting negative priorities, and with

determining where cost-cutting can be most efficiently applied in line with the government's stated objectives.

Indeed both PMC and PCO have a capacity to question and evaluate policy, to raise doubts about the consequences (and both do have politically sensitive antennae) -, and to protect the general cause. Further because their perspective is largely that of the head of government, they can assist the partisan appointees in the prime minister's office to see the links between administrative methods and political priorities. They are after all the only bureaucrats whose main perspective is the prime minister's; they are uniquely placed to assist the prime minister in the function of priority setting.

In modern government the interrelatedness of so many issues has increased the burden of the prime minister. The Trudeau response was in part to increase the collegiality of ministers so that they were involved in decisions on a wider range of topics through the system of cabinet committees. Awareness of the broad implications of proposals has thus grown, while the Priorities and Planning committee of cabinet has been able to consider the most important issues. The existence of PCO has added to, not limited, that collegiality. Whitlam and Fraser have both increased the burden on cabinet itself while adding to the policy capacity of their department to assist in their judgement. In neither case does it seem tenable to argue that the existence of those departments has reduced their capacity to consider the broader view or dulled their capacity to ensure politically viable solutions; indeed the reverse seems likely.

3. <u>The department will be regarded as naive and meddlesome and its policy prescriptions ignorant and damaging</u>

In both Canada and Australia the increasing authority of PCO and PMC is regarded with some dislike by departments. Since the central agencies do get involved in policy issues (Campbell and Szablowski 1979, 82) in which departments claim to have the expertise, that is not surprising. Their

interference is often regarded as ill-informed, particularly where it appears to frustrate cherished plans. The process by which PMC ensure that the proper procedures are accepted is seen by some departmental heads as squeezing the life out of proposals, and reducing the number of alternatives, although that is a criticism of the whole process of central coordination, not just PMC.

Ministers too have complained of the excessive centralisation that the cabinet procedures required. In Canada these complaints were as often directed at the emphasis on collegiality as at the PCO itself. In Australia some ministers argued they would be concerned if prime ministers listened too much to their own officials and too little to ministers (Weller and Grattan 1981, 195). When the minister for industrial relations resigned in protest at Fraser's style he even argued:

> The role now given to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet challenges the authority given ministers under section 64 of the Constitution (Sydney Morning Herald, 20 April 1981).(3)

In practice his argument was muddled, but the sentiment was not uncommon among ministers who were consistently unable to carry their proposals through cabinet.

Of course the capacity of PMC and PCO is limited. There are likely to be only a few people working in areas covered by whole departments. They can seldom provide clear alternatives and usually do not try to. At times their contribution may seem unsubstantial, naive or irrelevant to departments submerged in the importance of their own proposals. But whether PMC and PCO are meddlesome is a matter of opinion. The PCO is concerned to ensure that all options are revealed, to ensure that several channels are also available to the prime minister. An Australian prime minister put it explicitly:

> Specialist departments are not always right; they may have an axe to grind in a particular area and there is nothing wrong with that; but to have people with knowledge on a subject to ask questions - just to

make sure that everything comes out in cabinet - is very useful (Interview 1980).

In these circumstances the value of a policy counterweight is accepted. If PMC does not play that role, who else can? What too if departments are loath to provide alternatives or slow to provide recommendations and the cabinet wants speedy action. On occasion when departments are slow to provide information, PMC officials have to fill the gap. Nevertheless in general both PMC and PCO still have to rely on departments for much of their work. Whittington and van Loon (1976, 348) have concluded that 'most of the time the substantive information [PCO officials] are dealing with originates elsewhere, either 'above' them in the political world or 'below' them in the technical one'.

Coordination may at times slow down proposals and at times it may appear excessive to departments. Central agencies are never likely to be popular; but the role they play in Canada and Australia is regarded as essential for the prime minister's welfare and for the general strategy of the government.

4. A prime minister's department will distract the prime minister from problems of government as a whole towards what worries the department.

Both the PCO and PMC are partly concerned with servicing cabinet. In so doing they act on the prime minister's behalf as guardians of the cabinet process, enforcing the regulations set down in varous cabinet handbooks. When they service prime ministers as individuals, it is probably true that they account for much of the material going to them. According to one estimate, 65% of the paper going to Trudeau came from the PCO. At the same time, like the officials in No. 10, they act as a sieve for much of the material, drawing his attention to those factors that are most important. Like every other organisation including the Cabinet Office they have their bureaucratic interests to protect in the sense that they are concerned to protect their influence. But the security of existence that they have will mean possibly that these do not loom too large. One observer of the Policy Unit in No. 10 argued that the politics of sheer survival were often paramount and time-consuming. When the

policy analysts are secure, the departmental problems may indeed take less of the prime minister's time.

But beyond that, to suggest that the activities and interests of the a prime ministers' departments determine the agenda of the prime minister is to misunderstand the way that these bodies work. Most of the time they react to the prime minister's demands. The PCO is so structured that it can react quickly to meet the demands created by the prime minister's priorities. The PMC spends much of its time briefing the prime minister on the implications of other ministers' suggestions or on any event that has occurred. If the prime minister wants more detail he will ask for it. Usually the briefs are constructed in consultation with the operating department; but if the department is slow in responding, the brief goes ahead regardless.

Thus the existing prime minister's departments, working with the partisan PMOs, ensure that the prime ministers can spend their time on the items of importance to them. There is no evidence that their success in this area is any less than those of the civil servants in No. 10. In Australia both Fraser and Whitlam have been hard-working with wide-ranging interests. Their support has been structured to meet those needs.

5. A hierarchical bureaucratic structure would be inflexible and could not be changed easily to satisfy the different styles of prime ministers.

The departmental form is inherently flexible and there are few organisational problems in re-orienting a department in new directions. PMC provides a suitable example. It has been constantly re-organised to meet the changing interests of the prime minister (See Mediansky and Nockels 1981). When Fraser wanted improved advice on industrial relations, the department recruited the necessary staff and created a new branch. New organisation charts are issued regularly to keep up with the changes. Other divisions are formed and restructured to suit new interests. Its staff are also used to provide high-level support for major task-forces, particularly in economic areas. When a large group of PMC officials were seconded to organise the Commonwealth Heads

of Government Meeting in Melbourne in 1981, they were easily integrated back into the department. In PMC flexibility of organisation is accepted as crucial. PMC has been at times used to nurture new functions into which the federal government is choosing to expand. Federal involvement in education and aboriginal affairs both began under the control of a branch in PMC; now both are the main focus of complete departments. Women's Affairs and support for the arts both started there too, before being hived off elsewhere. It is explicitly accepted that, while the support of prime ministers may be necessary to get such projects off the ground, it is not advisable for a coordinating department to run a program for too long (Yeend 1979, 142).

In Canada, changes to the PCO's functions can also be easily made. When Trudeau created coordinating ministries for social services and economic affairs, the sections of PCO that had serviced cabinet committees in these areas were ceded to the new departments. Those departments now service the cabinet committees and, in the same manner as the PCO, assess the proposals presented there.

Indeed the clear distinction in Canada and Australia between a partisan PMO and a non-partisan department probably increases their flexibility. Jones (1973, 364) mentions the tensions that can exist in No. 10 when the principal private secretary has to draw distinctions between the political and official roles. When the obviously political functions, along with the general time-table, are organised by the PMO, such problems do not often arise. Obviously the practical distinctions between the official and the political are always blurred; advice comes from everywhere. But they are organisationally distinct and within those organisations flexibility is easy to achieve.

Jones (1976, 38) argues that the private secretaries in No. 10 are doing essentially the same job as a century ago. The staff and organisation of PMOs in Australia and Canada have changed regularly to meet new demands. The PMO in Canada has undergone several transformations under the one prime minister, Trudeau, as his style changed (Campbell 1981). In both countries the prime ministers' public service organizations have been easily adapted to new demands,

to the inclusion and then hiving off of functions, and to different styles. The departmental form has not been a hindrance; rather it has allowed the departments to adjust substantial resources to meet new demands.

6. There is a danger of having a single head of department through which everything might be challenged.

The secretary of PMC is the Australian prime minister's main bureaucratic adviser; the same is true of the clerk of the Privy Council in Canada. The two share that role with the secretary of the Cabinet Office in Britain. While they are obviously powerful officials, possibly the most powerful officials, none of them are, or ever could become, the single conduit through whom advice to the prime minister is channelled.

There are four obvious reasons. Firstly, neither PMC nor PCO is organised so that all advice is channelled through the head of department. The limitations of time and pressure of work prevent that from happening. In PMC all eight division heads have regular access to the prime minister as well as the secretary, the under-secretary (effectively a second permanent head) and the three deputy secretaries. Branch heads will sign off notes to the prime minister in areas of their expertise and the prime minister will ring them direct for information. And all this occurs at a hectic pace. The PCO is similar. Two or three officials attempt the briefing each morning and a range of officers have direct access. Working arrangements in both departments are fairly flexible. The departmental form does not prevent these bodies acting in a manner similar to the flexible Cabinet Office and the staff of No 10.

Second, the prime ministers in both countries have partisan PMOs to whom they can, and often do, turn for advice. Third, the prime ministers have other official sources of advice in specialist areas; in Australia the Public Service Board and the Office of National Assessments (an intelligence analysis organisation, attached nominally to PMC) can report direct to the prime minister. In Canada the Federal Provincial Relations Office (for much of its

existence headed by a former clerk of the PCO) has direct access to the prime minister. Bureaucratically therefore the heads of the prime minister's departments do not sit astride the access to the prime minister. Nor could they if they wanted to.

Finally, and most important, the existence of a prime minister's department does not make any less true the fact that in Australia and Canada the prime minister's main advisers are his ministers. All the forces mentioned by Jones as forces of cohesion in Britain (Jones 1976, 37) are as true there too. It is collective and party government. Of course there are complaints about the role of PMC and PCO; there have been plenty of complaints by Crossman, Benn and others of the role of the Cabinet Office too. But their existence cannot invalidate the basic truth that all prime ministers rely heavily on their ministerial colleagues for advice. That has not changed since the policy capacity of PMC and PCO has been increased. Nor will it.

The comparatively open access of Canadian and Australian prime ministers is also illustrated by the simple facts of geography. In Britain the prime minister's office and residence is part of an interconnected set of offices which give easy access to the prime minister for the staff of No 10 and the Cabinet Office. In Australia the prime minister and his private staff always work from a suite of offices in Parliament House. That suite includes the Cabinet Room. All his ministers work in Parliament House too. PMC by contrast is some three hundred yards away. In Canada both the PCO and the PMO have their offices in the Langevin Building, again some distance from the prime minister's office in Parliament House. As a result of their continuous presence in the same building access for ministers and indeed backbenchers is perhaps easier in Australia and Canada than in Britain, and prime ministers are probably <u>less</u> coccooned by their officials.

What lessons can be drawn?

It is not useful to ask which is the best method of supporting the prime ministers or the best constellation of organisations. What works in the one place may not work in the other. Even whether they work well at all will be disputed. Campbell and Szablowski (1979, 323-33), for example, would like to see British institutions moulded onto the Canadian centre. But it is still preferable that the debate be directed from a level of ungrounded speculation to a firmer basis of such evidence as does exist. Since both Australia and Canada in practice do have prime minister's departments, it is possible to draw two main conclusions from the empirical evidence that is available.

First, of the specific criticisms launched against prime minister's department, none are fully sustained by an examination of other systems. Indeed of the six main dangers posed only one - the view of the meddlesome department - have any validity and even that depends on the perspective of the commentator. The theoretical problems anticipated by Jones do not occur in practice. Whether they would occur in Britain is a matter of speculation. It can be stated categorically that they are not the inevitable consequence of the creation of a prime minister's department in a parliamentary system.

Second, Jones ends one set of arguments against a prime minister's department with a general proposition:

> In any case a prime minister's department would be a revolution in the constitution, a move from a ministerial and cabinet system to prime ministerial government (Jones 1979, 20).

That is sheer nonsense. It would mean that, because of the existence of the prime minister's department, Australia and Canada *ipso facto* have prime ministerial government. In practice each country has different sets of checks and balances within which prime ministers operate. It is difficult to sustain

for long a comprehensive argument that British prime ministers are weaker than their Australian and Canadian counterparts. Further, and more fundamentally, such a comment is contrary to Jones's own careful and persuasive argument that prime ministerial power is limited by a whole range of institutional and personal factors (Jones 1969). Since the bureaucratic support is only one - and not a major one - of those factors it would be surprising if a change in the one area can negate the remainder of Jones's argument. In practice it does not; any concept of prime ministerial government needs to rely on far more than bureaucratic support. A prime minister's department certainly increases the policy advice available to a prime minister; it cannot and does not replace his ministerial colleagues or remove the other party and parliamentary constraints.

A Prime Minister's Department in Britain?

If none of the problems that Jones anticipates for such a department will necessarily happen, a further question is whether the adoption of the Australian or Canadian model would add anything to the central capacity in Britain. Indeed the discussion of the pros and cons of a prime minister's department may have at times muddled the debate. In the past the existing smooth arrangements that exist in Britain, sanctified by history, have been compared to the option of an ill-defined department with uncertain powers and problems. It is not surprising the debate is often one-sided and narrow, cleaving to the orthodoxy with an uncritical appreciation of the comfortable.

In part PMC, PCO and the Cabinet Office fulfill similar functions. In servicing the prime minister as team leader all these organizations service the functioning of cabinet; they receive and check the submissions, ensure consultations have taken place, take the minutes, record and circulate the decisions, and generally hold the ring. They are concerned to see that the running of the machinery of government is smooth. In this role the expertise of the Cabinet Office is indeed legendary.

In relation to the strategic function - of determining broad priorities for the government - there seems little difference in the lack of effective functioning in any system. In Australia the attempt was never even started, in PMC or anywhere else. In Canada the PCO's grandiose schemes came to little. In Britain strategic planning was one of the proposed roles of the Central Policy Review Staff where Chequers weekends were to be a forum for discussing the government's general directions. But in practice this function was one of the first to fall into disuse as the CPRS became more concerned with the collective briefing of ministers and task force investigations into sensitive topics (Pollitt 1974).

The major distinction is the degree of individual briefing that prime ministers may get on items that are particularly sensitive. It is necessary to avoid understating the amount of policy advice a prime minister receives. There has been a substantial increase in the last decade or so. Although the Cabinet Office is nominally a servant of the cabinet, in practice much of its time it works primarily for the prime minister. According to one former prime minister, the secretary of the Cabinet Office is secretary of cabinet and to the prime minister. Indeed, even though the numbers in the Cabinet Office are small (substantially only twenty people divided into four groups), there is no doubt, according to participants, that the Cabinet Office will inevitably move towards policy advice. Even if its briefing notes remained primarily procedural and pointing out potential hazards - 'you may wish to press the minister on paragraph seven' - , that itself will have policy implications. That process is likely to increase, as it begins to make substantial comments on policy content too.

The Cabinet Office has been bolstered too by the CPRS. Some of its time is spent in directly advising the prime minister on specific items of interest. At times Heath was said to use it as his own department and its head had direct access. More recently it had worked through the Cabinet Office, to the extent that it has been accused of being 'a powerful lobby for the Cabinet Secretary himself' (Benn 1979: 12). It can also be a strength to a prime minister on some specified interests, but its direct contact has declined.

The Policy Unit, set up by Harold Wilson and under Labour headed by Bernard Donoghue, was the innovation that has received considerable attention in the last few years. Previously prime ministers had been served by small ad hoc groups of partisan advisers; the Policy Unit formalised the process. Under Labour the Unit was always small - never more than seven or eight people; its members had regular and immediate access to the prime ministers, sat on official committees, and could see all necessary papers. They could feed in ideas, particularly on politically sensitive issues; and attend cabinet committees. How effective the unit was is more open to dispute. Some members thought it had achieved rather more than was anticipated; they had feared there would be frozen out by officials but were not. Others argued that it had really had little impact, that there were no specific occasions where the existence of the Policy Unit made a major difference. Anyway, one argued, the prime minister could only run with a few issues and the Policy Unit could make little difference to that.

After the Conservative victory the Policy Unit was reduced in size. It was headed by John Hoskyns, with only one or two assistants at different times. Initially the policy unit looked at the government's medium or long term strategy, being regarded almost as a 'surrogate think tank (The Economist, 27 December 1980, 47). Inevitably it gradually became involved more and more in day-to-day matters and, with the departure of Hoskyns, the very role of the Policy Unit under its new head, Ferdinand Mount, may be under review (The Times 4 May 1982). Thatcher has at various times had other non-official staff, such as David Wolfson, but the number of her partisan advisers have always been few, probably 'far too few to enable a policy unit to achieve even the minimal monitoring ... required to ensure that a strategy is being followed' (Stephenson 1980, 33). The Labour experiment has thus barely been continued, and even that limited policy support for the prime minister has been severely reduced. Indeed the weakness at the centre has been the subject of considerable comment (Stephenson 1980; The Economist, 27 December 1980; 7 February 1981; The Times, 4 May 1982).

The important point is that, even with the CPRS and the Policy Unit, and with the growing policy involvement of the Cabinet Office, the numbers involved are still comparatively small, whether the comparisons are made with partisan or

non-partisan components elsewhere. The Cabinet Office and the private secretaries in No. 10 are organized on a functional basis, but the other units were designed to meet matters of immediate impact. Unlike the PMC and PCO, there was no systematic covering of all areas of policy in any depth, as Berrill's comment quoted earlier indicates. Yet it remains impossible to determine what happens if prime ministers choose to become heavily involved in the details of specific policy. As one Australian minister commented, 'Prime ministers tend to be super-heated people and they can't leave things alone, particularly things that interest them and their tastes are usually pretty eclectic'. Besides, whether by choice or not, prime ministers must become inevitably involved in a larger range of issues, due to international and media pressures. They probably need wider briefing, more detailed analysis and more widely coordinated advice as more and more they speak for cabinet on many items. New circumstances may make impossible demands on the old style at the centre, even when it has been boosted by the Policy Unit and the CPRS.

If that occurs, if there is a need to increase that policy capacity explicity, to give prime ministers policy advice in depth, it may be useful to consider the advantages of organising the civil service component into a broad department and the partisan into an office. Whether consciously or not, the Australian and Canadian response to these pressures was to increase the policy capacity of the PMC and the PCO and to boost the general political capacity of the PMOs. It is not necessary to suggest that these models are panaceas that can solve all problems or that they are cost-free benefits. They clearly have limitations. But their problems are not those forecast for a prime minister's department by Jones, and they do provide a useful model against which expectations and alternatives can be judged. Above all, their examples indicate clearly that prime minister's departments are compatible with collective responsibility and cabinet government.

FOOTNOTES

1. Parts of this article are based on a series of interviews undertaken by the author in 1979 and 1980.

2. For other discussion of the proposal, see also Whitney 1980 and Boston 1980.

3. Section 64 of the Australian constitution states that 'The Governor-general may appoint officers to administer such departments of State of the Commonwealth as the Governor-general in Council may establish'.

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