

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, governments in every corner of the Commonwealth have introduced widespread reforms in public administration. As a general rule, these reforms have been motivated by two overriding objectives: containing public spending; and improving levels of service.

Despite the similarity of objectives, however, the range of approaches has been very broad. A recent study carried out for the Commonwealth Secretariat categorised seven different kinds of reform, ranging from initiatives aimed at improving policy procedures to the development of commercialisation and partnerships. In many countries, more than one initiative is being undertaken at a time.¹

The initial results are very encouraging. Countries such as Canada and New Zealand have been strikingly successful in trimming public expenditures. Britain seems to have had some success in improving public satisfaction with service levels. At the same time, however, these changes have introduced new stresses, the effects of which are not yet completely known or understood.

One consequence has been a rapid increase in the demands put on the men and women who hold the post of permanent secretary, one of the most critical in the system of public administration.² Permanent secretaries sit at the apex of the public service and at the crossroads between political power and public administration. They act as critical links between the political will of ministers and the long-term public interest as understood by the public service.

It is estimated that today there are about 1,400 permanent secretaries in the 54 countries of the Commonwealth. In their collective hands lies the effectiveness of the government of almost 1.5 billion (1,500 million) people – about a quarter of humanity.

The new demands on the men and women who hold that challenging position are the subject of this inquiry. Recent public service reforms have raised the bar for permanent

¹ Mohan Kaul "From Problem to Solution." *Commonwealth Strategies for Reform: Managing the Public Service*. Strategies for Improvement Series, No. 1 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996).

² The traditional term "permanent secretary" is not used in every Commonwealth country. Other terms used to designate the same position include "principal secretary," "head of department," or "chief executive." Canada even uses the confusing term "deputy minister." For the purposes of this study, by "permanent secretary" we mean the most senior career public servant responsible for a government department or agency.

secretaries, who often face diminished resources, increased workloads, reduced staff morale, a critical public, and overlapping accountabilities. They also find themselves increasingly dependent on the collaboration of a range of other bodies, public-private partnerships, arms-length agencies, and even the private sector to accomplish the objectives set for them. In short, the tasks demanded of permanent secretaries have expanded immensely.

This publication examines changes in management responsibilities and accountabilities. It also examines the changing skill requirements of permanent secretaries and their evolving relationships with ministers, central agencies, and staff.

We recognise that degrees of development differ enormously among Commonwealth countries, ranging from the tiny Pacific island-nation of Niue, with a population of 3000, to India, with a population of 1 billion. But our objective is to provide an outline of some of the broad trends in government reform and the impact of such trends on the roles of current and future permanent secretaries. We attempt to describe common problems and issues, and to make recommendations that we believe will help permanent secretaries to perform better.