

THE ROLE OF THE PERMANENT SECRETARY

While governments and ministers come and go, the permanent secretary remains the permanent custodian of permanent problems.

– Former senior Canadian permanent secretary

In the Westminster model of government, the permanent secretary is the administrative head of a department or ministry. They are “permanent” in the sense that they are normally career civil servants who have tenure beyond the life of any particular government. This system, in which the permanent public service extends to the topmost levels of public administration, is one of the defining characteristics of the Westminster model. It answers the need to balance administrative continuity, without which governing is unpredictable and difficult, against political sensitivity, which is the basis of democracy.

Commonwealth countries are not unique in making this sharp distinction between ebb and flow at the political level and continuity at the administrative level. It is also a characteristic of the French system, for example. But it does stand in sharp contrast to the practice of many other countries – the U.S.A. and Mexico, to take two examples – in which every change in elected government leads to sweeping changes in personnel at many levels of public administration.

THE PERMANENT SECRETARY AND THE MINISTER

The most significant characteristic of the permanent secretary’s role is without doubt his or her position at the juncture of the political level of government and the public service. Different observers use different terms: interpreter, translator, buffer, interface, funnel. However, they all describe the same situation: the permanent secretary is inescapably caught between the partisan political world of the minister and the rational, impartial and scientific world of the public servant.

Above, the permanent secretary lives with the minister and his world of elections, party politics, caucuses, question period – the hurly-burly of politics, the press, and public perception. Few ministers understand, or are even interested in, the public service or how it works. Their view seldom extends more than a few years. They ask, “What do we need to do to get the government re-elected?”

Below, the permanent secretary toils with his fellow public servants – including many friends and colleagues. This is the milieu from which the permanent secretary has

usually come. It is a world of public consultation, cost-benefit analysis, higher education, due process, equal treatment, scientific data, and probity.

Caught in the clash of these two cultures, the permanent secretary is continually pressed from both sides. The minister is rarely satisfied with the secretary's advice. It is always too slow, too cumbersome, or too rigid. On the other hand, his or her public service colleagues feel the secretary fails to stand up to the minister's proclivity to make political hay at the expense of important public policy issues. As a result, the permanent secretary is caught in a terrible vise: required by law to serve the minister and the minister's needs, yet harshly judged by peers on his or her ability to bring a rational approach to departmental decisions and thus maintain moral authority.

There is an additional set of contradictory pressures on the permanent secretary. He or she may work for a particular minister but has usually been appointed by the head of government, who has the right to withdraw the appointment at any time. Only in rather unusual circumstances would the minister be consulted about the appointment of his or her permanent secretary.

This matrixed relationship seems cumbersome. It is hard to believe that such unclear and overlapping responsibilities would be tolerated in the private sector, for example. But the approach has proven itself very effective in creating a supple but strong bridge between the political and the administrative levels of government. It ensures that the permanent secretary is both *responsive* to and *independent* of the minister. It gives him or her the ability to "speak truth to power" when advice or counsel is called for. It also ensures that, in the final analysis, the democratic will of elected officials will carry the day.

This delicate balance is made all the more remarkable because it generally relies on practice rather than clear rules and defined law. In most countries, permanent secretaries are employed "at the pleasure" of the government.³ This appears to be a contradiction in terms. How can someone be permanent if they are appointed "at pleasure"? The answer is that while heads of governments jealously retain the right to nominate, promote, move, and even fire permanent secretaries as they see fit, as a general rule they exercise this right judiciously, with an eye to maintaining the integrity of the system as a whole. They know that certain actions that do not respect accepted norms (for example, dismissing a permanent secretary on political grounds) could be

³ The term "at pleasure" means the contract can be terminated at any time. In recent years, some countries, particularly in the South Pacific and Africa, have moved to employ permanent secretaries on a fixed-term basis. New Zealand now employs "chief executives" on five-year contracts. The objective is to enhance the autonomy of the permanent secretary in the exercise of his or her functions, while retaining ultimate accountability for results. There is no unanimity on the effectiveness of this approach.

politically costly and could prejudice the integrity of the system as a whole. This means that, in practice, the permanent secretary has permanent – well, almost permanent – status.

For the permanent secretary, the importance of building a good working relationship with the minister cannot be overstated. Without the trust of the minister, it becomes extremely difficult for the permanent secretary to exercise departmental control and manage effectively. The reverse is also true. The success of the minister depends to a large degree on the ability and goodwill of a permanent secretary who often has a very different personal or professional background and whom the minister did not appoint. Ministers who too readily trust permanent secretaries lose the ability to act independently. But ministers who ignore the advice of their permanent secretaries run the risk of making serious errors.

“Experienced permanent secretaries recognize that tacit acceptance of their competence and good intentions constitutes a leap of faith for ministers,”⁴ notes a former Canadian cabinet secretary, Gordon Osbaldeston. “They try very hard to demonstrate that they are both willing and able to support the Minister.” When a good working relationship exists between the two, the accountability system functions very well. However, when the minister and permanent secretary are not able to work well together, both face difficulties carrying out their responsibilities. Central to a good working relationship is a clear understanding on each side of the appropriate role of each individual.

THE BASIC ROLES OF THE PERMANENT SECRETARY

In the Westminster model of government, ministers are both individually responsible for the affairs of one department or ministry, and collectively responsible for the conduct of the government as a whole. The power and authority to make decisions with respect to particular departments are provided through statute to individual ministers. *The principle of individual ministerial responsibility* refers to the responsibility of the minister, as the political head of a department, to answer to the legislature and, through the legislature, to the public, both for his or her personal acts and for the acts of departmental subordinates. *The principle of collective responsibility*, on the other hand,

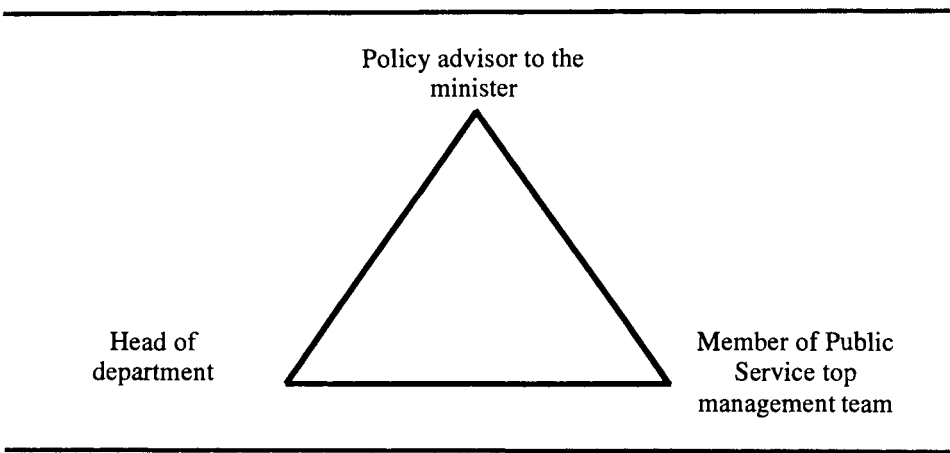
⁴ Gordon Osbaldeston, *Keeping Deputy Ministers Accountable*. (Scarborough ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1989).

refers to the concept that ministers are responsible as a group – as members of the Cabinet – for the policies and management of the government as a whole.⁵

As the under-secretary to the minister, the permanent secretary has three basic roles: providing policy advice to the minister, leading the department of which he or she is the administrative head, and participating in the collective management of the public service as a whole.

These three basic roles can be represented as a triangle of competing responsibilities (Figure 1), each pulling on the permanent secretary for time and attention. Each is somehow related to the others; yet each competes with the other two.

Figure 1. Three basic roles of the permanent secretary



As *policy adviser to the minister*, the permanent secretary is expected to provide objective advice on policy issues, on the government's options in dealing with them, and on the implications of each option. Policy advice is always based on a combination of hard evidence and intuitive assessment. It often requires a complete understanding of complex technical, managerial, legal, and/or financial issues. By definition, it almost always has important political implications for both the minister and the government as a whole.

⁵ For more on the role of ministers, see Kenneth Kernaghan and David Siegel, *Public Administration in Canada*. (Scarborough, ON: Nelson Canada, 1995).

The minister, of course, has other policy advisers. They may include people from his or her political staff and political party, as well as outside experts engaged *ad hoc*. Traditionally, however, the permanent secretary has played the central role in developing policy options and in recommending courses of action to the minister. He or she is responsible for gathering and analysing the evidence to support a course of action (or inaction) proposed to a minister.

As head of a department, the permanent secretary must direct and manage, on the minister's behalf and within the law, a department of government. In part, this means ensuring that the work of the department (controlling immigration, maintaining a transportation system, or collecting taxes, to take three examples) is carried out effectively and efficiently. The permanent secretary has to ensure that the department responds to ministerial priorities and that the administration of the department is carried out in a way that reflects the minister's direction and interests. From time to time, this may require implementing policies which the permanent secretary has reservations about, or may even have advised against (Box 1). Nonetheless, as a loyal public servant, the permanent secretary has the duty to respect the authority of the democratically elected political level, and to carry out its policies to the fullest extent possible.

Like the manager of any other large organisation, the permanent secretary must ensure that the key tasks of planning, organising, execution, control, and evaluation are carried out. However, most permanent secretaries have many more constraints on their management decisions than do their private sector counterparts. These include: limits on their latitude to hire, fire, promote, and compensate employees; constraints on procurement; and inhibitions imposed by the highly public nature of their decisions.

As a member of the public service top management team, the permanent secretary shares a collective responsibility for the management of the public service as a whole. Permanent secretaries are members of the larger collectivity of government and are expected to play a *corporate role* on behalf of the government. Part of this entails making sure that departmental initiatives are consistent with overall governmental objectives. New Zealand's State Services Commissioner spelled out this collective responsibility in a letter to all chief executives (that is, permanent secretaries):

You have a key role in ensuring that the collective interest of government is not lost sight of, and indeed is enhanced by your department's actions. While departments properly and necessarily specialise in certain areas, it is important that they always consider the relationship of their own policy advice and programmes to the wider context of the Government's strategy. I would therefore, expect you to work with central agencies and other chief executives, both in the public service and in the wider state sector, to ensure

that the work of your department complements that of other State agencies (...) and that consultation takes place at all levels.⁶ (Box 2)

Box 1

The rogue minister

Every experienced permanent secretary has been faced, at least once in his or her career, by the problem of the "rogue" minister. A rogue minister is one whose personal agenda is in conflict in some substantial way with that of the government of which he is a part.

The rogue minister is the permanent secretary's worst nightmare because it forces him or her to choose between two competing loyalties – to the minister and to the prime minister and the government he leads.

There are many reasons why a minister might not be synchronised with the prime minister. Ethnic or regional loyalties or personal ambition are often the causes. Political rivalries within the governing party can also be contributing factors.

But it falls to the permanent secretary to ensure that the initiatives of his or her minister are within the boundaries set out by the prime minister.

How should a permanent secretary deal with a rogue minister? In the first instance he or she must make sure that the minister understands where or how the ministers initiatives are inconsistent with government policies or priorities. Where he cannot come to agreement with his minister, however, the prudent permanent secretary will normally seek the advice of the head of civil service or the cabinet secretary.

Participation in the collective management of the public service may also include serving on special task forces investigating policy questions or perhaps matters of government organisation, heading corporate projects, or joining committees.

Finally, permanent secretaries must observe and support government-wide management standards and regulations that have been set by ministers collectively. They are delegated certain responsibilities over finances and personnel by central agencies. Box 3 provides an illustration of the extensive range of tasks demanded of the permanent secretary on a given day, and is by no means complete.

⁶ New Zealand State Services Commission, Key Documents. *Responsibility and Accountability: Standards Expected of Public Service Chief Executives* (June 1997).

Box 2

The permanent secretary and “the contract”

“Hire permanent secretaries as you would CEOs,” some people argue. “Put them on contract to deliver specific outputs, pay them competitive salaries (with performance bonuses), give them the freedom to manage – and fire them if they don’t deliver.”

Advocates of the business approach to government often point to New Zealand, which sold off many of its state-owned enterprises and re-organised the remaining government departments into about 30 agencies. Agencies are headed by chief executives recruited through open competition and paid competitive salaries for fixed-term contracts with specific deliverables. They are given wide latitude in managing their agencies, free of central controls.

On the whole, the assessment of the New Zealand experience is positive. Government is now smaller and more focused, without obvious reductions in the volume or quality of public services. But some warning flags have been raised about applying a business model to government. Some of the dangers include:

An excessive focus on the contract. Several incidents have revealed a worrying tendency for chief executives to focus excessively on what is in the contract, to the detriment of broader government objectives. After a tragic accident in a national park, for example, the chief executive of the parks agency refused to resign, claiming that while “reducing expenditures” was in his contract, “building safe viewing platforms” was not.

Focus on the short-term. Rewarding public sector chief executives for meeting financial targets builds incentives to improve results by putting off much-needed equipment maintenance, for example, or cutting back on employee training.

Reduced emphasis on the collective. The business approach tends to evaluate chief executives primarily as heads of agencies, and only secondarily as leaders of the public service as a whole. This tends to undermine the development of teamwork among government departments.

Reduced deployment flexibility. The system does not provide any soft landings for a head of department who performs well but does not get along with the minister. This makes it more difficult to handle the inevitable conflicts between minister and deputy, exposing the government, and the agency, to potentially serious problems.

New Zealand has already moved to deal with some of these problems. In June 1997, the State Services Commissioner, (the effective boss of the public service), sent a letter to each chief executive to clarify what is expected of a senior-level New Zealand public servant. It states that chief executives must be sensitive to the needs of the government as a whole, demonstrate a high level of personal ethics, and manage their departments with long-term stewardship in mind.

Box 3

What does the permanent secretary do all day?

The range of tasks demanded of the permanent secretary is extensive. Here is a short list culled from interviews with permanent secretaries around the Commonwealth.

- Consult with and advise the minister and staff
- Oversee the formulation of policy advice
- Write speeches for the minister
- Deliver speeches for the department or the minister
- Write memoranda to cabinet
- Prepare the minister for Question Period
- Ensure that ministerial initiatives are consistent with government priorities
- Represent the ministry to parliament, including the Parliamentary Accounts committee
- Chair or participate in inter-ministerial committees
- Chair ministerial committees
- Network with other permanent secretaries
- Represent the ministry to client groups
- Maintain relations with donor agencies
- Participate in and support community activities
- Deal with the media
- Recruit, train and promote key staff
- Motivate, educate, and discipline staff
- Visit frontline departmental units
- Exercise control over departmental expenditures
- Oversee strategic and business planning for the ministry
- Act as steward for public resources entrusted to the ministry

Management environment

Permanent secretaries operate within a complex environment of demands, constraints and competing interests. They must manage the demands and the often competing interests of ministers, interest groups, client groups, staff, other government departments, and other levels of government – to name but a few. They must also operate within a climate of often ambiguous and competing accountabilities. As one academic text commented:

[Permanent secretaries] are entangled in the net of bureaucratic politics within their departments, and between their departments and other administrative units. In short, [permanent secretaries] are challenged to perform the difficult feat of keeping their nose to the grindstone, their ear to the ground, and their back to the wall. Moreover, in the executive-bureaucratic sphere, [permanent

secretaries] are required to look in three directions to find the audience for their performance. They must look upward to their political superiors, laterally to their administrative peers, and downward to their departmental subordinates.⁷

The following list of the most important stakeholders in the management environment of the permanent secretary demonstrates its richness.

- The *prime minister (or president)* normally has the power to appoint and release the permanent secretary. In some cases, the permanent secretary will receive a ‘mandate’ letter indicating the prime minister’s priorities. The permanent secretary may have little contact with the prime minister, or a lot, depending on the size of the country and its political culture. But the prime minister must always loom large in the mind of the permanent secretary.
- The *head of the civil service (HCS)*, sometimes called the cabinet secretary or the clerk of the cabinet, is the chief administrative officer of the government. Usually a former permanent secretary, he or she has a large say in the careers of permanent secretaries. In many cases, the HCS will convene regular meetings with the permanent secretary group to discuss overall government direction.
- The *minister* has political responsibility for the department and is a member of cabinet. In many ways, the minister is the permanent secretary’s boss, and it is the obligation of the permanent secretary to make the minister look good. But the permanent secretary also has a broader obligation – to the minister and to the government – to make sure that the minister keeps to the government’s agenda.
- *Junior ministers* with specialised areas of responsibility are created by some governments that like to expand the number of ministers. These junior ministers have various titles: some are called “Deputy Minister”; in Canada they are called “Secretary of State.” Junior ministers often want to cut their own figures, and keeping junior ministers on-side with the minister and the department can be an important task for the permanent secretary.
- *Parliamentary committees* are bodies through which parliaments exercise their power over permanent secretaries in a number of ways. A parliament may have a specialised committee to look at certain issues such as transportation and telecommunications. There is often a public accounts committee to examine the priorities and management of each department. Maintaining good relations with

⁷ Kenneth Kernaghan and David Siegel. *Public Administration in Canada*. (Scarborough, ON: Nelson Canada, 1995).

parliamentary committees is an important responsibility of the permanent secretary.

- Individual *members of parliament* are very sensitive to the impact of departmental decisions on their ridings, and are usually quite prepared to defend the interests of constituents. While most ministers will want to retain direct contact with members of parliament, it often falls to the permanent secretary to ensure that these relations are as smooth as possible.
- The *Public Service Commission* (or a similar body) is found in most Commonwealth governments. Its responsibility is to ensure the non-political nature of the public service. This limits what a permanent secretary can do – in hiring, transferring, and firing staff, for example.
- The *Treasury Board (or Management Board)* allocates funds for each department through the budget process and sets rules governing expenditures.
- The *Auditor General* (or a similar independent body) may be created by parliament to verify that the funds it votes are in fact devoted to the ends agreed to. This involves a series of controls, investigations, and – occasionally – public reporting of mismanagement.
- *Specialised oversight agencies* are created by parliaments in many countries to make sure that broad policy objectives are carried out. One agency already mentioned is that of the Auditor General, who generally reports directly to parliament. Others might include commissions whose job it is to protect gender or racial equality, linguistic rights, the environment, privacy, and so on. All of these agencies look over the shoulder of the permanent secretary, and make reports to parliament.
- *Crown corporations or state enterprises* – arm's-length agencies created by many governments – may operate in the general policy area of the permanent secretary. The permanent secretary of the Department of Transport, for example, may find that he or she has several port authorities to deal with. Though the permanent secretary may or may not sit on the board of such authorities, their actions may have an important impact on the portfolio.
- *Other government departments* are often involved because, increasingly, issues present themselves as cross-cutting or 'horizontal' matters for which no one department has exclusive responsibility. The control of AIDS may primarily be a Health issue, for example. But any AIDS strategy must also involve other departments such as Education, Prisons, Police, and the Judiciary – to name a

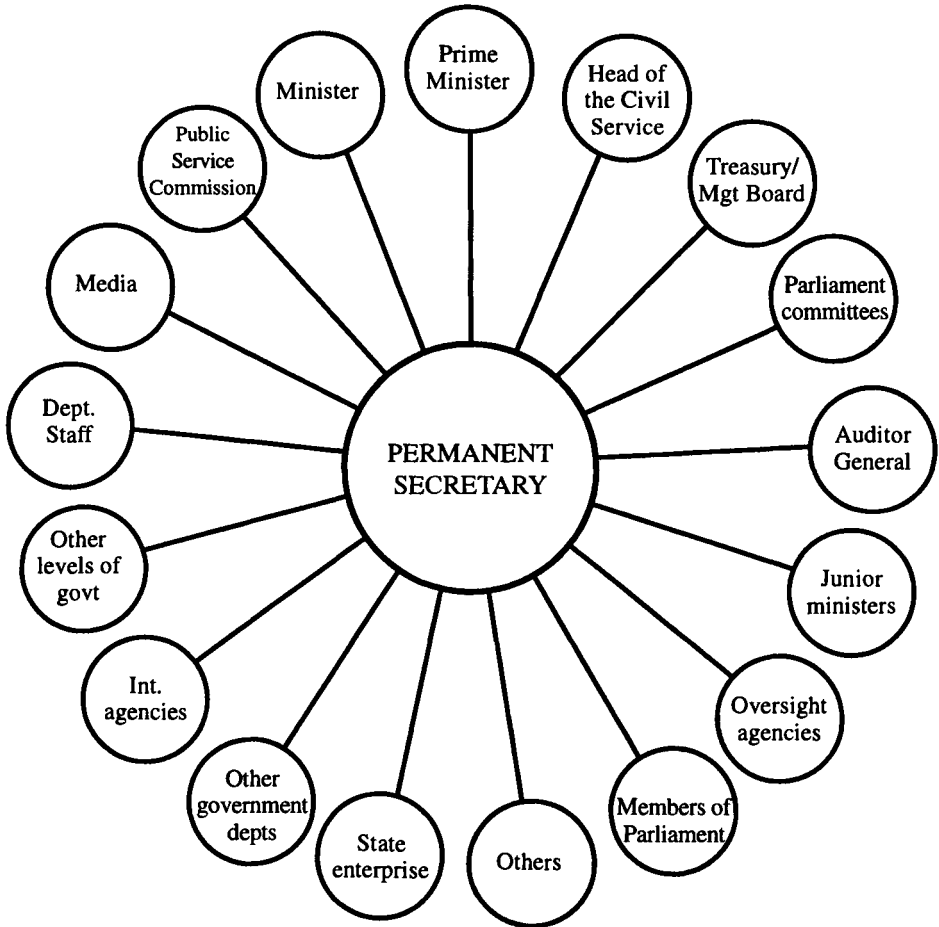
few. It is the responsibility of the permanent secretary to ensure that initiatives are carried out in co-operation with other departments of government.

- *Other levels of government* are factors in Commonwealth countries such as Canada, South Africa, and Australia, which are federations. The interests of states or provinces may diverge from those of the federal government and each other, and regional governments have the legal and economic power to pursue their own interests. Even in unitary states, many municipal and local governments are significant political players. The successful permanent secretary must pay careful attention to other levels of government.
- *Departmental staff* are a primary concern of the manager of a large department, which sometimes includes thousands of unionised employees, “exempt staff,” and a senior executive team. The permanent secretary has to pay attention to them and their representatives, and may have to deal with unions when he or she wants to make changes in the way work is done, for example. However, because wages are usually negotiated centrally (there are now some exceptions, for instance in the UK and New Zealand), the permanent secretary has very little control over one of the most important Human Resource tools – compensation policy.
- *Media* (the press, radio, and television) now demand greater access to government documents, research, and decisions. More than ever, the permanent secretary works in a “glass house” environment. His or her ability to deal with the press is crucial to the credibility of the department and the government as a whole.
- *International agencies* play an increasingly important role in the operations of permanent secretaries, who often find themselves involved with regional and international agreements, conventions, and organisations. This is most clear in areas such as environmental protection and immigration, where the subject matter is not inherently defined by national boundaries. Today, almost every government department is a signatory to, or participant in, regional or international conventions or agencies, and the range of decisions that can be made without co-ordinating with them is diminishing.
- *Others* include clients, professional associations, citizen groups, farmers’ unions, ethnic communities, and so on. No list is ever complete.

This bewildering list of stakeholders can be represented, in somewhat simplified form, by a bubble diagram that arrays the stakeholders around the permanent secretary. Of course, the elements of the diagram will vary from country to country and ministry to ministry, but the overall dynamics are remarkably similar around the world.

Figure 2 is a representation of the basic management environment of a permanent secretary in Canada.

Figure 2. Management environment of a permanent secretary



Adapted from Gordon F. Osbaldeston, *Keeping Deputy Ministers Accountable* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1989) p.16.

Accountability system

We often hear it said, for example, that a permanent secretary is ‘accountable’ to the client groups of his or her department, or to individual members of parliament, or even to the public at large. But accountability relationships, while embedded within the management environment of the permanent secretary, constitute a more precise set of relations based on conferred power. In the discussion that follows we will use the definition of accountability offered by a former Clerk of the Privy Council of Canada.

Accountability is the obligation to answer to a person or group for the exercise of responsibilities conferred on him or her by that person or group.⁸

Permanent secretaries are accountable only to those individuals or groups with whom they have a direct authority relationship based on legislation or convention. In this sense, therefore, we would not say that a permanent secretary is accountable to the public. This is not to say that they have no obligation to the public for they clearly do. However, the public has no direct authority relationship with the permanent secretary. Permanent secretaries are accountable only to their political superiors, to the courts, and to any internal governmental authorities given oversight authority by the law or common practice. From this point of view, in most Commonwealth countries permanent secretaries have six essential and somewhat overlapping accountabilities. In approximate order of importance, these accountabilities are to:

- the Prime Minister or President, who in most Commonwealth countries appoints permanent secretaries and confers specific powers on them;
- the minister of the department, for whom the permanent secretary provides advice and manages the department;
- the head of the civil service, who on behalf of the government, confers collective responsibilities on permanent secretaries;
- a management or treasury board, usually consisting of a small number of key ministers supported by a powerful secretariat, which provides funds to carry out activities under agreed conditions;

⁸ Gordon F. Osbaldeston. *Keeping Deputy Ministers Accountable*. (Scarborough ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1989), p 5.

- a public service commission, responsible for the independence of the public service, which delegates certain staffing, financial, and personnel management functions to the permanent secretary under specified conditions;
- parliament, through one or more parliamentary committees, including the public accounts committee – the body that holds permanent secretaries accountable for the expenditure of public funds.⁹

While the permanent secretary has accountabilities to all six of these entities, there is rarely any doubt about where his or her principal accountability lies. In almost all Commonwealth countries, the power to appoint (and remove) permanent secretaries lies with the head of government.¹⁰ In practice, this power may be delegated to an administrator, such as the head of the civil service, who may exercise considerable influence – but always on behalf of the head of government.

In Canada, for example, permanent secretaries (confusingly called “deputy ministers”) are appointed by the Prime Minister on the recommendation of the head of the public service (or clerk of the privy council). In making recommendations to the Prime Minister, the Clerk takes advice from, but is not bound by, a committee of senior officials. The selection and deployment of permanent secretaries is a powerful tool for ensuring consistency across departments and continuity in departmental administration despite changes in ministers. It also emphasises the collective interest of ministers, and the special interest of the Prime Minister in the effective management in the public service.

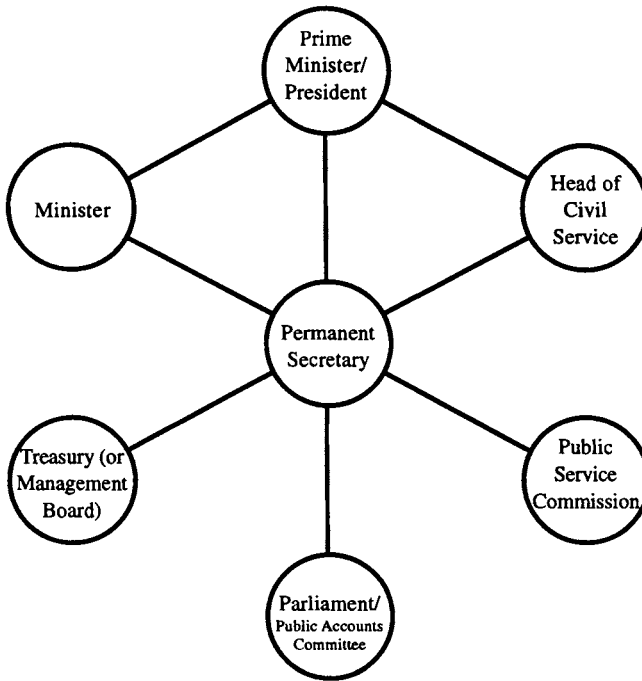
The specific accountabilities of the permanent secretary vary from country to country, but at the most basic level the six illustrated seem to be most common. Another layer of complexity comes from the fact that many of the six also have accountabilities to each other. For example, the head of the civil service is normally accountable to the Prime Minister. The Public Service Commission is usually accountable to parliament.

Figure 3 provides a simple illustration of the basic accountability system of the permanent secretary.

⁹ The “accountability” of the permanent secretary to the parliament through the public accounts committee varies from country to country. In the UK, the permanent secretary is the “accounting officer” and has a duty to account to parliament. In other countries, including Canada, the permanent secretary only reports to parliament on behalf of the minister. He or she is not legally “accountable” to the public accounts committee.

¹⁰ In New Zealand and a few other countries, permanent secretaries (called chief executives) are appointed by the State Services Commissioner on the recommendation of an independent selection board.

Figure 3. Basic accountability system of permanent secretary



While these six basic accountabilities seem to exist in all governments in all Commonwealth countries, their relative importance varies from country to country and from time to time. Some countries have highly centralised systems in which the dominant lines of responsibility lead to the centre. Others have decentralised systems in which the dominant accountabilities are to individual ministers. Some systems have a very large political component in which the prime minister or president has a key role; others are more administrative, with less involvement of the political level.

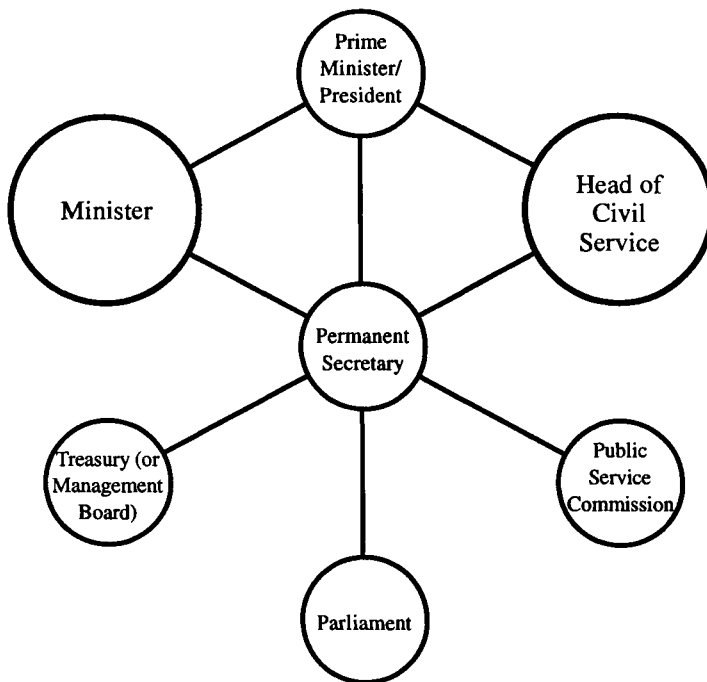
In the Canadian model, for example, the cabinet secretary, who is also the head of the civil service, plays a central and powerful role. The prime minister normally relies on the cabinet clerk's advice in making any appointments at the permanent secretary level. This variant might be called a "corporate-administrative" approach.

In the New Zealand model, however, the cabinet secretary plays a rather small role in the appointment of chief executives, who are recruited in open competition by an independent board under the public service commission (called the State Services Commission). The minister, on the other hand, plays a large role in determining the outputs stipulated in the contracts governing the chief executives. This approach can be called an “executive-decentralised” one.

Other variants are also possible. For example, in many African countries the president (or prime minister) plays a very large role in the nomination of permanent secretaries. In many cases, the approach is so centralised that permanent secretaries themselves are not clear on either selection criteria nor the basis for eventual dismissal. This approach could be called “political centralised.” Figure 4 provides an illustration of some of the variations outlined above.

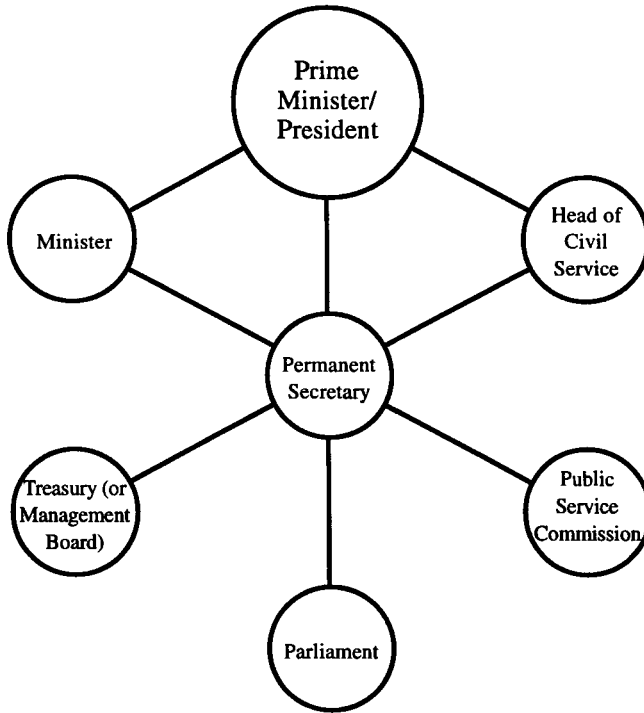
Figure 4. Variations of basic accountability system of permanent secretary

Variant A: Corporate administrative



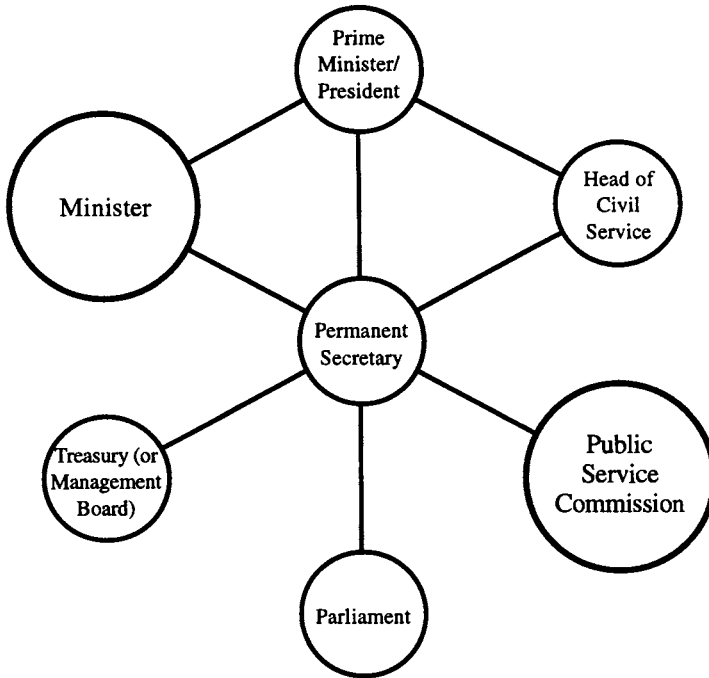
In Canada, the minister and the head of civil service play key roles in the accountability of the permanent secretary.

Variant B: Political centralised



In some Commonwealth countries, decision-making is very centralised.

Variant C: Executive decentralised



In New Zealand, the key accountabilities of a permanent secretary are to the Public Service Commission (called the State Services Commission) and to his or her minister.

The richness of the Westminster system can be seen in the variety of its applications. There is no right way to organise and distribute power. Each country has evolved a political structure from its own history, social composition, and level of political and economic development.

The need for feedback

Any accountability system needs adequate feedback. Surprisingly, permanent secretaries report that they get very little. Most say their relations with their ministers focus on specific dossiers and offer little opportunity to reflect on the overall quality of the relations between them. They also state that they are more often than not left guessing as to how their effectiveness is viewed at the centre. In fact, over 65% of those who responded to our questionnaire say they receive no regular evaluation of their work. Not surprisingly, they find this a source of considerable frustration.

Over and over again, permanent secretaries lamented the lack of feedback – either from the minister or from the head of the public service. “Regular evaluation encourages permanent secretaries to be better qualified for their jobs. It gives confidence and more job satisfaction,” noted a permanent secretary from a Caribbean nation. “Once this standard of qualification and accomplishment has been set, other permanent secretaries will aspire to this goal, and would seek to improve their self-worth and not just wait for promotion through age or years of service.” She also felt that regular evaluation of senior officials would increase the confidence of junior staff in the calibre of the top management. “As it is,” she added, “junior staff are evaluated, but the most important civil servants are never given any direct feedback.”

Routine performance evaluation encourages clearly expressed expectations and establishes specific goals and objectives for which the permanent secretary is then held accountable.