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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT OFFICES
IN OECD COUNTRIES**

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on Using New Tools for Decision-Making:
Impacts on Information, Communication and Organisation**

Istanbul, 7-8 October 2004

This paper is based principally on a survey of "The Structure and Functions of the Government Office" in OECD member countries carried out in early 2004. Survey responses were returned by 27 OECD member countries as well as Slovenia (an observer to the OECD Public Governance Committee).

Countries are invited to provide the Secretariat with any comments they may have by 30 October 2004.

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT OFFICES IN OECD COUNTRIES

by

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August 2004

¹ The opinions expressed and arguments employed in this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not reflect those of the OECD or of the governments of its member countries.

Note on the terminology and abbreviations used in this paper

Centre of Government (CoG): The term Centre of Government encompasses the body or group of bodies that provide direct support and advice to the Head of Government and the Council of Ministers.

Council of Ministers (CoM): This term is used to refer to the regular – usually weekly – meeting of Government ministers, referred to in different countries as the Cabinet, the Government meeting, or sometimes just ‘the Government’. The term Council of Ministers is used in many countries (mostly European) and has the advantage of being unambiguous.

Government Office (GO): This generic term is used throughout the paper to refer to the administrative body that serves the head of the government (normally the Prime Minister) and the Council of Ministers. The actual term used varies from country to country, for example, General Secretariat, Government Office, Government Secretariat, Chancellery, Cabinet Office, etc. Please note that this term is used here even in cases where the entire organ serving the Government is called Prime Minister’s Office (e.g., Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Poland).

Prime Minister’s Office (PMO): This generic term is used throughout the paper to refer to the office that serves **specifically** the head of the government, normally the Prime Minister. (Often it is referred to in Europe as the Prime Minister’s *cabinet*.)

Prime Minister: Known variously in different countries as President of the Government, Chairman of the CoM, Chancellor, Taoiseach, etc.

State Secretary: This term is used generically in this paper to denote the administrative head of a Ministry. There is great variability in the roles, responsibilities, place in the hierarchy and mode of appointment of State Secretaries. The name itself is confusing, especially since in some countries a State Secretary is a title used for the junior tier of Ministers.

Government Secretary: This term is used generically in this paper to denote the head of the Government Office. The exact title of this post holder varies from country to country – Secretary General of the Government, Head of the Prime Minister’s Office, Secretary of State to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Chief of Staff, Cabinet Secretary, etc – and there are many differences in the functions and responsibilities of the post, but the term ‘Government Secretary’ is relatively unambiguous.

Ministerial Committees: This term denotes formal sub-groups of the Council of Ministers.

Note on sources of information for this paper

This paper is based principally on a survey of OECD member countries carried out in early 2004. Survey responses were returned by 27 OECD member countries.² Of the three observer countries to the Public Governance Committee of the OECD (Brazil, Chile and Slovenia) only Slovenia completed the survey and its response is included here – bringing the total to 28 responses. This exercise was carried out following a survey of Central and Eastern European countries in 2003 by SIGMA using the same survey instrument.³ Additional information and examples used in this paper are taken from data gathered by the authors from direct contacts with staff of Government Offices in OECD member countries, and from the websites of member countries.

The authors are grateful for comments from Joanne Caddy, Anke Freibert, Kenneth MacKenzie and Christian Vergez.

Giovanna De Sero provided invaluable assistance in checking the questionnaires and their consistency with previous data.

² Australia, Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. Survey responses were not received from: Canada, Mexico and the United States.

³ SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) is a joint initiative of the OECD and the European Union, funded mainly by the EU.

1. Introduction: why compare Government Offices?

There is no ‘correct’ way of organizing the centre of government. The apparatus surrounding each country’s Council of Ministers has developed incrementally, and often haphazardly. Arrangements have only rarely been based consciously on foreign models; usually the centre of government is homegrown, influenced mainly by domestic traditions of law, politics and administration. Often it has been caused to develop in unexpected directions by political circumstance, personality and chance. The degree of variation is enormous.

However, governments can learn from each other about different approaches to organizing and staffing the GO and the PMO. Since no model fits all systems, the main advantage of a comparative approach is that Government Secretaries can study what has and has not worked in other countries, and may identify a few ideas worth transplanting. However, it must be remembered that transplantation is a delicate business. Institutional and procedural models must be adapted with great care and sensitivity to the needs and objectives of a given constitutional, political, and administrative system.

There are few comparative reports available on the Centres of Government of OECD countries, hence the decision of SIGMA in 2003, as part of its programme of assistance to countries of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, to design and launch a survey of the organization and structure of CoGs, which resulted in a technical paper⁴. The same survey instrument was subsequently sent to OECD Member countries. This paper presents the key findings of the survey of OECD member countries, gives an overview of the existing range of practice in member countries and aims to facilitate mutual learning between them. A number of key issues for CoGs, such as risk management and the capacity to scope future policy issues, are not covered in this paper given the nature of the original survey but might merit further investigation in the future.

2. Types of central executives, and their influence on the Government Office

Since the roles of Councils of Ministers and Prime Ministers vary between different political systems, the role of the Government Office will vary as well. Three typologies are helpful for identifying some of the basic differences.

A constitutional typology

Among OECD governments, there are three distinct types of central executive, whose difference is rooted in the constitutional contexts from which they spring. These are:

a. Collegial systems

This is by far the most common type of central executive amongst OECD countries, including most European Union and Commonwealth members⁵. In these, the Council of Ministers is a central element of

⁴ Ben-Gera M. (2004) “Co-ordination at the Centre of Government: The Functions and Organisation of the Government Office. Comparative Analysis of OECD Countries, CEECs and Western Balkan Countries”. It should be noted that the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia are covered in both this paper and the SIGMA technical paper.

⁵ The term ‘Commonwealth’ is used as convenient shorthand for those OECD countries whose system of government is based on the British model: Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as the United Kingdom itself. The Irish system is also rooted in the same model. It should be noted, however, that while the basic similarities within these systems persist, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have experimented quite boldly with innovations in their central executives in recent years.

the decision-making process, and there is an emphasis on its collective nature and responsibility. Its existence and composition are usually stipulated in the constitution; and usually (but not always) its basic functions are set out in the constitution or a Law on Government. Most often, the constitution provides for Parliamentary approval of the Government as a collective, rather than the appointment and approval of a Prime Minister who then appoints a Council of Ministers. The Government is usually held (either as a matter of law or a matter of practical politics) to be collectively responsible to the legislature, and generally behaves accordingly. In these countries the collegial system remains a reality, and the Council of Ministers remains a genuine (although not unique) locus of decision-making .

It is important to note, however, that the degree to which the Council of Ministers is genuinely collective varies considerably between collegial systems. There is a wide range of different practices including - at the extremities -the Netherlands, where the Council of Ministers is the key locus of decision-making; Germany, where issues are brought to the Council of Ministers for ratification, rather than for decision, and key decisions are taken in bilateral discussion between ministers and between the Chancellor and ministers; and Austria, where the dominant characteristic is the great autonomy enjoyed by individual ministers.

b. Presidential systems

In these countries, in contrast, the Council of Ministers is clearly subordinate to the President. The US President's website defines the Cabinet's duties as "to advise the President on any subject he may require relating to the duties of Cabinet members' respective offices". The Cabinet will not necessarily meet often: indeed, in Mexico, the Council of Ministers meets only on ceremonial occasions. While the President may delegate extensively, the final authority (and responsibility) rests with him or her, not the Council of Ministers. The template of analysis used in the current survey was primarily designed for collegial systems⁶, and the presidential model does not fit easily into it. Therefore, in the following analysis, presidential systems have not been included in the numerical totals, although some examples from them have been included in the text.

c. Hybrid systems

The most obvious type of hybrid system is the semi-presidential model - principally Finland, France and Portugal⁷. Korea, whose Prime Minister is described as 'principal executive assistant to the President' responsible for supervising Ministries and policy coordination, is a borderline member of this group. The main characteristics of semi-presidential government are an extensive role for the President in foreign affairs and defence matters, and in relation to many public appointments. The President usually chairs the Council of Ministers and has certain powers in relation to appointments. (In France, if the President's party has a majority in the Assembly, he is also *de facto* head of the government, although often leaving much freedom, and responsibility, to the Prime Minister). For these functions, the President is supported by his or her own staff. However, the essential point in these countries is that in most policy areas the institutions and processes of decision-making remain focused on the Council of Ministers and the Prime Minister, and the administrative apparatus supporting the president is focused principally upon his or her formal powers.

⁶ In recent years, international donors have commissioned several reviews of GOs and PMOs in presidential central Asian countries. It soon became clear that to study these institutions separately from the President's office was pointless: the main focus of power was elsewhere.

⁷ The role of a President in a semi-presidential system will rely to a large degree on (a) whether his or her party commands a majority in the legislature, and (b) the ability and willingness of the President to assert himself. Many of the new constitutions of eastern European countries in the 1990s seemed to offer a potentially considerable executive role to their presidents, but in practice they have not asserted themselves, except on an occasional basis in Poland and Romania.

For most practical purposes the Prime Minister/Council of Ministers nexus of semi-presidential systems, and the machinery supporting it, can profitably be studied on its own. This paper focusses on the Prime Minister and the CoM, not the President's administration.

However, it can be argued that another hybrid is emerging: that of a prime minister within a traditionally collegial system whose post has become dominant to the point of being quasi-presidential. The reasons for this are complex, but include the development of international summitry; the increased personalization of politics, which focuses attention on the Prime Minister; and more effective use of media relations by Prime Ministers. The tendency is present in most OECD countries, but in some (for example, Spain and the United Kingdom) has reached the point where many observers maintain the Prime Minister's role is taking on some presidential characteristics. The institutional manifestations of such developments may include a downgrading of traditional collegial *fora* for decision-making; a greater use of informal decision-taking mechanisms; and a greater emphasis on the Prime Minister's personal relations *vis-à-vis* the public. So far, this is a tendency, and has not yet produced a distinct new type of central executive,⁸ but it is one with a powerful dynamic.

What are the main implications for the role of the Government Office of these different models? Firstly, and obviously, they require GOs to organize themselves differently. Presidential systems have large staffs serving the President directly, and few staff supporting 'collegiate' functions. In collegial systems, the reverse is often true: Denmark and the Netherlands, for example, provide the Prime Minister with very limited staff support and concentrate their policy capacities in the section of the GO supporting the CoM (although obviously the Prime Minister can call on their help, in his capacity as chair of the CoM). Semi-presidential systems require both the presidential staff and the Government Office to have some form of parallel systems in the areas of the president's executive functions, and consequently also require coordination arrangements between the two. And as the role of the Prime Minister has grown in almost all countries, the immediate support staff has usually expanded to match.

Secondly, these differences affect the focus of Government Offices' work. While maintaining high standards of neutrality and professionalism, GO staff must show particular sensitivity to where power lies, and to shifts of power between institutions, and between personalities. Staff in the French system of government, for example, have had to show considerable adaptability as the country has moved in and out of phases of *cohabitation*. In the British system, as the locus of decision-making has gradually shifted from the Council of Ministers to a multiplicity of ministerial committees, the GO's activities have concentrated mainly on those committees. Less obviously, in a system where a Prime Minister (or perhaps another senior minister, such as a Deputy Prime Minister or the Minister of Finance) is becoming more dominant, they need to shift the focus of their work.

Thirdly, the GO may find itself being used as an instrument for altering the balance of power between the Prime Minister and other Ministers. The considerable strengthening of the Japanese Cabinet Office in recent years has quite explicitly been carried out to strengthen the role of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet as a collective body. The same thinking was behind the strengthening of the Government office in Italy and Spain in recent decades. Recurrent proposals to create a Prime Minister's Department in the United Kingdom have run up against political opposition alleging that it would make the Prime Minister 'too presidential'.

These factors can create dilemmas. For example, if a prime minister uses informal mechanisms to circumvent established collegial practices, to what extent should GO officials constitute themselves the

⁸ It is worth recalling that Israel (not an OECD member country) took this tendency to a logical conclusion in the 1990s by instituting direct election of the Prime Minister alongside election of the parliament. This was not reckoned a success and the change was recently reversed.

guardians of traditional practices? And is there a danger that, after the departure of an unusually dominant prime minister, the GO may inadvertently perpetuate the dominance of the office by continuing the pattern of 'prime minister-centric' behavior it has become used to?

A functional typology

An alternative way of distinguishing between central executive systems is to look at the function that they perform. Here, the main distinctions are between what can be termed the 'quasi-legislative' model, the 'political' model and the 'advisory' model.

The 'quasi-legislative' model is distinguished by a Council of Ministers whose primary function is to consider and approve laws and regulations (many of which may require subsequent ratification by the legislature) and to approve (usually formally) a number of other decisions (e.g. public appointments). Most European OECD countries belong to this group: the procedures of the EU Council of Ministers are deliberately based on this model, the meetings are formal in character and driven mainly by the scrutiny of legal text.

In the 'political' model, in contrast, the Council of Ministers acts much more as a political high command, addressing key political issues and taking decisions at a general level, rather than considering specific legal texts (which are addressed more as technical issues in other fora, such as Ministerial Committees for Legislation). The most obviously characteristic group of 'political model' Councils of Ministers is that of the Commonwealth countries⁹.

The advisory model is characteristic of presidential models. Its title is self-descriptive. In these systems collective meetings of ministers are not necessarily the most significant source of advice to the president, whose bilateral relations with them (and with his or her own personal advisers) are likely to be more important.

The distinction between quasi-legislative and political models is not clear-cut: there is a spectrum. At one end, the British CoM deals almost exclusively in general political issues, and rarely receives papers; at the other extreme, CoMs of Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland and Slovenia tend to be highly formal; Denmark and Norway seem to be examples of a mid-point between the two, considering a mixture of legal and political business. However, while the distinction is blurred, it remains fundamentally valid.

These distinctions have implications for the work of Government Offices, but they are not necessarily easy to discern. One obvious difference is that, as far as volume of work is concerned, advisory CoMs, being limited in influence (and not necessarily meeting often) are likely to require limited support. Quasi-legislative CoMs, since they consider draft laws and much normal business, will receive a considerable volume of paper; marshalling this and guiding ministers through it will require a considerable organizational effort. Political CoMs may require less paper, but the difficult activity of drafting policy papers in collaboration with ministries still demands a lot of sensitive work.

Secondly, there is an organizational implication: GOs in quasi-legislative systems are more likely to require a capacity for legal analysis and review (see 5.2 below). Thirdly, quasi-legislative countries may employ informal devices to inject a more 'political' element into their proceedings. For example, previous French governments have, during periods of cohabitation, held frequent 'seminar' meetings (without the presence of the President) to allow freer discussions of priority issues; the current German government

⁹ One device, whose importance is under-estimated, existing in Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, is the Privy Council, a formal body that exists to approve many regulations and official appointments, relieving pressure of business and paperwork on the Council of Ministers.

holds periodic ‘retreats’ of several days outside Berlin; Norwegian and Swedish ministers supplement their formal proceedings with informal meetings and lunches; and the Finnish CoM has a regular ‘evening school’. Such arrangements may require preparation and support from the GO.

Overall, the point to bear in mind is that the differences in practice between, say, the GO of the Czech Republic and its counterpart in New Zealand or Spain are not simply a matter of different procedures and organizational structures. There are some profound underlying constitutional and functional differences that must be kept in mind when comparing the experience of different countries.

Single-party versus coalition governments

While there are great political differences between these two types of government, the impact on the work of GOs seems to be a matter of degree rather than a matter of substantial difference. It is notable that Canada, Ireland and Spain, amongst others, have moved from single party to coalition government without radical changes in the structure and operation of the central government system. The difference, as far as the impact on GOs is concerned, is manifested mainly in the dynamics of policy coordination. A large part of the GO’s work is the reconciliation of differing policy stances, and the impact of coalition is to complicate that process. This can take various forms including the lengthening and complication of the process of policy clearance between ministries; a tendency to push decisions upwards rather than settle at lower levels; some attenuation of the Prime Minister’s authority; and occasional public crises over key points of political difference.

However, this impact is a matter of degree. Even in a single party government the difficulty of reconciling different policy stances is not easy, since, firstly, there can be ideological divisions within one party and, secondly, most policy disagreements will arise from the differing interests and institutional positions of different ministries, rather than the political affiliation of their ministers. The existence of a coalition may lead to the use of institutional mechanisms for liaison and negotiation between parties: for example, regular meetings of the coalition parties, as have operated at various times in Austria and Belgium; or a coordination unit within the GO of officials appointed by the various parties, as existed at one stage in Sweden. But for the most part, the implications of coalition government for the work of GOs are the intensification and complication of the usual process of inter-ministerial bargaining and brokering that might be expected under a single party government.

3. The structure and staffing of Government Offices

In their structures, Government Offices vary more among countries than other, subject-based ministries. This is not surprising. The structure of the GO must reflect constitutional and legal requirements, must be sensitive to changeable political factors, and must be highly adaptable to the needs and personality of the Prime Minister of the moment. But while organization charts of different Government Offices reveal large variations in their structure, there are fundamental similarities. Like Ministries of Finance, they are principally concerned with coordination of other ministries rather than regulation or service provision. And while structures vary, the functions of GOs are often similar, usually including:

- logistical and technical functions related to sessions of the CoM;
- strategic planning and work planning;
- policy co-ordination, policy advice, and conflict resolution;
- legal functions;

- communications functions;
- some monitoring functions;
- their own internal management functions.

In much the same way, the size and structure of Prime Ministers' personal staffs vary tremendously, but usually consist of:

- logistical support
- political and policy advice
- a speech writing capacity
- communications support

On the face of it, one of the most visible differences between countries is whether they combine PMO and GO in one organization, or separate them. In 18 of the countries responding to the present survey, they are combined; in 10 they are separate, although the PMO is almost always a part of GO for administrative purposes (office services, pensions, etc)¹⁰. But this distinction is probably less important than superficially appears. Even where they are separate organisations, the two bodies find it essential to work closely together (e.g. France and the United Kingdom). And in countries where the two are combined, there is usually (of necessity) a clear division of functions between the two. In practice, what matters is (a) the overall volume and quality of support available to the Prime Minister and CoM, (b) a clear and well-understood differentiation between the PMO function and the GO function (which, admittedly, is not always easy to establish and stabilise) and (c) close working cooperation between those two functions.

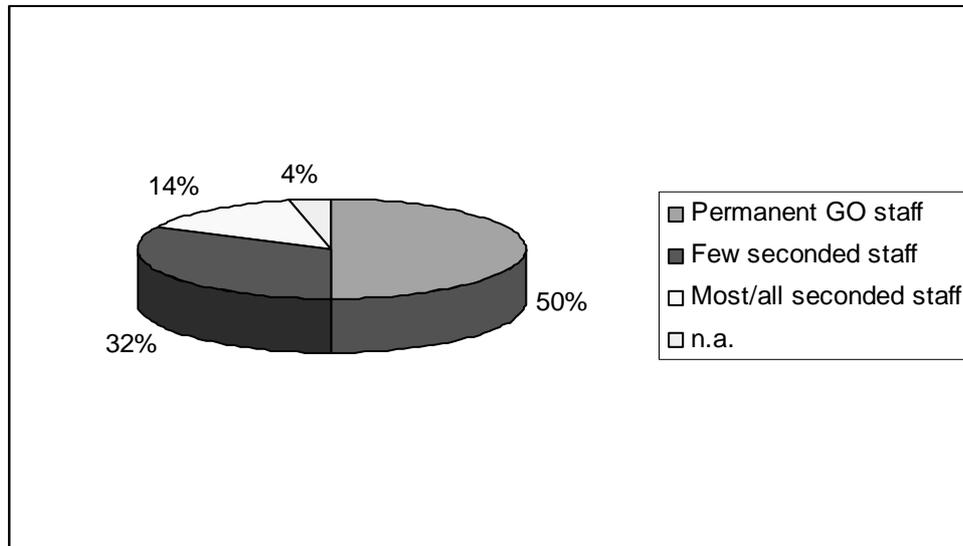
In terms of staffing and leadership, the GO/PMO nexus requires two elements:

- A permanent element, to ensure stability of structure, and continuity of procedure and policy knowledge, so that a change of government does not cause a dislocation of business and a loss of institutional memory; and
- Temporary elements, to allow for some political advice sympathetic to the Prime Minister's views that can be changed with each PM.

In all countries that responded to the survey, except Portugal, the GO is staffed by civil servants. Most of these are permanent GO employees. The practice of seconding GO staff from ministries is not widespread: in 14 of those countries, the GO had a permanent staff; 9 countries seconded a small number of staff in from ministries (although, as in the United Kingdom, the secondees may be concentrated in the more sensitive posts). Only 4 countries seconded most or all of their GO staff from Ministries (see Figure 1). It is worth noting Denmark's reason for its secondment policy: "to ensure a continuously dynamic and changing staff which possess relevant expertise and analytical skills in different policy areas".

¹⁰ In a number of cases where they are separate, the head of the GO is also the head of the PMO, but usually for administrative purposes only.

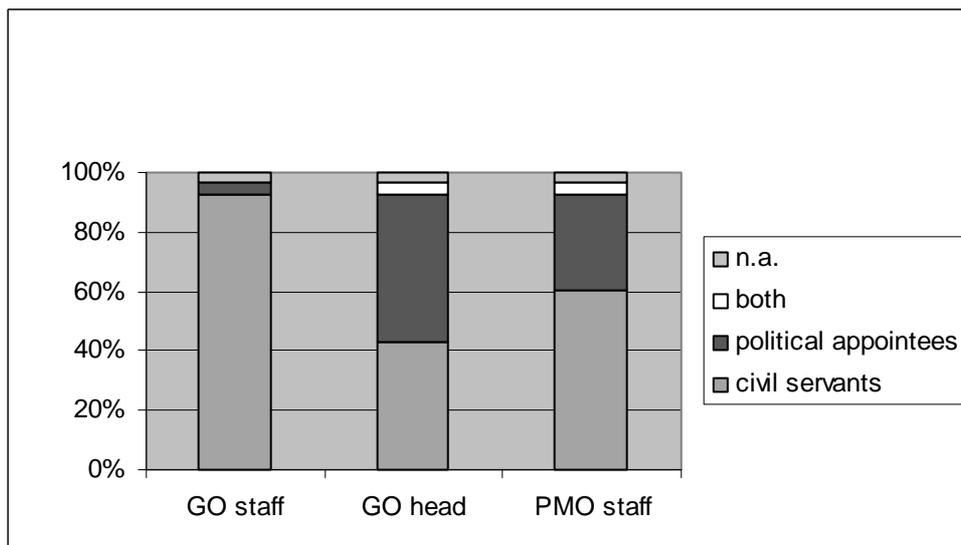
Figure 1 – Working at the Centre: permanent or seconded staff?



Source: OECD

It is hardly surprising that GOs should be staffed mainly by civil servants, since their functions are predominantly organisational and managerial. More surprising is that, civil servants also make up most of the staff in the majority of PMOs (17 countries), and only in 9 countries are the staff primarily political appointees (Belgium has an even mix) (see Figure 2). The figure of 17 contains a number of countries with cabinets ministériels systems, in which civil servants and political appointees may be mixed in the same units. A mixture of both civil servants and temporary political appointees in the PMO obviously provides for a useful element of continuity when the Government changes.

Figure 2 – Working at the Centre: civil servants or political appointees?



Source: OECD

The leadership of the GO, however, is on aggregate more susceptible to political appointment. 14 of the countries surveyed had a GO headed by a political appointee, almost always of Minister rank, who, by definition, would normally be replaced with a change of Prime Minister¹¹. Twelve others were headed by a civil servant, almost always having the rank of highest civil servant, and in 10 of those the incumbent would not normally change when the Prime Minister changed.

4. The Government Office and Policy Coherence

Modern government and administration are complex and multi-dimensional, and must deal with an almost infinite variety of subject matter. At the top political level, they are also required to balance widely varying considerations: economic, diplomatic, moral, legal and other considerations that are often irreconcilable. Fundamentally, however, the key functions of the Council of Ministers – and by extension, of its Government Office – are:

- Setting strategic priorities: which may be done rationally or, more often, by a rather intuitive and incremental process;
- Taking decisions on the big issues of the day: ‘big’ either because they are intrinsically important, or politically flammable, or both;
- Communication: putting across the Government’s case to the public, media and legislature, an increasingly important feature in sophisticated democracies;
- Taking collective responsibility for the performance of the government;
- Ensuring that government policy is coherent: that is, that the financial and staffing resources to implement proposals have been secured, and that the different interests of Ministers have been identified and conciliated.

Of these, the most demanding is ensuring the coherence of policy. As noted by the OECD, the reasons are many and varied, including the need to manage and maximize the effectiveness of limited resources; rapid and continuous change which necessitates flexibility; the interpenetration of international and domestic policy domains which require management of multiple layers of policy-making; and the information explosion that has multiplied the number of actors in the policy arena and which has fostered policy fragmentation.¹²

The OECD brief identified eight basic tools of coherence, with the caveat that they can only be adapted to each national system cautiously and sensitively:

- Commitment by the political leadership is a necessary precondition to coherence, and a tool to enhance it.
- Establishing a strategic policy framework helps ensure that individual policies are consistent with the government's goals and priorities.

¹¹ The exception is Switzerland, where the post of head of government rotates annually between members of the CoM, but the post of Government Secretary comes up for re-appointment only after elections.

¹² OECD (1996) “Building Policy Coherence: Tools and Tensions”, *Public Management Occasional Papers*, no. 12.

- Decision makers need advice based on a clear definition and good analysis of issues, with explicit indications of possible inconsistencies.
- The existence of a central overview and co-ordination capacity is essential to ensure horizontal consistency among policies.
- Mechanisms to anticipate, detect and resolve policy conflicts early in the process help identify inconsistencies and reduce incoherence.
- The decision-making process must be organised to achieve an effective reconciliation between policy priorities and budgetary imperatives.
- Implementation procedures and monitoring mechanisms must be designed to ensure that policies can be adjusted in the light of progress, new information, and changing circumstances.
- An administrative culture that promotes cross-sectoral co-operation and a systematic dialogue between different policy communities contributes to the strengthening of policy coherence.

This puts the GO at centre stage. But there are real practical limits to the extent to which coherence can actually be increased. Moreover, greater coherence is not an absolute end: it should not lead to excessive control, or squeeze flexibility and creativity out of the policy-making system. Coordination is more effective than command and (at least in a non-presidential system) is more compatible with the underlying political dynamics.

5. A comparative study of the dimensions of coordination

The means by which cohesion is achieved is coordination. In this paper, the common functions of the GO in different countries are discussed under eight headings, all of them functions that are carried out by most or all GOs¹³. All of these functions are different aspects of coordination¹⁴:

1. Co-ordination of organisational arrangements in preparation for the Council of Ministers and Ministerial Committees;
2. Co-ordination of the policy content of proposals for the CoM;
3. Co-ordination of legal conformity;
4. Co-ordination of the preparation of Government programme and priorities, and their link to the budget;
5. Co-ordination of communications messages;
6. Co-ordination of the monitoring of Government performance;

¹³ In many cases, the GO shares some of these responsibilities with the PMO, but constant distinctions between the two would complicate and burden this paper unnecessarily, so a reference to GO should be read as including the PMO as well.

¹⁴ These are taken, with grateful acknowledgement, from the SIGMA Paper No.35. See Ben-Gera M. (2004) "Co-ordination at the Centre of Government: The Functions and Organisation of the Government Office. Comparative Analysis of OECD Countries, CEECs and Western Balkan Countries". SIGMA/OECD (2004).

7. Co-ordination of relations with the Parliament; and
8. Co-ordination of specific horizontal strategic priorities.

These functions are to be found in most GOs. However, an important organisational point is that many GOs (at least 12 of the 28 surveyed) combine several of these functions in one unit. For example, in Spain the same group of staff are responsible for policy analysis and coordination, strategic issues, and work planning. In Hungary, the 51 staff of the 'Referatura' of the Prime Minister's office combine responsibility for preparing items for the CoM, policy analysis, legal verification, work planning monitoring implementation and relations with Parliament. This approach obviously makes sense, since the same group of staff can follow the same issue through all stages of the process, and it encourages an integrated approach to policy-making and implementation. For simple managerial reasons, however, most GOs find it necessary to divide this group of staff into smaller units, and this is usually done on a subject area basis. This can lead variously to simple structures – such as the Danish PMO's division into a department of International Affairs and Defence and a Department of Domestic Affairs – or to complex ones, such as the numerous 'mirror units' in the German Federal Chancellery that shadow line ministries.

5.1 *Co-ordinating organisational preparations for the CoM and other Ministerial committees*

This is the most fundamental task of GOs. Much of it is mundane and organisational: scheduling meetings, setting deadlines, preparing agenda, circulating papers. However, competent logistics and orderly procedures are an essential precondition of good CoM decision-making.

This area of work highlights two issues crucial to the role of a GO.

The authority of the GO

The first is the authority of the Government Secretary and his staff to speak in the name of the Prime Minister and Ministers. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the interminable battle that all GOs fight to enforce deadlines for the submission and circulation of papers for the CoM. Most countries require that materials be circulated to Ministers between 2 and 7 days before the CoM meeting (or the Ministerial Committee that is to consider the issue). Only five countries set no deadline at all, and only Switzerland requires longer (7 to 21 days, depending on the type of business). Over half the countries surveyed (16 countries) confirmed that they were able to enforce these deadlines with no exceptions, but 2 reported some exceptions, and as many as 10 reported many exceptions¹⁵. A parallel but less prevalent problem is what is known in Canada as 'walk-on' items: items that are brought to the CoM or one of its committees by a Minister without going through the normal preliminary procedures of submitting the item to the GO for review and scheduling. Again, this phenomenon is known to all CoM systems, but most OECD countries seem to have checked it effectively: only 4 countries reported that this was a common problem, as opposed to 10 who said it happened rarely and 4 who said it never happened¹⁶.

The authority of GOs is also tested in the area of vetting proposals submitted to the Government to ensure that proper procedures have been followed. Virtually all countries responding to the survey required the GO to check not only that procedural requirements had been met, especially whether all ministries

¹⁵ There was no particular logical pattern to these responses: many exceptions were reported in Switzerland, which requires documents to be submitted between 7 and 21 days in advance depending on their nature, as well as in countries that require circulation only 1 or 2 days in advance (Belgium, Finland, Ireland and Sweden).

¹⁶ There is no particular correlation between the prevalence of 'walk-ons' and the breaching of deadlines. Both are a problem in Belgium, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic; whereas the Netherlands enforce deadlines without exceptions yet has a problem with 'walk-ons'. But one can speculate that enforcing deadlines encourages 'walk-ons', and vice versa, so this line of analysis is inconclusive.

affected by a proposal have been consulted, and to refer the paper back to the Ministry if this is not so.¹⁷ Most also require the GO to check the substance of the proposal (e.g. that it makes sense, is well justified, and is in line with the Government's programme and priorities) although only two-thirds of responding countries empower the GO to refer a proposal back to the line ministry on the ground of inadequate substance, the others mostly allowing the GO only to flag the omission when the paper goes before Ministers.

The point regarding the GO's authority is that it is only as strong as the Prime Minister's backing for his or her Government Secretary. Regularly ministers will short-circuit the rules by breaching deadlines and circulating inadequately prepared proposals, and when the GO seeks to restrain them, the Minister will appeal over the Government Secretary's head to the Prime Minister, who in most countries has the discretion to waive the rules, usually in cases of urgency.¹⁸ Inevitably, the political temptation is for the Prime Minister to let the Minister to get away with it, but each time a minister breaks the rules, other ministers are encouraged to imitate him. The Government Secretary has to persuade the Prime Minister that allowing the rules to be breached is, in the long-term, counter-productive for both the quality of decision-making and the Prime Minister's own authority. This battle for the enforcement of the rules is interminable.

The GO's role in managing business: proactive or reactive?

The second issue is the extent to which the GO takes an active, as opposed to reactive, role in planning the agenda of the CoM. In some countries, such as Austria and Finland, the CoM agenda is simply a compilation of proposals that arrive from Ministries by a certain date. In other countries, the GO is required to take a more active role in planning and scheduling the flow of business. Around half of countries responding to the survey said there was a weekly meeting of state secretaries or other senior officials to discuss and finalise the agenda for the next CoM (see section 5.2 below)

Other countries rely more on the staff of the GO, which seems to have the advantage of allowing them to plan further ahead and to exercise more purposive control of the agenda in the interests of overall cohesion. In France, for example, an elaborate system allows the agenda to be derived from the government's programme of work, which is usually prepared every semester by the Prime Minister's Cabinet (PMO), and the GO (the Secretariat General of the Government). Draft agenda for the eight subsequent meetings of the Council of Ministers are drawn up on Friday mornings in two successive meetings. The first one is internal to the GO; the second is a joint meeting of the PMO and the GO. In the United Kingdom, where virtually all decisions are taken by an extensive network of ministerial committees, a schedule and draft agenda for their meetings for the following three weeks is updated each week, and a more tentative list of projected business for three months ahead is also prepared periodically.

5.2 Co-coordinating the policy content of proposals for the CoM

In almost all countries participating in this survey, the initiative in policy innovation usually comes from line ministries.¹⁹ Ministries may be reacting to impulses from elsewhere (the Government programme, the coalition agreement, an initiative by the Prime Minister, a request for action by the CoM)

¹⁷ Most governments specify a format that documents submitted to the CoM should take, including certain issues (financial, regulatory, legal, etc) that it must contain. For examples, see the templates to be found in the websites of Australia's Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Ireland's Department of the Taoiseach.

¹⁸ One technical device that may discourage such attempts is a formalization of the exceptions procedure. For instance, Ireland's 'Cabinet Handbook' requires the Minister to submit a formal written Certificate of Urgency explaining why normal procedures must be cut short.

¹⁹ The picture is presumably different in presidential countries.

but even in those cases the minister has considerable discretion in determining the nature, scope and timing of the action. The 'right of initiative' (as it is called within the institutions of the EU) resides principally with the individual minister. Consequently, the coordinative function of the GO is to a large extent reactive.

Even if its participation is mainly reactive, the GO has the duty to ensure that policy has been adequately coordinated, that is:

- To ensure that sectoral and cross-sectoral issues have been considered and addressed from all aspects;
- To ensure that the analysis and analytical material (fiscal, economic, social, environmental, etc.) that underpin proposals from Ministries are of good standard;
- To ensure that the proposals from Ministers are in line with the Government strategic and budget priorities;
- To ensure that disagreements between Ministries over materials submitted to the Government, are resolved or minimised prior to sessions of CoM; and
- To ensure that the Prime Minister and the Chairs of Ministerial committees are briefed on issues reaching the committees and the CoM for decision.

In most cases, the GO's involvement will be limited to reviewing proposals that are submitted to the Government, and if need be asking the responsible ministry to carry out more work. But when issues are particularly complex, important, sensitive or affect a large number of agencies, the GO may act to establish a mechanism, such as an inter-ministry committee of civil servants, to ensure that ministries work collectively to concert their action.

The ability of the GO to coordinate policy effectively relies upon a number of factors.

a. The degree to which line ministries accept as legitimate an activist GO role in policy issues

To a large extent this is a reflection of the Prime Minister's own authority in the policy sphere. In countries such as Canada, Germany, New Zealand and Spain the right of the Prime Minister to provide leadership in policy matters is accepted as a legitimate, even desirable part of the political culture; so, consequently, is an activist role for the GO. In contrast, in Finland and the Netherlands, where the Prime Minister's role is more restricted, the Government Office has correspondingly less leverage over line ministries.

b. GO staff need a well developed network of contacts with ministries

This is essential for them to get early warning of potentially difficult or complex issues that will come to the CoM. Once alerted to the issue, they can track its development and may be able to attend meetings of preparatory Working Groups, or discuss issues informally with line ministry staff preparing concept papers or early drafts. They can suggest early inter-ministerial meetings of experts to discuss issues before they are decided, or to offer additional ideas about sources of information and international experience.

In part, the ability of GO staff to do this depends on the GO's remit and authority in the field of policy development, as discussed above. However, one organizational facet that favours the development of a good working relationship with ministries is the organisation of GO staff on a subject basis, as mentioned

above, so that some specialize in social matters, others in economic issues, others in foreign affairs, and so on. The use of secondments within the GO is another device that can facilitate networks of contacts.

c. Effective dispute resolution mechanisms

In every country, some mechanism is required for resolving inter-ministerial conflicts over policy issues in advance of final decision by the CoM. Managing these mechanisms are one of the key functions of a GO. The ability to bring an issue before one of these fora is one of the GO's most important tools for ensuring policy coherence.

These mechanisms tend to take one of four forms:

- Arbitration at official level led by the GO. The classical example of this is the French system of 'arbitrage', under which the GO convenes a meeting of members from the 'cabinets' of the ministers affected. The GO provides the secretariat to the meeting. A member of the PMO takes the chair and, after a discussion of the matters in conflict, issues a decision that is effectively binding on all parties.
- A regular meeting of senior officials from Ministries. As mentioned above, many countries hold such meetings to plan the agenda of forthcoming CoM meetings. Often, this forum is also used for resolving policy disagreements, as a final coordination stage before the consideration of items by the CoM. Such meetings are held half of the 28 countries responding to the survey. Almost always they are chaired by the Government Secretary. Usually they are meetings of State Secretaries (as in Finland, Germany, Norway and Spain, amongst others); in Italy, there is a meeting of heads of cabinets and/or legal departments.²⁰ It is clear that, in order to be effective devices for narrowing the differences between ministries, the business coming before them must be well-prepared by GO staff and the Government Secretary needs to be well briefed.
- *Ad hoc* meetings of civil servants. In Canada, for example, such meetings are widely used. They are usually chaired by a member of the GO who has the advantage of acting as "honest broker" since they do not represent any one Ministry interest, but only the collective responsibility of the Government. This latter type of meeting, however, tends to be less definitive than the French arbitration system in the sense that, if consensus cannot be reached, the matter is referred up to a Ministerial Committee for resolution. If this happens, at the least the meeting of officials will have served to define precisely the points of issue in contention, and perhaps to narrow the gap between ministries to some extent.

In countries with a system of 'cabinets ministériels' these bodies provide a less formal network through which such discussions are organised. In some countries, including Belgium and Portugal, such networks have at certain times been very influential.

- Ministerial committees. Many countries make use of Ministerial committees to discuss issues in depth and resolve final conflicts prior to the full meeting of the CoM. These exist in 19 out of the 24 countries who responded to this question, while 10 countries reported that they are used

²⁰

A weekly meeting of state secretaries has proved a popular model in Central and Eastern Europe, being adopted in Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania and Macedonia. One reason for this may be that in Eastern Europe, coordination between ministries is often difficult and authority often is not delegated to civil servants to reach compromises on behalf of their ministers. Consequently decisions tend to be referred upwards, and the State Secretaries' meeting saves the CoM from being completely overwhelmed with small disputes.

systematically as ‘filter’ mechanisms: that is, that all items must first go to a Ministerial committee before consideration by the CoM. In these countries, the common arrangement is to have ‘standing’ committees organized on a sectoral basis. For example, New Zealand has a network of committees, each meeting every week or two weeks, covering respectively strategic policy issues; economic development; social development; legislation; government expenditure; public appointments; external relations and defence; and domestic and external security.

Alternatively, committees can be established *ad hoc*. Finland, for example, uses standing committees only in the spheres of economic, European and foreign affairs, and otherwise relies on *ad hoc* committees as needed.

These devices are not mutually exclusive. Many European countries require issues to go to a meeting of State Secretaries, and then to a Ministerial Committee, before going to the CoM. An approach common in Commonwealth model countries is for a committee of civil servants to consider an issue before it goes to a Ministerial committee, and then to the CoM. Whatever the procedure adopted, the aim is to reconcile differences between ministries or, if that cannot be done, at least to narrow the areas of disagreement and to clarify the points at issue, in order to allow a well-focused debate at the CoM.

In many countries, it is at this intermediate level that most of the high-level policy coordination is carried out. In France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, amongst others, the expectation is that all disagreements should be resolved at the level of ministerial committees and that matters should come to the CoM only to be reported and noted.

d. Briefing the Prime Minister or Committee chair

A very useful tool for ensuring that the GO efforts at policy coordination influence the outcome of CoM discussions is the preparation of a briefing note for the Chair of the CoM (normally the Prime Minister). The survey showed that such notes are prepared in 17 countries for all items, in 5 other countries for some items while 6 countries prepare no such notes. Such notes allow the GO to inform the Chair of outstanding issues or unresolved conflicts between Ministries that might need special attention at the session. In 11 countries they usually (and in 7 countries sometimes) include in the note advice on the handling of the item at the meeting (in 2 countries this is never done).

The fact that the GO is briefing the Chair before the session also gives the GO a certain status in the system, and some informal authority to push for better information and to resolve conflicts. If Ministries know that the Chair might be briefed that the item is not ready for the CoM, they might make an extra effort to fix the problems and avoid a “negative” brief.

5.3 Verifying legal conformity

A third dimension of coordination, but one in which only some GOs are engaged, is the verification of legal conformity. For obvious reasons, this function is more commonly found in the GOs of ‘quasi-legislative’ systems, where proposals from ministries are usually checked for conformity with the Constitution, conformity with other laws and regulations (including where applicable those of the EU), and conformity with the national legal drafting style. Institutional arrangements vary between quasi-legislative systems. In 17 countries responding to the survey there is a legal verification unit in the GO, although responsibility may be shared with a Ministry of Justice or, as France, Poland and the Czech Republic, with a semi-autonomous legislative council. In ‘quasi-legislative’ systems, such units usually have high quality staff whose expertise is much respected and who have considerable status within the decision-making system. It is not unusual for the head of such a unit to attend all meetings of the CoM.

5.4 *Coordinating preparation of the Government programme and its fit with the budget*

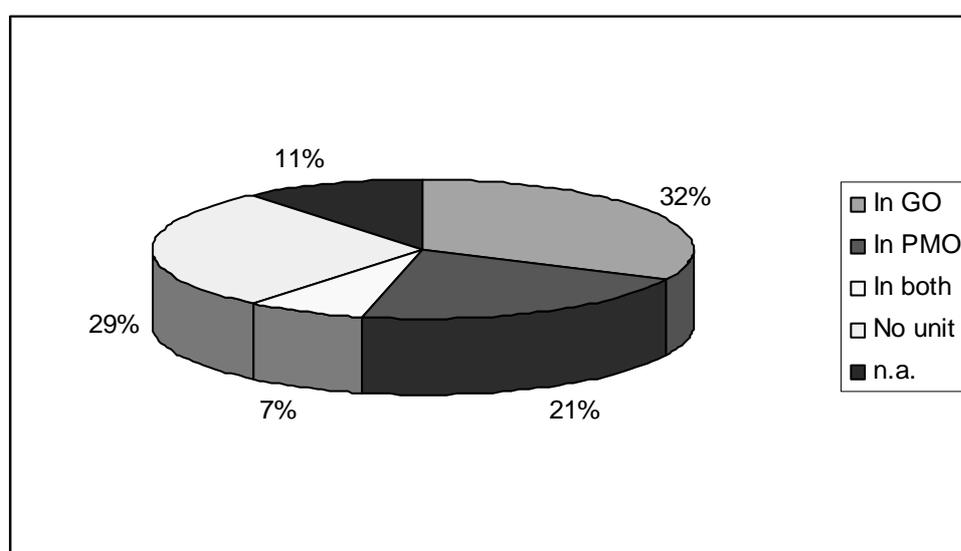
These are quintessential ‘centre of government’ responsibilities. As noted by the OECD report mentioned above (see section 4), a strategic framework is a central tool for achieving policy coherence. Parliamentary democracies commonly require the government to submit a programme to parliament, but this is usually pitched at a general level and needs to be translated into more detailed plans of action, and to be linked to resource allocation.

Generally, the role of GO with respect to strategic planning is:

- To ensure that the government’s deliberations on its strategic priorities take place with the benefit of a broad assessment of the overall economic, political and social situation;
- To ensure that the strategic priorities are harmonised with other strategic documents of the government, such as economic and fiscal strategies, and other key policy and reform strategies;
- To ensure that the budget preparation process takes account of, and reflects, strategic priorities;
- To ensure that ministry work plans reflect the government’s strategic priorities;
- To ensure that the Prime Minister is regularly briefed on new developments affecting the strategic priorities and annual work plan, and possible responses or adjustments where warranted.

In the present survey, some two-thirds of the country responses identified this as a function carried out at the centre of government: in 9 countries it was assigned to the GO and in 6 to the PMO (in two countries, the responsibility was shared by both institutions). Only 8 said there was no such responsibility at the centre of government (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Strategic planning units: where are they located?



Source: OECD

However, defining the capacity of GOs in this area is not easy. First, what respondents mean by ‘strategy’ seems to vary considerably. Second, as noted above, in a number of countries, work on strategic

issues is carried out by staff also responsible for other GO functions; a sensible arrangement, but which makes it difficult to isolate the 'strategic element'.

That being said, 7 countries said they had 10 or fewer staff working on strategic issues, and 3 countries had between 11 and 20 such staff. A small number of countries stated that they had specific units dedicated to strategy issues. These include:

- The 4 member Department of Analysis and Planning of the Slovak Republic's GO
- A 'strategy cell' of 18 staff in Belgium's PMO
- A Strategy Unit in the UK Cabinet Office
- An independent Government centre for Strategic Studies in Poland, outside the GO/PMO nexus but reporting to the Prime Minister.
- Turkey's State Planning Organisation, which employs 337 staff.

This is an area of work that preoccupies many OECD Government Secretaries, especially given its potential importance for the rational allocation of scarce budget resources. However, while there are interesting experiments in various OECD member countries, little comparative data is currently available.

Two-thirds of the respondents also reported that they undertook some form of planning of the Government's overall work programme. (8 said they did not). Typically this happens on an annual basis, but its scope varies considerably, from a plan covering all items that Ministries intend to submit to the CoM, to a plan that covers only certain types of item e.g. those requiring legislation. This is usually seen as an organisational task rather than a political one, and as such is usually assigned to the GO (in 11 countries) rather than the PMO (2 countries) while in 4 countries the responsibility is shared. It is not clear, however, to what extent this is a reactive process – simply compiling the proposals submitted by ministries – as opposed to a dynamic process, in which the GO plays an active role in prioritizing proposed actions, and reconciling them to each other, to the Government's strategic aims and to available resources (both budgetary and parliamentary time).

5.5 *Co-ordinating of communications messages*

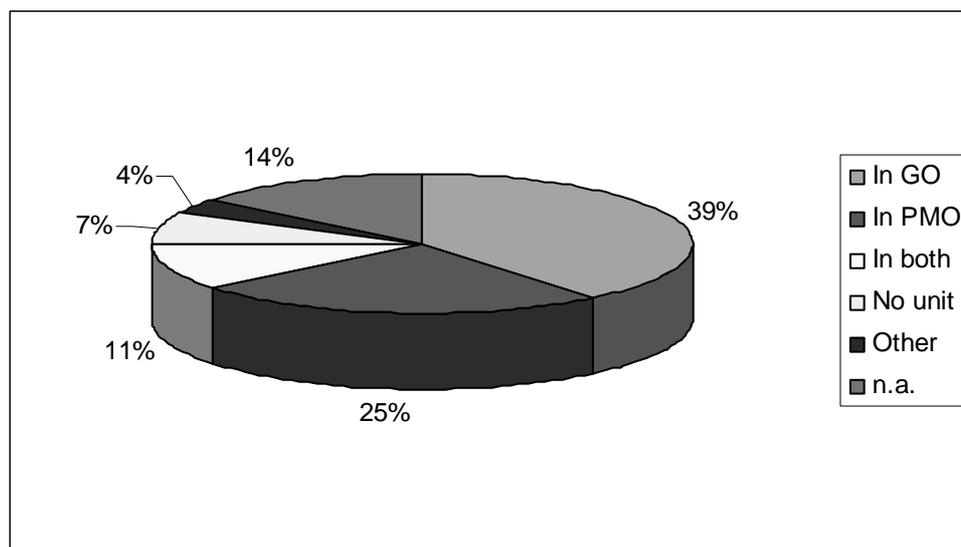
It is an almost universal trend in democracies to strengthen the link between policy-making and public communication. In part, this is a reaction to a more active and omnipresent media; in part a reaction to public and political expectations. But from the point of view of policy effectiveness, governments have also realized that they have an interest in communicating certain messages in order to increase the popularity and acceptability of their policies.

While all ministers and ministries will insist on having their own communications capability, virtually all OECD governments also place an overall responsibility for communications at the centre of Government. First, there is a need for someone to speak on behalf of the Government as a whole – for example, many Governments issue public statements after the weekly CoM meeting. Second, the Prime Minister is expected to speak on behalf of the Government collectively, and needs staff support for this. Third, there is a need to ensure that the information provided by one Ministry is consistent with information issued by others, that initiatives are synchronised and that announcements are timed to maximise their impact.

Common mechanisms used for coordinating communications are: a requirement that every proposal submitted to the CoM should include a section proposing how the decision should be communicated to the public; weekly meetings of the communications advisers of Ministers, chaired by the Government Spokesperson; a weekly item on communications in the CoM meeting; and a system within the GO for strategic communications planning.

All countries in the survey place the responsibility for managing these systems at the centre of Government, except Iceland and Luxembourg (whose GO operations are small-scale for obvious reasons). Of these, 11 countries place them in the GO, 7 in the PMO, and 3 countries have a public information capacity in both (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 –Communications units: where are they located?



Source: OECD

This is usually treated as a distinct function, in a separate unit, staffed by a distinct cadre of press officers. The number of staff employed in these units varies enormously: 10 countries have fewer than 10 staff, 4 countries have between 11 and 20, and a few countries have large offices: 24 staff in Spain, 28 in Hungary, 36 in Portugal, and 44 in Austria. The United Kingdom has by far the largest press operation, with 38 staff in the GO and 62 in the PMO, although it should be noted that the size of the British PMO press office has become the subject of some criticism.

Despite the importance that the ministers and the public attach to this function, it is an under-explored area. There are at least five difficult issues:

- Government communications almost always walk the fine line between information and propaganda. A complex distinction must be made between “public information” and “government communications”. The former is concerned with the informing the public, in the sense that the government as a democratic institution has a duty to keep the public informed about its actions. This should be broadly politically neutral. The latter is concerned frankly with influencing the public, and is politically committed: it is concerned with the government’s political right to explain, to justify, and even to “sell” its policies and legislation to the public. The distinction is not always easy to maintain.

- Linked to this is the question: to what extent should the communications function of the GO/PMO be staffed by political appointees and to what extent by civil servants? What should the relationship, and the boundary of responsibility, be between the two?
- How large should this function be allowed to grow? Given the development of 24-hour, global media and the pressure on ministers to provide instant responses to events, the demand for media support for ministers is, potentially, vast.
- Is there a danger that issues of public communication will overshadow the substance of policy: in other words, that policy will be driven by the headlines that its announcement will create rather than by its intrinsic merits?
- How to cope with the sheer volume of correspondence – by mail and email – that many GOs now receive, often addressed from citizens or organisations to the Prime Minister?

5.6 *Co-ordination of the monitoring of Government performance*

The implementation of government decisions and the monitoring of results are quintessentially the responsibility of individual ministers. However, the government collectively, and especially the Prime Minister personally, have a responsibility (constitutional, legal, or by convention) for both individual and collective performance.

Just under half of the countries responding to the survey (12 countries) reported having a capacity for monitoring policy implementation in their GO, 2 had a capacity in the PMO and 3 had some capacity in both. Only 8 reported having no such capacity. However, the survey revealed only 4 units solely dedicated to monitoring: in most countries this function is covered by units also covering policy analysis, strategic work, etc, which makes it difficult to establish the extent and nature of existing monitoring arrangements in OECD GOs. One can, however, make the following conjectures:

- As an organizational principle, it makes good sense to combine (as many countries have done) responsibility for monitoring decisions with responsibility managing issues through their passage throughout the government's decision-making process. This makes for continuity. However, the potential drawback is that monitoring issues will be sidelined in the pressure of other day-to-day business.
- There is almost certainly a great variation in the scope of different GOs' monitoring operations. These probably vary from detailed tracing of all government decisions to a more limited check whether key items in the legislative programme have been passed. The very names of the four free-standing monitoring units above suggest a diversity of practice: the 'Control Section' of the Slovak Republic's PMO, a planning and monitoring unit in Italy's GO, the Policy Evaluation and Analysis Unit in Korea's Office for Government Policy Coordination, and the Cabinet Implementation Unit in Australia.
- Almost certainly some GOs focus on 'formal' implementation - was the law on pollution passed? – while others engage in checking 'real' implementation – was the law enforced effectively? The difference is considerable.
- The survey revealed little in the way of capacities for policy evaluation in GOs, except for the Policy Evaluation and Analysis Unit in Korea.

5.7 *Coordination of relations with Parliament*

It is customary for the centre of government to be responsible for managing and coordinating the relationship with Parliament, on behalf of the Government, especially the planning and scheduling of government legislation. This is a function usually seen as more managerial than political, and consequently usually vested in the GO (14 countries) rather than the PMO (3 countries – with 2 countries dividing the role, between GO and PMO). Usually such units are small: Spain, the UK and Hungary are unusual in having staffs of more than 30 devoted to this.

5.8 *Co-ordination of specific horizontal strategic priorities (EI, PAR)*

Almost all Government Offices include some additional functions, whereby they perform tasks that are not fundamental to their core responsibilities in managing the decision-making system on behalf of the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. These tend to be of three types:

a. cross-cutting issues of high strategic priority

Common examples of this are:

- In federal states such as Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Austria, the management and coordination of the relations with the constituent governments;
- In European Union member states, the coordination of EU business. However, the pattern of responsibility varies greatly from country to country, and the tendency may be to move responsibility away from the centre of government. In 4 countries, the main locus of coordination seems to be in the GO or PMO; in 5 it is shared between the GO/PMO and another ministry (Foreign Affairs or a separate Ministry of European Affairs), and in 14 countries the function is located primarily in another ministry;
- Public administration reform: this function appears in recent years to have become more commonly attached to the centre of government: 4 countries place this function in the PMO, and 6 in the GO; while 2 share it between the GO and a line ministry. Having said that, 9 countries leave this function with another body (typically a Ministry of Public Services or Ministry of the Interior) and two countries (Greece and the Slovak Republic) report having no locus for this function.

b. high-profile issues temporarily located in the GO

Often functions that might more logically be located in ministries are located temporarily in the GO, because the Government wants to give (or be perceived as giving) them high-level treatment. These include the office to deal with the results of the floods in Poland, the Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives in the US, offices for a range of equality issues in the Czech Republic, the Bioethics Commission in Greece, and units for regulatory impact and public service delivery in the United Kingdom.

c. issues unique to a particular country

Examples include units that deal with Greenland and the Faeroe Islands in Denmark, bi-cultural institutions in Belgium, Nordic cooperation in Iceland, and royal matters in Japan, the Netherlands and Spain.

At previous annual meetings of OECD Government Secretaries, the point has been made that it is unwise to allow too many 'additional' functions to accumulate at the center of government. To be

effective, the GO needs to be small; as it grows, it risks losing flexibility and becoming unwieldy. This is why Hungary (in 1999) and Italy (in 2000-1) deliberately undertook reviews of their GOs and abolished or relocated a number of functions that had accumulated there. In recent years Slovenia and Poland have done the same, although perhaps on a smaller scale. This periodic ‘spring cleaning’ of the centre of government seems to be a valuable exercise that all countries should consider undertaking on occasion.

6. Key challenges

What key challenges for Government Secretaries emerge from this analysis?

- a. **Strategic thinking.** There is a widespread feeling that Governments need to act ‘more strategically’, and there are a number of interesting experiments in OECD countries mentioned in this paper. But what is meant by ‘Government strategy’? How can Governments act strategically and, indeed, to what extent can they do so? How can strategy be linked to resource allocation?
- b. **Political appointees:** this is a live issue in many countries. In what capacities should they be employed, and for what purposes? What should the demarcation of responsibilities be between them and civil servants?
- c. **Communications:** there is almost universal demand for better government communications. How large should this function be allowed to grow in response to demands from the media, the public and politicians themselves? How tenable is the conventional distinction between (apolitical) “public information” and (political) “government communications”?
- d. **Implementation:** As pressure grows to demonstrate the effectiveness of government actions, what is the optimal role of the GO in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of Government decisions, without undermining the primary responsibility of line ministries for implementation?
- e. **The GO as guardian of collegiate practices.** In an era in which Prime Ministers appear to be becoming more dominant, to what extent can and should the GO constitute itself the guardian of more traditional collegial decision-making practices?
- f. **GO staffing and organisation.** Are there optimal ways of organizing and staffing GOs? Is secondment of staff from ministries a more effective approach than having a permanent GO staff? Does organising staff by policy areas, so that one group of staff handle all aspects of an issue (including strategic implications and implementation) generate better policy coherence?

On a broader canvas, there are other issues not treated in this paper that are important to the work of GOs and that have been examined at past meetings of the OECD network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government (CoG) at their annual meetings. These include issues related to “Public Sector Modernisation: The Role of the Central Agencies” considered in 2003, or to the challenges of “Using new tools for decision-making: Impacts on Information, Communication and Organization” to be considered at the 2004 annual meeting. These, and the issues raised in this paper, point to a continuing need to exchange good practice between countries in order to meet the challenges of policy-making in an ever more complex environment.