

A Man and an Institution: Sir Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Custody of Cabinet Secrecy

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A Man and an Institution is in reality three books combined into one. It is, first, a contribution to a biography of Sir Maurice Hankey, the first Cabinet Secretary; second, a history of the origins of the Cabinet Office and its development until Hankey's retirement in 1938; and third, an account of how the Cabinet Office came to be the guardian of official secrecy. Of these three topics, it is primarily the second that makes the book of continuing and permanent value to the constitutional historian.

The biography of Hankey is in a sense redundant. It had already been written by the time *A Man and an Institution* was published, in three magisterial volumes by Stephen Roskill, published between 1970 and 1974, and also in Hankey's own memoirs.⁽¹⁾ There was really no need to go over the same ground again. The third topic, that of the development of the doctrine of official secrecy, is dominated by an account, in the last chapter of the book, of the 'trial' of the diaries of Richard Crossman, and a plea for the relaxation of the doctrine. Much of this discussion has now been made redundant by the Freedom of Information Act, 2000. It was perhaps a mistake of judgment to include this topic in an analysis of the Cabinet Office.⁽²⁾

The account given of the history of the Cabinet Office, however, is of major importance, and it remains of considerable relevance, not only for the historian but also for the contemporary analyst of the machinery of government. Naylor brings out well the fundamental conflict that has always been implicit in the role of the Cabinet Secretary. For the Cabinet Secretary is, at one and the same time, both a servant of the Cabinet and an adviser to the Prime Minister.

'The Cabinet Secretariat', Lloyd George told the House of Commons in June 1922, 'has nothing whatever to

do with any question of policy. It is purely a recording machine' (p. 87). That, no doubt, was how the office was understood when it was established in 1916. The primary purpose of the Secretariat was to keep an accurate record of Cabinet decisions and of the decisions of Cabinet committees – the function of the Cabinet Secretary was to act as the Cabinet's memory and as a guardian of constitutional conventions; he had also to ensure that these decisions were in fact implemented by departments. This was a matter of some difficulty in the Lloyd George War Cabinet, since it comprised just five members, only one of whom, Bonar Law, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was a departmental minister. The ministerial head of every other department was outside the Cabinet, though summoned to the War Cabinet whenever matters of concern to his particular department were being considered. Where departmental disputes arose, it would be for the Cabinet Secretary to arbitrate them. The Cabinet Secretary, therefore, helped to ensure that the collective machinery of Cabinet government worked effectively. His co-ordinating role helped to make collective responsibility a reality. The role which he assumed as guardian of Cabinet secrecy was also intended to strengthen collective responsibility by ensuring that the position taken by individual ministers before final decisions were reached remained private.

The Cabinet Secretariat was established at the same time as the establishment of another new organisation, a private office for the Prime Minister, the so-called 'Garden Suburb', with which the Cabinet Office was often confused. The Garden Suburb, however, worked for the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Office for the Cabinet. But the Lloyd George regime seemed, in the eyes of its critics, to become progressively more presidential and authoritarian, and the Suburb was blamed for this development. It was, accordingly, abolished by Lloyd George's successor, Bonar Law, when the Lloyd George government fell in 1922 – although, as Naylor points out (p. 130), J. C. C. Davidson, as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in the first Baldwin administration, from 1923 to 1924, performed much the same function for Baldwin as the Suburb had for Lloyd George. Naylor quotes Baldwin's biographers as saying that Davidson's 'office at the Duchy of Lancaster was very much Baldwin's own Garden Suburb'.⁽³⁾ But Baldwin preferred that the function be performed by a minister rather than by what would now be called special advisers.

By contrast with the Garden Suburb, the Cabinet Office proved to be a permanent innovation in British government. But, because the two organisations were set up at the same time, and because the Garden Suburb had been avowedly established to strengthen the position of the Prime Minister, many assumed that the Cabinet Office was set up for the same reason. *A Man and an Institution* shows that this view needs considerable qualification. The purpose of establishing the Cabinet Office was to strengthen Cabinet government, not primarily to strengthen the Prime Minister. Before the establishment of the Secretariat, a minister had to secure the consent of the Prime Minister to bring a memorandum to cabinet. The only record kept of Cabinet proceedings was the letter written by the Prime Minister to the sovereign, after each Cabinet meeting, but this letter was not normally seen by any other minister. Even the king did not feel properly informed. George V told Hankey 'several times that until he received the Cabinet Minutes and papers ... he had never been fully informed of what was going on' (p. 19). Bonar Law, when he joined the Asquith coalition government in 1915, told the press magnate, Lord Riddell, 'that he was astonished at the lack of method, the absence of any agenda or minutes. He told Asquith this. The latter said that everyone who joined the Cabinet made the same observation, but speedily became reconciled to the method of doing business and saw its advantage for the special purposes' (p. 11). Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary and mistress, wrote that, at the last Cabinet before Asquith's resignation in 1916, 'There are three different versions, so Ministers said, of what had been the decision upon a debate (in the Cabinet) on the Air Ministry. And nothing was definitely decided' (p. 320). Naylor concludes that the Asquith Cabinet 'disintegrated, a victim of its own institutional malaise rather than a political conspiracy engineered by Lloyd George' (p. 13). Not the least of the virtues of *A Man and an Institution*, is that it gives an analysis of the collapse of the Asquith government that has more credibility than crude accounts which see this collapse as being entirely the result of a plot on the part of Lloyd George.

From one point of view, then, the Cabinet Secretariat constitutionalised, as it were, the role of the Prime Minister. Henceforth, memoranda came to the Cabinet via the Secretariat rather than the Prime Minister. Cabinet conclusions were sent to departments by the Secretariat, not by the Prime Minister. To fulfil this

constitutional role, the Secretariat had to be accepted as a neutral arbiter. Were it instead to appear to be projecting a view of its own, or the view of the Prime Minister, its neutrality would be compromised. The Cabinet Secretariat, unlike the Garden Suburb, could not be seen as *parti pris*.

But, from the beginning, the Cabinet Secretariat had more than a secretarial and coordinating role. The Cabinet Secretary rapidly became also an influential source of advice to the Prime Minister, perhaps even a Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister, helping to fill a hole at the centre of British government, the lack of an institutional base for the head of the executive. The theory was that the Cabinet Secretary should serve the Prime Minister only in his capacity as a member of the Cabinet, and not in his capacity as head of the government. He was to serve the Prime Minister only in his capacity as chairman of a collective body. But a distinction of this sort seems somewhat artificial, and it is difficult to see how one could erect a Chinese wall between the various capacities or roles of the Prime Minister. Certainly, neither Hankey nor his successors ever seem to have done so. There is no recorded instance of a Cabinet Secretary refusing to advise the Prime Minister on any matter connected with his functions as head of the government.

Hankey himself was always far more than a 'recording machine'. He was an authority, or regarded himself as an authority, on defence matters. He had strong views of his own on the Great War, views shared on the whole by Lloyd George. Both Hankey and Lloyd George were 'Easterners' believing that the war could most easily be won, not by frontal assault, but by a flank attack so as to undermine what Churchill, during the Second World War, was to call 'the soft underbelly' of Germany. Indeed, it seems to have been Hankey who first conceived the idea of the ill-fated Dardanelles expedition. He seems also to have been the first to propose the convoy system. During the inter-war years, Hankey argued strongly against disarmament and in favour of strong imperial defence, with a particular emphasis on the role of the navy. In 1927, he went so far as to threaten to resign if 'freedom of the seas' became a reality, so ending the possibility of Britain imposing an economic blockade upon Germany, though Tom Jones told Baldwin that 'it seemed to me a wrong conception of a Civil Servant's function to threaten resignation on policy'. Hankey's views, however, became widely known – indeed he felt so strongly that he violated the then rule that the Cabinet Secretary 'never communicates with the press in any shape or form' (pp. 173–4, 177), giving an unattributable interview to a journalist on the *Times*, which resulted in a favourable leader from the newspaper. In 1937, Hankey, in conjunction with Sir Thomas Inskip, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, masterminded the switch from heavy bombers to fighters, a switch which was to save Britain in the desperate days of 1940. Hankey, then, held strong views on policy, views, views which he did not hesitate to impress upon successive Prime Ministers. Indeed, he went even further in his role as policy adviser, treading a path which his successors avoided, since he wrote speeches, not only for Lloyd George, but also, on occasion, for Lloyd George's ministers, and, in particular, for the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon.

Hankey's deputy during the 1920s, Tom Jones, went further still, involving himself in electioneering as well as speech writing. He wrote speeches for Stanley Baldwin during the election campaign of 1923, fought on the issue of Protection, even though Jones was himself a strong free trader, who had regularly voted Liberal or Labour in general elections. His role as a speech writer for Baldwin in 1923 did not, however, prevent him from being accepted by Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government, which came to power in January 1924, after Protection had been rejected in the general election. No other member of the Cabinet Secretariat has ever involved himself in politics to this extent. But Cabinet Secretaries have continued to act as advisers and confidants of prime ministers. Indeed, Sir Burke Trend, Cabinet Secretary from 1963 to 1973, used, apparently, to refer to himself as 'in a sense, "the prime minister's permanent secretary"' (p. 7).

There is an implicit conflict between the two roles, the one, a secretarial and coordinating role, and the other an advisory role. The secretarial role strengthens the Cabinet as a collective body, the advisory role strengthens the Prime Minister, perhaps at the expense of the Cabinet, and could, conceivably, undermine the ability of the Cabinet Office to be accepted as a neutral co-ordinator and arbiter between departments. The Cabinet Office would then be in danger of becoming a rival to the departments, not a mere coordinator. Can a powerful official, which the Cabinet Secretary always is bound to be, also remain a neutral and detached civil servant with no strong views on policy? It seems somewhat doubtful.

Since 1983, beyond the period covered by *A Man and an Institution*, the Cabinet Office has had a third function, management of the civil service, and the Cabinet Secretary has also been head of the Home Civil Service. In addition, since 1997, the Cabinet Office has been given responsibilities for the delivery of government policy. Indeed, during his tenure of office, Sir Andrew Turnbull, Cabinet Secretary from 2002 to 2005, was seen as the chief deliverer of public service reform. The Cabinet Office now has units attached to it whose functions are executive as well as coordinating. Perhaps Tony Blair tried to make the Cabinet Office into a Prime Minister's Department without calling it that. Jonathan Powell, his Chief of Staff, has argued that the Cabinet Office ought to be 'the driver of government'. This means that it should 'not be some neutral body mediating differences between departments but an institution designed to drive through the policies of the Prime Minister and the wider centre of government (including the Treasury)'.⁽⁴⁾ But the proliferation of units holds with it the danger of duplicating the role of departments with a concomitant confusion of responsibility.

The current edition of Whitaker's Almanack lists 'three core functions' of the modern Cabinet Office. They are 'to support the prime minister in defining and delivering the government's objectives; to support the cabinet in ensuring the coherence, quality and delivery of policy and operations across departments; and strengthening the civil service's capabilities in terms of organisation, leadership and skills'.⁽⁵⁾ The 2006 Capability Review of the Cabinet Office also listed three 'core functions' 'supporting the Prime Minister – to define and deliver the Government's objectives; supporting the Cabinet ... and strengthening the Civil Service'. Later, it describes the role as 'providing high quality direct support to the Prime Minister across the full range of his responsibilities' (emphasis added). It also declares that 'Since the 1980s the Department has had an increased role in ensuring the effective delivery of public services'.⁽⁶⁾

Since 1963, the Cabinet Office has been located in the Old Treasury Building in Whitehall, adjoining 10 Downing Street and adjoining the Prime Minister's Office. There is now a permanent secretary to the Prime Minister located in the Prime Minister's office, an institutionalisation, as it were, of Lloyd George's Garden Suburb. The relationship between him and the Cabinet Secretary is by no means clear.

All this is of course a far cry from 1916. And it has led critics to argue that the Cabinet Office is overloaded and suffers from 'institutional schizophrenia'. In the eyes of critics, this overloading serves to undermine collective Cabinet government rather than reinforce it. Therefore, so it is argued, the Cabinet Office should be restricted to just one function, that of supporting the Cabinet – the other two functions listed by Whitaker's should be carried out elsewhere.⁽⁷⁾ Perhaps recent developments should be recognised by the explicit creation of a Prime Minister's Department, on the lines of those in Australia and Canada. These have proved perfectly compatible with principles of Cabinet government as traditionally understood. But a Cabinet Office whose functions were merely those of recording and coordinating, without any executive or advisory responsibilities at all, would be a somewhat weakened department, and it might not carry much weight in Whitehall. The alternative is to continue to move surreptitiously towards a Prime Minister's Department without actually calling it that.

A Man and an Institution shows that these modern dilemmas were inherent in the institution of the Cabinet Secretariat from its very inception. Perhaps they are incapable of being resolved. John Naylor does not seek to resolve them. That, indeed, is not part of his purpose. But he has written a fine study which casts as much light on the problems of the present as it does on the history of the years between the wars.

October 2009

Notes

1. Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets* (London, 1970–74); Maurice Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914–1918* (London, 1961), and *The Supreme Control at the Paris Peace Conference: A Commentary* (London, 1963). Naylor reviewed each of the three volumes of Stephen Roskill's

biography in the *Historical Journal*, 13, 4 (1970), 807–9; 16, 3 (1973), 650–2; and 18, 2 (1975), 443–6.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. See also, on the Crossman diaries, Hugo Young, *The Crossman Affair* (London, 1976).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin* (London, 1969), p. 172.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Written evidence to the *House of Lords Constitutional Committee Inquiry into The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government*, 2009.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Whitaker's Almanack 2009* (London, 2009), p. 185.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Capability Review of the Cabinet Office, 2006, pp. 9, 13.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Written evidence to the *House of Lords Constitution Committee Inquiry* by Andrew Blick and George Jones.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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