2 Cabinet Government and Cabinet Ministers

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Cabinet government has a number of characteristics, and principally two, which are likely to affect the background of the ministerial personnel, the shape of the pre-ministerial career as well as the duration and form of the ministerial career. In the first place, cabinet government is government by cabinet, and not government directed by an individual, be he or she Monarch or President: this means that the ministers are involved in general problems as well as in specific matters; this also means that they are involved politically as well as administratively in governmental life. Second, cabinet government is parliamentary government in that ministers are individually and collectively responsible to a parliament whose confidence they must maintain: this means that ministers are likely to have a special relationship with parliament and, more often than not, proceed from it.[1]

This situation leads to the roles of cabinet members being diverse and even contradictory. As B. Headey states in his study of *British Cabinet Ministers* (1974), 'ministers have important tasks to perform in Cabinet, in Parliament, in their party and in relations with pressure groups and other sections of the public'.[2] He thus identifies four arenas (department, cabinet, parliament and party, public relations) in which ministers have to be involved. From these different arenas emerge various pressures which both result in demands on ministers' time and are taxing from the point of view of the skills required of these ministers. If one rearranges the planes on which these demands are made, one can examine them at three different levels.

THE IMPACT OF CABINET CHARACTERISTICS ON MINISTERIAL CAREERS

Ministers as both Cabinet Members and Departmental Heads

The first of these levels is the best-known; it results from the fact that ministers are both departmental heads and members of the cabinet.

J. Blondel et al. (eds.), *The Profession of Government Minister in Western Europe*
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Admittedly, as ministers are members of a collective executive and are also, with very few exceptions, in charge of a department, the cabinet system can be expected to result at least in better policy co-ordination and even in a better linkage between policy-making and policy implementation. Yet there is a drawback, in that the skills demanded of ministers are many and are even contradictory. This is not so in presidential systems: in this case, ministers have an unambiguous function; they are appointed by the president to deal exclusively with the affairs of their department.[3]

If the collective character of cabinet decision-making is to be taken seriously, the demands made by cabinet government on ministers' time and even more on their competence are particularly heavy. Ministers cannot actively engage in debates with colleagues on all matters of concern to the government unless they have previously acquired a detailed knowledge of the issues at stake; they must therefore brief themselves (or more realistically be briefed) in advance about matters coming up for discussion in cabinet. This in turn entails having a grasp of specialised administrative and even technical questions which ministers cannot normally be expected to achieve easily. This requirement was perhaps realistic in the nineteenth century: it cannot be expected to be fulfilled in a complex modern State as a matter of course.[4]

In practice, admittedly, the requirement is somewhat relaxed and the extent to which ministers are likely to be involved in matters going beyond the province of their department is likely to vary appreciably. Prudence as well as lack of competence will lead many to avoid raising frequently questions which do not concern them directly. A *modus vivendi* which takes different forms and affects variously the different ministers tends to emerge: this will be examined in detail in a forthcoming volume on *Decision-making in Western European Cabinets*.

Ministers as both Politicians and Specialists in their own Departments

Yet, while in many cases cabinet members may be spared the need to play both a general governmental and a specialised departmental part, the problem reappears on another plane in relation to the role of ministers as departmental heads. As they are members of a parliamentary and representative cabinet, ministers are not likely to take lightly matters, however administrative in character, which may