16

National executives

Introduction

National executives are universal. Every country has an executive, a *government* in the strict sense of the word, as indeed does every other social organization, from the most simple to the most complex. There is always a body, normally relatively small, though varying in size, which has the task of running the organization.

failed states?

The executive is also manifestly a key point, if not *the key point of political life*. This remains true even if doubts are sometimes expressed about the ability of executives to affect markedly the course of events, let alone alter drastically the social and economic structure of their country. They have, more than any other body, an opportunity to *shape society*; indeed, it is their function to do so.

rather old fashion view

Unlike almost all the institutions which we have examined so far, national executives are rather *compact bodies*, whose views and pronouncements are usually well publicized. Parties and even legislatures are more amorphous, and their 'will' is less clear – if they can be said to have a collective will. National executives are relatively small and very visible, so that it is easier to think of them as groups which have a *common goal* and which act as *teams*. In practice, admittedly, they may well not be united, and their differences may even come out into the open. However, the notion of a united government is not wholly unrealistic, and it is a characteristic to which many executives aspire. The aim is to give an impression of a well-oiled and efficient machine which can lead the country towards its future.

Types of executive

Governments may exist everywhere and be, on the whole, rather small and compact bodies. Within this framework, however, major distinctions exist between them. They vary in *composition*, in *internal organization*, in *selection mechanisms*, in *duration* and in *powers* – both formal and informal. There are autocratic governments and

governments which emanate from the people or from its representatives. There are rather egalitarian governments and rather hierarchical governments. There are governments which seem to last indefinitely and ephemeral governments. There are strong and weak governments. As one examines the characteristics of national executives, therefore, differences among these appear to be as large as among groups, parties and legislatures.

Circumscribing executives

If one analyzes executives further, even the idea that governments form clearly defined groups is not altogether obvious nor is it very old. The concepr of government did not exist in republican Rome; in absolute monarchies, there were individual ministers helping the king, not a government.

Even now, the exact limits of the set of individuals who form part of the government are not always easy to determine. There are often men and women around the government whose status in relation to that body is not well defined. First, there are likely to be undersecretaries or *junior ministers*. From a formal point of view, these belong to the government, as they are appointed when the government is constituted and leave office when it ceases to exist. But they are normally excluded from the process of elaboration of governmental policy, as are sometimes even some of the ministers – especially in hierarchical executives in which leaders take the most important decisions and are free to choose whom they wish to advise rhem. Second, there are the *personal advisers* of leaders, who may well play an important part in decision making – a more important part than ministers even – although they do not belong to the official structure of the executive. This is the case with many of the counsellors of the American president. Thus, while national executives may have a clearly defined nucleus, composed of the leaders and at least most ministers, a 'grey zone' whose boundaries are not precise forms the outer circle of these governments.

Obama's zars

- In the first section of this chapter, we shall define national executives on the basis of the *functions which they fulfil*.
- In the second section, we shall examine the *forms which governments take* to fulfil these functions.
- In the third, we shall describe the *anatomy of these governments* by looking at their composition and at their duration across countries and among political systems.
- Finally, we shall assess the *achievements of governments* and attempt to discover what is their true impact on the life of nations.

The functions of national executives

Conversion of inputs into outputs

In a general way, the functions of a government are often said to be to 'run the affairs of the nation'; but this expression simply means that governments are at the top of

the pyramid of decision making. It is also a rather formal definition of the functions of national executives. If we look at the matter more closely, we notice that governments are at the junction between two processes which characterize national decision making. They 'convert' inputs into outputs – that is to say, turn demands into policies – as we saw in Chapter 2.

This process of conversion is not mechanical: governments can choose among inputs; they may discard some demands, however strongly supported, and select others for which there is little support. Yet, even when this is the case, governments do have to pay some attention to the demands which are expressed, if only to oppose them. No national executive totally 'invents' the policies which it formulates. Ideas for policies originate in the public, including in the 'entourage' of the government itself. If these demands arise, they have to be handled by the government in some manner. This is true even where the system is authoritarian, although the reactions of the government are then likely to be different from the reactions which characterize a pluralistic system.

Conception and implementation

Governments have to show imagination in the development of their policies: this imaginative effort is in large part related to the discovery of *practical solutions* to problems with which they are faced. Realistic policies have to be elaborated – realistic both in the sense that they can be technically implemented and in the sense that they are politically acceptable (if necessary by using compulsion). An agricultural, industrial or social policy will have to take into account the perceived 'needs' of the country as well as what the citizens are prepared to 'live with'.

Thus, while the government has a function of *conception*, which is linked in some manner to the demands which exist in the polity, it also has a function of *implementation*, at least insofar as it must find the means by which policies can become reality. It must therefore appoint and supervise a bureaucracy which is able to put the policies into operation. These two functions are therefore crucial for governments.

Tensions are likely to arise in the process, since conception and implementation require different psychological qualities. This is reflected, for instance, in the conflict between those who 'dream' and those who 'manage'. Members of governments are thus expected to combine skills which may not easily be combined. While the function of conception requires creative imagination based on a certain vision of society (this is true even of policies of relatively limited importance), the implementation function requires an ability to manage individuals and groups. The same men and women may well not possess both types of skill. Admittedly, the distinction corresponds in part to the division between 'leaders' and their 'helpers' (the word 'minister' refers etymologically to someone who 'helps'); but the two functions cannot wholly be separated, since it is not very useful to conceive ideas which cannot be implemented. Some links need to exist, and governments are the key place where these links develop.

Co-ordination

The link between these two functions is strengthened by the existence of a third function, that of *co-ordination*, which may be viewed as intermediate. An important element of the process of elaboration of policies consists in ensuring that these do not go against each other and, ideally, combine harmoniously. Moreover, policy elaboration entails making choices or at least establishing priorities, as a result of both financial and human constraints. Not everything can be done at the same time, and a timetable therefore has to be drawn up. But such a timetable must take into account the interrelationships between policies and the internal logic of policy development.

Co-ordination can be successful only if close ties exist among members of the government both at the level of policy elaboration and at that of policy implementation. For example, housing policy entails a school building policy, not merely in general, but in detail; the same applies to an industrial policy, which must lead to a housing policy, etc. The natural tendency of branches of the public service to operate independently of each other must be corrected in order to ensure that distortions, contradictions, and ultimately policy failures are minimized. This is the role of co-ordination, although there are limits to which it can effectively take place. Administrative and political centralization cannot go beyond a certain point without reducing overall efficiency, as many examples drawn from communist states in the past made abundantly clear. Even where centralization does not go too far, co-ordination remains a major problem. It must be at the centre of the preoccupations of the government if the process of implementation of public policies is to be efficient.

Conception, co-ordination and direction of implementation are therefore the three elements of governmental action. These elements are analytically distinct, and it is the government's duty to combine them. But this combination inevitably raises problems: depending on the circumstances, conception, co-ordination or implementation will be given more emphasis. It is not surprising that the development of governmental structures in the contemporary world should have been the result of a variety of *ad hoc* experiments, not all of which have been successful; not surprisingly, too, conflicts have arisen between the three functions of government and these have not all been solved equally well (Blondel, 1982: 21–9).

Forms of governmental organization

Evolution of governmental arrangements

Contemporary governmental arrangements reflect the diversity and increasing complexity of the tasks undertaken by executives. But the variations in the structure of these executives are not a new phenomenon: the oligarchical arrangements of Italian republican cities of the Renaissance were at great variance from those of the absolute monarchies which began to emerge in sixteenth-century Europe, and from those of theocratic and despotic governments which have existed occasionally across the world.

BOX 16.1
How governments emerged

The idea of a 'government' or a 'national executive' seems natural. Everyone automatically assumes that, at the head of each country, a body of men and women is in charge of the affairs of that country. Yet the concept of government is in reality relatively recent. It has been inherited almost entirely from the monarchical and even patrimonial concept of political rule. There were no governments in the strict sense of the word in the early partially democratic experiments which emerged in city-states and above all in Rome.

The concept of government is unquestionably linked to an idea of hierarchy or of a pyramid. This may explain why the idea that there should be 'dualism' at the top is alien to the notion of government.

Thus early republican states were ruled by a discrete number of officials, elected separately to accomplish specific tasks. Rome had consuls (war and foreign affairs), praetors (justice) and aediles (public works). These officials were appointed for short periods only (one year in most cases); re-election, at least immediate re-election, was not allowed. Admittedly, there was a Senate which dealt with many aspects of the life of the Republic, but this was too large (and also too divided) to constitute an executive.

Government in the modern sense came to Rome with the Empire and with Augustus. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it emerged out of the patrimonial rule of kings and other monarchs who were slowly expanding their role. 'Ministers' were appointed to look after the Exchequer, after problems of justice, or after the well-being and strength of the army. Subsequently, the rulers who became known as 'enlightened despots' and wished to develop their country economically began appointing ministers in charge of public works.

This led to what should be defined as *bureaucratic* government: that is to say, the governments of the absolute monarchs who ruled much of Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, those monarchs who were not able to control their society fully had to rely in large part on the aristocracy, some of whom were included in the governments. This move prefigured the other form of government which Europe came to know, *representative* government. Britain was the country in which this form of government developed earliest: it became a 'council' whose members worked together, if not necessarily as a team, at least in conjunction with each other. From this emerged a form of democratic executive which city-states had never been able to develop.

Nineteenth-century developments endeavoured to 'domesticate' governmental arrangements and to give them a less haphazard and more rational character. Two constitutional systems, which we already encountered in the context of legislatures,

have tended to dominate the European and North American scene for a century. On the one hand, the *cabinet system*, which originated in England, but also in Sweden, is based on the notion that the head of the government, the prime minister, has to operate in the context of a collegial system, in which a group of ministers participates in the decision-making process while also being individually in charge of the implementation of the decisions in a particular sector. Cabinet government extended gradually to western European countries, while in central and eastern Europe, the remnants of absolutism were gradually undermined, to the extent that the cabinet system seemed likely at one point to replace everywhere the old absolutist and authoritarian governmental structures (Verney, 1959: 17–97).

In contrast to the cabinet system, the *constitutional or 'limited' presidential system* was first established in the United States and then extended gradually to the whole of Latin America. In this model, the executive is hierarchical and not collective: ministers (often named secretaries in this case) are subordinates of the president and only responsible to him or her. Although this formula is closer to that of the monarchical government than to that of the cabinet system, it also means some demotion both for the head of state (who is elected for a period and often is not permitted to be re-elected at all, let alone be re-elected indefinitely) and for the ministers (since these typically have to be 'confirmed' by the legislature). The only country in which 'limited' presidential government has truly succeeded is the United States. The formula has been rather unsuccessful in Latin America, on the other hand, as many presidents have been uncomfortable with the restrictions to their powers and many coups have taken place, as a result of which authoritarian and even 'absolute' presidential governments have been installed. The difficulties which this system has encountered can be attributed partly to the rigidity with which it sharply distinguishes between legislature and executive (Blondel, 1980: 108–11; Linz, 1990: 51–69; Shugart and Carey, 1992: 36–43).

limits of presidentialism

At least one of the two constitutional formulas was therefore already encountering difficulties before 1914. The problems multiplied after the First World War with the emergence, first, of the communist system in Russia, then, of authoritarian governments of the fascist variety in Italy and later throughout much of southern, central and eastern Europe, and finally, after the Second World War, of a large number of 'absolute' presidential systems, civilian and military, in many parts of the Third World. These developments were characterized by the emergence or re-emergence of the *role of the strong leader*, which constitutional systems had sought to diminish, and the consequential decline of the idea, fostered by cabinet government, of collective or at least collegial government. But the period was also characterized by the 'invention' of a new form of executive structure, which was marked by the intrusion of *parties* and, in authoritarian systems, usually of the *single party* in the core of the national executive.

The role of parties in government

For the proponents of constitutional systems, whether of the cabinet or of the presidential type, the executive was regarded as the apex of the national decision-making process.

The question of sharing this position with any other body was not even conceived. With the emergence of parties, the recruitment of the governmental personnel and the determination of the broad lines of policy were gradually, but informally, influenced by these organizations. However, this development was not regarded as having profound consequences for the structure and decision-making powers of the government (Castles and Wildenmann, 1986).

power of executive depending on parties; informally

Single and dual governments

A new idea emerged with the arrival of the Communist Party to power in Russia after 1918. It was felt that it was the function of the dominant single party to ensure that the top organs of the state (that is to say, the government) were kept under control. From this view developed the concept of a *dual structure of party and state*, an idea which was partly followed in other authoritarian regimes between the two world wars: for instance, in Germany and Spain. In communist states the distinction was pushed to its limit, and the top party body, the Politburo, achieved a status equal or even superior to that of the government. Such a model was naturally extended from the Soviet Union to eastern European communist states after 1945. It was also adopted in some single-party states of the Third World, particularly in Africa – especially in those states which were of the 'progressive' variety. By a process of imitation, the formula was also used by some military rulers, who established military or revolutionary councils alongside the regular government. It has, of course, lost much of its popularity with the collapse of communism in eastern Europe, not just in those states which abandoned communism, but in the Third World as well.

The notion of a two-level or dual form of governmental structure was not merely the product of an ideology; it also corresponded closely to the functional division between 'conception' and 'implementation', which was outlined earlier. The increased complexity of governmental tasks (particularly in communist and other centralized states, but also in western systems) seemed to justify such an arrangement. Dualism was also affected, to an extent at least, by other developments. For example, the growth of the office of the President since the 1930s suggests a division of the United States government in practice into two layers (Blondel, 1982: 154–8). Moreover, the fact that western European cabinet systems experienced difficulties in maintaining the collegiality of the government is an indication of a degree of inability of executives to operate effectively if all functions are concentrated in the same hands (Smith, 1989: 217–22; Blondel and Muller-Rommel, 1988).

Governmental structures in the contemporary world

While every state has a government, it is only in the third quarter of the twentieth century that *independent* governments have come to rule practically the whole of the planet. This means that the number of national executives has more than doubled since

the 1940s. Meanwhile, as governments became more 'modern' by being increasingly concerned with a large variety of aspects of social and economic life, their size also increased substantially. While national executives had about a dozen ministers on average in 1950, they had on average about 18 posts in the 1980s. Globally, there were fewer than a thousand ministers simultaneously in office immediately after the Second World War; 30 years later there were over 2,500 (Blondel, 1982: 175–7).

However, the rate of increase in the size of governments has not been the same across the world. Atlantic, Latin American and Asian countries have had the smallest rate of increase, while Middle Eastern and African states as well as (to the extent that they remain in existence), communist states have experienced the largest increases. There are also substantial absolute variations. Communist governments have been large, even if one adopts a rather restrictive definition of governments. For example, the Soviet executive, which was the largest of all, had 75 members in the 1980s. Not surprisingly, perhaps, efforts were made in the late 1980s to reduce this number, but the prospects may not be good: the Chinese government increased in size again after having been substantially cut for a while in the 1970s.

The size of communist executives was in large part commanded by the concern of these systems to direct the economy in great detail, making it necessary to establish specialized ministries relating to various industries. The reduction in the number of ministries has thus been dependent on the ability (and desire) of communist governments to diminish their direct intervention in various sectors of the economy. Other governments have also increased in size, in response to various demands or desires for public intervention. For instance, developing countries, especially those of the 'progressive' variety have had rather large governments. Alongside the executives of countries whose population is very small indeed, such as Luxembourg and Iceland, only in those which have been regulated by legal or even constitutional rules has the number of ministries remained relatively small. This is why constitutional presidential executives – and, therefore, Latin American governments as well as the United States government – have relatively few members (12 to 15 as against 20 to 25 in many western European cabinets).

Single-party governments and coalitions

An essential feature of modern government is constituted by political parties. These naturally play a key part in many, indeed most, executives of the contemporary world, but this role does vary. At one extreme are governments fully dominated by one party in single-party systems, the clearest example being that of communist systems. At the other extreme are the national executives in which parties play a small part, either because they are weak or because the government and its head have sufficient authority to keep parties at bay. This tends to be the case in constitutional monarchies, of which few have remained, and in many if not all presidential systems. In the United States, the president, being elected on his or her own programme and because of his or her own appeal, may be able to pay little attention to party views.

Cabinet systems have often been described as *party governments* because parties are central to these executives: they help to streamline the relationship between executive and parliament; they also help to organize the life of the cabinet. Yet there are also differences among cabinet systems in terms of the influence which parties have (Katz, 1986: 31–71).

One key distinction is that between *single-party governments* and *coalitions*. This distinction applies also to presidential systems, as several Latin American presidential executives have been based on coalitions, for some or even most of the time. This has been the case in Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela. However, the distinction is perhaps even more important in cabinet systems because the government needs the support of a majority of parliament if it is to remain in office.

coalition governm. in presid. sys!

Continental European cabinet governments are nearly always coalition governments, although these coalitions can be small or large, and can include almost all the relevant parties. British and Commonwealth governments tend to be of the one-party variety, on the other hand, while Scandinavian governments oscillate between the two formulas, except in Finland, where coalitions are the rule.

There are also other differences among these governments, as they can be of a *majority* or of a *minority* character. In the latter case, the government depends on the continued support given to it by parties which have not joined the government. This arrangement may not seem viable, but it occurs relatively frequently, especially in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, and occasionally elsewhere (Britain, France, Italy) (Strom, 1990: 1–22).

examples?

The characteristics of cabinet governments thus vary appreciably from being minority or majority single party to small or large coalitions. The reasons why these forms of government exist are also varied. There tends to be a single-party government (though this is not always the case) when one party alone has or is close to having a majority in parliament; there tend to be coalitions in other cases. The existence of small or large coalitions also results from many factors. Some coalitions are 'minimum sized', in that they include only the minimum number of parties required for the government to have a majority in parliament; others include parties which are ideologically close even if the majority is as a result more than minimum sized; yet others include all or nearly all the parties represented in parliament and are thus known as *grand coalitions* (Riker, 1962: 149–68; Lijphart, 1984a: 46–66; Luebbert, 1986: 67–89, 233–47).

Collegial governments

Cabinet governments are in principle *collective and egalitarian*: decisions have to be taken by the whole cabinet. It is the parliamentary origin and basis of the cabinet which accounts for its collegial characteristics. Bagehot expressed this point in the nineteenth century by stating that the government is a 'board of control chosen by the legislature, out of persons whom it trusts and knows, to rule the nation' (Bagehot, 1963: 67). Neither the prime minister nor any group of ministers is formally entitled to involve the whole government. The counterpart of this provision is *collective*

responsibility, which stipulates that all the ministers are bound by cabinet decisions; in its most extreme form, the rule suggests that ministers are also bound to speak in favour of all the decisions.

These principles are markedly eroded in practice in nearly all the countries which operate on the basis of cabinet government: that is to say, in western Europe (except Switzerland), many Commonwealth countries (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Malaysia, Singapore and most ex-British Caribbean and Pacific islands), as well as Japan and Israel. Some ex-communist states, such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, have also adopted cabinet government.

The erosion of the collective principle is marked first by the fact that, in many of these countries, following British practice, the principle applies only to members of the cabinet *stricto sensu*: the government can be much larger and include substantial numbers of junior ministers. The practice of appointing junior ministers has extended throughout western Europe and indeed to cabinet governments outside western Europe, the British and Italian governments being among those which have appointed the largest number of holders of these positions. They are bound by the principle of collective responsibility, but do not share in the decision-making process.

Second, the number and complexity of decisions are such that the cabinet cannot, during what are normally short meetings of two to three hours a week (or at most twice a week) truly discuss all the issues which have to be decided on. As a result, while the cabinet ratifies formally all the decisions, the elaboration of these decisions is in reality delegated to individual ministers (if they come within the purview of their department), to groups of ministers sitting in committees (the number of these has markedly increased in many cabinet governments), or to the prime minister and some of the ministers (McKie and Hogwood, 1985). Cabinet government is at most collegial government and in some cases it is even hierarchical.

Types of cabinet government

One can distinguish among three broad types of cabinet arrangement, although there is strictly a continuum between truly collective and egalitarian cabinets (of which there are very few) and hierarchical governments, sometimes labelled 'prime ministerial cabinets'.

The truly *collegial* cabinets are those in which, often because of the existence of a coalition, but also because of political traditions, the prime minister has to rely on a high degree of interchange with colleagues before decisions are taken. As a matter of fact, although (or perhaps because) Switzerland does not have cabinet government, but has ministers elected for a fixed duration on the basis of a permanent coalition of the major parties, its executive probably is the most equal in western Europe; yet, even there, full collective decision making does not occur. Scandinavian cabinets are more collegial than those of central and western Europe, even in cases of single-party governments, which, especially in Sweden, occur rather frequently.

BOX 16.2
How coalition governments tend to form

There are three main ways in which governments are constituted: (a) from the top, in one go; (b) by the replacement of individual ministers as they retire; or (c) by discussion, often protracted, among a number of partners.

By and large, the first method is used in the case of the governments of countries in which a leader imposes himself or herself, whether in an authoritarian or in a democratic manner. In Britain, for instance, the leader of the party which obtains the majority in parliament constitutes the government, typically a few days after the election.

The second method, that of the slow replacement of ministers, is in use in countries in which there is effectively no break between governments. The clearest examples have been the communist states. Similar developments occur in traditional regimes in which the monarch is the effective head of the government: ministers are appointed individually to replace those who retire.

In both cases the constitution or reconstitution of the government is rapid. The third method is characterized on the contrary, by a substantial period of discussion among the potential partners of the government. This typically occurs primarily in the context of parliamentary systems as well as of some presidential systems, when it is either necessary or useful to form a coalition among two or more parties.

The process normally begins after the election has taken place, although, in some cases, the idea of a future coalition may be discussed by parties which form an electoral alliance and declare that they will govern together if they win. When this does not occur (or when the alliance proves less tight than had been anticipated), the process of government formation begins. It has two stages.

During the first stage, the potential coalition partners have to be found, sometimes by means of what in the Netherlands and Belgium is called a *formateur*. Various permutations may be possible and the successful formula may be difficult to find.

Once the parties have agreed to form a coalition, the second stage opens, during which a detailed governmental programme is elaborated and ministers are chosen. A general outline of the programme may have been agreed to during the first phase, but it must go much further if future conflicts are to be avoided: specific tax increases or cuts in benefits, for instance, will be agreed to. In some countries, the Netherlands and Belgium in particular, the outcome of the discussions results in the drafting of a long document, of perhaps 70 or 80 pages; this document is sometimes referred to as the 'Bible', since it serves as a guide to governmental action and is invoked in case of conflict. Ministers are then selected, typically by each of the parties of the coalition. Thus, sometimes after months, the government is set up.

The second model is that of the *team*, which is more common in single-party governments, such as Commonwealth countries, including Britain. The ministers, who often worked together for a number of years in parliament, have broadly similar goals and even a common approach. Much is delegated to individual ministers, to committees or to the prime minister, but there is a spirit of understanding which results from the relatively long joint experience of government members. While the prime minister appoints and dismisses ministers, the pool from which these are drawn – mostly the parliamentary party – limits drastically the opportunities for selection. In coalition governments, on the other hand, the partners in the coalition have a large say in the appointment of individual office-holders.

There is a third model, sometimes described as *prime ministerial*, in which ministers are noticeably dependent on the head of the government – for instance, because he or she has considerable popularity. This arises from substantial and repeated election victories or from the fact that the head of the government has created the party, the regime or even the country. Such cases have been frequent in the cabinet governments of the Third World (in the Caribbean and India, for example); in western Europe, they have occurred occasionally in West Germany, France and even Britain. In the British case, it has been suggested, somewhat exaggeratedly, that this was what British cabinet government was becoming (Bagehot, 1963; 48–57). In this model, the relationship between ministers and prime minister is then hierarchical and resembles that which prevails in presidential and indeed in traditional monarchical systems (Blondel, 1982: 67–78).

Hierarchical governments

The large majority of the other governmental arrangements are, formally at least, *hierarchical*, in that ministers – and any other members of the government – are wholly dependent on the head of the government and the head of state. They are appointed and dismissed at will; their decisions are taken by delegation from the head of the government; and they play no part legally in the elaboration of the policies which do not affect their department. These arrangements were traditionally those of monarchical systems, and the constitutional or 'limited' presidential system did not alter this model. The many authoritarian presidential systems which emerged in the Third World after 1945 adopted a similar formula: while perhaps about 50 governments are of the cabinet type, as many as double that number of countries – mainly in the Americas, Africa and the Middle East – have governments which are primarily hierarchical.

However, these presidential governments are not always hierarchical to the same extent. First, some are closer to cabinet systems in terms of their composition, as when the head of the government is not able to select or dismiss ministers at will, or may have to pay attention to their views. For instance, heads of governments may be constrained in their choice of ministers in traditional monarchical regimes, because members of some families are very influential, or in civilian or military presidential regimes, because some individuals may have helped the successful head of governmenr

to come to power. Indeed, the American president is freer in this respect than most other presidents, who are more closely dependent on party support to come to power. We noted earlier that some Latin American executives have more of a 'party government' structure than the American executive.

Second, in terms of decision-making processes, members of presidential executives may not be able to act independently. The complexity of issues, especially economic and social, obliges many heads of government to pay attention to the views of the members of their government to such an extent that the latter may exercise influence well beyond their department. Meanwhile, ministers are sometimes closely linked to the officials of the departments of which they are in charge. As a result they acquire some autonomous power and the head of government may have some difficulty in controlling them. Such national executives are more *atomized* rhan hierarchical.

informal dependency

principle agent problem

The American federal executive

This situation affects particularly the constitutional presidential executive which is the largest of all, that of the United States. The president may have much leeway in choosing members of the cabinet, but there is considerably less opportunity to control the members of the cabinet in their respective departments. Departments are vast and therefore naturally form self-contained empires. Moreover, any vertical relationships which might exist between departmental heads and president are undermined by the horizontal relationships existing between each department and Congress – especially the committees of Congress relevant to the departments, since these want to ensure that they obtain the appropriations which they feel they need and the laws which they promote. Finally, the links which develop between departments and their clientele (the various interest groups which gravitate around each department) tend to reduce further the strength of the hierarchical ties between departments and president (Heclo, 1977: 166–8).

how far is this true for Obama admin?

Thus the American government tends naturally to be atomized. To remedy this defect, presidents since F.D. Roosevelt in the 1930s appointed increasingly large personal staffs, whose aim has been to supervise and co-ordinate the activities of the departments in order to ensure that presidential policies are carried out (Campbell, 1983: 19). This has meant, however, that it has become difficult to discover what constitutes the 'real' government of the United States. Beyond the formal hierarchical structure of president and secretaries, the government seems to have two levels: an 'upper level' formed by the White House Office, which has some degree of collegiality, and a 'lower level', which has little unity. By gradually becoming a government at two levels, the American government thus resembles in part the dual arrangements which have prevailed in other countries, particularly in communist states (Blondel, 1982: 80–4).

"zars"

Multilevel governments

For the historical reasons which were described earlier, the party structure and the state structure led to the emergence of divided governments, first, in the Soviet Union

and then, after the Second World War, in other communist states. This division goes beyond duality: the *Politburos* of the communist parties have been helped by large secretariats, whose heads have constituted the personal staffs of the General or First Secretaries, the latter being generally regarded as the 'true' leaders of their countries. This was obviously the case with such leaders as Stalin, Tito and Mao. Meanwhile, the state 'half' of the governmental structure has tended to be divided into a *Presidium* and a *Council of Ministers* proper, the Presidium being composed of the most important ministers as well as of some representatives of geographical areas, at any rate in the Soviet Union. There could thus be a Politburo primarily in charge of policy elaboration, a Secretariat, a Presidium in charge of co-ordination, and a Council of Ministers dealing with implementation. The links between these bodies have tended to be achieved through some of the more important ministers and the prime minister (normally a different person from the First Secretary of the Party) belonging at the same time to the Politburo, the Presidium and, of course, the Council of Ministers (Holmes, 1986: 126–30, 156–8).

Comparable multilevel executives developed in some non-communist single-party systems and in a number of military regimes. *Supreme Military Councils* or *Committees of National Salvation* have thus been created to ensure that the regular government (often composed of civil servants) carried out the policies of the military rulers. This formula, which started in Burma in 1962, was adopted by many African states, such as Nigeria; it also existed for a period in Portugal after the end of the dictatorship in 1974. These arrangements have had a varying degree of longevity and of apparent success (Blondel, 1982: 78–93, 158–73).

Members of governments

Social and career background

During the decades which followed the Second World War, about 20,000 men and women have been members of national governments. These ministers have similar backgrounds to those of members of legislatures: they are mostly *male*, drawn from *middle-class groups*, and *middle-aged*. However, the number of women in government has been growing since the 1970s. In Scandinavia, women have come to be a substantial minority and in the late 1980s they formed a majority in the Norwegian government. Manual workers, white-collar employees and farmers are also relatively rare in governments: the proportion of manual workers, once substantial in communist governments (about a third) declined markedly in the 1970s and 1980s. Ministers are mostly drawn from among lawyers, teachers, civil servants, managers and, in military regimes, military men, while business leaders are underrepresented, as they are in most parliaments. Public sector managers and civil servants have tended to be numerous not just in communist and Third World states, but in many western countries as well (Blondel, 1985: 29–54; Thiebault, 1991: 19–30).

Routes to office

Ministers are rarely young and usually join the government in their late forties. *They come to office by one of three main routes:* politics, the civil service and the military. The *political route*, through parliament and a political party, is the most common, especially in western countries (though not in the United States, where the proportion of ministers coming directly from business is large). This route is naturally important in cabinet systems, where a formal link exists between government and legislature. In the Third World, the proportion of politicians among ministers varies appreciably: it is substantial in south-east Asia, where there are a number of cabinet systems, and in Latin American civilian governments. In some Middle Eastern and Black African countries, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the political from the administrative routes to office, as ministers often have a party background while being also civil servants; the same has tended to occur in the communist states. Lawyers usually come to office through the political route.

Alongside and sometimes combined with the political route, the *civil service route* provides a way of reaching the government for a substantial minority of ministers. This is pre-eminently the traditional route, monarchs having typically chosen from among administrators because they had expert knowledge and because they could be relied upon. Not surprisingly, therefore, the traditional monarchies which remain in existence appoint many civil servants to the government; so do other non-party systems (primarily led by the military) and even some single-party systems. In communist countries, particularly in China and, in the past, the Soviet Union and (though less so) in eastern Europe, a ministerial position has tended to be the apex of a long career in a ministerial department. The civil service route even plays a substantial part in some western European cabinet governments, notably in France, where civil servants (and managers of public enterprises) started to be appointed to the government with the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958, as well as in Austria, the Netherlands, Finland and Norway.

The third main route to ministerial office is *the military*, although it has declined in importance since the mid-1980s. A military career has led to ministerial office in many parts of the Third World, especially in Central and South America (though not in the Caribbean), in Black Africa (particularly in northern and western Africa) and in the Middle East. However, the extent to which military men come to office varies appreciably among military regimes. Meanwhile, even in civilian governments, ministers in defence departments are still often members of the military, as they were in western Europe in the nineteenth century.

The ministerial career proper

Although some come to office suddenly – for instance, after a military coup or other brusque change of regime – a long period of waiting has usually to elapse before one becomes a minister; yet one cannot normally expect to remain in office for more than

a few years and, in many cases, for more than a year or two. Admittedly, a position in the *cabinet* often follows a post of junior member of the government, which may have been held for four or five years. Even if one adds up all these positions, however, the average duration is low: to the four or five years as junior ministers can be added perhaps three or four years in the cabinet proper (Blondel, 1985: 10ff.; Bakema, 1991: 70–98).

There are appreciable variations around this average. Some are ministers for a decade or more, though usually not in the same post, and often not continuously, while a substantial proportion, indeed almost a third, are in the cabinet for only one year. There are also variations from country to country: the ministerial career has traditionally been longest in communist states (six years on average), especially in the Soviet Union; it is shortest in Latin America and in the Middle East (two years or less); ministerial duration is relatively long in Atlantic countries (about four years), in Black Africa, and in south and south-east Asia (Blondel, 1985: 90–8).

Institutional and cultural factors

A number of factors are at the origin of these variations in ministerial duration. *Regime instability* in the Third World and, in liberal systems, the *alternation of parties* in power are important contributory elements. Conversely, ministers have tended to stay in office longer in communist states because these characteristics, traditionally at least, did not obtain. These countries had, in a sense, kept the same 'government' in power for decades, and the near-static position of the governmental personnel may have contributed to the collapse of the regimes. Meanwhile, communist states in which there had been instability, such as Poland, had a shorter average ministerial duration. Because there has not been alternation of parties in government in traditional monarchies either, ministerial duration has tended to be relatively long in these states (for instance, in the Arabian peninsula) and in some Black African states in which a 'charismatic' ruler has been in power for long periods (as in the Côte d'Ivoire). For the same reason, ministerial duration is longer in those western countries where the alternation of parties in power has been relatively infrequent (Canada, Sweden) or where at least one of the parties has been in office for many years, if not permanently, in a coalition context (Germany or Austria, for instance). An indirect effect of these factors can be found in the fact that, by and large, ministerial duration is shorter in constitutional or 'limited' presidential systems than in cabinet systems. In the former, newly appointed presidents tend to select new ministers, while in the more collegial cabinets of parliamentary systems, the departure of the prime minister often does not entail that of the ministers.

Variations in ministerial longevity are also due to *cultural factors*. In particular, there appear to be different traditions with respect to the extent to which cabinets are periodically *reshuffled*. The contrast between Sweden and Japan is particularly sharp in this context, since in these two countries the same party was in power for decades and yet differences in average duration are considerable. Swedish ministers of social democratic governments have been in office for over eight years on average, while in Japan, the average duration has been little over a year – many ministers, and almost the entire cabinet, are replaced every year. Cultural characteristics also account in part

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for variations between Austria and Germany (where reshuffles are rare), on the one hand, and Britain and France (where reshuffles are more frequent), on the other. They also account for variations among other systems, in particular among presidential systems. In Chile, for instance, both during the period of constitutional rule up to 1973 and during the period of military rule of the 1970s and 1980s, the average duration of ministers in office was also scarcely over one year; in Mexico, on the other hand, reshuffles are rare and ministers remain in office on average for about four years (Blondel, 1985: 110–36, 142–8, 156–9).

One-post ministers and ministers who move from post to post

The averages discussed so far relate to the total longevity of ministers in office, not to their duration in individual posts. For the majority, the figure is the same, since most government ministers only ever have one post; but a substantial minority hold two or more posts in succession. This sometimes occurs after an interruption, although such interruptions have been rare in presidential systems, in military governments and in communist regimes. They tend primarily to occur in cabinet systems, in part as a result of the alternation of parties in government, and in part also because these ministers can be regarded as 'amateurs' and are selected to governmental posts not because of their specialist ability, but because of their political skills. Reshuffles leading to ministers moving from one position to another in succession are also more frequent in cabinet systems.

Generalists and specialists

The fact that many ministers move from one post to another is sometimes linked to political considerations, since the prime minister may feel that someone who changes positions is less likely to be a danger; it also relates to different conceptions of the role of ministers. Where the emphasis is on implementation, there will be a tendency to appoint *specialists* to head ministerial departments, and consequently to move these ministers to other posts rather less. This practice has been commonly followed in communist states; it has also tended to prevail in many Third World regimes, in many presidential systems, and even in some cabinet systems, especially in central Europe. Where, on the contrary, the emphasis is on office-holders being concerned with policy elaboration and co-ordination in a collegial manner, ministers are regarded as having primarily a political role: they are often described as being 'amateurs' or *generalists* rather than specialists, because they are selected for their political skills. This view is widely held in those cabinet systems which came directly out of the British tradition. The proportion of ministers having held more than one post in succession is naturally largest in this group of countries (Blondel, 1985: 189–212).

The career of ministers is short; it is almost an accident for most ministers – indeed, it is truly an accident for a substantial number of them. It is perhaps surprising that such a career should be sought after, as it seems to be, even in countries where the duration prospects are very low. Admittedly, the rewards are substantial while in office, and there may also be rewards after leaving office (in business and public enterprises,

or in international positions), but there are also dangers, including physical dangers, particularly in the Third World (Blondel and Thiebault, 1991: 153–73). In many cases, an attempt is made to marry political skills and administrative skills, but the duration is so short for most and the preparation so limited that the question does arise as to whether governments can truly have a profound impact on the countries which they rule.

The impact of governments

It is difficult to measure the realizations of governments or even to have a satisfactory impression of their extent. The contrast is sharp between the sweeping comments often made about the potential achievements of executives and the slow progress of systematic analyses designed to determine what governments can and do realize. This is because there are major problems at several levels in assessing what governments achieve.

A distinction has indeed to be drawn between developments which would have occurred 'naturally' as a result of social and economic change and developments which can be said to have occurred because the government decided them. Comparative analysis can help in this respect, since it is possible to discover whether different policies have a different impact. Thus, while unemployment began to be widespread across most of western Europe in the 1980s, it remained low in some countries, such as Sweden, Austria and Switzerland. Yet these national comparisons do not always provide an answer to the question of whether a particular effect should be attributed exclusively or even primarily to governmental action.

Attributing impact to a particular government

It is often not possible precisely to relate particular outcomes to particular governments. The duration of governments may be too short for valid conclusions to be drawn: little can normally be said about the impact of governments which last a year or less. Yet we noted that many ministers did remain in office for one year or less. Moreover, governments often 'slide' into one another, so to speak, as a result of reshuffles: the British conservative governments of the 1980s were almost entirely reconstructed, although the same leader remained in office; on the other hand, Italian prime ministers have tended to change frequently, but ministers have tended to stay in or return to office after a few years. What constitutes one government in such cases becomes a debatable point: if one takes a narrow definition and considers that a government has to remain truly identical to be genuinely *one*, then almost no national executive remains in office for more than a year or two; if one relaxes the condition and decides, for instance, to discard partial reshuffles, the problem arises as to which cutting point to adopt. One may suggest that a government is the same if it has the same prime minister or president, is composed of the same party or parties, and corresponds to the same parliament. Such a definition may be valid for some purposes (and for countries in which elections matter); but it is clearly a compromise definition, since such a

'government' will have been modified in composition, perhaps markedly, during the period (Lijphart, 1984a: 80–1; 1984b: 265–79; Blondel, 1985; Bakema, 1991: 77–9).

The duration of coalitions and single-party governments

It is because of these numerous reshuffles as well as because the problem is almost exclusively confined to western Europe that the question of the relative duration of single-party and coalition governments, though technically very interesting, probably does not deserve the prominence which it was once given. As was pointed out in Chapter 11, it has been suggested that proportional representation has the effect of leading to executive instability because it results in greater party fractionalization in parliament. Yet minority governments and coalitions, which are indeed numerous in continental Europe, are not all weak and unstable; the difference in duration between single-party and coalition governments is substantial only if one does not take into account the incidence of reshuffles in single-party governments. Moreover, as we noted earlier, there are many types of coalition: they can be small or 'grand', 'minimum sized' or 'oversized'. Conclusions about the longevity of these different types are not identical. It is at any rate wrong to claim that coalitions (and even minority governments) are necessarily or even generally weak and ineffective, as German, Austrian and Dutch examples indicate, especially when reshuffles need to be taken into account. British ministers last in office less than West German ministers, for instance; Japanese ministers are reshuffled almost every year. It is in any case difficult to use 'governments' or 'cabinets' as a basis for the calculation of duration: the longevity of ministers is a much better indicator (Lijphart, 1984a: 78–84; Blondel, 1985: 129–34).

The lag between conception and impact

There is a further difficulty, which is particularly serious because governments normally last for short periods: it takes time for governments to elaborate policies and perhaps even more time for these policies to be implemented. There is therefore necessarily a lag between the moment an executive comes to office and the moment policies have an impact. This point is true even if, as is sometimes claimed, new governments and new leaders may benefit from a *state of grace* (Bunce, 1981). Since there is such a lag, and it varies from policy to policy, results should often be attributed to preceding executives rather than to current ones. Moreover, since governments normally have little room for manoeuvre because the large majority of expenditure (90 per cent or more) relates to matters which cannot be altered (salaries, maintenance of existing activities, etc.), the determination of the real impact of a given government is often speculative and is likely to be highly controversial.

The likely impact of governments

Conclusions have therefore remained rather vague: they concern certain broad characteristics of whole classes of national executives rather than individual cabinets. It has been possible to establish that social democratic governments do have, at least in many respects, an impact on social and economic life, despite the view which is sometimes expressed that no difference could any longer be detected among governmental parties (Castles, 1982; Rose, 1984). It also seems established that, contrary to what some had claimed, Third World military governments do not perform better economically than civilian governments (McKinlay and Cohan, 1975: 1–30). However, other generalizations often made about governments have not so far been confirmed In particular, it is not established that the instability of the ministerial personnel has the negative consequences for social and economic development that it is often said to have (though it may have a negative impact on the regime's legitimacy) (Kellner and Crowther-Hunt, 1980: 211–12).

The conclusions which can be firmly drawn on the impact of governments on economic and social life are therefore limited. However, to consider only this impact is to conceive the role of national executives too narrowly. The broader cultural and ideological values which governments foster may modify the general climate within which political, social and economic life develops, although such an effect is, of course, even more difficult to assess. The nature and extent of a 'change of political climate' cannot usually be measured adequately, let alone be closely related to the activities of a particular government. But such a difficulty does not constitute a ground for excluding any impact, or even less for deciding not to consider impact at all. Only with patient efforts and on the basis of the general hypothesis that governments do matter somewhat, although probably less than is readily assumed (especially by those who wish to criticize particular cabinets), will the assessment of the role of national executives gradually improve.

Overview

National executives are at the centre of political life as they 'convert' suggestions and proposals into policies. They have to fulfil three functions, those of *policy elaboration*, *co-ordination* and *implementation*.

To fulfil these tasks, executives have taken different forms. They differ essentially in two ways: they can be *hierarchical* or *collegial*; they can be *single* or *divided*.

Presidential systems tend to be hierarchical, while *cabinet systems* tend to be more collegial. Presidential systems such as the American system may also be relatively divided; communist governments and many Third World governments have often had a *dual structure*.

Members of governments are generally *male*, drawn from the *middle-class*, and *middle-aged*; they come to office after a purely political career (in parliament, for instance), in the civil service or in the military.

Members of governments stay in office on average *only a few years* (three or four) and many (about a third) stay in office one year only.

Members of governments tend to be *generalists* in cabinet systems, although less so than in the past; they tend more often to be *specialists* in other types of government.

The precise impact of governments is difficult to measure, largely because of the short duration of ministers in office. This may seem paradoxical when so much emphasis is placed on national executives by the media, the organized groups and large sections of the public. Yet this paradox is only one of the many contradictory sentiments which governments create. Governments both attract and repel because they are powerful, at least ostensibly, and because they give to those who belong to them an aura of power, of *auctoritas*, which fascinates, tantalizes, but also worries and, in the worst cases, frightens those who are the subjects and the spectators of political life.

Further reading

Although the literature on national executives is very large, it tends to be essentially on a country basis. Indeed, there is a high concentration of works on the American government, on the British cabinet and on a number of European governments as well as on what was the Soviet Union. Works on other countries exist, but they are more sparse. On the structure of governments themselves, see J. Blondel, *The Organisation of Governments* (1982), J. Blondel and F. Muller-Rommel, eds., *Cabinets in Western Europe* (1988) and *Governing Together* (1993).

Among the texts giving an impression of the nature of government in the USA, one could cite T.E. Cronin, *The State of the Presidency* (1975), H. Heclo, *A Government of Strangers* (1977), A. King, ed., *Both Ends of the Avenue* (1983) and R. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (1960). Among the numerous studies of the British cabinet, that of J. Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet* (1962) remains most valuable because of the historical account which it gives. On the part played by committees in the cabinets of a number of western countries, see T.T. McKie and B.W. Hogwood, eds., *Unlocking the Cabinet* (1985). On what were the characteristics of communist executives, see L. Holmes, *Politics in the Communist World* (1986). For a view of the nature of governmental rule in Black Africa, see R.H. Jackson and C.G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (1982).

On the recruitment and career, as well as the role, of ministers, see J. Blondel, *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World* (1985) and J. Blondel and J.L. Thiebault, *The Profession of Cabinet Minister in Western Europe* (1991) as well as B. Headey, *British Cabinet Ministers* (1974).

On the characteristics of coalitions and on the problems they pose, there is now a considerable literature. The pioneering study is that of W. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1962); see also G.M. Luebbert, Comparative Democracy (1986) and, for a summary, A. Lijphart, *Democracies* (1984: 46–66). See also V. Bogdanor, ed., *Coalition Government in Western Europe* (1983).

On the question of the problems facing contemporary executives, see C. Campbell, *Governments under Stress* (1983) and R. Rose, *Understanding Big Government* (1984). A rather old but interesting comparison of the role of government in America and the Soviet Union, is given in Z. Brzezinski and S.P. Huntington, *Political Power USA/USSR* (1963).