

THE PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE

IT'S AT THE HEART OF GOVERNMENT
[BUT WHAT DOES IT DO?]

Practically whenever Canada's Privy Council is mentioned in print, you will see an attempt to describe it in six words: "the coordinating secretariat for the Cabinet" or some such. It is a concept rather more potent than those words make it sound. The Cabinet is a continuing meeting of the Ministers of government; the place where policy, programs and strategy are formulated, and the way in which the Ministers of government arrive at decisions for which they are collectively responsible to Parliament. The Ministers of government — most head departments but some are "without portfolio" — form the Cabinet. Unlike the United States where the President is the executive and the Cabinet simply some of his advisers, in Canada, with its Parliamentary system, the Cabinet is the executive and it holds meetings as such. All Ministers (except the Leader of the Government in the Senate) are elected members of the House of Commons. If the Cabinet loses confidence of that House, it must resign.

For the civil servants — the "officials" of the Privy Council Office — it is a tender place to work and staff members are politically neutral on all issues. They are borrowed from various departments, and to keep them as objective as possible, an official's term at the Privy Council Office generally is limited to two to five years. The exact role of the Privy Council Office and the way the Cabinet works are unclear not only to the general public. The Prime Minister recently thought it worthwhile to have an article prepared on just what it is the Privy Council Office does and how. The article, written by Gordon Robertson, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet, was distributed among the higher echelons of government and presented at the 23rd Annual Meeting of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada.

Mr. Robertson began his career in the Canadian government in 1941 as Third Secretary in the Department of External Affairs. He has also served as Assistant to the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Secretary to the Office of the Prime Minister, Member of the Cabinet Secretariat, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Deputy Minister with the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources, and was Com-

missioner of the Northwest Territories for ten years. He has been Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet since 1963.

Here follows a greatly condensed version of Mr. Robertson's analysis. For anyone who would like the whole text, a limited number of copies are available at this office.

In 1940 Mackenzie King, faced by the pressures the Second World War brought to the Cabinet, decided that Canada had to do what Britain had done in 1914: establish a Cabinet Secretariat. Perhaps Mr. King didn't really decide quite that much. As Arnold Heeny* had pointed out, Mr. King had only the vaguest idea what the Cabinet Secretariat in Britain did. What he really wanted was something to make it more possible for him, as Prime Minister, to cope with the new war-time scale of government operation. The Cabinet Secretariat was grafted onto the Privy Council Office, which had discharged largely formal and legalistic functions since Confederation, and the nature of the Office changed. With it gradually changed the operation of Cabinet government in Canada.

Though none of the fundamentals have changed, Mackenzie King would be astonished and possibly horrified to see where his decision has led. Mr. King was slow to agree even to having an agenda for Cabinet meetings and to the recording of decisions — and even to their temporary communication in writing to Ministers. He would have preferred to hold everything close to his chest to be brought out for consideration as he preferred, with his Ministers taken by surprise and at maximum disadvantage. Today he would find not only the agenda circulated well in advance, but for every meeting a thick dossier of Cabinet memoranda and reports of committees. He would be relieved to know that some of the Prime Minister's advantage had been restored through a system of briefings, to inform him of the main issues in every question, to draw his attention to any differences of view between Ministers or departments, and to suggest implications that required consideration.

* The late Mr. Heeny was the first Secretary to the Cabinet and later Ambassador to the United States.