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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on
Information Policy and Democratic Quality
Bern, 14-15 September 1998**

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INFORMATION POLICY AND DEMOCRATIC QUALITY

1. This meeting involves senior officials from the Centres of government in OECD countries, that is, Cabinet Secretaries, Chiefs-of-Staff or Secretaries-General. It is being held in Bern, Switzerland, at the invitation of the Chancellor of the Confederation. The meeting will include a presentation of the decision-making system in Switzerland, and major government reforms that have been in progress since 1993. This will give participants a unique opportunity to deepen their understanding of the procedures specific to a confederation.

Themes for discussion at the meeting will include:

- Main theme: information policy and democratic quality;
- Sub-theme: the political/administrative interface: the role of the Centre in governmental transitions;
- Final session: decision making for “mega” policies (with cross-sectoral implications).

Information policy and democratic quality

2. Transparency plays a key role in countries’ efforts to improve the capacity of democratic processes and in those of government to identify, undertake or enable effective, efficient and responsive action in the public interest (that is, governance). Member countries are well aware that, by virtue of the greater openness that it affords, transparency can lead to a better implementation of democracy and can bring decision makers (politicians and civil servants) and the public at large closer together. Because greater transparency has the advantage of providing the public with access to better information about decision-making procedures, the different components of a decision and the content of the decision itself, and also about those responsible for that decision, transparency contributes to the much-sought-after improvement in democratic quality. It can thus help to promote a better understanding between decision makers and citizens and engender improved public support for policy decisions.

3. On the other hand, greater transparency can very often require a change in attitudes. The authorities and policy makers work in the public arena; withholding information, which used to be a common basis of power, is becoming a thing of the past; decision makers are easier to identify and are expected to be more frequently accountable. At times, this can create opposition to openness at both the political and administrative levels. One of the aims of the meeting is to consider the strengths and limits of this transparency resulting from Member countries’ information policies.

4. The meeting will provide an opportunity to pool countries’ experiences with regard to information policies (practices, procedures and policies enabling the public to gain access to information held by the authorities) and the impact of transparency on the quality of democracy. Participants will discuss, in particular, the question of which part of government is responsible for overseeing “transparency”, and what role the Centre might play in this respect.

5. Information technologies, whether they are used or not, and their impact (or lack of impact) on transparency and democratic quality, will need to be considered in the course of the discussions.

Political/administrative interface: the role of the Centre in governmental transitions

6. There is a formal distinction between the political and administrative levels of government, the latter being subordinate to the former and executing its decisions. This distinction does not take full account of the reality, which necessitates day-to-day interactions between the different levels of government and decision-making powers in taking and implementing decisions. Depending on the country, these interactions are based on the legal framework, policies and practices which structure and govern the political/administrative interface. This complementarity is more apparent when governments change, some with only limited decision making during the transition period. With increasing globalisation making it essential for government to be constantly present on both the international and the domestic scene, in particular because of the rapid development of communications technologies and especially in countries where governments tend to remain in office for a short term, such a marked decrease in government activity can have serious consequences (policies lacking continuity, responsibilities watered down). The fact is that some policies more than others need to have guaranteed continuity over the longer term, or alternatively need decisions to be taken without unnecessary delay.

7. Participants will examine the case of policies which it would be really damaging to adjourn, pool their experiences of measures that countries have taken to ensure the continuity of such policies, and specify the role played by the Centre during the transition in the necessary political/administrative interface.

Decision making for “mega” policies

8. Member countries have to cope with major issues often affecting multiple levels of government at the same time and which, at the domestic level, encompass several ministerial departments and are usually long-term problems, significant examples being population ageing, the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development, jobs and unemployment. Of decisive importance are effective decision-making and co-ordinating capacities -- which take into account the government's obligation to show breadth and depth of vision, undertake integrated measures and seek public understanding and support -- and the capacities required to ensure that the decisions taken are lastingly applied. The purpose of the session on this question will be to have an initial exploratory discussion with participants aimed at identifying the main problems with which their governments have to contend in managing “mega” policies. The discussions will thus provide some useful guidance for PUMA's work on decision-making capacities over the period 1999-2000, especially in a context of perpetual change and in view of the major issues (cited above) with which the majority of Member countries are faced.