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**THE POLITICAL/ADMINISTRATIVE INTERFACE:  
THE ROLE OF THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT IN POLITICAL TRANSITIONS**

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on  
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## **The political/administrative interface: the role of the Centre of government in political transitions**

### **A. Introduction**

*“The ability to hand power from one administration to the next is an important test of the integrity, health and strength of the institutions of a democratic state”<sup>1</sup>*

1. Member country democracies all have experience of governmental transitions, some of which also involve the more complex transition of a change in the party in power. It is a period of democratic life during which routine habits born of the daily contacts between the political level and the administrative level are disrupted. The outgoing government has slowed down its activity and the new government has not yet taken up office. At the same time, international and national affairs require that decisions be taken and that business return to normal as quickly as possible.

2. The Centre of government, which constitutes the nexus between the political and administrative levels, is one of the crucial elements of a successful transition. In particular, it must ensure that:

- the new government is rapidly in position to lead the country and to carry out its programme;
- the State continues to function satisfactorily during the transition.

3. While there is no doubt that the Centre of government has a decisive role to play in transition periods, several questions do nevertheless arise concerning that role. Where does the Centre derive its legitimacy from? How far can it go in facilitating the handing-over of the management of public affairs? During the transition period, how does it manage and control its momentary influence on the more political aspects of the management of public affairs? To what extent can it ensure that there is adequate objective review of programmes and policies for the incoming government to decide upon?

### **B. The objectives of a successful governmental transition<sup>2</sup>**

4. A governmental transition constitutes a **power vacuum** during which the outgoing government can no longer exercise all of its functions (either because it no longer has all of them or does not wish, out of respect for democracy, to take decisions that would bind its successors) and the incoming government is not yet in full possession of all of its powers.

5. There are many possible **scenarios**. There may be a mere change of personnel, with power still in the hands of the same political formation. This arises when an election returns to power the outgoing majority or coalition but it is considered necessary to bring new blood into the government, or it may be a political manoeuvre to strengthen the government by a change of personnel, or it may be provoked by a resignation. There may be a new government when the election produces a majority or coalition of a

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1. Nicholas d’Ombraïn (former Head, Machinery of Government, Privy Council Office, Canada). Quote from “Canada: Managing Transitions of Government”. SIGMA Document No. 22 entitled: “Management challenges at the centre of government: coalition situations and government transitions”.

2. “As the simultaneous presence of these three conditions -- smoothness, speed, efficiency -- is therefore considered the goal to aim for, the means to achieve this can vary greatly depending on the institutional and political context within which the change occurs”. Guy Carcassone, former Prime Minister’s advisor on parliamentary affairs, France. Quote from the chapter on “France: Managing Transitions of Government”, SIGMA Document No. 22.

political hue different from that of the government previously in power. Also, a change in the holder of power can -- depending on the nature of the country's executive and whether it is a presidential, parliamentary or semi-presidential system -- entail a change in either the sole holder of executive power or, in the case of a bicephalous system, the two holders, sometimes almost simultaneously. This is what happened in France in 1981. Finally, in a bicephalous system, a situation can arise where the two holders of executive power belong to different majorities.

6. The first objective is to ensure a **smooth** transition. This means that the transition should take place in a spirit of democratic co-operation between the outgoing and incoming governments. For example, the outgoing government may, if a situation is urgent, decide to involve the incoming government in finding a solution, given that the new government will have to deal with it later anyway. In some cases, when the transition takes place in a state of confrontation between the political forces involved, there is a risk that the outgoing government will try to keep the incoming government away from the reins of power as long as possible or to prevent it from exercising power rapidly (by rushing through decisions that will bind the future government).

7. Ensuring a smooth transition will also consist in avoiding a disruption of administration. In some countries where the governmental organisation is not fixed and can be modified as the government in power sees fit, and in countries that operate a spoils system, it is important to ensure that the prospect of a change in government does not demobilise the administration during the transition, or render it unable to quickly start working with the new government. It is equally important not to disrupt the structure of government (e.g. the division of ministerial responsibilities) at every change.

8. The second objective is **speed**, for several reasons: political life continues (urgent national and international affairs requiring a rapid official response or the presence of a member of the government); the administration needs to be given directions to continue executing previous decisions or to stop executing them when the policy is ineffective or counter-productive. Long-term or wide-ranging policies involving, as is often the case, a continuum of measures or the complex management of multidisciplinary measures may suffer from an absence of decisions. Finally, as a government's term of office is short, new governments cannot afford to lose time in carrying out their programme or to squander the trust placed in them by the electors.

9. It is important to realise, however, that the duration of the transition does not depend entirely on the Centre and its efforts to shorten it. It may be determined by a minimum interval between the election and the investiture, as in the United States, or by the time it takes to check the results of the elections. It may depend on political circumstances, such as negotiations within a coalition or the formation of a coalition, which cause a delay in the designation of the new members of government.

10. The third objective of a successful transition is **efficiency**. The new government must be able to start executing business very rapidly. It must therefore have the necessary material resources such as suitable premises. It must also have the records of previous government decisions, and master the procedures quickly (new ministers or members of the new administration are not necessarily experts in the procedures of government decision-making or in constitutional law). Finally, as soon as it takes up office a new government must have at its disposal sorted and up-to-date files and advice (urgent matters and priorities, current or pending business, advice given at both the administrative and political levels when files are handed over).

11. The Centre of government has a crucial role to play in achieving each of these three objectives.

### C. Roles of the Centre of government during a governmental transition

12. The Centre of government has a two-fold role: to facilitate the installation of the new government and the departure of the outgoing one; to ensure that the administrative level continues to function, is prepared to work with the new government, and is ready for a dialogue between the political and administrative levels.

13. Beforehand, the Centre of government may have had a role in the **preparation of elections** (assistance to the incumbent government in organising them) and during the **election campaign**, as is the case in some countries. It will be responsible, for example, for recalling the limits on the use of government resources for electoral purposes, such as the ban on using official documents for electoral advertising, and the ban on ministers using public resources and personnel for the purposes of their personal campaign. It will also formulate advice on the government's actions as regards constitutional, legal and traditional rules designed to ensure that democracy is respected during the election campaign.

14. **Assistance to the outgoing government** consists in keeping the administration functioning so that any decisions that the government wishes to take can be implemented. Very often, the outgoing government will have already reduced its activity during the election campaign. Out of respect for democracy, after the election it will confine itself to expediting current business so as not to saddle the new government with irreversible commitments. It may, however, wish to complete implementation of measures which have been scheduled for a long time, and for which it needs the co-operation of the administration. The Centre must therefore ensure that the administration behaves fairly towards the outgoing government. The fact that in some countries the head of the Centre is also the head of the administration facilitates the adoption of instructions setting out the rules to be respected during the transition period, with regard to both the outgoing and incoming government.

15. **Preparing the new government to exercise its functions.** Contacts are necessary between the Centre and the new government which is not yet in place. They may be unofficial at the start but usually become official very rapidly. The administrative level -- for whom contact with the opposition during the election campaign is usually prohibited or strictly limited -- is seldom involved at this stage. These contacts, whether formal or not, provide an opportunity for the Centre to lay the foundations of a relation of trust with the new government. It is during this period that the rules and practices to be followed during the installation of the new administration are recalled (composition and organisation of the government; possibilities of, and limits on, the replacement of civil servants; reminder of the principles governing relations with the administrative level; reminder of the rules limiting the number of ministerial advisers in some countries; decision-making procedures that the incoming government must respect, for example). These rules and advice are sometimes gathered together in small guides or manuals designed to help members of the new administration get to grips with their job.

16. Another of the Centre's roles is to **rapidly enable the new government to take decisions.** In some countries, the Centre has specific responsibility for ensuring that the **written records** relating to previous decisions are transmitted to the incoming government. Sometimes it has the safekeeping of them and in some cases it was created for the very purpose of ensuring that a trace of decisions is kept by a body whose impartiality could not be questioned by political parties. The **"briefings"** or **"notes"** prepared either by the Centre in co-operation with agencies, or by the latter under the co-ordination of the Centre, are extremely useful for analysing the political/administrative interface. The purpose of these documents is as much to give the new government a snapshot -- which will sometimes be critical -- of the situation and to indicate a preliminary list of priorities, as to prepare the administrative level to perform the tasks set by the new government. These documents, which for the sake of convenience we shall call

briefings, may consist merely of a very neutral description of the situation (what has been done, what remains to be done by the government, the implementation steps and a timetable, for example). The new government is given entire responsibility for the decision without any special comment to guide it as to which decision is the appropriate one. It is informed of the areas in which it needs to act, of the varying degrees of urgency with which it will have to intervene, and is briefed on the past context.

17. A more proactive and perhaps constructive attitude on the part of the Centre, towards which some countries are now moving, may consist in giving the administrative level the opportunity, during the transition, to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the policies it is responsible for implementing. Such briefings, co-ordinated by the Centre and supplemented by detailed information on the progress made and the timetable, give the new government an idea as to whether it is useful or not to continue with certain policies. There is a fine line between such assistance and political counselling, from which the Centre usually abstains in order to preserve its neutrality. In any case, the notes should be kept short and there should not be too many of them, so that they can be read by people with little time available.

#### **D. Guidelines for the organisation of the discussion**

18. The Centre's role in the political/administrative interface is sometimes defined very precisely by the texts which set it up, or sometimes it is the outcome of a long evolution of the relations between the political and administrative levels. The same applies to its role during governmental transitions. Sometimes that role is based on a long-established tradition and **rules** (as in Canada, where the question of its role has been addressed since 1957 and the answer to it has been successively improved) or accumulated **experience**. In the latter case, the personality of the person in charge of the Centre is crucial. The personality of that person will also determine whether the Centre's role is momentarily widened to include policy advice to the incoming government.

#### **Issues for discussion**

19. Participants may wish to focus their discussions on the following questions:

- **Is it essential to have a text defining the Centre's role or is it preferable to rely on practice?**
- **What are the limits of the Centre's role during the transition phase?**
- **What are the respective roles of the administrative level and the political level, alongside that of the Centre, in a successful transition?**
- **Much is heard about the negative effects of governmental transitions on policy continuity. Should one not also ask whether transitions offer the Centre an opportunity to evaluate the impact of policies in the light of longer-term interests and commitments, and the relative needs for continuity?**