SCENES FROM THE DEPARTMENTAL COURT

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The Private Secretaries to Ministers are ‘the impresarios of Whitehall; and in their Private Offices the dramas and friction between politics and the machine are theatrically audible (Henderson 2001 [1984]: 1).

Being a PPS is being ‘at the centre of a great and powerful web’ and ‘wading through treacle’ (Interview PPS 14 April 2004).

Introduction: a personal observation

The Frank Stacey Memorial lecture is going to run out of speakers who knew Frank soon. My first academic conference was the Public Administration Committee (PAC) Annual Conference on the 13–15 September 1971, at the University of York and in theory I retire next year. Of the distinguished speakers at that conference, all are retired and several are dead. A generation passes.

I met Frank at that conference. He was the University of Swansea’s representative on the Public Administration Committee and its Honorary Secretary (between 1968 and 1971). Later he was Deputy Chair. He became the Francis Hill Professor of Local Government at the University of Nottingham in 1974. Frank died in October 1977. He is best known for his work on the ombudsman (Stacey 1971 and 1978).[^2]

I do not have many memories of him: tall, grey, well-mannered and the husband of Margaret Stacey, who wrote a fine local community power study of Banbury that I admired as a postgraduate at Oxford. Beyond that – nothing. I remember that he represented an older tradition in the study of public administration with which I had little sympathy. He belonged to a tradition I associated with William Robson: descriptive, reformist and atheoretical. I saw myself as a Young Turk. I was excited by the PAC Conference because it had such luminaries as Ron Brown, John Stewart and Peter Self and discussed such cutting-edge subjects as policy studies and organization theory. It also had Lewis Gunn and Jim Sharpe debating management training in public administration. Some 70 people attended – ‘the majority of those for whom the conference was intended’ (see PAC Bulletin, Number 11 1971: 2). They were exciting times as we explored new ways of studying
public administration. We were the new generation succeeding the Frank Staceys of the public administration world. I intend no disrespect. It was as it should be. One sign of a healthy discipline is its waves of new talent. I hope sitting here tonight are the new Young Turks eager to take over from my generation. I have a sense of travelling full circle because this conference also explores new directions for public administration.

In this lecture, I will offer my contribution to identifying that new direction for public administration theory by arguing, in the first section, for research grounded in interpretive theory and observational fieldwork. However, abstract discussions of theory and method are a cure for insomnia. Such matters only come to life when they are grounded in fieldwork. So, at the heart of my talk is an account of the central secretariat, or the departmental court, of British central government departments. I describe scenes from life at court to show the merits of both interpretation and observation. Finally, I identify some practical questions for practitioners and some new directions for research for academics from my scenes from the departmental court.

**Being there: studying elites**

*Interpretation*

Anthropology or ethnography, the two terms are commonly interchangeable, reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people’s stories from practices, actions, texts, interviews, and speeches. A focus on meanings is the defining characteristic of an interpretive approach to political science. As John Stuart Mill (1969 [1840]: 119–20) remarked:

By Bentham … men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? And by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? The one took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it… Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries… With Coleridge… the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved, was one of the phenomena to be accounted for.
In this lecture, I ask, after Coleridge, ‘what is the meaning of it’, where ‘it’ refers to the working life of the departmental court. I concentrate on meanings, beliefs and practices, not laws and formal rules, correlations between social categories, or deductive models. I look at the beliefs and practices of British senior civil servants and their Ministers.\(^5\)

Observation

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 2) claim ethnography ‘captures the meaning of everyday human activities’, and encourages the researcher to get out there and see what actors are thinking and doing. It is exploratory – ‘unstructured soaking’ (Fenno 1990: 57) – and characterized by deep immersion in social worlds so we can understand day-to-day practices, and how these practices become meaningful. Such soaking encompasses many ways of collecting qualitative data about beliefs and practices. They include historical archives, textual analysis of official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations, even statistical and survey data (see Shore 2000: 7–11). I am not a methodological missionary, but I do want to argue the case for observation as an important addition to the public administration toolkit. Too few students of public administration, whether we are talking of Australia, North America or the United Kingdom include observation among their armoury of research methods.\(^6\)

Ethnography is about ‘thick descriptions’: what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to (Geertz 1973: 9). The everyday phrase is ‘seeing things from the other’s point of view’. The key point is that the ethnographer provides his or her own interpretation of what the informants believe they are up to, so his or her accounts are second or even third order interpretations. It has four characteristics; it is interpretive; it interprets the flow of social discourse; it records that discourse commonly by writing it down; and it is microscopic. It is a soft science that guesses at meanings, assesses the guesses and draws explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. The task of the ethnographer is to set down the meanings that particular actions have for social actors and then say what these ‘thick descriptions’ tell us about the society in which they are found. And this analysis is always incomplete. Ethnography is a science ‘marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate’ – ‘what gets better is the precision with which we vex each other’.\(^7\)

To write a story that vexes the reader, I draw on three sources of information: ‘the pattern of practice, talk, and considered writing – the first is the most reliable, the second is the
most copious and revealing and the third is the most difficult to interpret’ (Oakeshott 1996: x).

Oakeshott will turn in his grave if I describe this approach as triangulation, but my account is based on these three sources of information. On ‘practice’, I observed the Private Office of two Ministers and three permanent secretaries for two days each, totalling some 120 hours. I also shadowed two Ministers and three permanent secretaries for five working days each, totalling some 300 hours of fieldwork. On ‘talk’, I had repeat interviews with: nine permanent secretaries (2 x 2-hour taped and transcribed), three secretaries of state and three Ministers (1 x 2-hour taped and transcribed); and 19 other officials (1 x 1-hour taped and transcribed), totalling 67 hours of interviews. On ‘considered writing’, I had copies of speeches and public lectures; committee and other papers relevant to the meetings I observed; and newspaper reports. I told everyone I would not write up the research during the life of the 2001–5 Parliament. One of the advantages of not publishing straight away is that I also had several insider accounts of the period on which to draw. I also calculated that everyone would have a different job when I told my story, thus minimizing if not removing any political sensitivities surrounding the events I describe.

My interviews and fieldwork observations are for citation but not for attribution without permission. I interviewed three female ministers and two female permanent secretaries. There were so few women that if I give the person’s gender, in effect, I identify them. So, I use the male pronoun throughout. The Private Offices were more equally divided between male and female and with 20 interviews, so it does not compromise a person’s identity if I use the correct gender. I anticipated that at least some parts of my story would have to be anonymous. I chose three Departments similar in size and status, so I could talk about the composite Minister, Department, or Permanent Secretary and remain plausible. Had I sought to draw a composite based on Departments as unlike as the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Department for Work and Pensions, the result would have been implausible. I conducted the interviews in 2002. The fieldwork was carried out in 2003. There were several repeat interviews and occasional visits in 2004. It is an example of multi-site or ‘yo-yo fieldwork’ (Wulff 2002).

When I cannot attribute a quote, and consistent with protecting the anonymity of the individual, I give the date of the interview and indicate the position held by the individual – minister, senior civil servants, member of a private office, and so on. All such information is from a taped interview. In every case, there will be at least three individuals who are possible sources for the quote.
I supplement this fieldwork with the usual primary sources and with the several insider accounts now available. Also, nowadays, senior civil servants speak in public regularly. Moreover, the speeches are easily available from the Internet. I attended many lectures and seminars under the Chatham House rule, which offered the opportunity to hear many senior public figures speaking, often frankly, and off the record. I found this combination of talk and considered writing a valuable primary source, which I recommend to colleagues. Throughout, whether drawing on my fieldwork or other primary sources, I focus on the views of insiders because I am trying to describe their world through their eyes.

One of the more stubborn problems in writing up observational fieldwork is how to turn messy day-to-day experiences into a considered written account. Van Maanen (1988: 35) declares ‘there is no way of seeing, hearing, or representing the world of others that is absolutely, universally valid or correct’. On a previous occasion, I told a chronological story based on the engagement diary about a day in the life of a Minister (Rhodes 2007). On this occasion, I do not provide a chronological narrative. Instead, I have written scenes and dialogue. Scenes are story segments that I use as building blocks to develop specific themes. The scenes are always in the offices of the central secretariat, written from the point of view of and sometimes in the words of its inhabitants, and cover moments in time not days or weeks. Dialogue refers to reciprocal conversations, sometimes in the form of semi-structured interviews but also, during the observational fieldwork, they were part of my everyday conversations at the office. There is no unfolding storyline or character development as in a narrative.

I present dialogue from the interviews in italics. Scenes from the fieldwork notebooks (FWN) are in roman font. To show that my scenes are plausible, and to guard against the criticism that I have picked only juicy quotes from my interviews and fieldwork notebooks, I cite other insider accounts. Most of these citations are in the endnotes and are illustrative, not comprehensive. Quotes in the text are attributed as usual. In this way, I can follow my own advice and compare observed practice (from my fieldwork), talk (from interviews and conversations), and considered writing (from autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, speeches and lectures). Also, readers always know my sources.

I triangulate my sources of information to increase confidence in my observation (Sanjek 2000: 281). I also report such details as the number and length of interviews and the total hours of observation for the same reason (Yanow 2006). Finally, I provide multiple quotes to demonstrate a point. Such detail is endemic in ethnographic fieldwork; it is a defining characteristic of ‘thick descriptions’.
‘The natives are hospitable’: the story so far

The Private Office has not attracted much attention. As Sir Nicholas Henderson (2001 [1984]: xvi) observes: ‘I do not think that widespread ignorance of the role of the Private Office matters. On the contrary, I think it is better that way’. Of course many will know the famous quote from Richard Crossman (1975: 618):

Apart from the Permanent Secretary, the other main feature of the Ministry from my point of view was the Private Office. Before I arrived I had not appreciated its importance. … Under George Moseley it was a good solid Rover of a Private Office, under John Delafons it was a Rolls Royce.

Most Ministers over the past 50 years find a page or so in their memoirs for the Private Office. Most limit their observations to their Principal Private Secretary (PPS) and their immediate Private Office. Patrick Gordon Walker (1970: 67) bears out Crossman’s views on the importance of the Private Office; ‘essential to proper control of a Department’ (see also Morrison 1964: 322–3). Geoffrey Howe (1994: 395) described his PPS as ‘crucial’ and the job as ‘infinitely varied’, requiring ‘the utmost personal sensitivity and political shrewdness’. The PPS would have an ‘intuitive sense’ of what the Secretary of State would want, yet would know ‘just when he could not safely rely on his own judgement’. Ministers in less exalted Departments differ but little. Michael Heseltine (2000: 189) considers ‘an efficient private office… one of the most important steps for a new Minister to take’.

Ministers under New Labour offer but minor variations on these themes. Initially David Blunkett (2006: 17, 19, 319) grumbled about the rapid turnover of staff, their lack of secretarial skills, their failure to be methodical with his tapes, and lapses of clarity in his diary entries. In the words of Round the Horn, he was a right ‘gruntfuttock’. But he ended by describing his DfES Private Office as a ‘really tremendous bunch’ and the Home Office as ‘a first-class team’, praising their commitment, hard work and long hours.

As well as a consensus about the importance of the office, there is also much agreement about its role. It exists to organize the Minister’s life and, according to Jary (2004: 15) it acts as a ‘bridge’ between the Minister and the Department. Or, as James (1999: 35) puts it, the Private Secretary must ‘face both ways without seeming two-faced’: ‘He must explain the demands of the Department to the Minister and the political needs of his Minister to other officials.’
Richard Crossman’s (1975: 21) claim that the Private Secretary’s job is ‘to make sure the Minister … doesn’t let the side or himself down’ rings true to this day. In pursuit of this goal, the tasks of the Private Office are many and varied: it keeps the diary, makes appointments, provides the papers for meetings, takes notes at the meetings, arranges visits at home and aboard and accompanies the Minister on such visits. It inducts the Minister into the ways of the Department and continues to act as a source of information about what is going on in the Department and elsewhere and an early warning system about possible snags. There is also a Private Secretaries’ network. Gordon Walker (1970: 67) praises its work because it ‘facilitates and short circuits the dispatch of business’. So, the PPS can ring a ministerial colleague’s PPS to pass on his Minister’s ‘observations’. As Henderson (2001: 157–8) observes, the network of Private Offices is ‘one of the means by which the policies of the different Departments of State are coordinated’.

There is even a consensus about the main problem: dual loyalty. According to Bruce-Gardyne (1986: 35), the Private Secretary, ‘in Whitehall folklore, owes his first allegiance to his Minister’. But folklore and practice can diverge. Some claim their primary allegiance: ‘is to support and execute the policies of the Government. If our Minister’s policies are in conflict with those of the Government, then it is the Government we must back’ (Bruce-Gardyne 1986: 36, emphasis in the original).

The Janus-faced nature of the job comes out in other ways. Michael Heseltine (2000: 188) refused ‘to see [his] private office as a training ground for junior civil servants’. In a similar vein, David Blunkett (2006: 82) complained ‘the Private Office is a training scheme for people to dib in and out of’. In short, the subsidiary function of speaking for the Department, and the even lesser role of training civil servants, can supplant the primary function of serving the Minister.

The Cabinet Office’s Centre for Management and Policy Studies produced a handbook on working with Ministers. It describes the Private Office as ‘essential to managing the Minister’s working life’; ‘instrumental in maintaining good working relationships around the Minister’, ‘exhilarating places to work, providing an unequalled high altitude view of the work of a government Department’; and ‘valuable allies for any top official working around the Minister’ (Jary 2004: 18).

There are various problems with this account of the Private Office. It focuses on one position and one part of the ministerial support system. There is more to the Private Office than the Secretary of State’s Private Office and his or her PPS. Commonly, it also comprises ministerial or special advisers (Spads) who have their own Private Secretary; the
Private Offices of Ministers of State; the Permanent Secretary’s Private Office, and some permutation of Parliamentary, Correspondence, and Business Support units. So, one Department had eight Ministers and about 80 people supporting them. It would be more accurate to talk of a Department’s central secretariat because there are several private offices and often they have shared support units.

The Permanent Secretary will head the central secretariat with the Principal Private Secretary as the Number Two. Under the PPS are several Private Secretaries (PS) and Assistant Private Secretaries (APS). The internal organization of the Private Office matches the functional silos of the Department. Most ministries are divided into functional directorates, headed by a Director-General (DG). Each PS will be responsible for several policies and problems coming up from the DGs. Each DG is a member the Department’s Management Board (MB), chaired mainly by the Permanent Secretary. Its role is to provide strategic direction and advise Ministers on allocating resources and monitoring performance. The Permanent Secretary’s Private Office services the Board.12 There is a Diary Secretary for the Secretary of State and in each Private Office.

For the civil servants who work in them, the differences in roles and processes between the various Private Offices are slight. The Secretary of State’s Private Office is larger, more prestigious, more pressurized. One PS who had worked in both a Minister’s and a Permanent Secretary’s Private Office commented:

> In terms of ways of working, they are similar in many ways, feeding things in, feeding things back into policy. Lots of meetings. In that sense very similar, the difference being that we are involved at an early stage in the policy development.

[PS 20/5/02]

Apart from being busier there was one other difference: the Minister’s Office was noisier than the Permanent Secretary’s Office.

Below, I describe the roles and responsibilities of the central secretariat but this focus is also potentially misleading. I will argue the central secretariat is better seen as a ‘departmental court’. I use this phrase to draw attention to the beliefs and practices of the court: to the court politics surrounding Ministers and senior civil servants, to the competition between Ministers, and to the tensions within the court and with the rest of the Department and between civil servants and Spads. My aim is to shift the focus from positions and offices to relationships both inside and outside the Department. We already know that Ministers, permanent secretaries and their Departments have to manage their relations across Whitehall, especially with central agencies such as No. 10 and the Treasury.
The departmental court is central to that exercise. But existing accounts pay much less attention to the role of the court in managing relationships within the Department. Most Departments are complex organizations. They have two or more Ministers of State and several Director-Generals heading major units. The departmental court is a key part of the organizational glue holding the Department together.

Scenes from the court

I focus on five facets of the everyday life of the departmental court: recruitment and training, internal management, communication protocols, networking, and the language that underpins everyday life. J. G. Ballard (2006) talks of ‘willed madness’ in modern life. What we have in Whitehall is ‘willed ordinariness’. I chose these topics because, as I will show, they lie at the heart of the willed ordinariness of everyday life. I use specific scenes and dialogues to reveal the court’s beliefs and practices. So, I focus on the departmental court and present each Department’s view of itself and of ‘outsiders’, not the outsiders’ view of the Department.

Recruitment and training

Recruitment

All discussions about recruitment to the Private Office focus on the Principal Private Secretary (PPS) and the other Private Secretaries (PS). In effect that means it focuses on the careers of fast stream civil servants; the best young talent in the Department. The posting is prized because it is an understood route to the top. The answer to the question what is the best job for an aspiring Fast Stream recruit is:

It’s the Principal Private Secretary. I mean why do you join the Civil Service – lots of reasons but one of them might be to be right at the heart of the machine, to really play a role in making this great thing work and that idea has never gone away. I think this is the plum job in the Department and when I got a shout at it my CV was being written within moments of seeing the advert. [PPS 14/4/04]

Selection is through the usual channels.

I had an interview in the first stage after a couple of weeks with the Permanent Secretary and the Director from the personnel mob. They will have then, I imagine, produced a shorter list and those people came to [the Secretary of State] a week or so later for interview and [the SoS] selected the candidate. [PPS 14/4/04]
Michael Heseltine (2000: 189) similarly reports that his Permanent Secretary selected three or four of the best candidates in the Department and he chose one.\textsuperscript{16}

The PPS plays the key role in recruiting to the rest of the court. His advice will be sought by both the Permanent Secretary and the Minister (Henderson 2001: 191). Recruiting fast streamers to the post of junior private secretaries poses some problems. Although most see it as an attractive position and as a stepping stone to promotion, few stay more than 12 months. In one Office, no one had been there for more than six months. Because of my yo-yo visits, I noticed the turnover of staff, with few staying more than 18–24 months. The problem is of the civil service’s own making. The PS posts are offered to:

‘fast streamers’, you know the graduate programme, who do a year in each job. They tend to want to move on. You do this job for say 6 or 7 months, you get used to it, you excel after that, you get really good at it, you hit the year mark, you reach ‘burn out’, you think, ‘sod this I am ready for [promotion], where I will earn the same money without all this overtime?’ [PS 10/4/03]

However, recruitment to junior posts in the Private Office can be more difficult. One PS seeking two replacements said it was a very difficult recruitment processes, because there is no one interested in working here. [PS 14/11/02]. The hours are often long, the pay was never good (especially for Central London), and career expectations are much lower, even non-existent. When I asked a Diary Secretary if there was a career structure for her, the answer was ‘probably not’. [DS 9/4/03]

Training

The traditional pattern of training for fast stream civil servants is a series of postings to challenging jobs; learning on the job. In each posting the high-flyer has a mentor, usually informal, commonly a Principal (now Grade 6 or 7 Deputy Director or Team Leader).

The fast stream is dead lucky because you get all this free attention from senior colleagues. They tend to get taken under the wing of a senior person every day, and that happened to me a lot. [PPS 14/4/04]

It is changing, combining traditional socialization with more formal training. One PPS was keenly aware of the challenges of blending old and new.

They sent me off to do an MBA at Imperial College, which was a very good experience for me followed by a short stint working on HR strategy and then I got promoted to the Senior Civil Service when I led one of the reviews of the
Department and then for 18 months after that I project managed the implementation programme. [PPS 14/4/04]

He felt the culture in which he had been socialized was:

much more a new public management [NPM] one. Most of my more senior colleagues have been schooled through the 80s and those people have traditionally always been through policy jobs and have ended up being the mandarins we all recognize, but I’m not a classic old-fashioned mandarin. [PPS 14/4/04]

He resisted any simple NPM versus mandarin dichotomy, admitting he had some of the features of a mandarin: ‘and as I get older I seem to have more’. Nonetheless he insisted:

There is already an understanding that to be an effective civil servant, he’s not in it just to be clever, you also have to manage the processes around the delivery of policy. [PPS 14/4/04]

When I summarized his account as ‘twin track’ training, combining manager and mandarin, he commented ‘I think it’s very fair’. [PPS 14/4/04]

This twin track training inculcates several values.

I think there’s a certain thing about incrementalism. I think there is something about seniority. [PPS 14/4/04]

I am completely, completely committed to transformational stuff, but what I’m not interested in is just knocking the walls down and building something from scrap. I don’t think we need to do that. [PPS4/4/04]

So, civil service values include incrementalism, respect for seniority, and a sense of tradition. Socialization is not about such skills as drafting, ‘it’s all about judgment and stuff like that; it’s those skills’. [PPS4/4/04]

The enthusiasm and commitment of the PPS was as obvious as it was unfeigned. So, I had to point out that:

Some of your colleagues in other Departments look back on the Private Office experience with more mixed feelings than you are expressing. Several say it was much better working out in the Divisions or a DG because you got a concrete policy job to work on. The difficulty with the Private Office is you are always juggling several balls at the same time and you never see anything from it. Does that strike a chord?

He agreed ‘it would be crazy for someone to spend 30 years in a Private Office’, but in a Private Office you get the challenge of ‘juggling all those balls and seeing the political reality of how things work’. There is a ‘dealing room flavour’ and ‘it’s no accident that
Private Office has been open plan for a lot longer than other bits of the Department’. Above all, and this point is made by everyone who works in the Private Office, ‘there’s a certain rush to that and a certain excitement working with the political side of things’.

[PPS 14/4/04] But you have to be careful: In this job you flit from one thing to another and you have to make sure you finish each one’ [FWN 13/11/05]

Nonetheless, most PSs looked forward to their next posting. They had clear ideas about what they preferred. The wanted a secondment outside the civil service to a big company, a stage in Brussels, a service delivery job in an agency, or a posting to a policy division, where, with any luck, they would be on a Bill team:

Civil servants love legislation, despite the fact that it’s incredibly time-consuming and in most cases does not achieve a great deal. But it’s seen as a high status thing to do within the civil service, one of the classic jobs, you work on a Bill team, you prepare legislation, policy becomes law. [PS 26.4.02]

So, training may be informal but it includes a clear sense of career progression.

Training for other support staff is focused. One Diary Secretary reported – ‘I had never done any sort of PA, PS work’. Nevertheless she received no training ‘strictly on PA work’ although ‘I have done training within the Department on various things; for example ‘I had had all the IT training’. [DS 9/4/03] Learning on the job remains the main form of training:

coming into this job I didn’t have a proper induction, I didn’t have a proper handover so it was basically relying on my own experience as well as the contacts that I had here. [DS 20/5/02]

This comment also applies to some PSs in some Departments:

Q. Was there any kind of induction process for you when you arrived?
A. Not really, no.

Q. Did you overlap with [your predecessor] for any period?
A. For about a couple of days. [PPS 21/5/02]

Not everyone was happy with this informal process:

I don’t think that you get a huge amount of leeway really. If you start making mistakes and people start frowning and saying, you know, ‘What’s going on?’ And there is just so much to do here. There is just so much to do. So no I don’t think I got an induction. [PPS 21/5/02].

So, for most members of the Private Office, recruitment and training had changed but little, although there were signs of change for the posts of PS and PPS. There was to be a broader pool from which the PSs would be recruited. The new generation of fast streamers had
‘twin track’ training combining a formal management education with mandarin style learning from regular postings.

**Internal management**

Managing the departmental court is the unglamorous but essential part of the task. The PPS ‘has management responsibility’ for the departmental court. The extent to which its ‘bits are stitched together’ varies. The court can be in separate rooms, not an open-plan office, and even spread over different floors and sections of a large building. The PPS’s job is to make it ‘a coherent whole’ and to make sure ‘all of us have got one purpose here’, which is ‘to serve the Department and to serve the Minister. [PPS 14/404]

The internal management task is burdensome. For example, one PPS had direct line responsibility for 16 people and signed off on another 60. Anyone who has taken the performance appraisal of staff seriously, rather than ‘ticked and flicked’, will recognize the demands of such numbers. To compound the difficulties of the job, the several constituent units have demanding roles. Few will have an interest in the Business Support Unit, essential though its financial tasks may be, but the Parliamentary Branch is another matter. It manages the Department’s link with Parliament. The workload is often mundane routine but it is always large; routinely, the Secretary of State will get about twelve written parliamentary questions a night in the red box (see below). All too regularly it will be the locus of frenetic activity. So, when I talk of the management responsibilities of the PPS and about the Private Office and its attendant units coordinating policy, resolving internal conflicts and managing its external environment, I am talking about the heart of the Departmental machine; about a mini-version of the central capability around the Prime Minister. I try to give a flavour of life in the Office by looking at the role of the Permanent Secretary in the court, relationship in the Office, and some of the internal problems.

*The role of the Permanent Secretary*

The Permanent Secretary is the boss, and everybody knows it. Only the Secretary of State has an equivalent aura, and that depends on the personality of the Secretary of State. Not all are a commanding presence. Ministers of State know their place, and it does not include getting offside with the Permanent Secretary. There are exceptions; there are no invariant rules in these matters. Folklore tells you about previous Ministers and Permanent Secretaries and their foibles and ‘unfortunate’ behaviour. But the incumbents are seen through rose-coloured spectacles. One PS can speak for many; ‘he is just so easy to work
for’ [FWN 13/11/05]. When asked about the Permanent Secretary, the first response is to say they are ‘nice’. One Diary Secretary (DS) used the term ‘nice’ six times when talking about her Permanent Secretaries. However, when we returned to the subject, she found there were things she disliked about them: forgetful and, as she warmed to the task, she added arrogant. Other senior civil servants were not spared. They were ‘gradist’ treating ‘the rest of us are mere minions and scullery maids of the office’. The Private Office ‘don’t give a tinker’s bloody cuss what grade they are’ as long as there is a ‘person out there that can give me the information that I need’. [DS25/4/02]

Even the PPS can suffer intimations of rank. I witnessed one scene in which the Permanent Secretary described the PPS as ‘the Minister’s representative on earth’. It was said with a smile, but like many flippant remarks, it was double edged. The phrase recognizes his standing while reminding the PPS that he is the [Permanent Secretary’s] subordinate. In turn, the PPS commented that the [Permanent Secretary] sometimes ‘takes his frustrations with the Minister out on me’. [PPS 10/3/03]. It is probably inevitable in a bureaucracy with a defined hierarchy that people will be reminded of their place in the scheme of things.

However, life in the court is mainly informal:

Everyone talks across the desk. It is very informal. I think that’s how it works out there as well (referring to the rest of the court) [PPS 14/4/04]

For example, everyone called the Permanent Secretary by his first name when in the Private Office. There is no formal roster of duties. They arrange cover for the Secretary of State informally between themselves. [PPS 14/4/04].

What the Private Office can forget is the impression they make on the rest of the Department. They may be informal and relaxed around the Permanent Secretary or the Minister but other officials are not. Some are intimidated. The surroundings are impressive. They see the Permanent Secretary irregularly. They sit bird-like, perched on the edge of their seat, rubbing their hands together, and expressing tension. Sometimes the Private Office jokes about its standing. So, in one scene, the PS jokingly answers the phone with: ‘Hello, we’re scary; we’re the Permanent Secretary’s Office’. He’s right, and it’s no joke.

**Managing the court**

The Permanent Secretary runs the Department, the PPS manages the court. Both the PSS and the PSs have to cope with this internal management tasks on top of their primary role of looking after the Minister or the Permanent Secretary. One found the demands of being a manager frustrating and vented at some length.
I find [management] the most challenging bit. That’s the bit that I worry about. Managing [the Office] out there is hugely difficult, given the volume of work. The core tasks of the job have to sit alongside your management responsibility. I know exactly what I ought to be doing to be the perfect manager. And short of sacrificing my future health, I physically can’t do that; for example, finding time to sit down and have formal ‘round the table’ meetings. Or knowing there is a particular document on the [internal reform], which everybody has received a copy of, which I ought to be sitting down and talking to them about. Because of time pressures it’s impossible to do that. I have to make sure that I have some kind of substitute for it, which is making sure that wherever I can, I give them feedback on how they are doing. I make sure we observe the formal processes, although to be honest, even now it is a struggle. None of them have got completed [performance appraisals] although they all have objectives. ... That side is really hard to do justice to. And it’s a particular struggle in this [Private Office] compared to other Private Offices in that I am the sole manager of the unit, and I am also the Private Secretary. In other Offices, the Private Secretary will manage two more junior people [APSs] who then manage the most junior people. And the burden of trying to make sure that [the recruits] develop as they should when they are both very new to the job and need simple things explaining to them and need to know how [the Department] operates, why they’re here, what the bigger picture is? I mean it just sends me spare sometimes because I spend, the core day helping [the Permanent Secretary] or answering the phone or shuffling papers. If I am spending time with them, then when do I do the notes of meetings, when do I do the stuff that [the Permanent Secretary] wants me to do? It’s quite difficult. And the [internal reforms]? What difference does the [internal reform] make to you in your job? Trying to bring that alive to people. It’s pretty impossible, to be honest. [PS 14/11/02]

This commentary sees the Permanent Secretary’s Private Office as a separate part of the court. Some PPSs had a different view.

We should be looking at ourselves as a team and as a management outfit and talking about how we get together. You see it is important to the way I run it, I think that the whole Private Office thing comes together in this office, and in many ways comes together in my seat, I think it’s a bit like jazz. [PPS 14/4/04]

His metaphor of the Private Office as a jazz band that must allow, even encourage, solos while remaining a coherent ensemble is an illuminating one.
There’s an old-fashioned way of running a Private Office and I’ve seen it, and I’ve worked with Principal Private Secretaries who’ve done this – you control everything. You can do that. You can do it but I think it’s a suboptimal way to do it. In a modern world where you’ve got all these different bits of information lying around, especially when you’ve got a switched on Secretary of State like this one, it is desperately suboptimal. Instead what I want to say to colleagues is ‘I understand it’s a bit frightening, it’s a bit brinky, but there are a lot of things going on that I can’t see. I’m going to sit here and I’m going to say to you “Let’s all play this game together and let’s jam together and what we get at the end will sound good”. You’ve got to trust me to be the one in the middle and if people don’t trust me then it will break down.’ And that goes back to what I said about my skill with relationships. [PPS 14/4/04]

However, this PPS was the only one who so described the Private Office and his tasks. Others had a more circumscribed view, focusing mainly on the needs of the Secretary of State or the Permanent Secretary, not internal management. Individual Private Offices could become isolated: ‘I move from my desk to the loo, to the kitchen, to my desk’ [PS 14/11/02]. The PS ‘sticks her head down and ignores you’. The PPS worries that ‘people need to realize we are all part of the same team’ (Departmental induction video).

Some local difficulties
As in any Office there are tensions. While I was there they revolved around the role of the PS, and the culture of long hours.

The Private Secretary
Most PPSs agreed there was a problem with the rapid turnover of PSs:

We’re trying to make it longer now. There’s been a policy until relatively recently of getting young, whizzy ‘fast streamers’ in, who have been placed here rather than through the Department’s internal advertising scheme. I have moved away from that and said that we will recruit through the advertising scheme. Which apart from anything else means you can fish in a wider pool and you give opportunity to other people who might not normally think about coming into Private Office. I’ve also stipulated that I want people staying here longer, so 18 months or two years. [PPS 10/8/03]
One PS suggested she was the equivalent of supply teachers, who irritated the long-stay members of the Private Office with their views about how the Office really ought to work.

*They always have the knowledge that you are going to go and there is going to be another one comes through. So you know you are just passing through the [Private Office] and they are permanent and you are not. Which I don’t think is very healthy and is a big barrier.* [PS 10/4/03]

Others are less temperate:

*Q. How irritating is it to have all these young men flying through every 18 months to two years? You’ve had 17; it must have got irritating on occasion?*

*A. The eager, maniacal, arrogant, little horrors.* [DS 25/4/02]

*It is not confined to the PS:*

*‘There is a tension between the Private Secretary, Diary Secretary half, and the clerical correspondence half (of the departmental court).’* [PPS 14/4/04]

The PS side of the court refer to the ‘corres girls’ and they are not being nice. The correct title should be ‘Correspondence Managers’. When I ask about allocating mail, I am told the ‘corres girls’ have a list of the subjects covered by each PS but ‘they ask all the bloody time’. The ‘corres girls’ reply ‘That’s not the way it’s done’. [PS 10/4/03]

Such tensions are all too common – a case of ‘so it goes’. However the problems around the PS are more intractable. It is not simply that they come and go but some, during their short stay, never fit in. I saw one PPS struggle. The scene is a mistake that will seem minor to an outsider but mistakes undermine the rationale of the Office. Papers had gone to the Permanent Secretary for the meeting but not to the rest of the Department’s Management Board. The PPS was upset: ‘whenever things go wrong I feel terrible not just because I like to do things right’ but because ‘I am thinking all the time about not letting him down’. I asked if that she received any mentoring – no. There was no regular monitoring or appraisal while learning the job. The PPS was learning the preferences of the Permanent Secretary and trying to win his confidence. It seemed obvious to me that the PPS was not succeeding.

The PPS commented that ‘there are people who have been very close to [the Permanent Secretary]’, who are ‘finding it hard to let go of that personal relationship’, so ‘they service the [Permanent Secretary] directly’. In other words, the Diary Secretary went direct to the Permanent Secretary and ignored the PPS. On a couple of occasions, the DS simply refused to do what the PPS asked. The PPS was ‘only just beginning to relax’ and to act on the problem; ‘I have set up some team building events’. The PPS’s confidence was
shaken: ‘I do have access to him, and I can put something in the diary if the (DS) will let me’ When I asked about her successes in the job, she um-ed and ah-ed before saying ‘I guess I have established myself as Private Secretary’. [PPS 21/5/02]

By this time I knew everyone in the Office well. We nattered about this and that, including ‘teamwork’; the preferred, understated euphemism for the Office’s little local difficulties. No one was prepared to criticize the PPS. And no one helped. The PPS was flailing and failing, so everyone else backed off. The body language was stiff. Much was said with glances between desks. The language was determinedly polite. The Private Office coped by keeping its distance. When the PPS asked if everyone had had a lunch break, they all said ‘yes’, but none had and she must have known that. At one point, I asked her why her desk faced the wall instead of the Office. The next day she had turned the desk to face the Office, and there was a deal of muttering. Distance had been breached. Now the glances between desks had to be rationed. When I returned to this Private Office on a repeat visit, the PPS was gone. Why? She had done the usual stint in the Private Office and returned to the Department. It was a short stint and rapid return.

Such problems can prompt drastic action. Another Private Office member commented, ‘We have had two horrors’, referring to Private Secretaries. So,

We call ‘total honesty sessions’. You basically shut the door and it’s ‘no holes barred’, no recrimination, no repercussion and everybody gets it off their chest. They say ‘I can’t stand what you do and the way you do it.’ And the times we’ve had to do it with some of the Private Secretaries, it actually worked, and some of the people that we’ve done it with I am still friends with. [DS25/4/03]

The evil thought crossed my mind that some Deans I had known would benefit from similar sessions.

Long hours’ culture

The entrenched culture of long hours has repercussions for recruitment, training and morale.17

It’s the culture of the [Private Office]. You can’t, you couldn’t, it’s so busy, the volume of business within the [Private Office], you couldn’t work on a 9–5 basis.

You just couldn’t. [DS 20/5/02]

Long hours and the related stress are harder to manage at the lower end of the departmental hierarchy:
When I was up here before it was stressful and I remember when, just before Christmas, I went home and I was very upset because I just found it so stressful and people had been ringing me up and had been talking in this rapid way to me about things I didn’t understand – it was always stressful. I was always aware that if I got something wrong it would be damaging, it would be embarrassing, people would shout. So when I came back I was ready for all that again. I find it a breeze actually.

One PPS offered a couple of reasons for this change. First, ‘It’s probably also something to do with me being a bit older and a bit more confident’. Second, he has ‘more clout. I mean nobody messes with me now’. As a result, ‘If you ask my wife how do I seem she would say that I seem completely relaxed. I sleep well and everything is fine’.

Others are not so calm.

I find I will have physiological reactions to the stress sometimes. I will have weeks where I will have awful skin and my heart rate doesn’t want to go down. Yesterday it was [The Secretary of State] being in a bad mood. And that’s stressful just because the service element of the job comes in. None of us knew how to make him feel better about his day.

One DS works ‘say 9 am to 7 pm. I enjoy the job. I enjoy the work. I have no kids. I have a flexible husband’. There are rewards. She enjoys working with the Secretary of State; ‘I’ve had the good fortune of working with five Secretaries of State who I have got on with and seem to be able to bear me.’

But the novelty wears off:

I have done a year-and-a-half, and you get ‘burn out’ in the job. Meeting [the Secretary of State] or the Chancellor or the Prime Minister has worn off so then the hard work kicks in and sometimes you feel like ‘I don’t want to be in work at 8:00 am because I will have to sit and listen to [work colleague]. You know it’s a very negative attitude but the novelty has worn off.

When I asked about their social life, the responses were almost identical.

Social life? I have not lost friends, but I have friends who are exhausted with saying, ‘Let’s go out Wednesday’, and me saying, ‘Yes’, and ringing them up 20 minutes before we are to go out saying, ‘It’s absolutely no way I can make it to the cinema. Absolutely no way.’

I mean that’s the worst side of it, I mean you ‘pack in’ a social life.
For members of the Private Office, it is hard to strike a decent work–life balance. They leave:

My partner is pregnant. We are expecting our first baby in a month and I knew that I wouldn’t physically be able to do these hours and have a family. [APS 21/5/02]

The clerical staff works fewer hours; ‘I don’t class it as a long hours culture’ [Clerk 3/11/02]. Core hours are normally 10–12 and 2–4. They can make up the rest on flexitime. Some have part-time jobs – bingo caller three nights a week. One is a martial arts expert who has appeared in cage fighting on TV. His prowess is cause of much Private Office hilarity; they get a kick out of his Warholian 15 minutes of fame. But the culture of long hours affects this group as well. An Assistant PS left home at 6.30 am and did not get back until 9 pm. He lived some way out because ‘it’s just too damned expensive’ to live in London. [APS 21/5/02]. One DS explained she had one early evening a week, leaving at 5 pm but commented ‘you just can’t plan anything’. Most get the weekends free but many, including the DS, take work home. [DS 20/5/02].

So the Department court may be an exciting place to work but it is also exacting for those who fail and for those with families. One Permanent Secretary told his Private Office ‘Go home some of you, I don’t want a long hours culture in [Rod’s] book’. The remark simply confirmed its existence. And no one left.

Communication protocols

The departmental court may be a forcing ground for some high-flyers, some of the time, but for most of its inhabitants, most of the time, the work is boring. The PSs know it: ‘This is so boring’. [FWN 13/11/05]. Everyone works long hours. The Minister is never unattended. Most of the work is some form of communication: mail, papers and meetings. It is routine because the aim is to make sure everything runs as smoothly as possible. The maxim is ‘no surprises’. To secure this outcome, Ministers have to move seamlessly from meeting-to-meeting, engagement-to-engagement, and topic-to-topic. The pace is frenetic with barely enough time to read, let alone digest, briefings. The diversity is also breathtaking. The Minister and Permanent Secretary have to be in the right place at the right time and with the right papers and keeping them happy is the cardinal virtue. Administrative protocols, or the accepted codes of procedure and etiquette, are the tools of the trade. Some are formalized and written down. Some exist as videos. Some are handed down orally as court traditions. The printed word remains the preferred medium of communication in the everyday life of the departmental court. [19] I focus on the
communication protocols of all three Departments. It is a focus the Private Office would recognize:

*I am a glorified postbox and I’m here for communication. I am just churning through the paper.* [PS 14/11/02]

I cover in order: the diary, the red box, correspondence, telephone calls, meetings and advice. They are all integral to the managing the court. I provide evidence of each, arguing they are the tools by which Departments domesticate their everyday life in the goldfish bowl that is modern politics.

**Diary**

The traditional Diary Secretary (DS), sometimes nowadays called Diary Manager (DM), is a key player in keeping everyone happy. They regulate access to Ministers and the Permanent Secretaries. Some DSs had been in post for twenty years. Some moved with their Minister and Permanent Secretary. They know what he wants before he wants it. The diary rules, so the DS is in a nodal position. As one PS observed:

*I’ve always thought, from the minute I started in Private Office, the Diary Secretary is probably the most important person in that office because if the diary is wrong the whole day collapses.* [PS 20/5/02]

This view is shared by the PPS:

*They are important. I’ve got a slightly old-fashioned Diary Secretary. I think that’s an area where you don’t want jazz. You do want control there and no one should touch that diary without her. I’m in line with that point of view.* [PPS 14/4/04]

Stanley’s (2008a: 5) observation may be jocular but it is accurate; ‘nothing in your official life will ever run sweetly again if you dare to commit the Minister without his or her written agreement – which will not be forthcoming for several weeks’.

Although nodal, the DS does not decide on engagements.

*The Secretary of State agrees everything that goes into the diary. There are certain things that have to go in, Cabinet, Budget Cabinet, all those things. There are certain things which are routine which [the Minister] expects me to get in the diary like monthly meetings with the [national interest group]. And I feel I have a reasonable amount of flexibility to adjust here and there. I am always very conscious that various Secretaries of State have worked in different ways and have obviously had different thoughts about the way their time is organized. I am always very conscious that it’s their diary and they’re doing it and I always think it’s a*
courtesy, if nothing else, to keep them in contact. You probably see me come in and out saying, ‘You know, what about a phone call here?’ Because [the Minister] might have a 20-minute slot in the day and might think, ‘I am going to ring my parents’. [DS 9/4/03]

The phrase ‘keeping the diary’ sounds simple enough but:

the diary is just a nightmare and you have to be very, very flexible. Nothing is set in stone, you know. You have to be very flexible and be prepared when meetings with the Prime Minister, meetings with the Secretary of State, have got to be completely rescheduled. [DS 20/5/02]

I just think the diary is the hardest thing to work on because it’s so fast-moving. You have to be able to change it sometimes at the drop of a hat, especially the Minister’s office with parliamentary business. [PS 20/5/02]

There are several versions of the diary. For the Secretary of State, there is the master electronic copy kept by the Diary Secretary. There is the White Board which records the day’s engagements, which changes regularly, and is visible to the whole Private Office. There is the long-term diary for the red box, so the Minister can look ahead. Sometimes there is a meeting between the DS, PPS and the Secretary of State to discuss the week ahead in detail and look at what is happening over the next six months [FWN 20/5/02].

Most of the time, the Secretary of State pops out, the DS pops in, to schedule and reschedule the Minister’s activities. If the Minister or the Permanent Secretary is out that day, then a folder of pending diary decisions is prepared to be read overnight.

And part of the job is to protect the Minister and Permanent Secretary.

I can’t stand this old-fashioned thing of being the ‘lion at the gate’ or the ‘gatekeeper’; it sounds so archaic. But I suppose that’s the way it is. But [the Assistant Diary Secretary] and I tend to have an unwritten rule that we are the people that make the changes to the diary (emphasis in original). [DS 9/4/03]

Even the Permanent Secretary knows the rules and asks the DS for an appointment:

But if [the Permanent Secretary] comes up and he loiters, to put no better a word on it, and says, ‘Is [the Minister] in?’ and he’s working at the desk, we’ll say, ‘Oh yeah pop in.’ DS 9/4/03]

Of course, he should get his Diary Secretary to ring. He knows. The same protocols apply in his Private Office. The funny thing about protocols is they become more rigid as you move down the hierarchy.
Protecting the Minister or the Permanent Secretary requires their cooperation. There are supposed rules like ‘no back-to-back meetings’ and protecting ‘the paperwork period’. They are observed more in the breach. I listened regularly to comments like ‘not one of our finest hours in terms of organization’, ‘it’s a bad day’, and ‘today is the day from hell’ [FWN 20/5/02]. I decided it was a form of machismo; a mark of one’s Private Office virility. One Permanent Secretary helped to manage the Secretary of State’s diary: 

*He thinks about the Secretary of State’s diary as well, quite seriously because he’s not good at managing his diary and he’s keen to get sight of his diary as soon as he can. And if he thinks that he is missing things then he suggests things and they go into his diary.* [PS DFER 14/11/02].

Also, the need for flexibility can be over-stated. Not every Private Office was frenetic. One DS had ‘never’ improvised a time for the Permanent Secretary to see the Secretary of State and ‘there isn’t much need for improvisation’ [DS 14/11/02] The job is not limited to the diary and scheduling. She – I never met a male DS – is also responsible for meeting folders (see the section on Advice below). She also smooths the Minister’s day.

*I see that as very important because if [the Secretary of State] is not happy or if it’s not done the way he wants it and it doesn’t fit with him, you know, it will change. So, I will do double the work on that sort of thing.* [DS 9/4/03]

So the DS is the authority on Ministerial preferences both minor – for example, sandwiches – and major – no more than two dinner engagements a week. She will tell the partner whether it is black tie or lounge suit, short cocktail or long dress. One used to pin the Permanent Secretary’s medals on because he changed into formal wear at work. Some have high informal standing. One DS was not managed by the PS but reported directly to the Permanent Secretary. A new PS was in left no doubt about his standing. It is part of Departmental mythology that fast streamers are ‘little upstarts’ (Departmental induction video). Elsewhere in the court, the dragon at the door is not so formidable. They hold sway to a lesser extent. They know their limitations:

*There is always an office joke about, but it’s a great joke, about training the PSs up.*

*But I don’t think of myself as being that grand.* [DS 9/4/03]

Most DSSs try to help the Private Secretaries by:

*Giving them an idea of what [the Permanent Secretary] would like and not like, and pre-empting any problems and if they say this is the way to do it, I will say no he won’t like it that way, you know, it’s best to do it this way.* [DS 20/5/02]
Finally, the DS can be a traditional secretary and type letters about engagements, senior staff, personal matters and secret affairs of the state. The most common items are about staff management. Some diary secretaries can take shorthand, so the Minister or Permanent Secretary will dictate. Others use dictaphones. Others get the PS to write a draft that they then correct and the DS types. One DS described herself as ‘Mrs Fix It’ because she did odd jobs like arranging for the Permanent Secretary’s home phone to be repaired.

Boxes

Every day the Private Office prepares and collates the papers the Ministers and the Permanent Secretary must read for the next day’s meeting and the letters that need to be signed. They are collected in a red, rectangular, box-shaped, brief case for the Minister to take home each night. The red box is a focal point of office activity. It is always battered. It is sometimes blue, but it is always a box. The red box is governed by its own rules. Thus, at the start of the day, the PPS will write a time, say 17.15, in the top right-hand corner of the red box. Everyone now knows the box must be ready by that time because that is when the Minister will leave the office. Everyone understands that it is ‘best to get it all in one box. If there are two they get discouraged’ [PPS 10/4/03]. By 16.30 the box will be the focus of a flurry of activity. All the paperwork in the Private Office must come together at this point. After the diary, it is a key organizing device for managing the Minister. It is just a cardinal rule that it must be ready by the stated time.

The role of the PPS in preparing the box varies.

They [papers] come through me to check them off, just to check that they make sense. I just try and check things to make sure it looks reasonably okay. [PPS 10/4/03]

[We used to have] some divisions that [the PPS] was first point of contact for and I have changed that because I think I can add best value by being able to look across the pitch. I see everything before [the Secretary of State] sees it whereas [my predecessor] didn’t. Stuff went in and [my predecessor] saw it on the way out. I felt very uncomfortable with that so I now see most things before they go in to [the Secretary of State], certainly anything of importance will be shown to me. So the trade-off with the Private Secretaries is they might have more divisions to look after but they know that I’m going to help them take a proper view before it goes in to [the Secretary of State]. [PPS 4/4/04].
These quotes don’t capture the process; ‘it’s incredibly difficult to know what’s important, what will cause controversy’ [PPS FWN 20/5/02]. A DG will have a quiet word to make sure his submission is in the box. The PPS has to exercise judgement about what the Ministers and Permanent Secretaries needs to see. The sheer volume of material could overwhelm even the most committed Minister. Jary (2004: 18) claims a ‘typical’ box contains: 20 letters to sign, three draft speeches, four draft replies to PQs, ten briefings for meetings, six submissions for decision, three draft press releases, a question and answer brief for an interview and the minutes of last week’s Cabinet meeting. This summary is not wrong but it errs on the side of understatement. For example, one of my Departments estimated there were on average twelve written PQs in a box. Also, most had difficulty limiting the paperwork to one box.

To help the Minister, there are two folders at the top of the box: a priority folder of matters requiring immediate action, and the diary folder of engagements. In an ideal world of course the red box is returned next morning, not only with the priority folders done but also with letters signed and decisions made. For obvious reasons, many Ministers will skim through much in the box. So if, for example, a letter really needs his attention, it had better be flagged. Some Ministers and Permanent Secretaries like to put their mark on letters and submissions (for example, David Blunkett, former Home Secretary). One DS announced with great glee that she had written the perfect letter; for once the Permanent Secretary had made no changes to it by. Some are less assiduous: ‘The first five letters have been signed, one speech and one submission has been read and agreed, one further submission has been lost behind the cooker, and the rest are untouched.’ (Private Secretary in Jary 2004: 18)

There is a world-weary cynicism to this quote that I did not meet during my fieldwork. With most Ministers, most of the time, most of the box was done. And the Private Office becomes adept at judging what it can expect from the Minister and adjusting its demands accordingly.

Correspondence (including record keeping)23

The protocols for both snail mail and e-mail are elaborate. The civil service is all too aware that the devil is in the detail so the procedures are clear and detailed.24 They also vary from Department to Department. However, there is invariably a correspondence section. The court may have separate correspondence sections in each Private Office. In that case, a PS or an APS can manage the correspondence team, although ‘they didn’t have the time to oversee what they were doing’ [PPS 14/4/04]. Sometimes, all the staff is in one central
office with its own Correspondence Manager. It is the team’s job to sort, code and distribute all external mail and send it to the appropriate section for action. Thus:

We record the details on our database which is a correspondence database. We record who it came from, who it was addressed to, the subject of the letter, when it was received, and when it was dated. And we keep a record of who we sent the document to. Inevitably anything that comes in we copy it for information or provide the draft reply to, the reply to that letter, and we need to keep a record of who we send it to and when it’s due to be answered. [Clerk 25/4/02]

Inevitably the system for recording snail mail is called ‘Postman Pat’.

There are targets for handling mail. They vary between Departments; for example, officials have five working days to respond to an inquiry. The system automatically flags any late responses. There are also cross-Departmental targets for dealing with correspondence and they are taken seriously because the Cabinet Office publishes a ‘league table’ of Departmental performance; for example, an MP must have a reply within 10 working days.

When the Secretary of State was told the Department would not meet its targets, letters were sent to those Ministers who were slow to reply telling them, ‘Come on, up your game’.

Even the Prime Minister gets involved:

The Prime Minister makes a big thing of correspondence. I go over to No. 10 on a regular basis, every three to six months. They have a seminar over there for all the Correspondence Managers around Whitehall and he always makes a point of coming to speak to us, which he doesn’t have to do. [PPS 10/4/03].

As ever, targets induce distortions. MPs’ letters go to the top of the pile. When the 10-day target proved impossible to meet because of the volume of letters, the target was changed to 15 days, which brought the Department into line with other large Whitehall Departments.

Correspondence is categorized in various ways. For example, in one Permanent Secretary’s Private Office, a green folder signifies background mail (that is, the Permanent Secretary has been copied in); and purple signifies high priority mail. Letters which go out for advice, draft reply, and come back to the Private Office are in blue ‘float’ folders. Mail is filed by topic, in date order, topics are then organized by weekly files and kept for three to four months as temporary folders before weeding and storing in orange folders. Most Private Offices have a ‘clear desk’ policy. Files are not left lying around but locked away at close of business. There is a separate cabinet for secret documents. It is security vetted with a combination lock and only accredited ‘Readers’ have access. It is a major disciplinary offence if left open. Its presence is a constant reminder of the need for care and caution.
One thing is not supposed to happen. Papers do not disappear. Only they do. I witnessed one such scene. It led to a major search that involved everyone in the Private Office. Other work just stopped until the paper was found. If it had not been found, there would have been a review of the system. The flow of paper is so central, it cannot break down. Of course, there is a second-best solution to finding the missing paper; the mistake could lie with another section sending through an incomplete file. ‘Good’ said the PS with great relief ‘it’s not our fault’. Or, as good, the Permanent Secretary has got it and not returned it. Thus, when all the memos for 19 November went missing, the Private Office thought ‘he [the Permanent Secretary] must have eaten it’. Unfortunately that still left the question of why there were no master copies! The PS was, to be frank, pissed off: ‘see how much time we waste when our systems don’t work’ [FWN 14/11/02]. In the face of this rebuke, the Private Office was silent. If Lord Butler (2004) was concerned about falling standards of record keeping at Number 10, he would be reassured by Departmental procedures.

Members of the court are talking about the paperless office. One Private Office had a target of 90% of all correspondence by e-mail. Beyond the dramatic reduction in the use of postage stamps and the reduced workloads of messengers, I doubt any outsider will truly appreciate the difference. It may save space but the protocols will change little. Nowadays, incoming snail mail is scanned and distributed as an e-mail attachment, but it is printed out for filing. Mail for the Secretary of State is printed out for the red box. One Permanent Secretary had a personal e-mail account for staff, which was sifted by the Private Office, printed out and given to him in a folder for weekend reading.

The main concern seems to be how to make e-mail like snail mail. Jary (2004: 31) worries that civil servants will dash off replies without due reflection, which could figure in formal inquiries. The Private Office shares some of these worries. One PPS agreed: ‘sometimes the speed of e-mail can be a bit of a problem’ and ‘it is a dangerous tool to have people wield’. [PPS 14/4/04]. Jary recommends writing the usual letter as an e-mail attachment. He is also concerned that Departments do not have the relevant protocols on, for example, politeness in e-mails and replies might be seen as abrupt.

E-mail still needs filing: ‘Anything that comes to us we don’t actually delete at all’. I pressed. Did they keep all electronic correspondence? Reluctantly one clerk admitted that ‘sometimes we do chuck away [advertising brochures]’. Others were a tad less anal. They deleted all junk e-mail and advertising. But, as with snail mail, every piece of correspondence was filed initially before weeding. So far as I could tell, electronic and snail mail were handled the same way; delete with caution. In the words of one
Permanent Secretary, ‘I like to see nearly everything so you must remember that, not to throw things away.’ The Private Secretary commented later ‘there are things that he doesn’t see. Quite a lot that he doesn’t see. I guess he just doesn’t realize’. [PS 14/11/02]

Nonetheless the arrival of e-mail is changing procedures, whether for good or ill I leave to the audience’s judgement. There used to be a ‘red pen culture’, in which trainees had their various briefings, letters and drafts of all kinds edited to be pithy and catch the essence of the argument. E-mails and electronic transmission have changed that. Nowadays, there may be ‘a bit of red pen about’ but ‘I think that’s gone away now’. On occasion, ‘I find myself doing a kind of a post-e-mail version’. [PPS 14/4/04]

Telephone

The protocol is strict and covers all Whitehall. There is a hierarchy of Ministers. So, the more junior Minister rings and waits to be put through to the senior Minister. Senior Ministers wait for no one on the phone other than the Prime Minister. The Minister’s and the Permanent Secretary’s business calls are monitored. The world of the Department is a world where even a casual remark in a phone call can have important repercussions. Such care and caution may seem exaggerated but it is nothing compared to the maelstrom the media can unleash on the unwary.

Q. Do you monitor [the Secretary of State’s] calls?
A. I take a note of [the Secretary of State’s] calls, yes. If anything significant is to be said I would do a note of it. No one else would. Then there’s an e-mail straight down, just to let you know I just took a call from Mr X.

Q. Would you listen in?
A. One of us would, one of two. I don’t – the whole of the Department’s responsibilities are split among my private secretaries and the relevant one would listen. I might listen as well, depending. [PPS 14/4/04]

Bruce-Gardyne (1986: 33 and note 1) similarly reports that: ‘all calls are filtered through the Private Secretaries, whose duty it is to listen and take note of what transpires’. He claims ‘they are apparently trained to replace their receivers at the signal of personal endearments’. Indisputably, the Minister relies heavily on the PPS’s discretion. But technology has struck! Nowadays Ministers can use their own mobiles for personal endearments.

It was possible to preserve privacy in the old days. At the old DTI, the PPS had a red phone dedicated to monitoring the conversations of the PS. He kept a handwritten note of any
potentially delicate or decision-making call. Everyone called this phone the Bat phone, after the instrument used by the mayor of Gotham City to summons the redoubtable caped crusader. But the Bat phone could be circumvented. The Permanent Secretary had a private line and:

above the door was a great big red light and when [the Permanent Secretary] lifted the receiver on his phone the light came on, and you didn’t go in. I mean death, death would be meted out if you went in when that light was on. [DS 25/4/021]

However, informality spreads. In one Department, ‘I listen to them all’ [FWN 13/11/05] but in another the PPS listened to the Permanent Secretary’s calls only at his request [PPS 21/5/02]. It varies not only between Departments but also between Private Offices in the same Department. Also, technology has struck again. I was struck by the quiet in the Private Office. I expected a maelstrom of ringing phones but there were few telephone calls. The prevailing attitude was ‘get off the phone, you’ll get it quicker’ (Departmental induction video). The decline of the telephone is further evidence, if it were needed, of the e-mail revolution.

There was a striking range of telephone manners. I could not listen in but I could observe the body language. I was particularly struck with the way the PS could impose authority over the phone. One Department thought it was being left out of the loop so the PS rang. She was not lolling back in her chair. She leant forward, back straight, eyes concentrating hard on the desk in front. Her tone was always polite but unshakeable in its firmness. It was a request to which there was only one answer: the Department would now be included. She spoke with the authority of the Permanent Secretary and the listener knew it; I knew it.

Committees and briefings

I need to note some elementary rules. For meetings, Ministers receive briefings. To help them make a decision, Ministers receive submissions. So, this section covers briefings. I discuss submissions under ‘Advice’. Second, Ministers never travel alone, not even between floors of the same building. They always have a PPS or a PS with them. It varies from Permanent Secretary to Permanent Secretary. The PS does not always see the point – ‘Sometimes you just sit there a bit like a spare part and you wonder why you are there’ [PS 20/5/02]. Each PS always has an A4 size bound notebook in which he or she records action to be taken, decisions made, calls to be made and letters to be written. The notebooks too are filed, shelved to be precise. Most PSs get through about one a month.
Committees are ubiquitous. I do not have the space to describe in detail any specific committee meetings (but see Rhodes 2007). I attended two or three committees on every day I observed a Minister or Permanent Secretary at work. So, I limit myself to four general observations about committees. I leave a detailed description of behaviour in committee to another occasion.

First, we may live in the eras of both managerialism, with its emphasis on decisive action and individual performance, and of ministerial bilaterals and sofa government, but committees remain the dominant forums for making decisions. The court spends much of its time setting up meetings and preparing Ministers for those meetings.

Second, committees come in many forms. They are not always about making decisions. They are also about coordinating activities within and outside the Department, keeping-in-touch, briefings on developments, and planning. I sat in on all four types of activity and I am sure that committees exist for a multitude of other purposes as well.

Third, there are protocols for both internal and external meetings. In both cases, who visits whom is governed by protocol. Normally, inside the Department, the Permanent Secretary would go to the Secretary of State’s office, not the other way round. However, Ministers of State would go to the Permanent Secretary. Some rile at this status hierarchy; Michael Heseltine ‘felt it appropriate that he should visit me to discuss the issue. This resulted in a compromise of which the television series Yes Minister would have been proud; we met in the corridor, at the top of the marble staircase’ (Heseltine 2000: 189).

Although, there is now much more informality, the old ways persist. There is much pomp and circumstances around Secretaries of State and, to be frank, some of them love it. The phrase ‘lording it’ was coined for just such circumstances; ‘there’s a bit of mystique around Ministers, they make you feel inferior’ (Departmental induction video).

Informality is more common lower down the hierarchy and when the meeting is attended only by Departmental members. Strangers induce formality. Thus, inside the Department, the PPS’s relationship with Ministers of State can be informal. The usual protocols would have their Private Secretaries ringing to say ‘X wants a quick word. Are you free?’ and the PPS would go to them. But ‘Again it’s quite informal’, so ‘If they wanted something, and indeed this has happened on a number of occasions, I can think of three or four of them have done this, they would stroll around here’ [PPS 14/4/04].

Finally, for committees outside the Department, the conventions about the ‘lead Department’ still apply:
There was always some resentment being felt by major Departments when a small one took the initiative. I was conscious that the high ranking the Prime Minister gave me in Cabinet pecking order, above the Secretaries of State for the Environment, Trade and Industry and Defence, meant that officials from major Departments had to come to my small Department to discuss proposals. That is Whitehall protocol’ (Walker 1991: 215).

Being the lead Department means you get to choose who attends. The PPS and PS decide, taking into account, of course, the Minister’s preferences. Normally, the PS will invite the lead officials for the topic under discussion. However, depending on the topic, it can also involve (on occasion) lawyers and (often) someone from the Press Office. According to Stanley (2008a: 5) for meetings involving outsiders – and, yes, they are referred to as ‘outsiders’ – the rule is ‘one official to each visitor’.

The briefings for meetings are as essential as they endless. They come in the guises of oral briefings and files. The defining element of both is a succinct summary of key points so the Minister or Permanent Secretary is up to speed for the meeting. The Private Office will commonly liaise with the appropriate person from DG to team leader. A subsidiary aim is to spot likely difficulties at the meeting; sometimes referred to, in true Colonial fashion, as ‘elephant traps’. Such traps are topics the Minister does not want raised by others, and matters the Minister should not raise (Jary 2004: 28).

The Diary manager collates briefings. She prepares files that have:

all the paperwork from the inception of how that came about, right through. It’s got all my notes, any paperwork, and it’s just a way of containing that in one place.

And that’s where the briefing eventually goes. I hand it to the PS, the PS sorts it, decides what, flags it, into [the Secretary of State]. It’s my responsibility to request a briefing. There is a slight exception in the fact Cabinet and Cabinet Committees are done on papers that come out of Cabinet Office and they are dealt with by the Cabinet documents person. [DS 9/4/03]

Flagging papers for the Ministers or the Permanent Secretary is common practice. There is far too much to read and flagging is a way of separating the wheat from the chaff. The initial sift will be done by the PS. For the Secretary of State, there will be a final sift by the PPS.

The DS in the Permanent Secretary’s Private Offices has an equivalent role:
Basically, in a nutshell, it is making sure the Permanent Secretary is fully briefed for all of his meetings. That he has all the support papers before the meeting and that he gets there, that he's in the right place at the right time.

An experienced DS can be invaluable because ‘If I need anything I know exactly where to go’ [DS 20/5/02]:

[The Permanent Secretary's] correspondence, requests for meetings, and other things, I deal with all of that. And if something comes in that I am not particularly sure about and I have an idea that [the Permanent Secretary] won’t know the answer, I usually send it out to the various officials asking for advice, whether they think this is an appropriate way for the Permanent Secretary to spend his time, or is there something he needs to do, or can it be delegated? Once I’ve got an answer, then I put it [the request] into [the Permanent Secretary] with the advice. [DS 20/5/02]

The skill of the PPS and the PS is to sift the material so the Minister and Permanent Secretary are fully briefed without being swamped and to keep the Department happy, not agitated because they have been pushed down the list of priorities.

Advice and submissions

A mainstay of the literature on the relationship between Minister and civil servants, and of the Yes Minister television series, is endless jockeying for position between the two over policy. Games are played over access to the Minister. The Department puts material to the Minister in which he has no interest. The Department is slow to respond to a request from the Minister. So the Minister responds, through the PPS: ‘As I asked for this well over a year ago… if I do not get a paper… within a month, I shall commission it outside the Department’ (Minister cited in Stanley 2008a: 4).

Gone are the days when the civil service had a monopoly of advice. In a similar vein, Kaufman reports that the Minister lets ‘it be known (through the invaluable Private Secretary) that I would take no action on their item unless they jumped to it on mine’ (Kaufman 1980: 45). However, such games take second place to straight forward discussion and debate about policy. During my stay, I saw little evidence of Sir Humphrey’s obstruction. I believe the PPS when he talks of incrementalism and a respect for tradition. There is no intent overtly or covertly to oppose or undermine the Minister’s policies. They are simply doing what civil servants are programmed to do; learning from experience and using that experience to draft feasible policies. In a phrase, they are trained
to spot snags. As Douglas Wass (1984:19 and 40), former Joint Head of the Home Civil Service, stresses, this tradition exemplifies pragmatism and muddling through. It is but a short step from spotting snags to caution and conservatism. Such beliefs and practices can feel like opposition and obstruction to Ministers in a hurry to make their name. But it is still only snag spotting.

The PPSs are the fulcrum of advice to Ministers because of their position in the flow of communication. As Henderson (2001: 163) would have it, the PPS ‘in a somewhat feline fashion’ picks his way between ‘dangerous, criss-cross paths’. James (1999: 35–6) is more direct: ‘private secretaries are not policy advisers’; rather their task is ‘brokering access to the Minister’. No one denies that the PPS can overstep the mark. David Blunkett (2006: 305) complained that his PPS was ‘audacious’: ‘they really do think that they run the show, and we Ministers are just the passing flotsam and jetsam’. I return to this topic in the section on working with Ministers. Here I focus on communication between the Department and the Minister: on submissions.

From my discussions and the few submissions I was allowed to see, the basic rules were: stick to the facts and deliver a clear message briefly.29 I was struck by two differences in handling submissions compared with the Yes Minister stereotype. First, such games as hiding bad news or unwelcome advice at the bottom of the box, or trying to manipulate Ministers in other ways, were seen as pointless. If anything, the attitude was get it over with straight away. The PPS plays a central role. He or she will determine the priority accorded to a submission, balancing the DG’s wishes against the Minister’s interests and preferences. If there are any games, they will be played around the PPS as DGs jockey for position. The trick is to know the Minister’s mind without giving the impression you are the Minister.

Second, Spads play an important advisory role. There is no attempt to bury them in an obscure office, corridors away from the Minister. Page and Jenkin’s (2005: 117–21) in their study of middle-ranking civil servants in policy making found that Spads were conspicuous for their absence. That is not the case at the top of the Department. They play two important roles. First, they are an external link to other Ministers, Number 10 and the Treasury (see below); and, second, they are political antennae for the Minister.30 As political antennae, they proffer advice on policy, especially on its presentation to the media and in speeches. The links with the Private Offices and the Press Office are close. Links with the DGs are more sporadic. I attended meetings within the court with Spads. Most were informal in the Minister’s office with the PPS there. Such meetings discussed
anything from Department to government policy. There were some discussions of the merits of individual Departmental policies but that did not seem to be the priority. The emphasis fell on progress chasing already agreed policy that was a priority for the Minister, ensuring the effective presentation of the Minister and his policies, advising on broader, party political matters, and external liaison most notably with Number 10. Within any of these broad activities, they were firefighters; for example, they would issue rebuttals of any adverse stories in the press. Progress chasing and fire-fighting can lead to one-to-one contact with DGs and collecting information for the Minister. Most had a good working relationship with the rest of the court. Beyond the impatience and odd curt word that can occur in any office, I saw little evidence of tension. Rather, most civil servants, and certainly the PPS, valued the political work of the Spads. It also worth remembering there will only be two Spads in any one Department. So they have little time, even if they have the knowledge and skills, to undertake detailed policy analysis. As Stanley (2008: 10) points out, advice from officials is more likely to be accepted if they understand the political realities facing the Minister. Spads can and do explain those realities.

Speech writing is one area where Spads have a regular and important role. In an ideal world, the purpose of a speech is to persuade or even inspire, and, above all, to entertain (Jary 2004: 53). Maybe, but Ministers and their speech-writers have lower aims. I attended several speeches. The audience did want to be persuaded or inspired. They would accept being bored, provided it wasn’t for too long. Given that alcohol was to hand, they did not want their thoughts provoked. For preference, they wanted to be entertained. What they wanted above all else was the Minister at their event.

The Department provides the basic information for a speech. Some officials have an aptitude in this area and no Minister willingly turns away a mellifluous phrase. Others stick to the basics. Depending on mood and the political climate, the Minister may settle for dull and short. It is safe territory. However, on occasion, the Minister may aim higher and the political gloss and the headline catching turn of phrase come mainly from the Minister and the Spads. I knew Ministers gave many speeches. I did not know quite how many. Nor did I realize just how much time it took to write a speech. It is hard to be dull and say nothing that can attract media criticism. The logistics of delivering a speech are also demanding, from driver to red carpet to lecture hall technology to reception while not forgetting security or division bells in the Commons.

**Networking: brokering and gatekeeping**
Networking inside and outside the Department is a major part of the communications task of the departmental court. I describe each facet of networking in turn, although in practice they overlap. The court is at the top of the hierarchy and a nodal point for the flow of information. So, it filters that flow; it acts as a gatekeeper. It does not decide policy. It may not exercise much influence over the substance of any policy. But it does decide who has access to the Permanent Secretary and the Secretary of State and, often as important, when they have access. Its gatekeeping role means, therefore, that it influences priorities. So, the DGs seek to influence the PPS and PSs. The court brokers deals over access and timing. As I have already explained, the role is Janus faced. The court also seeks to influence the Department. It speaks for the Secretary of State and his or her priorities. The next section describes the links between the departmental court and the rest of the Department, especially Ministers and briefings.

**Internal networks**

The Department

The attraction of working in the departmental court is:

*It’s being at the centre of things, knowing what’s going on, and meeting people.* [PS 26/4/02]

Or to employ an analogy from a PS:

*You are a loudhailer down for the Department, so whatever [the Secretary of State] says has to be boomed loud and clear, and you are a filter coming backwards.* [PS 10/4/03]

For most PPSs and PSs:

*This is the best job in the world. Ask anyone in Private Office they’ll tell you that. I just like the sense of responsibility. I mean you wouldn’t get this amount of responsibility at my grade anywhere else in the Department.* [PS 20/5/02]

Every PPS and PS freely admits that working in the Private Office gives you ‘an incredible network’ [PS 10/4/03].

The PPS in particular occupies a nodal position in the court and in the Department.

*There is another dimension that you don’t get out in the Department. This is where perhaps it comes together. If you’re going to do well in those big jobs in the Department, the one thing that you’ve got to be perhaps above all else is strategic. Of course, you’ve got to deliver it and you’ve got to manage it and so on, but if you’re not strategic then what on earth separates you from the people that are*
below? It seems to me that this phenomenon of having to deal with 30 or 40 things at once in a Private Office, it gets you into strategic management because you see there is a much wider reality than just your little individual piece of work. [PPS 14/4/04]

I put it to one PPS that the core skill was sifting and prioritizing what lands on the
Minister’s desk, but:

That is not the core skill. That is one of the important skills but I think the core skill for a Principal Private Secretary, as opposed to a Private Secretary, is making sure that the relationships work at the top of the shop. I spend a lot of my time trying to make sure that these big powerful brains that are our senior colleagues on the Board and so on fit together seamlessly. I spend a lot of my time talking to them about whether they’re happy. They sometimes get emotional and worried, particularly about the Secretary of State’s view of them. I do a lot of smoothing of that and quickly shifting my focus from kind of looking at them and making sure they’re happy, looking at policy issues and making prioritizations, decisions you talked about, and looking at [the Secretary of State] and [the Permanent Secretary] as my primary customers if you like, and making sure that they are happy with the way it’s all working. So I have to stitch it all together. [PPS 14/4/04]

To stitch everything together, there are, of course, regular meetings. The PSS meets all the PSs every Friday for an hour:

They have a just a couple of minutes each to say what’s on their Minister’s mind and what are the big issues that have come in and then we try – I try anyway – to mesh them together as a team. I try to engage them on management issues and leadership issues.

Then:

On Monday morning we have a more issues-focused discussion, just me and the Private Secretaries in this office, when we go through [the Secretary of State’s] calendar for this week and we look at what’s happening, what we can do and how. Also:

I have a monthly session with [the Permanent Secretary] where we talk about whatever needs to be talked about, whatever is on our minds. The Permanent Secretary] and [the Secretary of State] have more or less a weekly meeting that I sit in on and I try to stitch together some informal agenda for that as well.

In fact, in some Departments it was a weekly session. Finally:
[The Secretary of State] has weekly meetings with them [other Ministers] that I’m in on. I chat with them all informally. [PPS 14/4/04]

Whatever the specific arrangements, there is a regular programme of meetings in all Departments. The task is to ensure close, effective working relationships between Ministers, between Ministers and the DGs, and between DGs.

The internal structure of Departments is often likened to silos (Blunkett 2006: 219). The departmental court is the point of coordination, although some Private Secretaries think that ‘there is no mechanism for enforcing collective work efforts’. There are mechanisms, but they are not used to enforce. The departmental court is the locus for informal coordination and the task does not fall solely to the PPS. The DGs regularly approach the PS to sound out a specific proposal before seeking a bilateral meeting.

*The culture of the Department is very much based around the individual Director General’s responsibility for their groups dealing bilaterally with the Permanent Secretary. And they always argue the case for their group. Directors-General wanted to lobby the Permanent Secretary personally and get him to take decisions which were favourable to their group.* [PS 26 April 2002]

Of course, the DGs do not necessarily get their own way. I sat in on one such meeting and thought that, although the Permanent Secretary had been perfectly clear about what he wanted, the DG and his colleagues had not been listening. When I put the point to the PS he commented

*They are a bit like teenage children, they listen, they stick their bottom lips out and they argue and then they go away and think about it and then go and do it.* [PS 26/4/02]

Working with Ministers

Working with the Secretary of State is different:

*When I talk to others in the Department I must make [the Minister’s] points. So I need to wear a number of hats, to be rather Bernardesque about this. I need to be [the Minister’s] representative to the Department, I need to be the Department’s representative to the Minister and I need to make sure the whole thing links together.* [PPS 14/4/04]

There are dangers in this Janus-faced role for both the Secretary of State’s PPS and for the PS of the Permanent Secretary:
Because you are linked to an important person, people treat you as if you are important. And I think it’s really, really important to remember that you are who you are and that you are actually representing somebody else and to try very hard not to be superior or supercilious.

Q. Is there a danger when they ask you what [the Permanent Secretary] thinks, you tell them what you think?

A. There is a huge danger about that. A huge danger, which I watch with care. And I am sure I’ve slipped into it from time to time. I try not to. [PPS21/5/02]

Care is essential because the political side is not monolithic.

The purpose of the several meetings is to scan what is going on in the Department. You have got a Secretary of State’s Office and then you’ve got all these Ministers, then you’ve got Permanent Secretary then you’ve got a parliamentary team as well – in a sense it’s a team and it’s all at the top of the shop, but it’s also a bit loose. They’ve all got their own agendas – there are a lot of egos in there doing things.

The PPS and the PSs pride themselves on their ability to work with any Minister put in front of them. They do not have to like them; ‘they are not our friends’, although:

I like about half of them, you know. I would kind of be happy to spend an evening with that half, have a few drinks and a chat about nothing. [PPS 14/4/04]

Whatever they may think of them personally, they do have to build a good working relationship with them. Indeed, most would pride themselves on their ability to establish a working relationship with the most difficult of ministers. With most Ministers most of the time:

I get on well with them. I made it my business to go and see them all when I arrived. They can be a precious little bunch generally. To get on in the world of politics you do need some of that. I think they are much less precious and certainly less objectionable to many previous ministerial teams I have known which colours my approach. [PPS 14/4/04]

Keeping in touch is important.

If I hadn’t seen one of them for a few months I would go and seek them out and get the Private Secretary to fix me just a 10-minute chat – ‘How are you doing?’ And so on.

Of course they have views on Ministers. The previous Ministers were ‘a tired bunch’. One has a ‘fiery reputation’. Another is ‘an extremely nice bloke, really competent, works like
an absolute bloody dog’. One Minister ‘has a history’ – code for stuffing up – but most are seen as ‘nice’ (used about three). In short,

There’s a bit of coldness from one group to another, and you can see the way people line up. But there’s no disloyalty. [PPS 14/4/04]

Ministers can be difficult.

[The Secretary of State] will come out and say, like you heard this morning, ‘Why the hell haven’t you written to Tom?’ That’s pissed him off. And too bloody right it has. And we all look round the Private Office going, ‘the fucking Treasury should have done it’. Nothing to do with us. Why aren’t Treasury talking to [The Secretary of State]? We get it done. That’s stressful. And that’s why [The Secretary of State] is in a bad mood when you know it is nothing to do with us. [PS 10/4/03]

Difficulties arise for a multitude of reasons, major and minor. Of course, there are debates and disagreements about policy. Other difficulties arise from questions of financial propriety, libel cases against Ministers and, of course, the tabloids with their endless search for a story, especially ones involving the sexual peccadilloes or financial dealings of Ministers. There were no major public improprieties or peccadilloes while I visited the Departments. There were some minor ones on which the Permanent Secretary had to rule and for which the Private Secretary had to dig out the relevant information. For example, one Minister wrote an unpaid column in a local magazine but forgot to get formal permission to do so. Another failed to register that he was renting out some property. The point here is that ‘the civil service takes over: [The Secretary of State] had to stand back from the inquiry full stop and, in essence, all the decisions were taken by officials. [PS 26/4/02]

External networks

Working in the Private Office gives the PPS and the PS valuable networks across Whitehall. One PS put the point succinctly:

I have got good relationships with all the Private Offices and all the rest of Whitehall. I know how Whitehall works, I know how Parliament works, a good knowledge base. [PS 10/4/03]

Obviously such links are concentrated on the Departments with which they work regularly but they also include the relevant policy networks.

Number 10 and the Treasury
For the PPSs, the links with Number 10 and the Treasury are important:

_Conversations with the key people in No. 10. There aren’t many. There’s only one or two. There are very good links that exist between the senior officials, the special advisers, this office and the Secretary of State, so that does work quite well._ [PPS 14/4/04]

However, the contacts will go down to a Grade 5 and the team with the most expertise. Of course the danger is that senior colleagues will be left out of the loop: ‘it’s one of the things that if I am the jazz meister I need to keep an eye on, isn’t it?’ But the PPS’s involvement calls for judgement:

_Sometimes it is my judgment not to record a conversation that I know is happening. Sometimes I do not join in the conversations because I don’t wish to face the question of whether or not I should record it. One of the reasons why I need to have a close relationship with DGs in particular is so that they can perhaps feel relatively comfortable that I’m not going to let them get shafted._ [PPS 14/4/04]

The Treasury was more prominent than Number 10 during my visits. Departments spent much time and effort preparing for their meetings with the Treasury. Depending on the topic, there were mock ‘question and answer’ sessions to rehearse presentations (FWN 20/5/02). One PPS was critical of the caricature that the Treasury is clever, humourless and arrogant. He insist there ‘are very good one-on-one relationships in lots of areas’. He talks to the Treasury’s PPS and

_I also feel comfortable talking to special advisers. The special advisers at the Treasury are very powerful. In a sense they’re more like junior Ministers, but I would talk to them, and we have._

Also part of the problem lies with the Department.

_The problem with the Treasury is they sit around and they have a chat in the Chancellor’s room like this and they say ‘Well, issue X is important.’ A day later they’ve got like a hit squad that’s out there and they’re all over it. They’re all over it, you know, whereas we spend months ruminating about these bloody things, you know, before we decide to put it to paper. We’ve got to be quicker and we’ve been looking at that, about moving to projects, about getting ourselves so we can respond much more quickly than we used to. But I would like to see the Treasury versus others’ walls completely broken down._ [PPS 14/4/04]

There are constraints on the relationship. So, ‘_some fixed political relationships are difficult to change_’; an allusion to the Blair–Brown divide and attendant ‘TeeBee–GeeBees’. Also:
the nature of the purse strings [means] Departments tend to be a little bit more structured in their relations with the Treasury. So our Finance people lead on the relationship because we don’t want every Tom, Dick and Harry talking to someone at the Treasury about how good it would be if we had a bit more money. That would be a disaster.

There is ambivalence running through his remarks. He started out criticizing the Treasury’s image. But at various junctures he admits the Treasury needs ‘to address what signals they want to send’ and confesses ‘we are on the back foot, timid, slow, lambs to the slaughter very often’. For all that he insists, betraying his business school training, that the relationship must change: ‘you cannot have a networked organization where you have those sorts of dynamics. You’ve got to fix that.’ [PPS 14/4/04]

Others were less reticent about the Treasury.

There were moments that are unbeatable, you know, when something goes right. I can remember the last rows with the Treasury. I love the [Chancellor] and [the Secretary of State] on the phone to one another. You get to listen in and you hear [the Secretary of State] really ‘kick-ass’ with him. And [the Secretary of State] comes out and goes, ‘Right get those words over to him. You send them over.’ And the great thing is the Private Secretaries go into theatrical mode. So [the PS] over at the Treasury, he is then the Chancellor, and I am then [the Secretary of State]. You have these phone conversations and you are horrible to each other in this diplomatic way. It hones your skills. You know you have to do the diplomatic thing and there is a real thrill to it. There is a real absolute thrill. [PS 10/4/03]

So, the relationship with the Treasury is adversarial rather than networked. One Permanent Secretary acidly observed, the Treasury has religion but the trouble was the religion kept changing and they believed the new one as fervently as the old one. As one Diary Secretary observed of her Permanent Secretary:

The only time I have ever heard [the Permanent Secretary] swear and use the “f” word was when the Treasury tried to screw us on something. [DS25/4/02]

Spads play a prominent role in linking Departments to Number 10 and the Treasury. It is not without controversy. John Prescott (Deputy Prime Minister) ‘railed’ against Number 10’s Spads; he called them the ‘Beautiful People’. With obvious irritation, he records: ‘They used to ring up and say “Number Ten here”, and I would say, “No you’re not, you’re just Jo Bloggs. Tony’s Number Ten”. Then I’d hang up’ (Prescott 2008: 256).
Other Ministers were more accommodating. It is a matter of public record that Andrew Adonis and Michael Barber had close links with, and much influence on policy at, the Department for Education and Skills. All my PPSs knew whom to ring at Number 10 and rang regularly if not often. Such discussions were not limited to the Prime Minister’s priority policy areas. They encompassed the fire-fighting issue of the moment.

I sat in on three meetings involving Number 10 and the Treasury. The Treasury ran the meetings it attended. The Department rehearsed their answers for anticipated Treasury questions. They waited in nervous anticipation. Number 10 was received politely and in a relaxed atmosphere. It is too sharp a distinction to say the Treasury commanded while Number 10 asked, but it captures the difference.

Other networks

Most PS work more to other Departments than to Number 10 and the Treasury:

*My problem with No. 10, the Treasury, the hugely high-level bit is that I find it very hard to follow because if you are not in on all those meetings all the time and you don’t operate at Permanent Secretary level all the time, you don’t know half the time what they are talking about. And it’s all allusions as well, it’s never direct. He [Number 10 special adviser] chews up his words a lot. He is difficult to understand on the telephone.* [PS 14/11/02]

Networking can make links with other Departments sound amicable. They can be. But ‘turf’ warfare is never far away: ‘they are in major territorial mode’ [FWN 14/11/05]. It is also easy to overstate the extent of networking. When asked about the balance of work inside and outside the Department, one PPS believes:

*It is quite Departmental actually, so my main contacts are very much, in terms of the network thing, people I talk to in the Department. Other Departments, less so. I mean the Treasury, we have a pretty regular sort of flow of correspondence with, but there aren’t any other Departments I regularly talk to.* [PPS 14/4/04]

There is also an internal and external social network; ‘the Private Offices up here, we all try to go out together every two or three months’ [PS 26/4/02]. Not everyone goes. Some live a long way out but would go if they lived in London. They also meet Private Secretaries from elsewhere, usually the ones with whom they deal regularly. The Christmas Party is a favoured venue.

There are external networks that are not based on Whitehall Departments:
There’s another slightly more amorphous group which is our [client group] circles. I don’t think any Departmental official could operate properly at any level of seniority without having some sensible contacts with people outside the Civil Service. So I maintain contact for historical or this job reasons with a number of people from various sectors. [PPS 14/4/04]

The departmental court is also part of both the party network and the Parliamentary network. The party network includes the constituency, which has a regular link with the Private Office through the Diary Secretary. Friday is constituency day, so the Diary Secretary has to liaise with the Minister’s constituency office to arrange the trip:

[The constituency] organizes his Fridays. But if I need [the Secretary of State] for a Friday, or something comes up for a Friday, or if there’s a trip overseas, it’s up to me to keep in touch with [The constituency]. [The Secretary of State] doesn’t want to be bothered with that. He expects [The constituency] and I to work in tandem. I’m aware that [The constituency] needs [the Secretary of State] in the constituency for things. He’s got to have his constituency time.

And I will work round that. [DS 9/4/03]

However, the Diary Secretary does not organize travel; that is party business and done by the constituency officer. That is one example of the dividing line between Departmental and party business. The Spads step in where officials fear to tread, covering party meetings, conferences and all other party related matters. With the Diary Secretary, they are the boundary between two networks.

The impact of parliament on the departmental court, and the Minister in particular, is massive in time and energy if in nothing else. Whether through oral PQs, ministerial statements, debates, divisions, passing legislation with its various committee stages and amendments, or simply party management in the Common’s tearoom, Parliament is seen as a major imposition by many a Minister. Thus, Blunket (2006) complains about the demands of Parliament on his time and its role in contributing to his ‘crazy life’ with its late-night sittings and perverse procedures. It also makes major demands on the departmental court. Commonly there is a parliamentary section, which sits at the interstices of the executives accountability to parliament; ‘we’re the executive and we answer to Parliament’ (PPS 10/3/03). These parliamentary clerks provide the link between the Private Office, the Whip’s Office, and Parliament. They organize written and oral PQs, provide briefings for debates, ministerial statements and appearances before select committees, and organize amendments to Bills. The workload is often routine, always
considerable, and all too regularly frenetic. And for Ministers and Permanent Secretaries there is no escape. When parliament calls, they must obey. Of course, they may tell Parliament little, but that little must be accurate and must not deliberately mislead. So, the occasional set piece debate apart, an appearance in the House provokes only weary cynicism; ‘it could have been worse’; and ‘I’ve been more depressed by this committee’. [FWN 14/11/02]
For the departmental court, the party and Parliament are two more networks to be serviced, more demands to be managed, and more conflicts to be reconciled.

**Language**

Internal management, communication protocols and networking are supported by a distinctive vocabulary.

The first thing any outsider notices on arriving in a Department is that they talk in alphabet soup.

*I can remember thinking, I am never going to learn all these abbreviations and then within about three weeks you are saying the words. We would generally ask whichever policy team or directorate to bring a note taker just because they know all the abbreviations. [PS 20/5/02]*

Often the induction pack includes a list of the most common abbreviations. Invariably it runs to several pages.

After the names of organizations come the names of people. Kaufman (1980: 34 and 37) notes the ‘strange tribal customs’. He reports that the Minister calls the PPS by his first name, and may not know the surname, while the PPS calls the minister, ‘Minister’. However, Permanent Secretaries will use the Minister’s first name. In fact, the tribal customs are now much more relaxed. In the Private Office, most people use first names most of the time. They only slip into the Minister or Permanent Secretary mode of address when at a meeting where ‘outsiders’ are present. They would also wear a jacket, while they often work in shirtsleeves when back at the Private Office. Of course, there is the more magisterial Minister, with an eye for pomp and circumstance, who insists on formality.

Although I adopt the phrase departmental court to stress the shifting complex of relations at the top of the Department, it can seem like a court with some Ministers, and the expressions ‘holding court’ and ‘granting an audience’ remain all too fitting.

Exploring the language used by the civil service is an exercise in geology. There are historical layers, with the usage of the previous era buried below present-day strata. I will
distinguish between the traditional or classical Whitehall language, and managerialism. Of course, neither is monolithic and everyone uses both.

Traditional language

An effective way of unearthing language codes is to explore events where they are breached. In the civil service they are breached by anger and by swearing. Both breach the code of civility or politeness. Politeness assumes aggression and is a way of disarming it, and allowing communication between the potential aggressors (Brown and Levinson, 2000). Politeness governs most workplace encounters. So, most meetings start with a discussion of the weather and general enquiries about one’s health, journey to work and, of course cups of tea or coffee. And as Fox (2004: 185) points out this chit-chat includes ‘the usual full complement of pleases and thank yous, appreciative murmurs from the visitors and humorously self-deprecating apologies from the host, and so on, and on’.

Consider the following scene. At an internal budget meeting a DG lost his temper. His section was bearing the brunt of the cuts. He wanted a strategic review of the base and his colleagues did not. He is excited, short of breath and he raises his voice. His body language is stiff, angular. His colleagues stare at the table and avoid eye contact. Some try to suggest compromise solutions but they all involve cuts. It is clear he is getting nowhere so he leaves the meeting. Everybody was embarrassed by this outbreak. The event was described as the Department ‘at our worst’. The DG was ‘OTT’ and the meeting was ‘hard work’. No one thinks the DG should have lost his temper. It would have been better if he had been ‘disappointed’. He had breached the civility code [FWN 25/4/02]. This scene illustrates two features of civil service language; understatement and distance (or lack of emotion).

Now consider the following scene. Jo Moore, a special adviser to Steven Byers, Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions said that 9/11 was ‘now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury’. The statement was seen as typifying the cynicism of spin under New Labour. During negotiations between Sir Richard Mottram (the Permanent Secretary) and Martin Sixsmith (Moore’s boss) about his resignation, Byers pre-empted the negotiations by announcing Sixsmith had resigned. In response, Mottram said: ‘We’re all fucked. I’m fucked. You’re fucked. The whole Department is fucked. It’s the biggest cock-up ever. We’re all completely fucked’ (see PASC 2002 for a full account and chronology).
This scene illustrates two points. First, it shows the influence of social class on language. Mottram was criticized because he was born in the West Midlands, had gone to a grammar school, and had not gone to Oxford or Cambridge. There was surprise, whether feigned or pained is unclear, that the administrative elite swore. Our social superiors were setting a bad example. It was seen as evidence of declining standards. The old verities were slipping away. Of course, Ministers and members of the senior civil service use profanity, and the Private Office laughed at any suggestion they do not. Many would agree with The Observer (29 June 2006) that Mottram demonstrated ‘not only a clear proficiency in profanity but a knack for the forgotten art of conjugation’. But it is not the norm. What this scene throws into relief is the belief in ‘the proper way of doing things’. [DS 25/4/02]. In fact, and second, the more common way of dealing with anger is to become cold. I came across variations of the phrase, ‘He was one of those quietly icy men’ [DS 25/4/02]. ‘It’s a kind of withdrawal and coldness’ [PPS 21/5/02]. The following scene would be typical of the Departments I visited. The Permanent secretary is ‘mild’. It would be ‘unacceptable’ for him to swear. If something goes wrong, the PS will ‘confess’ that she lost the papers and the Permanent Secretary will ‘sigh’. Then ‘you know you’ve been ticked off’ [FWN 13/11/02]. Anger is managed by politeness; by detachment, not swearing.

These preferences for politeness, understatement, distance and detachment pervade the everyday phrases used by the civil service. They are all too well aware of their linguistic oddities. Indeed they mock themselves, producing lists of civil service jargon. Of course such lists are meant to be amusing – a joke. Two examples, courtesy of Martin Stanley’s ‘Mandarin English’ (2008b), will suffice.

The Minister was grateful for your submission which he read without comment.

‘It definitely went in the red box and it definitely came out again. Did they look at it? Search me squire.’ Usually means that the submission was (a) very dull, (b) on an insignificant subject well below the Ministerial radar, or (c) both.

**Bilateral**

A posh sounding meeting which involves two people at a time having a chat, usually involving Ministers/Perm Secs/Senior Officials in their swanky offices. But bilaterals sound so impressive that the purpose of a bilateral is never asked nor is the information often given. The fact that you have no hope of ever attending a
bilateral, nor do you really need to know that these meetings ever

take place, reminds you that you are not and never likely to have
equivalent influence. Bringing ego is essential, otherwise entry is
refused.

Most of these jokes are characterized by a political cynicism which, for the most part, I did
not encounter. It is the civil service’s preferred style of humour: dry and deadpan. There is
an equivalent cynicism about managerial reform, but that is found commonly in everyday
life. Politicians seem to be held in higher regard than management reform. However, these
jokes only work to the extent this language is used by the civil service, and it is used. So,
‘disappointment’ does not ‘express the view that a particular junior official is quite possibly
the most incompetent person it has ever been my misfortune to come across’ (Stanley
2008b). But it is a clear signal that performance was not up to scratch. Similar terms
include ‘concerned’ and ‘surprised’. Stanley correctly observes that were all three words to
occur in the same sentence or paragraph, the effect would be ‘devastating’.

It is also common for civil servants to use indirect language to avoid conflict. So, I came
across such phrases as: ‘I am reluctant to support’; ‘I haven’t formed a view yet’; ‘I am
happy to discuss’; ‘you might consider’ and ‘you should be aware’. All signify a lack of
agreement. Depending on the context, they can suggest more than a mere lack of agreement.
Along with such terms as ‘chap’, ‘sound’ and ‘elephant traps’, which might now be
considered archaisms, I describe a language with its roots in an earlier era. It is the
language of the old verities. This attachment to the old ways can also be interpreted as
hostility to managerial jargon.

Managerial language

Managerial language abounds. It is unavoidable. The most common usages include:
customer, delivery, stakeholders, mission statement, partnership, strategic, vision, and
value added. Less common are: scoped, champion and trajectories. There are genuine
oddities like ‘grazing with the private sector’. I had to be careful to distinguish managerial
language from today’s buzzwords. For example, ‘challenge’ kept cropping up and I
wondered if it, too, had managerial connotations. I decided not. It was just today’s
buzzword like ‘nerdish’, which was used regularly at one committee meeting about anyone
who raised a detailed point. It was never so used again. Challenge also disappeared.
David Blunkett (2006: 441) happily conceded, ‘They talk the language’ but, to his obvious
irritation, ‘they don’t do anything’. That is not accurate. There are strategic plans, visions,
and glossy mission statements. What remains unclear is the consequences of this linguistic shift. Even among sympathizers, there is uncertainty and ambivalence:

> We’ve got away from inputs but we’re still stuck a bit on outputs so I think that what I have seen is not so much a shift from policy to delivery, because I don’t really understand that language, but it is a growing awareness of the requirement for us to focus on outcomes. [PPS 14/4/04]

Others mock managerial language. One PS talked about challenges, ventilating and forward posture in a parody of the language. He is mocking, but he knows the language is widely used otherwise there is nothing to mock. Others are ‘off message’. For example, Jary’s (2004: 63–4) CMPS booklet on working with Ministers lists jargon words, many of which are the everyday language of managerialism. Among the ‘words and phrases to avoid’ are such commonplace notions as customer, delivery, stakeholders, and partnership, to name but a few. A critical interpretation of his judgements would be to class him as an opponent of managerial reform of the civil service. A more sympathetic interpretation would note his preference for the traditional Whitehall ways of speaking.

*The language game*

The problem with my two categories is they squeeze the social world into artificial boxes. I was discussing the language of the civil service with one PPS. His response is both sophisticated and teaches the interviewer an important lesson: never underestimate the intellect of your interviewee:

> I’ve often thought that the sort of thing that sets senior people apart from not so senior people is their ability to use your language, to always have a story for something that’s happening. I remember in one of my postings, stuff would happen and I wouldn’t know what the hell to do about it. I would think ‘Oh, bloody hell, it’s a disaster. I’ll go and see one of my bosses’. I’d say, ‘It’s terrible. I don’t know what I’m going to do.’ He would say to me ‘Yes, yes, you’re right.’ And then he would come up with an anecdote. They would always end with, ‘And then I realized that I was in Bulgaria and I didn’t have any trousers.’ I’d look at him and I’d think, right! But the point is that he had been to this place before in 1973. So, there is a sense in which that story is critical. I think the web, which I’m talking about being in the middle of, is a little bit like a language game and it only has meaning insofar as people use it and to ask for the
meaning of it is to miss the point, rather ask for the use instead. We use words to go where we’re going and that’s what this web is. It’s a web of – is it a web of words?

I don’t know, but it’s a web of relationships. [PPS 14/4/04]

I consider that an insightful account of much of the life of a PPS; it is a web of words embed in a web of relationships. I have an equivalent dialogue, this time from two retired civil servants. When discussing the interpretive approach during a seminar at the Public Records Office, two former permanent secretaries commented as follows.

Postmodernism is only a posh way of saying what Henry Ford said: history is bunk!

I remember coming to this conclusion when I was the PPS at No. 10. You could not give an accurate account of 24 hours there, especially at times of crisis (that is, most days). It was a painful re-education of an Oxford educated history student.

It seems like chaos. We impose some order for the Minister but it is so arbitrary.

The language game is integral to imposing that arbitrary order.

Conclusions

I said the aim of ethnographic research was to vex one another with greater precision. I summarized the conventional portrait of the central secretariat with its focus on the Private Office and the Principal Private Secretary. I have now drawn a different picture. I have shown a departmental court with its protocols, language, and networks. The court is best viewed as the fulcrum for internal and external organizational and individual networks.

When viewed from this standpoint it is more than just a ‘bridge’.

- It acts as the keeper of administrative protocols and language.
- It socializes high-flying civil servants as part of their career development.
- It coordinates the Departmental policy process by filtering and packaging proposals from the Department.
- It contains and manages conflicts between the different sections of the Department.
- It acts as the gatekeeper and broker for the Department’s internal and external networks.

What is striking about the worlds of politician and administrator is their similarities. Both confront unrelenting events which they struggle to grasp with the help of a court that exists to serve. Distinctions between policy and management, politician and civil servant, are meaningless when confronted with the imperative to cope and survive.
Coping is not a dramatic activity. It is surprisingly ordinary. Private Offices exist to domesticate trouble, to defuse problems; and take the emotion out of a crisis. Confronting a major issue with a public corporation, the Permanent Secretary commented, ‘Thank you, a good way of cheering me up’. Everyone smiled. The style of the Permanent Secretaries was low key. What we have in Whitehall is ‘willed ordinariness’. And its ordinariness should not mislead. These everyday routines are unquestioned, and to a degree unrecognized. Of course one can ask if the Minister instructed his Private Office to fast-track a visa application. He may or may not have done so, but the question does not probe deeply enough. It is just as likely that the Private Office anticipated the Minister’s needs. They pride themselves on knowing what the Minister wants before the Minister knows he wants it.\(^{38}\) As Jary (2004: 5) observes, ‘while it is helpful if Ministers understand the needs of their civil servants, it’s essential that civil servants understand the needs of Ministers’.

Finally, the central secretariat is a court because it is a microcosm of the tensions within the Department. Coordination and conflict resolution at the top of the Department is essential because of the debates over policy, personal disagreements between individuals, office politics within the court, strife between Ministers, and tensions between Ministers and civil servants. These are the tasks of the departmental court under the guiding hand of the Secretary of State’s PPS.

**Practical questions**

Critics talk of the ‘impossibility’ of a ‘positive contribution’ to policy analysis from an interpretive approach because it is ‘descriptive rather than evaluative or critical’ (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987: 171). In contrast to prediction, I prefer the looser idea of ‘informed conjecture’ (Morton 1966) or provisional narratives about possible futures (Bevir et al. 2003). So, I have offered a story about life in the departmental court. This research is best described as curiosity rather than applied research, but it still allows a few conjectures.

I have described a bureaucracy at work. I have told a story of caution and attention to detail. It may seem predictable; a world of routines. That is my aim. In a world of never-ending calls for reform, there are times when I think we forget that bureaucracy is a clever invention. It has many uses and it does several things, not everything, well. The Private Office looks after its Ministers. Many do not appreciate how well until they leave office and rediscover the irritations of life as an ordinary citizen. However, although the Private Office may be seen as a Rolls Royce to some, this outsider was puzzled as to whether it was seen as individual units or as a central secretariat or court. Both Henderson (2001) and
Jary (2004) substantially ignore the internal management function and never discuss how to improve either coordination or advice. With one exception, Departments do not plan the development of the central secretariat function or even see the need to strengthen central capability. One PPS spoke about the importance of links with the rest of the Secretariat but had few meetings with them and never introduced me to any of its members. So, the links between the constituent bits can be sporadic, especially when they are on different corridors or in different buildings. I wondered if the development of the central secretariat paralleled the development of central capability at Number 10; they had equivalent problems of coordination. I was reminded of Peter Hennessy’s (1998) summary of Blair’s innovations at the centre: here we had a directorate that dare not speak its name. Indeed the entrenched expectation that postings to the Private Office for PSs will last no more than 12 months arguably prioritizes career development over developing central capability.

There is also an entrenched culture of long hours. If postings lasted longer, the problem of ‘burn out’ would become more acute. For junior members of the court, as one Minister observed: ‘My girls in the office are working all hours and it is not fair to them. It’s all right for me. I asked for it but they didn’t’ (Currie 1989: 19).

Perhaps Ministers and Permanent Secretaries should put their money where their demands are and pay more people to provide the required Rolls Royce service. Perhaps the conscious effort to run the court as a cohesive unit, not as individual offices, would unearth opportunities for sharing. Does every Private Office need someone to hang around until the Minister leaves? Could the departmental court have a duty roster that covered all the Private Offices? Perhaps it is not feasible. I would be more persuaded were there evidence of systematic review.

Finally, there is the problem of recruiting and training junior members of the court. At several points I reported PS saying they had problems recruiting people and bemoaning the lack of time for proper induction and training. While I saw many a plan for the DGs, I never saw any plan for a central secretariat. Perhaps the first step is to subject the directorate that dare not speak its name to a staffing review that seeks to match needs and resources?

**Future research**

I tell a story of a willed ordinariness that domesticates events by using elaborate protocols. I describe a departmental court, not individual Private Offices. I can tell this markedly different story from the portrait in the existing literature because I focused on the beliefs
and practices of civil servants and politicians; because I listened to their reasons for doing what they did or did not do. This focus on beliefs and practices is the distinguishing characteristic of an interpretive approach. I have tried to show that an interpretive approach allows us to look at old topics with fresh eyes; to tell new stories. The way forward for Public Administration is to focus on understanding the beliefs and practices of actors. The focus on everyday practices provided the detailed evidence about internal management, protocols, networks and language that is the bedrock of my interpretation of their interpretation of what is going on. The only way to collect that evidence was by interviewing members of the Private Offices and observing them at work. Observation has two other benefits. ‘Being there’ fosters trust. Private Secretaries talked to me fully and frankly about their jobs in a way that would not have happened if I had dropped in for the usual one-hour interview. I also gained access to everybody in the office from the head to the most junior clerical member. I was less and less a stranger the longer I was there and I was there long enough for confidences. Also, I could check the accuracy of my findings. I was also able to compare the information in interviews with what I saw. Observation was a way of cross-checking the interviews, just as the diaries and memoirs of former Ministers were a guard against cheery picking the odd and the unusual from my data. Any method that provides new even novel evidence, that helps with access to interviewees, and that can be cross-checked for its accuracy makes a strong case for inclusion in the toolkit of every student of public administration. The Public Administration community could profitably adopt a more adventurous toolkit.

Finally, the Public Administration community needs to pay more attention to how it writes up its research. Richardson (1997: 2) comments there is an academic rule ‘that the “I” should be suppressed in [academic] writing’ for the impersonal ‘all-knowing, all-powerful voice of the academy’. But ‘We are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves’. So, how do we tell our stories? Van Maanen (1998) distinguishes between realist tales, confessional tales and impressionist tales. Realist accounts are dispassionate, third-person documentary accounts of everyday life. A confessional story is autobiographical and told in the first-person. Impressionist tales are episodic and complex, stressing contingency. His aim is to find new and better ways of reporting back from the field. There is no one, given way to tell our stories. Here I have used scenes, or story segments that serve as building blocks to develop specific themes. Deliberately, I am present in my account of the fieldwork. I do not recommend the use of any specific narrative device. I do urge more self-conscious choices in our storytelling.
I have identified practical questions. I have urged a new research agenda on academic colleagues with my interpretive approach and its focus on beliefs and practices and my recommendation that we add observation to our toolkit. But I have left out one key conclusion; observation is fun because you stand in other people’s shoes and see the world from where they sit. I have done research in many ways over the years; historical archives, surveys, case studies, and elite interviewing. I have been the sole researcher and supervised large research programmes. I have done consultancies, applied research and pure or curiosity research. None of it was more fun than observing politicians and civil servants at work. I was never more engaged. I shook off the shackles of academe and lived in someone else’s world, no matter how incomplete that experience, for a short time. I was refreshed and invigorated. So, even if you do not buy into the interpretive approach, nonetheless I urge you to go in the field and enjoy yourselves.

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Notes

1 My greatest debt is to the 20 members of the Private Offices in three Departments who agreed to taped interviews and allowed me to watch them at work. They needed extra work like they needed a hole in the head, yet they tolerated me with great good cheer and were unfailingly helpful. I am most grateful and, should they read this piece, I hope they think their efforts were not in vain. I am also grateful to their bosses; the ministers and permanent secretaries. They gave me access to their staff and commented on a draft of the text. Again my thanks for the time and trouble because I am all too well aware of the demands of ‘the diary’. I would also like to thank Mark Bevir (University of California), Jenny Fleming (University of Tasmania), Paul ’t Hart and John Wanna (Australian National University) and Patrick Weller (Griffith University) for comments and advice.

2 I am indebted to Andrew Dunsire’s obituary in the *Public Administration Bulletin* Number 25 December 1977: 2 for the information about Frank Stacey.

3 The books that impressed most as a novitiate were such theoretically informed case studies as Michel Crozier’s *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (1964), and Philip Selznick’s, *TVA and the Grass Roots* (1966).

4 This section on methods draws on Rhodes 2002, 2005 and Rhodes, ’t Hart and Noordegraaf 2007: chapters 1 and 9.

5 I do not summarize the main features of an interpretive approach here because I have done so elsewhere at length: see: Bevir and Rhodes 2003 and 2006. For the debate with our critics see the symposia in *British Journal of Politics and International Relation* 6(2) 2004: 129–64; and *Political Studies Review* 6(2) 2008: 143–77.

This section is paraphrased from Geertz 1973: chapter 1. For the debate about Geertz and the literary turn in cultural anthropology see Inglis 2000, Clifford and Marcus 1984, and Geertz 1988.

For the period 2001–5, Michael Barber 2007, Alastair Campbell 2007, and David Blunkett 2006 were especially useful. Some historians and journalists should also be included in this list because of their impeccable off-the-record sources. Anthony Seldon’s (2004 and 2007) two-volume biography of Blair has a staggering array of insider interviews. Peter Hennessy (various, but especially 2001) and Robert Peston 2005 are not far behind; the latter had the best access to Brown and his court. Less consistently useful contributions are: Beckett and Hencke 2004, and Pollard 2005. The other memoirs, diaries, biographies and autobiographies were of episodic use.

Although we usually say ‘Chatham House Rules’ (plural), in fact there is only one rule: ‘participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed’.

On the problems of writing up fieldwork, see: Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1984; Geertz 1988: chapter 6; and Van Maanen 1988.

The fieldwork for this project will be written up in several ways because I am exploring the modes employed in writing fiction as ways of writing non-fiction. So far, I have played with narrative, scenes and dialogue but there are many modes of writing fiction for me to explore, including for example, biography, summary, exposition, introspection, flashbacks, recollections, action, feelings and thoughts, and background (see for example White 1973).
Most departmental organization charts, or organograms, show it to one side of the line hierarchy and it advises key actors in the departmental court.

Of course, there are other protocols around, for example, travel and hospitality, but they are not as central to the work of the Private Office. On another occasion I will discuss the role of drivers and the keeping of hospitality registers.

When I am referring one of the specific departments or positions under study, I capitalize the first letter; for example, Department. When I refer to the generic department or position, I use lower case; for example departments.

At the Treasury, Nigel Lawson’s (1992: 269 and 385) PPSs included some of the most distinguished Permanent Secretaries-to-be of the next 20 years; for example John Kerr (Foreign Office), Rachel Lomax (Welsh Office, Transport), Alex Allan (PPS to John Major and Tony Blair and Permanent Secretary at Justice), and John Gieve (Home Office). On the Foreign Office see Henderson 2001, and Dickie 1992: chapter 4.


Some senior civil servants had to make similar decisions. Gus O’Donnell current Head of the Home Civil Service turned down the opportunity to become Nigel Lawson’s PPS at the Treasury for the same reason (Lawson 1992: 385).
Many protocols are written down in induction packs and equivalent internal Departmental documentation. Of the publicly available sources, Jary 2004 and Martin Stanley’s website ‘How to be a civil servant’ available at www.civilservant.org.uk/ are useful. Martin Stanley is the Chief Executive of the Competition Commission who joined the civil service in 1971. His advice to aspiring civil servants codifies many a protocol with a welcome leavening of humour. Rhodes 2007 talks about the rituals in the Departments. Rituals are habitual practices or customs that, unlike protocols, are rarely written down. Indeed, people may not be aware of their habits until they are pointed out. They include for example ‘coffee sipping amity’ (Stothard 2003: 34 and 61). He also describes the messengers who deliver it as ‘a source of continuity and a kind of comfort’ (see also Stewart 2004: 21–2). In my Departments, it was tea more often than coffee but the quality of ritual comfort remained (Rhodes 2005). I knew I was accepted when the messenger brought my tea in a mug without my asking.

On the diary see also, for example, Stanley 2008: 5; Blunkett 2006: 82, 271; and Kaufman 1980: 39.

Indeed Jary (2004: 6) stresses that ‘Ministers are human’ and urges the Private Office to be ‘sympathetic to the sacrifices Ministers and their families are often making’.


The correspondence protocols are so central to the life of the Private Office that they are written down. For example, Jary (2004: chapters 4–6) advises on writing letters, answering PQs, and preparing speeches. Stanley (2008) offers general advice on correspondence and speeches. Both are civil servants writing for civil servants.

When files were weeded and correspondence thrown away, caution was still the order of the day. Everything was either torn in half or shredded before going into the waste paper bin and placed in sacks for disposal at the daily close of business.


Jary 2004: 21 also adds information (or updating) briefs and question and answer briefs. He also provides advice on how to write briefings in Chapter 3. See also Stanley 2008a.


See Jary 2004: 13, 21, and 23. He provides a template for a submission on p. 27. See also Stanley 2008a: 5, 7, and 8. For further advice on drafting a submission see: 17–18.


Stanley (2008: 23–4) offers sensible practical advice on speeches: i.e. don’t write them, dictate, and don’t show to senior colleagues who will spot all split infinitives
and turn it into written text. Jary 2004: chapter 6 is a man for the written text, not the spoken colloquialism.

32 Permanent Secretaries increasingly appear in public, often to explain Departmental policy. They also present seminar papers and lectures. Such presentations usually involved the PS with assistance from the relevant DG. They did not involve the Spads as, necessarily, there is no political gloss; the intention is to stick to the facts.

33 On internal networks see, for example, Henderson 2001: 157–8; Page and Jenkins 2005: 115; and Walker 1970: 67.

34 Many Ministers have recorded their policy disagreements with civil servants from Tony Benn, Richard Crossman and Barbra Castle to Michael Heseltine and Margaret Thatcher. Latterly see: Blunkett 2006: 342, 344, 354, 355–6, and 41.

35 On external networks see, for example, Blunkett 2006: 601, 638; Henderson 2001: 157, 158, 159–60; and Prescott 2008: 256.

36 On the impact of, and the several forms of engagement with, Parliament see Blunkett 2006: 12, 13, 80, 124, 152, 165, 191–2, 193, 501–2, 508–9, 576, and 600.

37 On the language of Whitehall see, for example, Blunkett 2006: 153, 210, 441, and 519; Denman 2002: 208; Henderson 20091: 161; and Kaufman 1980: 34–5, 37, and 44.

38 I was not there, so cannot know, but this interpretation could explain David Blunkett’s experience; see, Blunkett 2006: 718 and 734–6