THE TEAM AT THE TOP:
Ministers in the Northern Territory

The Australian National University North Australia Research Unit
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Preface

With this study the North Australia Research Unit introduces a new series of monographs designed for the publication of research on Northern Australian topics. The monographs replace an earlier series, the North Australia Research Bulletin which is to be discontinued when number 8 is published during 1982. Other monographs in the new series which are at an advanced stage of preparation include Steven Thiele's study of the Aboriginal-owned cattle station, Yugul, in the Northern Territory, a report on the National Aboriginal Conference election in the Northern Territory in 1981, and a selection of papers dealing with service delivery to Aboriginal outstations from the Research Unit's 1981 conference.

The Unit, located in Darwin, is a part of the Research School of Pacific Studies of the Australian National University. It provides services for visitors and maintains its own research program. Patrick Weller, senior lecturer in political science at the Australian National University, visited the Unit in 1981 when he and Will Sanders, one of the Unit's staff, carried out the interviews on which this monograph is based. As field director of the Unit I would like to join with them in acknowledging the cooperation of Northern Territory ministers and departmental heads, all of whom gave generously of their time. To all of them we owe thanks and particularly to the Chief Minister, Paul Everingham. Our thanks go too to Debbie Hill who set the text on the computer.

P. Loveday
CHAPTER 1: MINISTERS

The comment that ministers are overworked has become one of the cliches of the study of politics. Whenever ministers are discussed, it is assumed they are overworked and a variety of explanations for this are given.

First, they have a multiplicity of roles. They must at the one time be departmental head, cabinet member and local electorate representative. They are also responsible for explaining government actions to the general public. In between times they have their private lives. From one day to another ministers are playing all these roles at once. They are conscious that if they ignore any of them they may court political trouble and may lose their very position as minister. If a department is ignored the bureaucrats may make some politically insensitive judgments. If the party is ignored, the backbench or the machine may revolt. If cabinet is ignored then it may become impossible for the minister to initiate anything. And if the electorate is ignored the minister may find himself out of the parliament.

A second explanation is the size and complexity of ministerial jobs. Ministers usually sit at the top of large, often technical, bureaucratic organisations which feed up advice and recommendations on how to act. In so doing departments will inevitably sift out the large proportion of material but the flow to the top is still considerable. According to federal ministers their greatest burden is the mundane paper shuffling, the considering of routine matters which have to be settled in order that government may go on. Most of what governments do today, they did yesterday and they will do tomorrow. Much of the policy which is carried on has long been settled, is seldom challenged but is none-the-less necessary if the minister is satisfactorily to fulfil his departmental role.

At times the questions which come to a minister are technically complex. One does not have to be choosing the tactical fighter replacement for the Australian air force to be aware of this. Whether it is in areas of health or uranium mining there is always a range of disputed scientific facts which ministers may or may not want to be aware of before they make decisions. And, given the fact that most ministers are generalists, that they have reached their position not because of expertise in the area for which they are now responsible but because they have had a more general political background, they inevitably rely heavily on the advice of the permanent bureaucrats. So most ministers are technically unable to challenge the assumptions on which advice is made. A distinguished permanent head in Britain pointed out that, as long as the bureaucrats set the parameters for decisions and make the assumptions on which decisions are built, and as long as politicians are not prepared to challenge those assumptions, then inevitably the bureaucrats set the terms within which policy decisions are to be made.
These factors have led to a challenge to the concept of ministerial responsibility. Growing government involvement in all areas of social activity has meant that ministers cannot possibly be aware of all the actions that are taken in their names. They may set policy— invariably with considerable advice from the bureaucrats; they may determine priorities and make the major decisions; but in most cases, whether they are questions of administration or of policy, decisions must be taken by the bureaucrats and the minister will be unaware of them. Ministerial responsibility has necessarily been reinterpreted to mean an examination of things that go wrong, a capacity to explain to parliament how processes will be improved, and not the requirement to resign because some official somewhere has made a mistake.

Indeed the acceptance of the view that ministers should not even be expected to be responsible for everything undertaken by their bureaucrats has even led to demands, espoused by the Fulton committee in Britain and the Coomba committee in Australia, that the bureaucrats ought themselves to be held accountable, within the framework set by the minister, for the decisions which they take themselves. This is not to suggest that there is a dichotomy between administration and policy, for clearly there is not. Rather it is to acknowledge that the ministers cannot maintain an overview or an involvement in everything that goes on. In practice, the reinterpretation of ministerial responsibility probably means in the last resort that nobody is responsible. Ministers blame public servants for not informing them, public servants shield behind the more general idea that ministers themselves ought to be responsible. Yet that myth of responsibility remains; and inevitably creates much of the work that ministers do (Fraser 1978).

It is this combination of factors; formal responsibility to parliament, the complexity and technical pressure of the job, multiplicity of roles and the sheer pressure of the workload on ministers that has led people to think that ministers are inevitably overworked.

As a result several ways of lightening the ministerial load have been put forward. In the Australian context such suggestions were made in the book Can Ministers Cope? (Weller and Grattan 1981). It was proposed that there should be more ministerial advisors to allow ministers to be more aware of the basic assumptions on which recommendations were made and to act at the very least as a sounding board for new ideas; that parliament ought to reorganise its standing orders to allow most divisions to be taken at one time and to reorganise its question time so that particular ministers are questioned on given days. These ideas obviously have political implications in that they reduce the capacity of the opposition to put ministers under the spotlight but they would also allow ministers to reorganise their time and be able to give more attention to the administration and administrative problems created by their departments. It was suggested the cabinet delegate more to ministers because in the Australian federal situation the workload of cabinet is both diverse and frightening in its intensity; the parties should examine more carefully the people they select for safe seats because it is from these that future ministers are likely to be drawn. Above all it was recommended that the appointment of assistant ministers, whether with skeleton departments to circumvent the requirement of the constitution or actually as a second minister to the same department, would allow the senior ministers to
concentrate on the major questions and to reverse the present tendency for the immediate and trivial to squeeze out the immediate and important, and for the long term, whether trivial or important, never to be considered at all (Weller and Grattan 1981:203-11). The purpose of these ideas was to change the balance of pressure on ministers, to allow them more time to examine the important questions of government administration that face them. They are, therefore, based on the premise that government administration ought to be given more ministerial attention than at present vis a vis the other ministerial roles. This, of course, is a subjective judgment but one with which some federal ministers would agree. It does not follow that it is necessarily correct.

The federal Australian government is not by foreign standards very large. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the federal ministers are under pressure, that some have become the captives of their departments and that even the good ministers have to pick and choose which issues concern them and on which issues they are prepared to accept the advice of the bureaucracy. That is a function not so much of the competence of ministers but the complexity, the speed and the pressure of the system itself. Obviously changes can be made and many of the measures suggested, even if condemned as nothing more than bandaid proposals, could make the life of ministers somewhat easier. But it is never likely that ministers' positions will be easy and, given that there is strong competition for them as they are now, it would not seem necessary to make them so.

Foreign systems, which are larger and sometimes more complex, increase the pressure on the ministers. Such material as we have on Britain, particularly from the Crossman and Castle diaries, shows the pace, complexity and diversity of the ministerial job in Britain. What is true for the Australian federal system is true in foreign systems as well.

Need it be so? Is it inevitable in all systems that the ministers are overworked? Is it inevitable that there are things a minister would like to do but does not have the time to do?

Having looked at the federal system it seemed logical to turn to the other extreme in Australia - to the smallest Australian political system, with the fewest parliamentary members - to see how ministers there organised their time. Can Ministers Cope? was concerned with the patterns of ministerial behaviour in federal government. If ministers in the smaller system were investigated, it would be possible to observe whether or not the types of pressure on them, their perceptions or their styles were significantly different. After all both groups are ministers within a parliamentary system. Both groups at least purport to be doing the same things. But do they? It was to explore these issues that we interviewed ministers and senior public servants in the Northern Territory of Australia. The pattern of interview used was similar to that for federal ministers in Can Ministers Cope?.

By institutional and demographic criteria the Northern Territory provides a dramatic contrast to the Australian federal system. It comprises only one of the one hundred and twenty-six federal House of Representatives electorates and in population is one of the smallest of those, with only 55,000 enrolled voters - the only four smaller electorates are in Tasmania where the need for five seats is protected by section 24 of
the constitution. The total population of the Northern Territory is approximately 120,000. The working population is between 40,000 and 45,000 (ABS Summary 1980). The electorates within the NT for the Territory Legislative Assembly, nineteen in all, each have between 2,000 and 4,000 electors. There are only six ministers in the NT compared with twenty-seven federally and around twenty in some of the state governments. The Northern Territory is a unicameral system; the one parliament is not bound by an upper house nor limited by any substantial growth of local government below.

In a political system which is so small one might expect a different style of ministerial involvement. It would appear to be the ideal setting in which to investigate whether the parliamentary system itself overloads the minister or whether he is a product of the complexity of the Australian federal government and the larger political systems. But it is worth pointing out that, while it is a small political system in terms of numbers of electors, parliamentarians and ministers, the Northern Territory may in other ways be atypical.

First, in geographic terms, it is immense. It is more than five times the size of Victoria and four times the size of Italy. Approximately 70 per cent of the population live in six urban areas each separated by some hundreds of kilometres and ranging in population from less than 2,000 to about 55,000, while the remaining 30 per cent is widely dispersed across the Territory in small communities of up to 1,000 people.

Second, the NT has one peculiar demographic characteristic of great political salience: approximately 27 per cent of the population are Aborigines, many living in remote areas. This population creates special issues which may in turn be reflected in special pressures on the ministers.

Third, because of the size of the Territory and the dispersal of a significant proportion of the population the mere cost of delivery of government services is an exceptional problem in itself. In its submission to the Grants Commission the Territory government has argued that the per capita costs of providing various services in the Territory can be five or ten times the cost in the standard states (Treasury 1980). It is not very useful in such circumstances to examine delivery costs in simple per capita terms as if the differences were only of degree. Rather one should recognize it as a peculiar problem due to dispersal of the population in the Territory and observe if and how this affects ministerial roles.

The fourth and most important disadvantage for comparative purposes is that the Territory was granted self-government only three years ago in June 1978, at which time the present government took office. Since January 1977 some territorially elected representatives had acquired limited influence through the Executive Council, a body established to 'assist' the Administration in the transitional stages. Before that, the Administrator's Council had had no real authority.

When the Executive Council was first established in 1977, five ministers were sworn in. In January 1979 this was increased to six. The first elections since self-government were held in June 1980 and the Everingham government was returned (See Jaensch and Loveday 1981). No
ministers have been replaced in this period. Each of the present ministers has therefore been a minister since self-government in June 1978 or very nearly so. There are no ex-ministers. There are also no examples of ministers from the other side of politics since the Labor Party has never been in government. Historical comparison within the Territory is therefore impossible. This study is of ministers at a special time in the Territory's political history.

One other point should be made before embarking on a study of ministerial roles in the NT; it may be a small political system, but unlike local government, it does not have small areas of responsibility. The Territory government must provide schools, hospitals and infrastructure - roads, bridges, sewerage, electricity. It is responsible for public transport, community development, agricultural development and industrial and resource development initiatives. It is in reality a state government in the Australian federation even if it is a small one. Small, in this situation, may create heavier demands on ministers rather than alleviate them for, in parliament with only eleven government members it is difficult to have more than six ministers. Each minister will have to cover a wider range of government activity both within the Territory and in inter-governmental relations. The simple burden of attending federal-state ministers' conferences in his policy areas could be multiplied two or threefold for a particular minister vis a vis his counterparts in other states. The small size of the parliament and ministry may therefore increase rather than decrease the workload of ministers.

Given all these peculiarities, it remains true that the Territory is one of the smallest parliamentary systems of government in existence - in terms of size of the population, government, the parliament and the ministry - and it certainly is one of the newest. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that if ever ministers are going to be on top of their portfolios, if ever they are going to be able to cope adequately with all the demands of political life, then the NT might be the place where that would happen.

This monograph examines the modus operandi of ministers in this small system. The questions under discussion are similar to those in Can Ministers Cope?: Are ministers on top of their department(s)? Are ministers aware of what is going on? Are they in a position where they can direct and dictate to their permanent officials what should go on? How conscious are they of the bureaucratic procedures which underlie their actions? How do they prepare for and perform in cabinet? How do they react to the media, to parliament, to the electorate? Or, to put it another way, what are the pressures that exist on ministers, what roles do ministers play or think they should play? Are the roles and pressures different from those in the federal system? If so, what are the important systemic differences?

It may be possible, without preempting what follows, to put forward a general hypothesis: All ministers are overworked regardless of the system in which they operate. This is not because of the reasons suggested earlier and in Can Ministers Cope? such as the size, complexity and multiplicity of roles they have to play, but because ministers are likely to be activists. They are concerned with institutional structures and power in society. They may wish to change or maintain the system which
exists, but either way they will be involved. They are overworked not because the system requires them to be, although it may, but because they choose to be overworked. A minister’s interests and his desire to be involved will always expand to exceed the time available. Groups and individuals always want access to ministers whether it be on government business or just to ask them to open their fetes. Another way of putting this is to suggest that there are various points at which a minister may cut off his activity. When there is a heavy paper load or a need for international travel, the degree of involvement in other areas must be reduced. As the system gets smaller and these pressures are reduced, access becomes more possible, so ministers spend more time talking, commuting, listening to grievances — but still always working. Whatever the system, ministers are likely to be overloaded.

The corollary of this hypothesis is that ministers cannot be critically observed, let alone judged as good or bad, independent of the system in which they operate. Different systems make different demands on ministers and require a different balance of roles for success.

Let us take one or two examples. If a minister wants to spend his time travelling the electorate, listening to the grievances of electors, and then asking his department to propose remedies for the complaints he may be acting at that time as an effective minister since he may see public contact as being crucially important to ministerial success. He sees himself, legitimately, as a conduit between the public and the bureaucracy. If, on the other hand, a minister chooses to be isolated from the public and spend his time considering with his department the initiatives which the government might pursue, that too is a legitimate role for ministers to play. It may be that the first of the two roles we have suggested is more suitable in a small Territorian government and the second more suitable in a larger federal government. That has yet to be seen. Even within the same system, ministers’ conceptions of their proper roles may differ. It is these patterns that are important.

This, of course, does not mean that we can no longer distinguish good ministers from bad ministers, but that in different systems good and bad may reflect different criteria. The question becomes: Why and how do ministers’ roles in a small system differ from ministers’ roles in a large system? If it is the system which ultimately determines roles then perhaps panaceas and piecemeal reforms should less readily be put forward by academics and other observers. After all statements about what ought to be the case are, as often as not, political statements themselves. The prescriptive questions become very complex if they must continually be related to the individual system.

If we achieve nothing else in this monograph we are concerned to identify with some accuracy the perceptions of the processes of government at the top levels in the Territory: the process by which ministers, permanent heads and statutory officers perceive the inter-relationships both between themselves and with the public, for this is a descriptive job which has not yet been done with any degree of sensitivity.
CHAPTER 2: MINISTERIAL ATTITUDES AND THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Since ministerial roles can be adequately understood only in the context of the broader features of the particular political system, in this chapter we will relate ministerial roles in the Northern Territory to two elements of the political system - the structure of government administration and the ministerial attitudes thereto. The former is a major determinant of ministerial behaviour in any political system. The latter - ministerial attitudes to the government administration, that is, their perceptions of the structure, processes and behaviour of the public service - take on an unusual importance in the present Territory context.

The Ministers

But first, some basic background about the six Northern Territory ministers. When they were first chosen by the chief minister, the ministers were young. The oldest at the time of self-government was thirty-eight; the youngest was thirty-two. In 1981 the chief minister, Paul Everingham, was thirty-eight, his deputy, Marshall Perron, thirty-nine. The other ministers - Nick Dondas, Roger Steele, Ian Tuxworth and Jim Robertson - were forty-one, forty-two, thirty-nine and thirty-six respectively. They are probably the youngest ministry in the history of Australia. Even now, after five years' experience, the oldest is of an age when most federal ministers are reaching office for the first time.

The ministers come from throughout the Territory. Four represent Darwin electorates, one comes from Alice Springs and the sixth has a large country electorate based on Tennant Creek. This is not to suggest that area representation was necessarily important in the choice of ministers. When a chief minister has only eleven people from whom to choose there is little opportunity to worry about representational factors. He chose the six most able to do the job.

The ministers come from a range of professions. Everingham was a lawyer; Perron a small business manager; Tuxworth was in mining, and then owned a soft-drinks factory; Robertson worked in a law office, then was briefly in real estate; Dondas was a business man with a variety of interests; and Steele an insurance consultant with a grazing background. Most, therefore, have been involved in small business. None of them had administrative experience in large organisations. This is scarcely surprising since there are no large private organisations in the Territory. The only organisation of significant size has been the public service and although one leading public official did stand as a Country-Liberal party candidate for the Senate in 1975 no senior public servants with administrative experience have yet run for parliament successfully.

The ministers entered office with very little parliamentary experience. Although there had long been a Legislative Council it did not provide the tough parliamentary training which is regarded as desirable in
other states and in the Commonwealth. It had little real power, and between 1974 and 1977 there was no formal opposition in the Council. Also the ministers had no opportunity to undertake smaller or easier portfolios before they were thrown into their present jobs. The one source of training which could have been tapped—the public service—was regarded with suspicion by the ministers, as we shall see later.

Many of these general characteristics of the ministers can be related to the newness of the Territory's representative political system. Under the old federal administration of the Northern Territory, politics was a largely bureaucratic process carried on between departments at the centre—Canberra—and the periphery—Darwin. Local representative politics did not exist. It is hardly surprising then that the ministers in this new brand of Territory politics since self-government were, at the beginning, both young and inexperienced by comparison with ministers in other systems. They had to learn by experience, even while they were governing.

Almost as significant was the way in which some of them entered politics. It was at times almost by accident. One minister gave the coalition parties a donation, of which part was used to make him a financial member and eligible to become a candidate. He was selected for a seat held by a leading member of the Labor party; although he campaigned widely, his election was made easier when his opponent was made a judge the day before nominations closed.

One common factor in their decisions to stand was frustration with the Canberra bureaucracy. One person now a minister leased land with a covenant that required him to build on it within two months; when his factory was erected, he was told that electricity was not due to be connected until the next year. His problem was solved after a complaint to the federal member, Sam Calder, who told him to 'stop whinging and start working'. But that experience was indicative of the anger felt towards 'the mobile, unresponsive, faceless machine' that has run the Territory. One minister summed it up

We were drawn into politics out of sheer frustration about what ‘they’ were doing here.

The Structure of Government Administration

The job has been made no easier for these ministers by the structure of the government administration in the NT. There are ten government departments and a larger number of authorities all under ministerial control. Without exception, therefore, the ministers are required to cover a wide range of government activities. Four of the six ministers have two departments. Roger Steele has the department of Primary Production and a commission which covers Territory tourism policy. Nick Dondas has the large Transport and Works portfolio and the youth, sport and recreation and ethnic affairs areas from within the department of Community Development.
Ian Tuxworth is minister for Health and minister for Mines and Energy. As the former he is responsible for all the Territory's hospitals, Aboriginal and community health services, environmental health, and the new Drug and Alcohol Bureau. He is also responsible for the Medical and Health Registration Boards and the Liquor Commission which regulates the sale of alcohol in the Territory. As minister for Mines and Energy he is responsible for another department and another statutory authority - the Northern Territory Electricity Commission. He is also the member for Barkly - a country electorate almost as large as Victoria. His air charter bill is indicative of the range of activities he must cover - in 1979-80 it was $100,000.

Jim Robertson is minister for Education and minister for Lands and Housing. The education function has grown gradually with the transfer of various bodies from the Commonwealth to the Northern Territory. The last of these - the Teaching Service - was transferred on 1 July 1981. The education bodies which now report to Robertson include the University of the NT Planning Unit, the Industries Training Commission, the Darwin Community College, the Post-School Advisory Council and the Education Advisory Council. The Department of Lands has responsibilities which, although only peripheral to the Aboriginal land rights process covered by federal legislation, have become politically contentious as other groups in the Territory such as the pastoralists have begun to demand more secure forms of land tenure (Martin, Wells & Lanhupuy, 1980). The Northern Territory Housing Commission has direct access to Robertson and requires his involvement in contentious policy areas in its attempts to alleviate the high cost and acute shortage of housing in Darwin. Since Robertson is the only minister from Alice Springs, his colleagues regard it as essential that he maintains an overview of government activities in 'the Centre'.

Even though all these organisations are small by the standards of federal and other state government administrations, it was frequently argued that this does not make the policy making loads any less. To paraphrase several interviewees: the decisions are as important and as difficult whether they involve a few hundred or many thousands of people. Resources are still limited, the issues still as complex. If this is in fact so - and to some limited extent it may be - then the diversity of issues covered by any particular minister is enormous. The number of government organisations through which a minister must work is similarly increased in comparison with other states. Marshall Perron covers areas of responsibility which would be distributed over four or five ministries in other states: Treasury, Consumer Affairs, Corrective Services, Community Welfare and in part Aboriginal Affairs - although, given the large size of the Aboriginal population in the NT, Aboriginal issues arise in all portfolios.

One public servant suggested that the distribution of responsibilities to the various ministers has been consciously structured. He believed that in the reshuffle after the 1980 election there had been a pairing of 'high profile' and 'low profile' responsibilities - with each minister receiving one of each type. Everingham claimed that the reshuffle reflected 'new priorities in Government direction, such as community development, industrial development and tourism'. He added that 'the moves were designed to strengthen ministerial control and enable ministers to concentrate on implementing and achieving government policies' (Digest,
1980).

In reality, the reshuffle was neither as politically patterned as the permanent head suggested nor simply a matter of changing government priorities. It was the outcome of many complex factors which set the constraints within which the ministry can be structured. Everingham, as the only lawyer in the group, falls in almost necessarily as the attorney-general. Tuxworth claimed that he had one of his portfolios because he was the only one who could spell it. Although flippant, the remark indicates how minimal experience in an area can be the simple qualifying factor. In 1980 these two ministers' portfolios remained unchanged. Of the others, the newest minister, Dondas, had proved himself worthy of retention but the Community Development portfolio was becoming too contentious. The department was in the process of building a community welfare division from virtually nothing and of taking over functions previously handled by the federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The Community Development portfolio was, therefore, given to the deputy chief minister, Marshall Perron, who as treasurer could also keep an eye on its burgeoning level of spending. Dondas was given the larger, but rather more routine, Transport and Works portfolio and soon after regained the youth, sport, recreation and ethnic affairs areas from within Community Development. These latter are well suited to his political style as a person with strong links in the ethnic community, a former prominent sportsman and patron of many sporting bodies. Robertson had satisfactorily demonstrated his ability and was given Lands and Housing in addition to his previous responsibility, Education. On the other side of the coin, it was frankly acknowledged that the combination of Transport and Works and Industrial Development had been just too much for Steele and that the lighter Primary Production and Tourism portfolios he now has suit him better.

Ministerial Attitudes and the Public Service

The Northern Territory public service created at self-government was largely inherited from the Commonwealth Northern Territory administration. Of the 8961 NTNSP staff in January 1979, 8294 had been transferred from the Australian Public Service (PSC 1978). Even with the expansion of staffing to the present level of over 11000 the Commonwealth inheritance remains significant.

The new ministers regarded their bureaucratic inheritance with suspicion. The public service was viewed as slow, unwieldy, procedure bound and self-interested. The ministers believed that the bureaucracy was nostalgic for the autonomy of the old days when its only political masters were disinterested and far away and that it resented the intrusion of the new political masters. Everingham has himself been the most vigorous and persistent critic of the bureaucracy he inherited:

Once in office, the minister is immediately confronted not just with a myriad of problems which are usually beyond his immediate experience and expertise, but also a seething
cauldron of office workers, professionals and semi professionals, advisers, planners and clerical staff known as the public service, united by a single conviction - that they know more about government than does their new minister.

It is a daunting prospect and the new minister who believes that this departmentalised mass of people has as its collective first interest a will to support him through his initial weeks in office, has a hard lesson coming to him.

The minister who fulfills his electoral responsibilities, and attempts to initiate new policies espoused by his party during the pre-election period, soon finds out that many more reasons can be found by an established public service for not implementing new policy, than for doing so.

Most of these reasons are expressed in terms of 'usual practice', 'tested procedure', 'past experience' and 'precedent setting' - the euphemistic phrases that mean 'we've always done it this way before' (Everingham 1981a).

The ministers were determined that whatever happened they would not become captives of the public service. The public service was an organisation to be tamed, to be servant, not master. Its procedures should expedite, not inhibit, ministerial direction. Everingham has again been critical of bureaucratic procedures saying:

The word 'procedure' - the word which governs public administration today - comes from the word 'proceed' - to go forward.

In the Public Service the word too often means - to hold back, to delay (Everingham 1981b).

These sentiments are not uncommon among new ministers in all political systems. They arise when individuals not experienced in the intricacies of particular portfolios confront established public servants who have considerable expertise in the area. They are exacerbated if the incoming political masters are for some reason suspicious of the bureaucracy or if they believe it still to be loyal to the outgoing regime. The Whitlam government's experience when it came to power in 1972 illustrates the more general nature of the phenomena in Australia.

The Northern Territory ministers, particularly Everingham, have considered their position, both in theory and in practice, and have taken significant steps to change their relations with administration. On the theory side, Everingham has stated the need to re-examine the tenets of ministerial responsibility. In a speech to the Administrative Staff
College at Mount Eliza he spelt out the current situation, as he sees it. He is more forthright, more accurate and more realistic than his federal counterpart on the same topic. Fraser's 1977 Garran Oration was, by contrast, a collection of rather bland simplicities. Everingham acknowledges that ministerial capacity is limited and that therefore alternative methods ought to be adopted to make public servants responsible and accountable. What he asks for is a re-assessment of principles in the light of new circumstances. One of his strategems for reform is

A new definition of the principles of ministerial responsibility, simply, since ministers are responsible for government policy they should continue to be held accountable for the wisdom of their policy decisions. But ministers should not be required to bear responsibility for the administration of these policies. It is the task of professional public servants to administer and implement. If these tasks are not adequately performed then responsibility for this should be laid at the relevant door and the consequences accepted there (Everingham 1981a).

This statement of ministerial and official responsibility need not mean, and doubtless Everingham did not intend it to mean, what his opponents in CAGEO and some academic commentators seem to have carefully misinterpreted it to mean ('A Response to the Everingham Orations, Northern Territory News 20 July 1981). He did not say that when a minister becomes involved in administration that the minister is not thereby responsible for those actions. He did say that within the bounds of policy, where ministers are not involved, the relevant public servant should bear responsibility. There is nothing new in these ideas. He has not restated, as some have suggested, a dichotomy between politics and administration. Rather it is a plea to introduce some concept of accountable management, a doctrine which was accepted by the Fulton Report in Britain and espoused by the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration. It is a plea for some realistic appreciation of the methods and the mechanics of modern government.

Everingham included three or four other strategems in his proposals for gradual reform of the public service: increasing limited tenure contract officers in the public service, simplified legislation, and better public service accountability by allowing public servants to answer challenges to their competence. The remaining strategem - 'A steady reduction of government involvement in commercially oriented services' - adds little to the proposals. It reads more like a CLP article of faith and is not so coherently related to the process of public service reform.

At the same time Everingham is conscious that in practice it is very difficult for a government to interfere in the procedures of the public service. Whatever changes are designed to achieve they are often seen as political interference. Therefore actions taken in the NT in the last
couple of years in an attempt to tame the inherited public service have been taken within the confines of generally accepted administrative practices. But where possible the Everingham government has been more active and more decisive in such reforms than any of its counterparts in other states. This is not surprising since in no other state has the government so recently inherited a public service of which it was so deeply suspicious.

What then, in practice has the NT government done? First, it has consciously set out to buy the best expertise available. It has gone 'head hunting' to attract people with talent though, of course, there will always be disagreement about the criteria of choice and whether, in any given case, the best was obtained. And it has acquired those people from far and wide. The secretary of the Northern Territory Treasury appointed in early 1981, Dr Neil Conn, was previously the under-secretary of the Treasury in New South Wales. The secretary of the Department of Health, Dr Fleming, was formerly a deputy secretary of the department of Veterans Affairs; before that he was the person primarily responsible for attempting to implement the Whitlam government's national compensation scheme. The examples continue: Mike Purcell in Mines and Energy and Rod Unwin in Transport and Works both come from large private corporate administration in Western Australia. Sid Saville of the Department of Education was formerly a public servant in Papua New Guinea. The Solicitor-General came from private law practice in Alice Springs. The net for catching the right department heads has been cast widely and the methods adopted aggressive. The Territory government finds what it considers the best people and then makes sure it gets them.

Second, the government has ensured that it maintains controls over the department heads it employs. After the 1980 election the reshuffle of department heads and statutory officers made the reshuffle of ministers look like minor fine tuning. Seven such officers were moved around the service, some to retirement and others to greater heights (Northern Territory Digest, June 1981). This process of change at the top is ongoing. The Northern Territory government has not been loathe to shift those senior public servants who have not performed adequately, who have embarrassed the government, or who have proved unable to subordinate themselves to ministerial direction. The head of the Northern Territory Development Corporation reputedly embarrassed the government and soon thereafter exercised his option to leave. The former head of Primary Production found a job elsewhere and the former head of the Health Department was planning to retire, possibly in part because of an incompatibility in working styles with his minister but at the last minute moved into the vacancy left by the departing head of primary production. Top executive officers either 'shape up or ship out'. To quote one senior officer, 'In the Territory they're not "permanent heads" they're just "department heads"'.

Another made the point more allegorically by referring to the secretary of the federal Treasury's recent disagreement with his minister: 'If John Stone had done what he did up here he would either have been asked to leave or posted to the South Australian tick gate'. This same department head also remembers an interchange he had with the chief minister one hundred days after his appointment. Sensing the pressure to perform he commented: 'Well, I suppose my probationary period is now up'.
The chief minister reported, 'Yes, I haven't zonked you yet, have I?!' This is indicative of both the informality of the Territory system and of the appreciation of the senior public servants that their jobs are always on the line. They cannot expect to perform inadequately, embarrass the minister, resist or undermine the minister's directives and still survive. One of the recruits from private enterprise commented: 'I feel no more permanent than I did in private enterprise. If I didn't perform they would dump me somehow or other'. This does not mean that they are cowed. Most agree strongly with the aphorism of a federal public servant that if they disagree with a minister, 'to object once is obligatory, twice is necessary, and three times is suicidal'. But they are more acutely aware of the last alternative, and of who must make final decisions.

Most observers have been highly critical of this treatment of senior public servants. They claim that it constitutes politicisation of the service, the introduction of a spoils system. Such a suggestion does not withstand examination. Those who have been appointed to many of the senior positions are not political hacks who happen to support the government of the day. Indeed many of those recruited from elsewhere were serving or had served Labor governments with considerable distinction. What the critics are usually referring to is the seemingly capricious way in which ministers may disregard their senior public servants, dismiss or shift them in cases of disagreement. Certainly since self-government the turnover of top officials has been rather too high for good government. Whether this is justified depends primarily on where one sits. From the ministers' point of view it has been an attempt to sensitise the inherited public service to ministerial direction by appointing able administrators who are willing to serve ministers rather than resist them: if the minister makes up his mind these administrators must make sure it gets done. At times this process of top level sensitisation has been expensive, but it is an expense which Everingham sees as value for money:

I would like to see the Northern Territory Public Service become the most progressive service in Australia. I will count that a major achievement of government during my office. For that reason we deliberately offer wages and conditions comparable with and often better than those offered in other states. This need not be a long term policy. The top people we are able to attract have as part of their brief a requirement to pass their knowledge down the line and modify and adapt the service to better suit both government and the electorate (Everingham 1981b).

This extreme sensitisation can probably only occur in the first years of the new service. If the government had not decided to act immediately it may have lost the opportunity.
Perhaps the new government's attitude can best be summed up by once again quoting the chief minister. In his Mt Eliza speech he recalled the statement of a long time Territory public servant who

when pressed for the present policy on an issue said, 'We don't know where we are since self-government. We decide on a course of action, the submission goes to Cabinet and they take a completely different line.'

Everingham did not deny the truth of the public servant's comments. Rather he took them as indicative of a new phenomena in the Northern Territory - 'democratic government by elected representation'. He went on to explain:

A change of policy - whatever its seeming difficulties and implications, is never 'political interference' even though it may interfere with the status quo and be politically inspired. A public servant who takes it on himself to resist policy change breaches a basic democratic principle. Like it or not, a minister has been given a licence not accorded to a public servant regardless of experience and expertise, a mandate to govern (Everingham 1981a).

To an extent this whole process is a re-assertion of Westminster parliamentary democracy in reaction to the government by bureaucracy which existed prior to 1978. In the Westminster model ministers lay down policy. They may or may not choose to become involved in the administration but they require obedience from a public servant. However, it is more than this. It is also a brand of political realism which accepts that there are all sorts of bureaucratic reasons why public servants act other than as instruments of the minister's will. But it asserts that these are not sufficient to allow a public servant to forget or delay the requirements of the minister and it therefore suggests a number of mechanisms designed directly to sensitise the public service to its political masters.

This justification for moving, removing and recruiting senior public servants can not, however, be used for ever. It was specific to the period immediately after self-government. The claims of critics that the NT ministers are so deeply suspicious of their public servants that they can not establish stable relationships will gain some credence if in the next few years the moving and removing continues unabated. A government is not making best use of its senior officials if they are continually being moved just as they are establishing themselves in a particular job.

The unusual factor in the contemporary Northern Territory government is that the ministers won office with a suspicion of the public service and were conscious of the need to rapidly impose their own wishes upon the service; and further because the service was small enough, was momentarily
insecure as it changed masters and was probably anticipating some pressure
to redirect it towards Territorian priorities, they were given an
opportunity not often granted to ministers. The Whitlam government was far
less successful in its attempts to sensitise the federal bureaucracy in
1972 than Everingham's government has been. In the NT there were fewer
interests opposed to sensitisation and such opposition as did exist has in
part been either squashed or redirected elsewhere. When the combination of
a determined ministry and a small uncertain public service is put together,
when the issues which have been discussed above are not just part of the
rhetoric of government but are also part of the practice, then ministers,
however new, however untrained and however unused to wielding power are in
such circumstances given a chance to control the public service. Quite how
well this may or may not be done can be seen in the next chapter when we
discuss the practical relationships between the ministers and their
departments.

At least at the general level, a start has been made. Although
Everingham has not as yet instituted his Mt Eliza strategems for reform to
any great degree he has expended much political time and effort, both
rhetorical and practical, in attempting to sensitise the top level of the
public service by moving officers in, out and sideways. Other changes may
yet come.
CHAPTER 3: MINISTERS AND THEIR DEPARTMENTS

'It is difficult to generalise about the relationships between ministers and departments because of the importance of personalities and the variations this creates' (Weller and Grattan 1981). This statement about the federal scene is no less true in the Northern Territory. As difficult as it is to generalise it is important to identify the crucial elements in a system at a given time and show how these affect ministerial/departmental relations.

We have already noted some of the salient characteristics of the present group of ministers - Everingham's suspicion of the public service and his attempts to make it responsive; their general youthfulness and lack of political experience at self-government; the way in which they were thrown into portfolios if they had even the most minimal related experience and displayed some basic capability; the wide range of responsibilities which the six of them have to cover. One of the consequences of the sudden transition to self-government was that few of the ministers, when they reached their portfolios, had well developed notions of what they wanted to do substantively. Rather they had a general idea of getting the Territory moving, of providing responsive, rapid and action-oriented government. They had a simple philosophy of action rather than a detailed policy platform. They saw it as politically important to be doing things. The great political sin was to be seen, as the old Northern Territory administration had been, to be doing nothing at all or to be bogged down in the bureaucratic processes of doing things. These are the general characteristics within which the ministerial side of minister/department relations must be understood, though naturally enough they were not equally important for each individual minister.

Department heads are the other important group which critically affects ministerial/departmental relations. At the end of 1981 it is possible to place most permanent heads along a spectrum of attitudes to ministers and attitudes to action. Any such spectrum is in part an over simplification. It spells out the sorts of permanent heads that exist, without pretending that everyone can be fitted nicely at some point along the spectrum. Nevertheless the spectrum is a useful guide because it indicates some of the tensions which existed and still do exist in the relations between ministers and their senior public servants.

At one end of the spectrum are the process-oriented public servants. To these public servants what matters is that the system works properly, that the right people are consulted and the forms and procedures of the public service are followed. Any proposal should be thrashed out cautiously and in detail before it is put into effect. There is a 'proper' relationship between the minister and the public service, a 'proper' understanding of the various roles - for only then can the system be made to operate smoothly. One department head who fits generally into this category felt there 'should be a government directive regarding the roles of ministers and department heads'.
At the other end of the spectrum are what may be termed the output-oriented senior public servants. Often these have been recruited by the government precisely because of their lack of concern for procedures and formality. The output-oriented public servant is an example of the famous Carmody 'can do' philosophy. If the minister wants to get something done this kind of public servant does it by whatever means he can and as quickly as he can. Informal mechanisms are used, bureaucratic requirements are short-circuited and even ignored in order to ensure speedy returns, in political terms, for the minister.

Few if any public servants in the Northern Territory fit into either of those categories exactly but different tendencies are easily identified. Many of those who tend toward the process-oriented style are, in practice, the former Commonwealth public servants. Many of the output-oriented ones have been recruited within the last year or two. Although these top officers have their own personal ideas about their proper roles there is no question that these different types of senior officers have very different relationships with their ministers.

One further factor which is usually of considerable importance in determining ministerial/departmental relations is that senior public servants have a continuity of experience in a particular policy area which ministers do not. In most systems senior public servants have been in departments for many years; they know the files, understand past experiments and failures, and can explain the difficulties and problems of undertaking new initiatives as well as advising on the most effective way of achieving them. However, in the Northern Territory public service, because of Everingham's quite deliberate policy of moving senior public servants, the situation is quite the reverse. In October 1981 only two department heads had been in their current positions for more than twelve months. Apart from Martyn Finga, secretary of the Chief Minister's department, no permanent head has been in his current job for more than fifteen months. This means that the continuity that can often be used to stifle or over-ride minister's wishes just does not exist. It means that as often as not it is the bureaucrats who are being shown the ropes by the ministers; the bureaucrats are less aware of the local conditions and problems or departmental history and are being sensitised to local conditions. One memorable image is of Ian Tuxworth introducing a new permanent head to his vast country electorate. The event was the Borroloola races.

The period since self-government has been marked by rather stormy minister/department relations as each of these participants has been learning new roles. Ministers have been learning how to work with their departments starting from a position of deep suspicion. New permanent heads from interstate have been learning about the Territory, finding their feet in a very different social and political environment. Old permanent heads are feeling their way in new departments where they have comparatively little detailed expertise. Old federal bureaucrats are learning how to live with a minister on the spot. All are learning to strike up some sort of relationship with the others. For those who are flexible this seems to have been an enjoyable experience. For some of the old guard 'process' permanent heads it has been extremely frustrating as the ministers will not fit the model they believe ministers ought to fit. There have been some major disputes between some of the old heads and the
new ministers, resulting as often as not in the department head being moved on. These unsettled relations are understandable because of the newness of the political system. But it does mean that the more detailed and mundane ministerial/departmental relationships have to be understood within this atmosphere of newness, suspicion and continual change.

Ministerial Access

One of the questions around which tensions are generated is that of access to a minister by various officers within a department and vice versa. Some permanent heads believe that all contact with the minister should go through them. The permanent head will then determine who down the line may be brought in to help advise. These permanent heads object to the concept of the minister ringing direct to 'action officers' to find out what has happened or to obtain advice. The objection is justified by arguing that the action officer may be able to give reasonable advice on the particular case but is not in a position to place his advice within the broader departmental policy context. One commented that ministers 'didn't have enough knowledge to know they had to run it through the top'. At the other end of the spectrum there are permanent heads who do not care whom the minister talks to. The minister is welcome to ring whom he likes and if he chooses to take a decision on the basis of that advice, that is his responsibility. The range of opinions is as great as the range of permanent heads.

Some ministers believe that the system of working through the permanent heads is the best one. One of these ministers has now been reasonably successfully paired with one of the 'process' permanent heads who, interestingly enough, had been totally unable to work with his previous minister. His previous minister was and still is a person who rings anyone for advice and makes decisions on the spot – often by gut reaction, as he put it. This minister could probably never get on with a process oriented permanent head. He is now paired with a quintessential 'can-do' permanent head.

Another minister demanded that each submission that came to him had both an action officer's name and a telephone number so that he could consult down the line immediately. That minister was at times criticised by senior officers for taking the action officer's advice and making a decision without checking back. In a couple of instances such dissatisfied permanent heads have consciously set out to corral their minister. One attempted to create a system in which the minister agreed to turn to him as chief adviser before making any judgments or any final announcements. He drew up a detailed exposition of how the department should work and through whom advice should reach the minister. The minister approved the idea; but there is little doubt that arrangements which looked good on paper will be broken as soon as the minister finds it convenient to do so, and that of course is his prerogative.

The other side of the coin is some bureaucrats believe that ministers do not appreciate the protective role their senior bureaucrats can play. Their objection to ministers making decisions or public statements without contacting their top bureaucrats is not, they say, because of their belief
in the procedural necessity of consultation so much as their belief that ministers would be better protected politically if they sought top level confirmation more often. Some ministers argued that while they had the right to go down the line they nevertheless could use it only sparingly because of the pressure of time. One complained that the one thing he would have liked more time to do was meet officers in the department and be able to talk to them.

Some departmental heads saw their minister only once or twice a month, rang far more often, yet seldom felt they had difficulty seeing their minister if they so desired. Others did complain of problems of access; they would have liked to see their minister more often, but pointed out that his workload and the whole range of other items he had to cover meant that they waited until a really important problem arose. One former federal public servant described the fact that ministers were actually in the Territory as 'sheer heaven'. Another recalled the delightful shock when 'suddenly ministers were twenty-five yards away' and added: 'we had to be more serious about our advice'.

Above all, the style of interchange depends on the ministerial style. Some ministers prefer to write their comments on paper, to amend suggestions on the ministerial briefs that reach them. Others prefer to discuss things directly with their departmental officers. In the final analysis the patterns of access depend on what the individual minister is prepared to accept.

Whatever else is said of ministerial/departmental relations in the Northern Territory, it is necessary to mention their rather special informality: the 'call me Paul' syndrome as one officer put it. This practice does have its drawbacks too, as when one minister ringing direct and introducing himself briefly by name only to his department head's stenographer, was kept waiting for some time while the stenographer reluctantly attempted to find where the acting head of department could be found. It was not until the stenographer returned, three or four minutes later, and gave the minister the government switchboard number that he informed her that he was the minister, much to her embarrassment. That type of situation, grumbled the minister, 'could only happen in the Northern Territory'.

One simple physical fact which affects ministerial/departmental access relations is that no ministers work in their departments. Each has an office in the Chan Building. The chief minister and deputy chief minister are on the first floor which also houses most of the department of the Chief Minister. The other four ministers all have offices on the second floor. Whether or not ministers ought to have offices in their departments is, as in other systems, a question for dispute. The chief minister has apparently indicated he would prefer to have all ministers within easy reach while they are in Darwin. Some departments would like to see more of their ministers, some ministers visit their departments regularly to talk to their officers. Nevertheless in the present situation where each minister oversees more than one organisation it would require a fairly distinct allotment of time if ministers had separate offices in each department. Such delineation of time would probably be difficult to maintain at times when the minister is needed to solve one crisis after another. At the moment, no minister who has more than one department
organises his time on a department by department basis. Rather they are inclined to solve the problems and look at the files as they are presented to them. One minister claimed he tried in the beginning to allot time but found it to be itself a waste of time.

The advantages of having a single office to which all files are sent without having to commit oneself to one department or another were therefore seen to be overwhelming. The arrangement presents no insurmountable problems of access since Darwin is a small city and it is comparatively easy for senior officials to come the few hundred yards to the ministerial offices if they want to see the minister. Some believed that he spent too much time on one portfolio and too little on their own, but that of course is only indicative of permanent heads having a departmentalised view of what ministers' priorities ought to be.

Administration and Senior Appointments

Many of the ministers maintained a strong interest in senior departmental appointments. All permanent heads are of course statutory officers appointed by cabinet. In at least one case the permanent head was interviewed in Sydney by half the cabinet before being offered a job. But ministerial interest generally goes further down the line than this. The appointment of a particular person as deputy or division head is likely to be canvassed with the minister before the appointment is made. All ministers expected it. Most permanent heads acknowledged that it was both desirable and necessary. If the minister did not want a person appointed, the departmental heads realised they would be unable to go ahead with the appointment. In one case, a minister admitted that he had raised questions about a particular choice but had been persuaded to let the appointment proceed. Twelve months later he valued the person as a solid and extremely competent adviser. There is, however, a general involvement with senior appointments. This is, probably, related to the deep seated suspicion of the public service and Everingham's attempt to make it responsive to ministerial direction. It is these senior public servants who will determine the success or failure of the responsiveness drive and it is therefore understandable that the ministers take abnormally high interest in the appointment of senior staff.

Yet several senior public servants were more sceptical about the ability of the ministers to intervene in the administrative processes. One commented:

None of these men have great experience working strategically through large organisations, so they see how we're doing it and find the bits they don't like ... Ministers do not see the real problem is to get the fundamentals laid down.

He thought there was a danger that appeals to political reality could be used to excuse administrative 'ad hocery'. Ministers occasionally made
decisions without thinking about the administrative implications. But, when departments were restructured, ministers usually were only marginally involved.

Ministerial Advice

Another important element in the ministerial/departmental relationship is the system of advice. When submissions are being prepared for cabinet it is regarded as essential that they include a range of options and a clear recommendation. Reputedly some departments at first included only recommendations and the chief minister retorted: 'Give us more credit'. Not all the options are particularly useful; some were facile. One of the choices was usually to do nothing. But both ministers and permanent heads agreed that options and recommendations were required.

For memos going from the department to the ministers all will include recommendations; some will include options. In not all cases were options regarded as useful. Legal advice is clear cut. In another area a department head stated that he gives clear recommendations after he has satisfied himself that the action is consistent with government policy and entails no political embarrassment. Whether or not the minister then chooses to accept that option or recommendation will vary from minister to minister. Some, it seems, will accept the majority of proposals that the public service puts before them. One minister accepts about 49 out of 50 - but then, the department head argued, he knew what his minister would or would not accept. Others are more sceptical. They want to look and judge for themselves - often by political 'gut feeling'.

It is at this point that the Northern Territory system of advice differs from the federal system. Some of the ministers in the NT are far more willing to go it alone, to make their own decision on their own local knowledge irrespective of the advice they receive. One of these categorised advice situations into three types: 'Sometimes I want options, sometimes I want recommendations and sometimes I tell the department what I want and it's up to them to do it'. The less politically confident were more concerned at least to get a good argument to support the direction they wanted to take. Even so there is within the NT system a greater propensity for ministers to act contrary to or without departmental advice. One of the reasons is, no doubt, the smallness of the political system. Most ministers have extensive local knowledge and long standing personal networks which radiate out widely into Territory society. Most ministers believe that they know the electorate's feelings directly and that based on this knowledge they can make their own political judgments without too much bureaucratic augmentation of their local knowledge.

Nevertheless there is always an awareness that they may not know all that goes on in their name. One minister argued: 'it was hell, virtually accepting people's say so on so much'. All were conscious that, by pure pace of business if nothing else, they could be snowed; possibly all were at some time or other; one claimed that it only happened to him once; thereafter, if the public service tried it, 'it was like catching the bishop with his fingers in the till'. Another believed that the danger was reduced because 'your colleagues are your critics; they tell you if they
see you're doing something wrong'. In turn the ministers were conscious that at times they made great demands on the public service: 'we can demand answers that don't exist'; 'we want to do more faster than what was happening before, but don't have the expertise'.

In their turn department heads were not always satisfied with the speed of ministerial response. One minister made decisions 'so tentatively you don't know whether the answer is yes or no'. Another commented that his minister was not quick with his paper work; if something worried him, he put it on one side. Another minister was on occasion slow, and then made and publicised a decision without telling the department. Others were regarded as very quick - at times, indeed, different departments regarded the same minister in very different lights. The chief minister was regarded as being 'incredibly quick'. All agreed that the ministers would not be pressured too readily.

Department heads accepted that ministers would interpret advice in a political context. Equally one said: 'if it's silly I tell them, but I have no monopoly on expertise', and another thought that ministers could get carried away with enthusiasm and needed restraining common sense. It is particularly difficult to keep up with ministers when they receive advice from a whole range of other sources.

Ministerial staff were not regarded as a great problem; although some were regarded as inexperienced, others acted as useful conduits to the minister. In one case where they tried to intervene between a department head and the minister they were quickly pulled into line; thereafter 'a phone call, a snarl, a wink and a nod fixes it'.

Initiatives invariably came from a variety of sources; that was regarded as widely acceptable. Some ministers were inventive. When one public servant was asked if he had initiated any proposals, he retorted 'I haven't had time; I'm far too busy reacting to the minister'. One minister commented: 'I'll listen to anyone anywhere anytime and I very soon learn who I can trust and who is worth listening to'.

Another abnormal characteristic about the system of advice in the NT is the degree of detailed decision-making which comes to the minister. Much of what they see appears routine and, to observers used to dealing with larger political systems, ridiculously insignificant and detailed. However, when asked if they thought they were involved in too much detail, most ministers said no. As one put it, each time he gets a routine submission he asks himself whether he really needs to know about the matter. He finds that almost invariably the answer is that it is better to know than not to and that there are few things that reach him that he would prefer not to have spent the time on.

The one exception to this was the requirement that all interstate travel by public servants be approved by the minister. This was a specific instruction from the chief minister - 'a Paulism from the early days' - to curb what he saw as unnecessary public service interstate junkets. Most ministers believed it was a little unnecessary and some had developed periodic pro forma approval arrangements with their permanent heads. But even in this instance many ministers argued that it was always useful to know who was going where to do what.
Ministers were surprisingly reluctant to decrease the amount of detail that crossed their desks. This can be related to two characteristics of the NT political system. First, that prevalent characteristic, suspicion of the public service. Ministers are still unwilling to let the public service have its head. Three years after self-government the public service is still perceived to be in need of constant sensitisation and supervision. The second reason is the smallness of the electorate. When twenty-five votes changing hands is a 2 per cent swing then ministers are peculiarly vulnerable to the dissatisfaction of a very few voters. In a small political system it is arguably necessary to keep a close check on detail in order to ensure political survival. The details of individual cases become more the currency of political survival than they are in a larger system.

This acute accessibility to electoral representation and responsiveness to individual case detail led a couple of permanent heads to comment that ministers were acting more like municipal councillors than state ministers. One minister even agreed that they may be too accessible, too responsive to pressure from the electorate. And yet it is arguable that political survival depends on just this style of operation.

The years since self-government have seen some fairly heated episodes in ministerial/departmental relations. The new ministers have brought with them what has variously been called 'percentage politics' or 'shoot from the hip government'. They want to be seen to be getting things done quickly. It is better to make more decisions and get a few wrong than make far fewer but more thorough decisions. This style may well be politically sensible, if not imperative, in a small system. But it is bureaucratically difficult, especially for those bureaucrats who were used to the distant and disinterested political masters of the past. This style brings with it a tendency towards informality of access and advice, a frequent short-circuiting of procedures and in the extreme case the 'promise now, tell the department later' method of ministerial decision-making, all of which can put strain on ministerial/departmental relations.

This process of ministerial decision-making is settling down too. Although people tend to remember the more obvious sudden decisions, increasingly ministers are taking advice more readily; or at least delaying decisions until they have thought it out again. Greater confidence with the public service is growing too.

The most difficult years are probably now over. Many of the new 'output' public servants are relaxed about the informality of ministerial/departmental relations. Some of the old 'process' public servants now find the political immediacy of the decision-making exhilarating if not unnerving - and perhaps even a refreshing change from the endless bureaucratic procedures of the old Northern Territory Administration. One of the 'old guard' went out of his way at the end of our interview to tell us how much he was now enjoying the process - and yet only twelve months previously he had been unwillingly evicted from the department where he had been for many years. At the senior official level, the public service has had its ministerial shaking. As long as the department heads maintain their political responsiveness their relations with ministers should be more settled in the next few years. Perhaps the same cannot be said of the public service middle management who may well be
in for a dose of political sensitisation.

CHAPTER 4: CABINET, COORDINATION AND THE CHIEF MINISTER

In any Westminster system cabinet and the chief minister are at the centre of the decision-making process. Cabinet decisions give authority to the activities of government and therefore the procedures by which cabinet operates, the formal and informal pressures which are brought to bear in cabinet, and the means by which decisions are reached there, are all central to understanding how a system of government works. Chief ministers also like to have a say in all areas of government policy and to have departments designed to allow this. The Northern Territory, although a small polity, provides no exceptions.

Cabinet

Perhaps the best way to begin to understand cabinet coordination of government decision-making is to look at the formal processes through which a policy initiative must pass. This is not to suggest that the formal processes are the most important. In fact, in keeping with the informality observed at other points in the NT political system, cabinet too has an important informal side, to which we return later.

The rules of cabinet are set out in a three part cabinet handbook. The first part deals with major policy issues, the second with security; the third section is the important one. It explains how material ought to be presented to cabinet. The rules for submissions largely follow those of the Commonwealth cabinet handbook. The Territory handbook has been adjusted to reflect local institutional structures. For example, when a department is preparing a submission it is required to consult with the coordinator-general in the Chief Minister's department before the submission is finalised. The coordinator-general is responsible for ensuring that all departments that have a particular interest in an issue or some related responsibility are consulted, that their views are considered and perhaps even incorporated in the final cabinet submission. If there are objections from other departments then these objections may be attached to submissions. When the coordinator-general is satisfied that appropriate consultation has taken place, draft submissions go back to the sponsoring minister for final signature. Often, of course, the minister is involved throughout as he may have initiated the idea. On occasions these conventions would go by the board if the minister were in a hurry.

The format of the submission follows standard lines. As with the federal cabinet requirements, the outside page has to include a title, the name of the sponsoring minister, the purpose of the proposal, its relation to existing policy, the timing or legislative priority, the details of any announcement, the action required before announcement, and staffing and costing implications.

Before any submission can be lodged with the Chief Minister's department it must also receive endorsement from elsewhere. The department of Law must comment on every submission coming before cabinet. If there
are financial or staffing implications then there must also be a comment from the department of the Treasury or from the Public Service Commissioner's Office. In practice the process is not quite so smooth. Often the central agencies have almost no time for a reasonable analysis; sometimes these agencies have to say that an item must be postponed.

When these other requirements have been met, nine copies of the submission are lodged with the cabinet secretariat in the Chief Minister's department. It is possible for the Chief Minister's office to decline to accept submissions if the formal requirements have not been satisfied but in practice this has seldom happened. Even in those cases, a minister could approach the chief minister directly to ask for it to be listed. More commonly, urgent items are accepted without full compliance with formal procedures in order to get them to the next cabinet meeting. Once an item is accepted by the Chief Minister's office it is automatically given a number in the cabinet agenda book and will appear in that order on the next agenda of cabinet.

In most political systems framing the cabinet agenda is the prerogative of the first minister and certainly the Northern Territory chief minister can scrutinize the agenda. But there have been no suggestions that he keeps items off the agenda on a regular basis or that he manipulates the agenda to his own advantage or to achieve his own aims, as some premiers and prime ministers do elsewhere. There are occasional examples where he may discuss with the minister the desirability of postponing a particular item until it is more politically opportune but these are exceptional and the item is generally kept off the agenda with the consent of the minister rather than in the face of his opposition. There is certainly no instance of a minister complaining that he has been unable to get an item on the agenda over a long period of time as there are in some other systems.

All submissions are supposed to be lodged at least five days before the cabinet meeting at which they are to be considered. The five day rule is a requirement to allow ministers sufficient time to consider the proposals. In practice it is not always adhered to and ministers often receive their papers only a day or two before cabinet.

When cabinet submissions reach the cabinet secretariat they are passed to the Office of Policy and Planning, a small body of ten officers within the Chief Minister's department. The OPP may comment on the desirability of the proposal, on the capacity of the department to put it into effect, on the implications of the proposal or on the logic or the options; it tries to put the submission in the philosophical context of the government's plans. That advice goes to the chief minister and the deputy chief minister who is also the treasurer. Other ministers, it is said, could receive this brief if they asked for it. One minister, at least, saw the OPP as rather unnecessary and an accretion of power to the Chief Minister's office. This may reflect the early period when the head of the OPP wished to intervene far more in departmental policy than does the present incumbent. However it was accepted as the chief minister's prerogative to have such an organisation for alternative advice if he chose, and the more general comment was that the advice they gave was seldom so acute as to undercut that of the sponsoring department.
Cabinet meets generally every fortnight on a Tuesday. The number of items on an agenda ranges from twenty to forty. It convenes in the morning and continues for as long as required to get through the business. Very seldom have the bottom items on an agenda not been reached although items are often sent away for further information or temporarily put in the 'too hard' basket while the implications of the proposals are more thoroughly considered. Items are dealt with in the numbered sequence which reflects their order of receipt at the cabinet secretariat. Occasionally if an item is particularly contentious or urgent or if a public official has been called to advise cabinet on technical detail – as they regularly are – then the chief minister may bring items forward on the day's agenda. Generally, however, it is a deal-with-them-as-they-come agenda.

At the end of the official agenda under-the-line items may be considered. Ministers may raise general items for the attention of their colleagues or, in cases where they have not had time under the five day rule to introduce proposals earlier, they may bring particular items for decision to cabinet. Unlike the federal cabinet it is not considered necessary to inform the chief minister what items might be brought forward in under-the-line business. Usually the chief minister will just go round the table asking individual ministers if they have any issue they wish to raise. Some might have nothing to raise, others might raise three or four items, although they are discouraged from going further. Once a month cabinet also reviews progress on the fifty major projects which are in hand within the Territory's administration. This generally means a quick flick through a constantly updated list with ministers stopping the chief minister at particular items if they want further information or discussion.

Decisions are taken by consensus. Votes are not taken. The chief minister goes round the table asking each of the ministers their views before he either sums up or dictates a decision to Martyn Finger, the secretary of cabinet and director-general of the Chief Minister's department. The secretary is responsible for noting decisions but not for maintaining any record of the debate. Decisions are written up and circulated later. If there is any ambiguity a check with the minister or with the chief minister is usually sufficient to clarify the situation but this is seldom necessary since the recommendations in submissions are required to be in a form suitable for final decision. Cabinet decisions are circulated to departments on a need to know basis. Law, Treasury and the Public Service Commissioner's office receive all of them while other departments receive any that may be relevant to their responsibilities.

The secretary to cabinet is the only official who regularly attends cabinet; for a time a second official attended, but ministers found her presence rather inhibiting since they felt they had to curb their natural language.

Since January 1977 approximately 2,000 submissions have come to cabinet. This represents a rate of 500 per year or 20 per cabinet meeting. Many of the submissions may be pro forma items, such as department annual reports, which are merely tabled for information and noted. Nevertheless the number of decisions going to cabinet is still large and the workload demanding.
This raises an interesting question: What do ministers bring to cabinet and why? Items come to cabinet for a wide variety of reasons and what individual ministers bring to cabinet will depend to some extent on the minister concerned. Some ministers are more inclined to go it alone than others but all bring a significant number of items to the cabinet.

There are major items which must always be brought: items that have interstate implications; items that require significant changes to policy; items that require staffing or financial commitments; items which may have major electoral implications for members. These types of decisions are those for which ministers always require cabinet backing. But beyond these, items may be brought to cabinet for a variety of reasons. Many items come to cabinet purely for information, to ensure that all the ministers have some basic knowledge of significant developments across the range of government activity. The monthly review of major government projects is primarily to keep ministers informed. Other items may come for tactical reasons as when a minister wants to make a potentially risky or unpopular decision and feels that it is better to have the support of the whole cabinet rather than individually to take a decision which might later come unstuck. This is common in all Australian state and federal systems.

Individual ministers differ greatly. One minister stated he never took anything to cabinet unless he wanted to win it and believed he would. He could not see any point in wasting his colleagues' time if he himself was not convinced that the proposal should proceed. Another deliberately took fairly little to cabinet: even while his department was preparing a submission he would say - 'we'll do it without going to cabinet'. Others took proposals about which they were indifferent or unsure in order to evince reactions and comments from their colleagues. Some used cabinet as a strategic weapon in disagreements with their departments: 'it is better that cabinet say no to the department than to have to say no yourself'. Another said: 'the object may just be to get a submission thrown out; you have to keep faith with the people working for you'. Some have even been reputed to argue against their own submission. One minister quite consciously categorised the types of submissions he took to cabinet. He stated that with items he wanted to win he did not take them to cabinet until he knew that he could win. On other items he was much less concerned and was quite prepared to take them to cabinet for general consideration of the proposal and whether he won or lost was of less importance.

The next step is actually winning in cabinet. Just taking a submission is not enough - a minister has to be able to make his proposal prevail. Even though one bureaucrat recalls the chief minister telling departmental officers not to judge ministers on the number of wins they had in cabinet, it is inevitable that some such judgments are made and some officials did think their ministers should win more often than they do. Again it is very difficult to determine precisely why some ministers win on some issues while others lose. There are a number of suggestions that can be made: the quality of advice; the preparedness of the minister and his native wit.

On their own items, all ministers are briefed by their departments. Ministers are usually well on top of these items, although there were a few suggestions from department heads that a minister had not properly read his briefs before attending the cabinet meeting. On other people's items
practice varied. Few ministers sought regular briefings across the board from their department. They acknowledge that with the exception of the general areas, which relate to spending and staffing, their department often did not have the expertise to brief them. Further the pressure of work and the number of submissions made it impractical to expect advice on all items. Anyhow, most ministers really did not see the need. They believed it was sufficient to read through the proposals themselves and have some 'gut' political reaction. Alternatively, if they really wanted to find out they would ring round colleagues or relevant knowledgeable people in the Territory to obtain more information. Many of the ministers are confident of their own understanding of Territory politics and see no reason to rely on the bureaucracy for detailed briefing. To the extent that alternative sources of advice over and above the actual submission are important at all, the chief minister and deputy chief minister have the advantage of the independent OPP brief – but this is supposedly available to other ministers if they request it.

Perhaps of greater importance is the minister's own preparation for cabinet. Most ministers stated they read all papers before they went to cabinet. Some admitted that they read just the recommendations and that this could lead to problems. There are clearly those who do their 'homework' more and less well than others. One of the conscientious homeworkers who regularly annotates his cabinet papers the night before argued that it is often possible to tell who has or has not prepared for cabinet thoroughly. Nevertheless, homework for cabinet is easier said than done. The pressures of electorate, Territory or interstate travel, the comparative lack of advice that most ministers beyond the chief minister and the treasurer receive on the full range of cabinet proposals and the spread of items which are discussed at any one meeting make it inevitable that most of the time some ministers will not have fully considered all the proposals before they come to cabinet. In this situation solid preparation for the item you want to win may give a sponsoring minister the edge in the case of argument.

Arguably more important than either the quality of advice or the minister's degree of preparation is his ability to appreciate the political implications of a proposal - his political wit. There is no doubt that some ministers are just more adept at the whole political game than others. One in particular is very confident of his ability to breeze through with seemingly only the most perfunctory preparation. Others may have less native wit, but one in particular makes up for it with sheer hard work.

Although these variables may be significant in determining who wins in cabinet the capacity to generalise is limited. Advice, preparation and political wit must all be related to the issue at hand. If it is something a minister really wants, then even the less able ministers may be able to win by sheer persistence. If a proposal is seen as vital to the future of the Territory, such as a new powerhouse, then it may be hard to lose and battle lines may be drawn around the finer points of detail. If a strong minister is sponsoring something he is not very keen on, having the proposal rejected may be as much a win for him as a loss.

The problem for the observer is that with a group of six ministers, who have close links with one another, it is extremely difficult to decide who wins and who loses in cabinet. Factional alignments do not exist.
Personal alignments are fluid, depending on particular items at a given time. The number of leaks about who wins and who loses is minimal and the media seem incapable of probing further. The details of proceedings inside the cabinet room are well guarded. The chief minister and deputy chief minister both carry considerable weight although none would suggest they are omnipotent. All ministers remember occasions when the chief minister has been rolled. Equally, they are inclined to agree that if the chief minister wants something badly enough, given his status and his reputation, then he is likely to get it.

Coordination of government action at ministerial level cannot be understood solely in the formal and informal process of cabinet. Cabinet is only the culmination of a whole range of interactions between the ministers. Six ministers in offices within one floor of each other linked by direct phone and in the habit of lunching or drinking together are bound to carry out much of their business informally. Cabinet lunch is regularly used to 'chew' over the proceedings more informally, or to discuss strategic political matters; evening drinks may be an occasion to preview a future cabinet. When there are only six of you that is quite possible.

The NT cabinet is, more than any other cabinet in Australia, a team. There is a strong captain, a solid vice-captain and some weak links in the team, but they are still a unit, in a way that larger factionalised cabinets are not. They are a team also in the sense that they have informal and flexible relations which transcend the merely mechanical and formal interactions of a number of individuals doing related jobs. According to a senior bureaucrat 'they work together like a family'. Indeed, as elsewhere in the NT political system, informality is at the very heart of the mode of ministerial coordination. There is also a general unanimity of feeling of the direction that the government should be going that makes consensus easier to reach. This does not mean that there are not fierce arguments in cabinets, for resources are limited. But it does make it easier to operate. Despite the feeling that cabinet is overloaded and that often ministers are less well prepared for it than they might be, most ministers believe that few of the items that come to cabinet would have been more profitably dealt with by the relevant minister individually. It was acknowledged by one minister that some colleagues were still being conned by their public servants who preferred a cabinet, rather than a ministerial decision. He thought it showed an odd conception of ministerial responsibility. But ministers appear to want to be involved in each other's decision-making and see it as politically necessary. This tendency can again be related to the present state of the NT system. First it can be related to the suspicion of the public service. There is a consequent willingness for the ministry as a whole to keep a close watch on departmentalised policy-making and to make sure that the various departments are responsive to the ministry and not vice versa. As one minister put it, 'in the interests of political longevity, it is imperative that a long list of things go to cabinet'. Second, it can be related to the smallness of the political system. Collectively the ministers have what could only be described as a wealth of local political knowledge. This collective knowledge is, given the electoral susceptibility of small electorates, of far more use politically than the expertise of any bureaucrat. Robertson knows most of what happens in the Centre, the same can be said of Tuxworth in the Barkly region. For a minister making a policy decision, his colleagues are probably his best advisers.
Several permanent heads are - again not surprisingly - less sure that cabinet works quite so well. They consider it would be preferable to take things more slowly, that better advice would be available if many items were held back for two or three weeks and that the workload could easily be reduced. Thus the update of major items was usually rather rushed because ministers 'think they know everything that is going on'.

The Chief Minister and His Department

Despite the team approach of cabinet and its high level of involvement in decision-making, there is no doubt that the chief minister is in a predominant position. He and his department play a separate but related central coordination role to the cabinet. How is the chief minister's role different? What institutional mechanisms are used to achieve this special role? In short, why is he captain of the team and how does he maintain that position?

There is no doubt that the chief minister's predominance was established soon after self-government and that it has been consolidated since. The reasons are manifold. First, he is predominant because of his considerable personal political skills, his capacity for hard work, his ability to cover all areas of government policy and to be able to ask crucial questions on them. His style of operations was varyingly described as 'hands on', as 'bullying and truculent when he wants to be', and as 'the headmaster'. Having once established his position, he is the person who is more often approached by the general public asking about particular issues and therefore the predominance feeds on itself. He is also the person who gets involved in politically sensitive issues that arise from time to time and he maintains a watching brief on the crucial issues in Territory politics.

However his predominance is not solely based on his personal political ability. There is no doubt he does have some distinct institutional advantages and has cultivated these over time. First, there is the cabinet sub-committee on staffing establishments which consists of the chief minister and the deputy chief minister. A screening committee consisting of the public service commissioner and the under-secretary of the Treasury advises the sub-committee. The screening committee examines all proposals for variations of staff establishments, knocks back many of them and then brings recommendations to the cabinet sub-committee for staffing variations. The decisions of the sub-committee are final. Second, Everingham is also attorney-general, briefed by the department of Law. As the only lawyer in parliament this must give him a substantial advantage. Third his prime adviser is Martyn Finger, the head of the Chief Minister's department and the longest standing department head. Finger can be used to find out what is happening in the bureaucracy, to draft letters to federal ministers and to maintain a broad view; he has been called 'a sniffer, not a dobbert'. Further, the department of the Chief Minister includes two bodies mentioned previously: the Office of Policy and Planning and the coordinator-general's office. Both these aid the Chief Minister's predominance and his ability to control from the centre.
The position of the coordinator-general was upgraded in the reshuffle after the 1980 election. He is now in practice a second department head within the Chief Minister's department. He chairs the coordination committee which consists of the heads of all departments and the major statutory authorities. The monthly meeting of the coordination committee is, by all accounts, an important affair. It has been called a 'quasi-cabinet' which works out a range of options. Some of the new department heads said that it had played a major role in quickly familiarising them with the Territory scene and their colleagues. The coordinator-general describes his role as knocking heads together to ensure that government programs and initiatives actually happen.

The coordination committee has a number of ad hoc sub-committees to help implement more specific areas of government policy. There is a capital works sub-committee consisting of the under-treasurer, coordinator-general, secretary of Transport and Works, the public service commissioner and the director-general of the department of the Chief Minister. All departments and authorities lodge their annual public works shopping list with this committee which examines them, assigns priorities to each item and draws up a public works program for the next year to be submitted to the general coordination committee and then to cabinet, each of which may re-order the priorities as they see fit. The sub-committee picks the works it considers essential - in the past this has consumed some two thirds of the available budget. The final third is more flexible and provides scope for cabinet to reorder priorities. The coordinating committee also appoints short term sub-committees at various times to deal with the implementation of specific programs. One of these, a task force, was concerned with the government's remote community improvement program which was introduced in April 1980 as a grandiose five year plan but was soon scaled down to be more in line with available funding.

Further, as noted earlier, the coordinator-general also has a role in coordinating proposals that are on their way to cabinet. He has reserved for himself the right to give advice to the chief minister on any item when he sees fit. In short, the coordinator-general is close to the chief minister, acts as his agent in giving the departments a shake up and has invaluable institutional links with all areas of government policy through his coordination committee. It was also said that 'he could not interfere with the line ministers want to take, but he can point out it is counter to previous government policy or against their philosophy'. He can point to the barbs in proposals.

This institutional arrangement represents a significant accretion of power to the chief minister and his department and for that reason it is not universally liked by departments. Even though relations with central agencies were far more relaxed than in other systems, some see it as interfering in their own affairs. The whole paraphernalia of coordination was seen by some as excessively heavy and indeed counter productive in such a small system.

The other important general body within the Chief Minister's department is the Office of Policy and Planning, whose role as alternative adviser on cabinet submissions has been discussed above. The OPP claims also to be 'concerned with the evaluation of the medium and long term implications of policy proposals being considered by Government'. It seeks
'to identify the major objectives of Government and to provide a basis for determining how these objectives are to be achieved' (Department of the Chief Minister 1980). Exactly what activity lies behind the lofty rhetoric is not always clear. Long term policy planning is one of the things that all governments think they ought to do but when it comes down to tinfoil they are not quite sure what to do. In reality the OPP has often been brought in to deal with specific policy issues of particular importance. It was the driving force in the chief minister's bid to get a federal commitment to the Alice Springs/Darwin railway. Similarly it has advised on the NT's approach to the two airline policy and a number of other important issues (Department of the Chief Minister 1981). Even if its role does not fully reflect the rhetoric, the OPP is an important central policy body within the Chief Minister's Department and another institutional aid to and manifestation of his predominance.

A third body within the Chief Minister's Department, the Office of Inter-Government Relations and Parliamentary Liaison, is responsible for coordinating relations with the state and federal governments, constitutional matters and the oversight of the government's legislative program.

Beyond these general bodies, the department of the Chief Minister has a number of offices which deal with specific policy areas - the office of special development projects, the office of industrial relations and the office of Aboriginal liaison. Each of these bodies, particularly the last, covers a policy issue of particular importance in NT politics. The Aboriginal Liaison Office, for example, although it has no functional responsibilities, maintains a watching brief on all government activities, both territory and federal, of relevance to Aborigines. Locally, among other things it organises annual conferences of Aboriginal council presidents and representatives of other Aboriginal organisations.

The chief minister's predominance is difficult to exaggerate. It relies on both his personal ability and the well developed institutional support of his department. There is no doubt that he could hold his own in any cabinet in Australia. In a small NT system he can probe throughout the system, he can put 'salt on tails' where it is needed, he can monitor the whole political system even to the extent of making sure his colleagues are pursuing the government's objectives. All these things he most certainly does. He has been accused, somewhat unkindly, of being the minister for everything and there is no doubt that he has interests in all areas of the Territory administration. But he does not undertake these activities over the heads of other ministers. Normally he approaches permanent heads through the ministers involved. He will send memos probing items, asking why certain steps have or have not been taken. He likes to be involved in the choosing of permanent heads and any structural changes within the public service. But this does not mean that he runs everything himself. Much of the time he scrupulously ensures that the ministers are involved in discussions and that final decisions are taken by the responsible minister. There are no complaints from ministers that he gets too heavily involved or that he imposes his will on others without proper discussion.

One of the senior public servants who has worked in other systems suggested that Everingham was not a one man band or a dictator but a very successful and powerful consensus builder. He does not ride rough shoed
over his ministers, he builds their support. Since cabinet does not leak, it may often appear that, when announcing a decision, he is announcing his own decision. That need not be true. His predominance should not be allowed to delude us about the importance of the cabinet.

There is considerable respect, for and acknowledgement of Everingham's position but not a view that this means he gets his way all the time. Even granted the considerable bureaucratic support which he has developed within the department of the Chief Minister in the last two or three years, NT government remains very much cabinet government.
CHAPTER 5: PARLIAMENT, PARTY, MEDIA AND THE ELECTORATE

There are several other institutions that have an impact on the lives of all ministers in Westminster systems. The one that is usually regarded as important is parliament. In the Northern Territory at present the Legislative Assembly meets for about 24 days a year, in four sessions, each two weeks long, sitting for three days each week from about 10.00 am to 6.00 pm. It is a very small parliament consisting of nineteen people; after the 1980 election, eleven were on the government side, seven from the opposition and one was independent. A parliament of that size inevitably has some problems. When the speaker, the chairman of committees and the government whip are added to the six ministers, there are only two backbenchers on the government side. The opposition side does not have the numbers to develop a coherent range of criticisms of government policy.

In the federal sphere there is a considerable if reluctant reverence for parliament - its capacity to frighten, the need to prepare for it and the way in which it dominates the life-style of ministers when parliament is sitting. To some extent this reverence is determined by the requirement of most ministers to serve an apprenticeship in parliament. Their first step on a political career is to get preselection for a safe seat. They then have to maintain that seat, develop for themselves a reputation in parliament and finally progress to the ministry. Parliamentary success is, on the federal scene, almost a pre-requisite for progression to the position of minister.

In the Northern Territory such a reverence does not exist. The Assembly, though not regarded with contempt, is regarded with a sort of broad indifference. Northern Territory ministers did not have to grow up and develop in parliament. All were elected in 1974 before self-government. Four of the six then reached executive rank after the 1977 election saw the defeat of four of the five members who had previously held executive positions. When in 1978 the Northern Territory gained self-government, the ministers had very little parliamentary experience, very little debating experience and comparatively little concern for the institution of parliament itself.

This is reflected in attitudes of ministers to the parliament. One thought it rather a nuisance because it got in the way of the real work of being a minister; another thought it quite interesting and acknowledged they were there because that was what they were elected to do. A couple admitted to being nervous, and acknowledged that the opposition sometimes got under their skin. But none saw it as much of a challenge. Nor was the opposition regarded as much of a threat, by either the ministers or by the public servants responsible for briefing them. One minister commented that the opposition had difficulty maintaining a supply of interesting or probing questions, even for those twenty-odd days, while a senior public servant commented: 'A good parliament needs a good government and a good opposition; perhaps the less I say the better'. But what the future holds is uncertain. The Labor party has been hampered by internal divisions, leading to the resignation of its leader in October 1981. The new leader,
Bob Collins, may be more vocal in his attacks, but that must be turned into effective opposition. As a result, although most ministers were well prepared for parliament and for question time, that preparation was not seen as onerous.

Question time is much the same as it is in the federal parliament, with each side asking questions in turn. Few found it particularly challenging. One commented 'I enjoy answering questions at length because I know that when I am on my feet answering questions, no one else is on their feet asking them'. And he usually proceeds to answer questions for ten minutes or so at a time. The small number of ministers does mean that all members are likely to be more involved than their federal counterparts; one recalls being asked twelve questions in a morning.

Smallness has its odd consequences too. One local idiosyncracy is that the speaker persists in getting down from the chair to address the Assembly. He claims to be the only person able to represent grazing interests properly and therefore accords himself this liberty. Indeed, in a small parliament the favourite statistic is not sitting days per year, but sitting time per parliamentary member per year. It was argued that each member had much greater opportunity to participate than most federal members, since the federal parliament sat for only sixty or so days, yet is almost seven times as large.

The general impatience with parliament is exacerbated by the requirement that while parliament is sitting all ministers are expected to be in the parliamentary chamber. The quorum is ten out of nineteen. That means that probably not more than one minister can be away at any given time. The opposition declines most of the time to give pairs. As a result, ministers are actually at their desks in the chamber from 10.00 am to 5.00 pm. One observer claimed the Territory assembly is consequently a 'disciplined' parliament. It is probably the only parliament where ministers are required to sit and listen to all the debates, and it is not surprising that in the circumstances they find it frustrating to sit through the often repetitive speeches. It is perhaps surprising that standing orders have not been altered so that ministers can leave the chamber to get on with the business of governing while parliamentary debates are continuing. Their offices in the Chan Building are just across the road from the Legislative Assembly and it would be easy, even within the two minutes for which the bells now ring, for ministers to leave their offices and reach the assembly in time for any votes. Doubtless such a change would be opposed by the opposition and, initially at least, greeted with some scepticism by the public. But every other parliamentary system manages with a limited attendance at debate and there is a need not to muddle the symbolic role of parliament as a forum in which speeches are made and postures are adopted with one which is a serious debating chamber.

Further, given the contempt with which the old Legislative Council was often treated by the administrator before self-government, perhaps it is not surprising that a similar attitude of ennui has carried over to the Legislative Assembly. The ministers see it as a necessary appendage rather than a forum for politicising or an occasion for putting their message across. Nor, it would be true to say, are opposition members impressed by ministerial performance. Although Everingham's skills are freely acknowledged, the ability of others to understand their areas of
responsibility, let alone to perform adequately in parliament, is questioned. That is no more than would be expected.

This is not to say that what goes on in parliament can entirely be ignored. One minister admitted that the knowledge that the opposition could put down a censure debate or raise questions on an item, ensured that he paid slightly more attention to the presentation and consideration of proposals than he might otherwise have done. Parliament certainly serves some purpose; but the lack of patience for it in the Northern Territory is perhaps a response to its size, the weakness of the opposition and the unnecessary forms and restrictive procedures which are currently adopted within it.

The Party

Within the parliament the other institution that is normally of importance is the party meeting: the meeting of the government parties in which government proposals are thrashed out. In public all party members are expected to act in a united fashion and backbenchers will support the government. In party meetings alternative ideas can be presented. When there virtually is no backbench it makes the whole question almost hypothetical, particularly when the backbench itself is not loaded with talent. As one minister put it, 'You've got to have somebody who's no good and that's your backbench'. Proposals for legislation or major changes of policy are brought before the backbench before they are presented to parliament. Obviously the ministry has the numbers if it wants to get something adopted. But the ministry will listen to the reactions of backbenchers, particularly when a proposal may have some impact on the electoral fortunes of an individual member. Some members of the backbench feel that they have as much influence by being able to range across all government activities, as they would if they were publicly limited only to one portfolio. But, given the comparatively infrequent meetings of parliament, the dominance of the ministers and apparently the reluctance of the backbenchers to get heavily involved, or even educated, in the details of administration - an opportunity that has occasionally been given to them by the chief minister - it is not surprising that the backbench offers no challenge whatsoever to the influence and control of ministers. Party meetings are not a forum in which any more than detail is thrashed out. It would appear that there have been few occasions when they have changed the government's mind.

Obviously this situation could change if the parliament were increased in size and people of ability were thereafter elected to it and not immediately to the ministry. As it stands, to quote one minister, 'people are not scrambling to be ministers and competing; in the Northern Territory whoever can do the job of minister, is it'. There is no pressure from the party on ministers to perform or be discarded.

A third factor often of some importance is the party machine. In the Territory, machines are comparatively small and are organised as much around individual members as around the party itself. As Jaensch (1981) has argued, parties were late comers in the Territory and were formed primarily for the work of winning elections. That is scarcely surprising
in the case of the CLP which has now dominated Territorian politics since the 1974 election, and where the public spokesmen of the parties have been either the executive leaders or the ministers. These are the people whom the public recognises as the party. Even if at times there have been quite fierce pre-selection battles, no minister has been challenged for pre-selection. In 1980 the former executive member, Grant Tambling, did attempt to get pre-selection in two seats in Darwin and was knocked back for both. He got pre-selection for the federal seat instead. But none of the ministers saw any threat to their position and all felt that as long as they proceeded to deliver and look after their electorates, their pre-selection would be secure. One interesting situation that arises is that of Ian Tuxworth, who for 30 years has been a resident in Tennant Creek and has now left that electorate to live in Darwin. But given his established local connections it is extremely unlikely that the local branch would want to look voluntarily for anyone else as a possible candidate for the seat of Barkly.

The party machine’s policy input is minimal. There are the occasional incidents where the party machine (or rather a prominent member of it) speaks out as a voice independent of and even critical of the Everingham government - but the issues are usually ideological in nature and have only marginal effect on the practical policies of the government. For example, Everingham has from time to time been criticised for allowing the government to continue to do things which 'free enterprise' could do - after all, it is said, this is a free enterprise government. Everingham’s inclusion of the ideologically symbolic stratagem - 'a steady reduction of government involvement in commercially oriented services' - in his proposals for reform of the public service may in part be seen as a response to this type of intraparty pressure. The contracting out of the occasional government report to private consultants may be interpreted similarly. However, this latter practice has not progressed far and, to quote one permanent head, the senior member of the Liberal party who did one consultancy report did 'a less than excellent job'.

The Media

The media in the Northern Territory are in no danger of becoming an alternative opposition. Press, radio and television appear to be incapable of making life uncomfortable for even the less competent ministers. The ABC station there is understaffed; in practice the chief minister and his colleagues have easy access if they choose. Normally the chief minister is asked if he has anything he wants to say.

The only major newspaper is the Northern Territory News. It is owned by Rupert Murdoch, who is also the chancellor-elect of the proposed Northern Territory University. The News has one political correspondent, who often has problems of access to ministers. The first pages of the News commonly include a number of government announcements, even to the extent that a local academic commentator referred to it as a semi-government gazette. Often it reports in full the text of major ministerial speeches with no analytical commentary. But, given the comparative lack of news, that is not surprising. At times, ministers claim that the News has harassed them over their errors or that it has been an 'irritant', but little more.
The Electorate

If all these peripheral elements of the political system are under-developed and place little pressure on Territory ministers, there is one other element in the NT system which makes up for them all - the electorate. The average electorate has only 2,500 voters. There are no blue ribbon seats even in Darwin. If 25 people change their vote, the result is a 2 per cent swing. This type of electoral arithmetic is imprinted on the minds of all Territory politicians. Ministers feel they must remain responsive and accessible to everyone in their electorates.

No group - either informal or a formal organisation - in the electorate is too small for ministerial attention. Indeed one of the practical restraints on Everingham's reform of the public service could be the potential electoral consequences as much as the bureaucratic consequences of such reform since the white collar public sector unions are the biggest in the Territory, dominate the NT Trades and Labour Council and represent a significant number of votes. There is a myth in NT electoral 'history' that in 1977 one of the executive members who lost his seat did so because of adverse reaction from the staff of the Darwin Community College. In all probability the myth has no basis in reality. Yet it is an important myth, because it illustrates the perceived need to satisfy all groups in the community. One minister had a picture of himself visiting 'his school' on the wall of his office and declared his intention to spend two weeks in the new year doing a door knock of his whole electorate 'just to keep in touch'. For the one minister with a non-urban electorate, Tuxworth, keeping in touch is not quite so easy but as his air charter bill indicates, he certainly gets around. He has been known to be seen on the tray of a truck with a ten gallon hat on his head at the annual race days in his electorate. And from all reports the locals do not miss their chance to ask for a few things, or he to respond.

Because of this electoral susceptibility, nothing is too small or trivial for a Northern Territory minister. They must be inveterate openers of small group functions, fixers of small problems and patrons of organisations. One minister was patron of the Girl Guides before he even had a daughter. Even the chief minister often visits schools in his electorate. He will be stopped in the street and asked about anything from the time tabling of lectures at Darwin Community College to the unblocking of drains. And he is always addressed by his christian name. All ministers have their private phone numbers in the directory and reportedly are contacted by electors at all hours of the day and night. It is here that Territory politics differs so markedly from the larger Australian systems. If politics in the larger states still has a scent of pork barrel around election time, in the Territory barreling never stops. Simple reactive politics, flexibility in reordering program priorities so that immediate demands of the electorate can be satisfied is the essence of political survival in the Territory. It was said of one backbencher: 'he will mow your lawn and feed your budgie while you are on holiday'. Even ministers can not divorce themselves from those trivia.

There is no feeling of distance from the electorate among ministers, indeed as one put it 'we are ordinary Territory blokes, we just happen to be in this position'. He believed that ministers were 'extraordinarily, indeed ridiculously accessible'; perhaps, he argued 'we are too responsive
for good government'. But they know that to remain in their position they have to respond to the demands of those other ordinary Territorians.

Of course this responsiveness and almost direct democracy does create problems in the public service when promises are made and public servants feel that they should have been consulted. One public servant, recruited from private enterprise, commented that the government was responsible to rather a different type of share-holder and that they had to be constantly considered. As a result all planning had to be sensitive to short term logic. It took him some time to adjust to these different types of pressure. That is the style of Territory politics; it is a natural consequence of small electorates, of no blue ribbon seats and of an interest in the Territory's progress by people who are regarded by their neighbours as immediately accessible. There is not a feeling of aloofness, of distance or, quite crucially, of deference.

To fail to understand this electoral pressure would be to fail to understand Territory politics and to fail to understand the pressures on Territory ministers. Ministers would still be busy even if parliament was not sitting, they had no interstate engagements and their departments were looking after themselves. Seeing none of these conditions ever applies, NT ministers are all the busier — but that, as we argued in chapter one, is the nature of parliamentary politics and of the people who become ministers.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

The timing of any political research project is going to have an impact on its findings. Any political system as new as that in the Northern Territory and any group of ministers as small as those who run it must be more liable to variation than larger, bureaucratised systems. If, for instance, the interviews had been carried out a mere fifteen months after self-government it is likely there would have been an even greater suspicion about the role of the public service, an even greater belief that ministers have to act on their own and possibly less awareness of the advantages that a public service can bring than at present. If on the other hand the interviews were repeated in three or four years time, say, three or four months after the 1984 election (assuming the government is returned), then, with an extra three years in office behind them, the ministers may have developed greater confidence in the public service and be prepared to delegate more than they do at present. This report indicates perceptions of the role of NT ministers in October 1981 and in this way it is very different from the previous work on federal ministers. Had the interviews undertaken for 'Can Ministers Cope?' been done ten years earlier or five years later, it would not have reported great differences in the attitudes of ministers or bureaucrats or in the way that the system of government is run. In the Territory this is not so. Because of the special nature of the present period in territory political history the timing is of the utmost importance. As a result conclusions drawn about the role of ministers in the Northern Territory are likely to be more specific to the time of interviewing than those drawn about other systems. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions are worth drawing.

Ministers were widely seen as being more powerful than their counterparts in other systems. One public servant with comparative experience commented: 'No other politicians in Australia have the power of Territory politicians ... the term "minister" up here does not equal the word elsewhere'. He described the ministers as the 'last of the cattle barons', because they were not limited by precedent or by other levels of government within the Territory. Another preferred the analogy of a group of cowboys who opened the gates and rode out shooting. When comparisons were made with premiers in others states, or with ministers both federal and state, they were complimentary to the Territory ministers - always when referring to Everingham, usually with Perron and sometimes with Tuxworth. Federal ministers by contrast were mostly seen as indecisive and distant.

As in other systems the idea of what constituted a 'good' minister varied. Ministers were more concerned with the public appearance, one listed four necessities - to present well in parliament, to deal effectively with the media, to control the department, and to have common-sense. Another minister, in practice not so effective, commented: 'If you've got presence, you've got 50 per cent of the job under wraps'. Public servants agreed that common-sense was essential, but some preferred the ministers to spend more time on their paper load. In a rather strange attempt to distinguish roles, one public servant commented that a bad minister was one who spent too much time being a politician. On
contemplation it is difficult to see how the two tasks could be divided, nor perhaps would it be desirable that they should be.

The present Territory ministers agree that they are always excessively busy. Some accept this as necessary. 'A lot of people think I work too hard; but on the other hand I've taken on the job of governing and, having done that, I don't want to only half do it. It's a job that, when taken on, has to be seen through!' A second minister was clearly dissatisfied: 'If you believe there is more to life than work, then you'll be dissatisfied with the job ... I'd like to read your book [Can Ministers Cope?] but I don't read books any more'. He commented that he really became aware of the pressure when his staff came into a toilet with him to get a decision, and even more when he realised he was in a hurry to get to sleep at night. The feeling was that too much time was taken up with paperwork, and sometimes with travel. One commented he had to spend 'too much time bogged down in Darwin just working: e.g. today. I could be out doing something'. That comment provides insight into what that minister regarded as his proper role. By contrast another argued that, if the travel was removed, it would be fairly easy to stay on top, but that, he acknowledged, was the game of politics. A third was happier: 'we're always working, but it's not really work'. In general ministers argued that what they did was necessary to be on top of the job in the way Territorians expected them to be.

Certainly, there are some things they felt they had too little time for. One wanted more time to look at the longer range pattern of activity which might help direct the Territory in future years. A second thought they had too little time to talk to members of the electorate, to be aware of what the people in the street were actually thinking. A third wistfully felt it would be pleasant to spend a little more time diving. They were all conscious of being in a hurry, of having to work under pressure.

The present ministers are quite explicitly and consciously setting a style for Territorian politics. This is important, more important than many of the actors realise. They are determining what sort of relationships exists between the ministers and the public service, how cabinet is run, and what expectations Territorians have of their ministers. Many of these expectations are the reverse of the situation which existed when the Territory was run by the federal government. There is a desire to be easily accessible, to have rapid decisions, to be seen to be doing things for the Territory. Since self-government the ministers have tried to create their own style and not have one imposed on them by their public servants. Accessibility is the key, both in order to listen and in order to bring results to the general public.

In a small community with a small electorate, the accessibility of ministers is crucial. What is more difficult to say is whether in twenty or thirty years time - when the Territory population may have grown dramatically, when the bureaucratic methods which are currently being established become more fixed, when the flexibility of new systems has given way far more to precedent - incoming ministers will be allowed to change that style, or to create their own patterns of behaviour different from those which are currently being set by the ministers. It seems more likely that future ministers will be judged by the standards now being created. Future ministers will have to remain accessible.
There is no doubt that the majority of the ministers work extremely hard. They have to, in order to be on top of the range of portfolios for which they are being held responsible. And yet none of them thought they really worked too hard in itself; everything they did was necessary to do the job in the way that Territorians expected. Is it possible to alter their workload without reducing their control?

Certainly it would be possible to delegate some of the paperwork which at the moment the ministers see as essential. In two or three years time, if the confidence in the bureaucracy grows, some delegation might take place. One department head argued that at least a quarter of the ministerial workload in his department could be reduced if only ministers would agree that much of the material they were considering was in practice routine. Another argued that some of the ministerial correspondence could in fact be handed over to the department but acknowledged that ministers like to answer their own and particularly in a small place like the Territory had completely sound political reasons for doing so. Indeed if all federal ministers insist on answering their own correspondence it would be remarkable if Territorians decided that they did not need to do it. Whether greater delegation will take place is something that will have to be examined in three or four years times. Although some ministers at the moment think that it would be giving up the government of the Territory to the bureaucrats, in practice it would be maintaining control over the more important items while ceding influence over some of the very small regulations.

It will depend on the degree of confidence in the bureaucracy that ministers develop. Now that the senior levels have been filled with choices of the incumbent government, that confidence could follow. If it does, the whole system of government will benefit without ministers losing any of their control. But it will not happen as a matter of course. If, as remains conceivable, suspicion, especially where unjustified, remains endemic, public servants may become more concerned with anticipating uncertainty than serving their ministers. The initiative must come from ministers; they have shaped the senior part of the service – and done it well. Now they must use – in some cases learn how to use – that machine. They probably will, but the costs of failure may be higher than they realise.

Another option, often discussed, is to increase the size of parliament in order to provide a larger pool from which ministers can be drawn. There are two problems with this proposal. Even if the government won two or three more seats, there is no guarantee that the pool of ability would be increased unless the party carefully pre-selected people of evident ministerial ability. Second, there is no certainty that a larger ministry would be an improvement. To have one or two people in the ministry who do not perform well adds to the workload of other ministers rather than reducing it, as they have to spend too much of their time protecting their ministerial colleague. It is better to have four or five competent ministers than five competent and two incompetent ministers in any cabinet. Therefore it seems unlikely that the number of ministers in practice would be much increased in the near future.
Several other minor changes could be made. Ministers could stop attending all parliamentary sessions. Ministers could increase the size of their own personal staff to maintain some sort of check on the work they could then delegate to the bureaucracy.

Basic to all these questions is the problem of whether or not ministers want a lighter workload. It seems unlikely that there is such a thing as an underworked minister since most ministers will expand their interest and involvement to exceed the time available. Overwork is endemic in any political system if there are interested ministers. What is left are the choices made within the time available. If a ministers's workload of paper is reduced it is likely that there will be an increase in the alternative functions which he undertakes. The problem of the overloaded minister is one which is not particularly useful to try to solve.

A general point can be made about 'time to think'. At federal level most ministers commented that they would like time to stop and think about where they were going, about the major problems which were likely to occur in two or three years time, rather than two or three weeks time. The point was made again, though less often, among Territorian ministers. The problem is to determine precisely what ministers mean when they say that they want time to think; if they were to sit down and relax what is it that they would think and talk about? Politics is almost inevitably structured to the short term. There is not much point looking beyond, or far beyond, the next election although some major works will of course go on long beyond the life of one parliament. A minister's role is about reacting to people, about satisfying people's needs, about being responsive. It is not often about long term views, about grandiose plans or about detailed visions splendid for the Territory or for anywhere else. There certainly are things that might be changed over three or five or six years but the process of sitting down and 'thinking' is one which is easier to advocate than to do.

The most obvious differences between the ministers at federal and Territorian level arise from the size and newness of the system in the Territory. The latter is particularly important. Everingham has commented: 'If I were called upon to name the single most attractive feature of Territory politics at this time, I would say it lay in a lack of precedent, the freedom of choice left to the new government as it makes policy decisions on matters settled in other states in Australia' (Everingham 1981a). Small size brings a form of direct democracy; the way the Northern Territory is currently run is much closer to some conceptions of Westminster democracy than larger systems. Ministers are responsive, perhaps too responsive to the electorate. Ministers are in control of the issues that come before them and in control of the bureaucracy that serves them. That is not to say they understand everything, that they do not make mistakes and wrong choices, or that occasionally they are not bamboozled by the technical jargon which is fed up to them. All those obviously will happen, not because of bureaucratic conspiracies but because of the natural pressure of the system in which ministers exist. Nevertheless it is also probably true that because of the size of the problems, because of the extent of local knowledge, because of the networks of personal contact in a small group of ministers, they are more in control of what is being done in the political system in the Northern Territory than any other group of ministers in Australia. They are more aware of the pressures which exist
and how to react to them; they have a greater sense of identity with the Territory than the ministers of most states in Australia. This is primarily because of their need to maintain close links, a need to act both as local representatives, municipal councillors, ombudsmen and ministers. They have created the expectation that this will happen; they have developed a system of comparatively easy accessibility. They have developed a style of government the essence of which is more the concept of action itself than any particular mode of action or any philosophical commitment to priorities in the community. The one word that counts is 'action'. Act now or perish.

Small size is not exclusively an advantage; it means that ministers must have a wide range of responsibility. Without doubt each job individually is easier than those of larger systems. There are fewer people to service, fewer resources to divide, fewer options to choose from. For instance responsibility for the limited range of energy and mining functions in the Territory is not so diverse as for the federal government. That needs stating. But the wide range of diverse functions makes each minister's job hard, even if it does no more than force him to make decisions about intrinsically small items in several often unconnected areas.

What is interesting in comparative terms is the different concepts that are held by ministers of the ministerial job at different levels of government. In the Territory the emphasis is on smallness, teamwork, responsiveness and cohesion. An effective minister is one who knows more than many of his departmental officers about what is actually happening and can make decisions often on the run about the areas that need change. In a federal system there has to be much greater bureaucratization, much greater reliance on the department, much greater machinery for co-ordination and obviously therefore less ability to know what the actual impact on the ground is. Many federal ministers are taking decisions about areas which they have scarcely ever seen. That is both inevitable and necessary.

The concept of minister cannot depend on any objective view of a job in a Westminster system; it is created by a set of pressures which will always vary depending on the local circumstances. Those observers who argue that a minister must fulfil an established set of criteria, and that their performances can be judged against those criteria are misleading themselves. The quality of a minister has to be judged against his own conceptions of the job. That choice may be challenged and or criticised, but an effective electorate minister may be as useful to a government as a good departmental minister. Only within these limits can ministers be declared good or bad, even though they can always be readily judged by someone else's criteria. A minister in the Territory or in the federal government, or a minister in Britain or in Queensland, will all differ according to these local pressures. Most ministers will be overworked, however that term is defined. What has happened in the Territory system is that of the diverse publics a minister must serve the constituency public has replaced the departmental and media public as the most pressing. The fact that the system is smaller, the fact that the minister may be more self reliant does not necessarily mean that his job is any easier, just that it is different. If many of the Territory ministers are regarded as doing an excellent job of governing the Territory, that does not mean that they could shift to the federal sphere and do as well there. Obviously
some could not. But nor could the reverse happen. It would be no more possible for John Carrick to shift places with Ian Tuxworth than it would for the opposite to happen, for the style of Northern Territory politics is one developed by Territorian politicians. Many federal politicians would be ill at ease in that situation.

If it is not useful to consider reducing the ministerial workload, what useful lessons can be drawn from this description? Perhaps a two-stage process is needed. First it is necessary to establish how ministers actually spend their time, how their roles are perceived and what their priorities are. Then, and only then, can the second stage be reached: an assessment of whether those priorities are the most essential, whether they could or should be changed and in what direction. That assessment can only be subjective; it may be that an observer feels that ministers ought to spend more time on departmental business, heeding the advice of experts; or it may be that ministers, when standing back from their job and assessing the priorities implicit in their allocation of time, decide there is a need for a change.

If there is a decision by anyone that a change in priorities is needed, then comparative data is useful for understanding the way that pressures may be diverted. The pressures that exist in one system can be examined in the light of others. It might be possible to restructure the load on many NT ministers by learning from reforms made elsewhere. For instance, just because delegation does not take place does not mean that it cannot. It is easier to make those judgments in relation to other systems; few problems will be appearing for the first time.
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