

The Roles of Government Departments and Central Agencies in Federal and Provincial Governments

I. What do Government Departments do?

Government departments in the federal and provincial governments are made up of public servants who play two main roles: developing the details of laws, regulations and policies; and developing and delivering government programs.

The responsibility for developing a law, regulation or policy is handed off down the line from the Deputy Minister (or higher) down to an Assistant Deputy Minister down to a working group under a specific Director General (in some governments know as Division Directors). The Director General's group will include staff with expertise in the initiative and additional research staff and expert consultants. The group will push the policy proposal through a process of research, consultation, design and negotiation all the way to the door of Cabinet. It is up to the department's policy staff to assess and integrate all positions, interests and evidence into a policy proposal.

The responsibility for a government program is also handed off down the line from the Deputy Minister (or higher) down to an Assistant Deputy Minister down to a working group under a specific Director General. The group will develop the program through a process of research, consultation, design and negotiation, and then will remain responsible for overseeing the operation of the program.

II. Roles of Public Officials in Government Departments

1. Cabinet Ministers

The Cabinet is the government body that assists a Prime Minister (PM) or provincial premier run the government. The Cabinet is made up of Cabinet Ministers chosen by the PM or premier, each of whom is usually an elected official (although at the federal level there is usually at least one Cabinet Minister chosen from amongst the appointed senators in the Senate).

In appointing a Cabinet Minister to a specific issue portfolio, the Prime Minister or provincial premier may assign a broad range of responsibilities but usually included is overseeing a specific government department (for example, the federal Minister of Industry oversees the federal department known as Industry Canada). Ministers are supported by a Deputy Minister and public servants. Ministers are also provided with funding for other staff whom they personally appoint to assist them in constituency and political work.

Departmental powers, duties and functions are the legal responsibility of each Minister, and are defined in laws and regulations passed by Parliament (or a provincial legislature) and in policies decided by Cabinet. Many of these powers are normally delegated to deputy ministers and public servants, who act on behalf of the Minister. Ministers are individually responsible to Parliament (or

a provincial legislature) and to the PM (or provincial premier) for their own actions and those of all public servants under their management and direction in their department. Ministers also have varying degrees of control and responsibility for the agencies and non-departmental bodies that fall under their department.

Cabinets also have committees, and heads of the committees and members are chosen by the PM (or provincial premier) and as a result usually have more power in Cabinet decision-making. One federal Cabinet committee is required by law, the Treasury Board Committee, which is headed by the President of the Treasury Board (who is a Cabinet Minister) and acts as the manager of the government's resources. Some PMs and premiers set up a lot of other committees, some set up only a few. Prime Minister Chrétien has set up only 3 other committees, each of which review proposals in their issue areas before a full Cabinet review, as follows:

- the Social Union Committee;
- Economic Union Committee; and
- Communications Committee.

2. Ministers of State and Secretaries of State

A **Minister of State** is usually an elected official who is appointed to assist another Minister or to undertake responsibilities assigned by the PM. While a Minister of State doesn't have a portfolio independent of the Minister he or she assists, the Minister of State is a colleague and peer, not a subordinate, of that Minister. Ministers of State are members of the Cabinet and participate in Cabinet decision-making.

Secretaries of State are usually elected officials appointed to provide additional support to Ministers and to the government as a whole (they are sometimes known as Junior Ministers, or in provinces as Parliamentary Assistants). Although they are not members of the Cabinet, they are part of the executive branch of the government, and they participate in senior decision-making processes and may attend Cabinet meetings as requested by the PM.

Since Secretaries of State and, generally, Ministers of State do not themselves formally preside over a department or any other part of the public service, the Deputy Minister of the Minister's department is responsible for providing them with support from the department's staff and other resources.

3. Parliamentary Secretaries

Parliamentary Secretaries are chosen by the PM and are assigned to assist Ministers for a specified period of time. This position usually does not exist at the provincial level. Although they assist Ministers on a broad range of ministerial responsibilities, Parliamentary Secretaries are not members of Cabinet, and so departmental powers, duties and functions cannot be delegated to them.

Since they cannot have delegated departmental responsibilities, Parliamentary Secretaries do not have authority over officials, nor can they initiate departmental actions. The responsibilities of Parliamentary Secretaries are carried out within the policy and program frameworks set out by their

Minister. Usually, they are a member of the House of Commons Committee that aligns with the Minister they work for (for example, the Parliamentary Secretary for the Minister of Finance is a member of the House of Commons Finance Committee).

4. Deputy Ministers (DMs)

Deputy Ministers are professional, non-partisan public servants. They are chosen and assigned by the PM (or a provincial premier) and the Cabinet with the advice of the Clerk of the Privy Council. Their role is to provide their Minister with the broadest possible expert advice (which is almost always kept secret) and staff and resources support needed to carry out the Minister's responsibilities. They also manage the day-to-day operations of the department on behalf of the Minister (with help from Assistant Deputy Ministers (ADMs) for specific divisions of the department). However, Deputy Ministers do not have direct authority over non-departmental bodies -- such bodies are the responsibility of the Minister.

Deputy Ministers are responsible and accountable for a wide range of duties including policy advice, program delivery, internal departmental management and interdepartmental coordination. In performing these duties deputy ministers have a fundamental responsibility to support both the individual and collective responsibilities of their Minister.

5. Public Servants (also known as Civil Servants)

Public servants are required to work within the laws, regulations and policies of the government, and are expected to remain politically neutral and help every government equally, no matter which political party is running the government. Public servants are expected to provide candid and frank advice to their Minister and the political staff in the Minister's office (advice which is almost always kept secret). At the federal level, they are hired according to conditions set out by the Public Service Commission (provinces have similar commissions for the hiring of public servants).

6. Non-Departmental Bodies

Most Ministers are responsible for several non-departmental bodies such as Crown or departmental corporations, agencies, commissions, tribunals or boards. A Minister's degree of control and responsibility for a non-departmental body is defined in the law that establishes the non-departmental body.

Heads of non-departmental bodies are appointed by the Cabinet, usually on the recommendation of the responsible Minister and after consultation with the PM (or the provincial premier). While their degree of independence from the Minister may vary, almost all have a responsibility to report to Parliament (or a provincial legislature) at least once a year.

III. What do Central Agencies Do?

Central agencies advise and assist Departments in drafting Memos to Cabinet, and ensure government-wide coordination and consistency in the development of new initiatives.

The central agencies described below play a key role in the successful formulation and implementation of federal government policies and programs by overseeing interdepartmental mechanisms of information-sharing, consultation and coordination. They are expected to provide integrated advice and support to the PM and the Cabinet on government-wide issues and concerns.

Provincial governments usually have similar central agencies, but the agencies often have different names than the federal agencies, or than in other provinces.

1. The Privy Council Office (PCO - also known as the Cabinet Office)

The PCO is the liaison office between the Cabinet and the departments. The Clerk of the Privy Council is the head of all public servants. The staff of the PCO help government departments ensure their Memos to Cabinet and other initiatives do the following:

1. Reflect Cabinet priorities and the direction of the PM (or provincial premier);
2. Are developed according to "due process" with relevant departments and stakeholders; and
3. Follow the systems for Memos to Cabinet and other Cabinet considerations.

2. The Intergovernmental Affairs Secretariat of the Privy Council Office

This Secretariat, part of the PCO, monitors areas of federal-provincial sensitivity and assists and advises departments in undertaking discussions with provincial officials.

3. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO - in provincial governments known as the Premier's Office)

The staff of the PMO monitor all developments and initiatives coming from departments but usually only gets involved on major items or if the initiative is straying outside the parameters of Cabinet's and the PM's priorities.

4. The Department of Finance

Because of its central role in the key Cabinet decisions of budgeting, spending and economic development, the Department of Finance has a central role in shaping new initiatives, especially in economic policy.

5. The Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS)

The TBS advises the Cabinet, through the Minister of the Treasury Board and the Treasury Board Cabinet Committee, on spending limits, staff issues, and administrative and financial issues involved in the operation of the government.