

NOTES FOR REMARKS BY
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DEAR MINISTER:
A Letter to an old Friend on being
a Successful Minister

Association of Professional Executives
of the Public Service of Canada
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DEAR MINISTER

Dear Minister,

Let me offer you my congratulations on your appointment as Minister and a member of the Privy Council. I received your letter yesterday. Because I have known you since we were in university together and I am retired from the public service, I think I can respond to your request for a frank and honest assessment of what makes Ministers successful. Also, as you request, I am delighted to provide you with a few rules of thumb that could help you in your important and challenging position.

I expect you will receive this letter a few hours after you and your colleagues have been sworn in at the Government House. Having attended several of these occasions in the past, I have always been struck by the importance and meaning that is associated with the oath that Ministers take. It reinforces and symbolizes the individual and collective responsibility of Ministers and demonstrates how deep these traditions are in our parliamentary-cabinet system of government.

Upon swearing that oath, and your oath of office, you have become a Minister of the Privy Council, and you have accepted the onerous responsibilities that go with your portfolio, including the obligation to carry out the legislative responsibility to manage and direct your department. You have also agreed to work as a part of a team of Cabinet Ministers and to maintain your oath of secret with respect to Cabinet deliberations. This responsibility is a time-worn tradition in the parliamentary-cabinet system of government that has enabled governments to maintain sufficient cohesion to be able to survive a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, and thus to govern.

You will find that this oath exacts a price of Ministers which is sometimes hard to bear.

When you became a member of the Privy Council, you joined a very exclusive club.

In the history of the federal government, there have only been 592 privy councilors, and only 220 are living at the present moment. The Privy Council, in the old days, actually acted as advisor to the Queen. Now, the modern manifestation of the Privy Council is the Cabinet. The Privy Council is largely a symbolic institution which meets very rarely;

such as on the occasion of the Queen's visit in 1967, our Centennial Year. As you will learn, the only lasting privilege extended to Privy Councillors is that the flag on the Parliament Buildings is lowered upon their death. Not a privilege one wants to enjoy too early!

Just to make sure that I don't ramble too much in this letter, I have tried to follow some sort of logical structure. First, I will comment on your role with respect to the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Parliament, and the department. Then, I'll address specific issues or questions that you raised in your letter.

The Role of the Minister with Respect to the Prime Minister, Cabinet and Parliament

A Minister plays many roles. He must be attentive to the needs of his constituents, while he carries out his duties as a parliamentarian, and as a Minister of the Crown. These are three very different and individually demanding roles.

As a Minister of the Crown, you are part of a collectivity as well as the Minister responsible to parliament for a particular department. From time to time, this dual responsibility will pose problems for you. You will want to take initiatives that are bold and creative; at the same time you will feel an obligation to consult with your colleagues up to the point of "enervating compromise" in respect of what you want to do. But that is part of your profession – to reconcile conflicting pulls and loyalties.

Having many roles you will be under constant and unremitting pressure to allocate some of your time to this or that worthy endeavor. You must establish your priorities and the time frame within which you want to accomplish them and allocate our time accordingly. If you don't do this, and do it well, you will be lost.

Not only must you balance your priorities and the time, but you must also balance your loyalties. You must support the Prime Minister's priorities and policy objectives, but you must also be faithful to your own ideas and do what you want to do and so accomplish those things that brought you into politics in the first place.

You will have to answer to the House of Commons – that's what Ministerial responsibility is all about. The members of the Standing Committees of the House, before which you will appear, all wish they were in your shoes – a Minister of the Crown. They want to add their mark to public policy too. However, unlike you, they are not responsible for the results of what they recommend.

As a Minister of a department, I would urge you to learn how to use the different kinds of expertise that you will find there. I mean the substantive and professional expertise of your Deputy Minister and the partisan political experience of your Chief of Staff. The two kinds of expertise are quite different and should be made to live within their own limits. But make no mistake, you need both!

Being a Minister is a matter of learning how to balance the many roles you play, and the many demands that will be placed on you. But, most importantly, if you are to be successful – in the midst of all this balancing and reconciling – you must never forget who you are and why you went into politics.

One of the most difficult problems that Ministers face is controlling their time. If you find you are working 70-80 hours a week, you are in good company. Ministers find it difficult to balance their roles as a parliamentarian, a cabinet Minister, a party member, and an elected member from a particular constituency. This means that they are unable to devote much more than one third to one half of their time to department business, and surveys indicate they often have only three hours a week to spend with their Deputy Minister. In order to perform all their functions, Ministers have to rely extensively on their Deputy Ministers and their Chiefs of Staff, and they have to quickly determine how they are going to how much time they are going to devote to each. One of the things a good Deputy Minister will do is constantly chastise a Minister who is overtaxing his physical resources. An exhausted Minister is a dangerous Minister – both to himself and to the Government. Try, I repeat, try to get some exercise and sufficient rest. On occasion you will have to be “bloody minded” – say no – and go home to bed.

The Prime Minister and Cabinet

As soon as the cabinet is sworn in, the process of governing begins. Most Ministers that I have worked with have found their initial four to six weeks in a new portfolio of a new government to be at once exhilarating and exasperating. After a long period on the backbenches or on the election trail, Ministers are usually thrilled to be in power and to have a department which they can “run”. However, for Ministers such as you, who have no previous parliamentary or cabinet experience, it is often very difficult to sort out the heavy responsibilities that they must bear and to understand what roles they are to perform. This is particularly difficult when the government is composed of many Ministers who also have no cabinet or parliamentary experience.

In the past, Ministers tended to work for a few years as backbenchers, then become parliamentary secretaries and then junior Ministers. By the time they became Ministers they had a good deal of experience in Parliament and in government. The kind of challenge that you face is relatively unusual in the history of the federal government. It will require you to learn quickly on several fronts at once, while at the same time, bearing the responsibility and the accountability for your portfolio. I don't envy you in this task.

The first few months are the most dangerous for you. You will be faced by people = bureaucrats and clientele of the department – pressing you to make decision which have been held up pending your appointment. It is natural that this should happen. But, at this stage, you don't know the department and will not fully understand the issues. Therefore, you will not be able to effectively judge the issues brought before you from the political perspective. So, don't make any more decisions that you have to in the first few weeks.

Keep in mind that you have taken on enormous responsibility as the Minister responsible for your department's present activities and responsibilities. Get a grip on the present realities of your department before you launch out in new directions. Most decisions can wait for a few weeks until you know what you are doing when you make those decisions.

I hope there is no need to tell you to make certain your personal affairs are in order and that you are clear of all real and/or perceived conflicts of interest. And for heaven's sake, don't redecorate your office or order a new car. You will read about the cost in tomorrow's newspaper. And by the way, never authorize any purchase unless you do know the cost, otherwise you may find some admiring aide has ordered a five thousand dollar desk – try to explain that to your constituents. You may find the media attention lavished on these relatively minor issues annoying. Just remember that people believe that if you show common sense in the small matters you will probably act sensibly when it comes to the big issues.

The overall approach to governing and cabinet decision-making in any government depends a great deal on the management style of the Prime Minister and his senior Ministers. There are, however, some general observations that I could make that seem to apply to most governments.

A Minister is usually expected to figure out for himself what to do with his or her portfolio within the context of party policy, the Prime Ministers priorities and the overall thinking of Cabinet and caucus. Given that the Prime Minister usually has his plate full and other Ministers are busy trying to figure out their portfolios and achieve their agendas, Ministers are usually left to their own judgement to a considerable degree. There is a very strong “sink or swim” element that pervades the role of a Cabinet Minister.

Since you have has a lot of experience in the private sector, you might find it surprising that a Prime Minister would appoint the head of a billion dollar department with little or no specific direction, whereas in business there would be discussions about the business plan and long range expectations in terms of return on investment, diversification, etc. Even if this were desirable in government, it is simply not feasible. The federal government is the equivalent of a \$100 billion company which is larger than the top 20 Canadian companies combined. Except in the most general terms, it is just not possible for the Prime Minister to figure out what is required for each particular department. Outside of a few key priorities which are important to the Prime Minister

and the government as a whole, it is ultimately the Ministers responsibility to establish what is required and to bring suggestions forward to the Prime Minister and to Cabinet.

A major challenge for Ministers is to discover the line between taking initiatives which are within the proper sphere of action of the Minister, and consulting or achieving the approval of cabinet or the Prime Minister. In new governments, this is a particularly difficulty line to draw because everyone else is also trying to determine their roles. The best advice that I can give you is, don't fall victim to either of the two extremes; (i) initiating new policies or programs which affect the Government or other departments without adequate consultation or (ii) consulting on everything and anything to the point where you cannot get anything done. Above all, do not fall into the trap of thinking that the way to be successful is to end-run the Minister of Finance or to spring surprises on colleagues who oppose what you want to do. It may work once or twice but it is a recipe for failure in the long run. By continuing to communicate with your cabinet colleagues and by carefully observing the priorities of the Prime Minister you will, over a relatively short period of time, learn when you have to go to Cabinet or to the Prime Minister and when you do not.

One of the key aspects of a cabinet positions to develop a rapport with the clients of the department. It is usually expected that a Minister will develop the support and confidence of the clientele of his department, whether they are fishermen, farmers, businessmen, or artists. Without a good rapport with your clientele, your value and support at the cabinet table will quickly depreciate. Thus, another difficult problem for Ministers is to balance the requirement to fight for client interests in cabinet (i.e., for policies and the necessary resources) with the requirement to meet other government aims, such as downsizing or deficit reduction. Many Ministers have got themselves caught in this vise and have never managed to free themselves of it. You might find it instructive to study the success that some Ministers have had in walking this tightrope over the past few decades.

Parliament

One of your campaign themes was an increased role for Members of Parliament – particularly backbenchers in the committee system. I sympathize with your concern that members of parliament play a meaningful role. Recent parliamentary reforms have provided Parliamentary Committees with more freedom to call witnesses, investigate issues, and issue reports. As a Minister you will soon be exposed to the importance of Parliament for Ministers. In terms of the parliamentary-cabinet system of government, Ministers are accountable to Parliament and must maintain the confidence of Parliament along with the Prime Minister in exercising their responsibilities in order to remain in power.

I guess I don't need to encourage you to be open with your parliamentary colleagues and your caucus. Make them aware of what you are doing and what issues you face. But, in the final analysis, it is important to realize that the Parliamentary Committee is not responsible for discharging your responsibilities. In the final analysis the Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition is to oppose the Government and to criticize and embarrass Ministers. Parliamentary Committees may be able to play a useful role in addressing some of the issues that you face, but it is more likely that they will run on their own agenda for their own reasons and you must be careful not to be snared in a mesh from which you cannot escape. In the spirit of reform I think it is both wise and practical to try to work cooperatively with your committee; but, ensure that you run your own agenda. In the final analysis it is you, not the Parliamentary committee, who is responsible for your portfolio and it is you who will be held accountable for the exercise of your responsibilities by the Prime Minister, your caucus, Parliament itself and the people. When things go wrong you cannot blame the Parliamentary Committee or anyone else. The responsibility is yours. So exercise your authority and responsibility while gaining from the work and insights brought to the issues before you by the Parliamentary Committee.

My final note on Parliament is that you will be greatly tempted to send your officials to represent you at Parliamentary Committee hearings. Given the tremendous time

demands that you will face, this is both inevitable and necessary. However, you must work with the committees and with your officials to develop a clear understanding that you are the Minister and that you speak for the department on both management and policy issues. If your officials are placed in a position where they feel accountable to parliamentary committees they will be faced with divided loyalties that will make your job much more difficult when you want them to follow a particular course of action. You may have to remind all concerned, including the Parliamentary Committee that your officials work for you!

The Role of the Minister vis à vis the Deputy Minister and the Chief of Staff

Successful Ministers know that they have to effectively utilize the two people who report to them most directly – the Deputy Minister and the Chief of Staff. It will take you some time to establish your operating style and to define how you want to work with your Deputy Minister and Chief of Staff. I want to comment on the roles of these individuals and to offer you some advice on how best to utilize them.

Selecting a Chief of Staff

One of the most important decisions you will face over the next two weeks is selecting a Chief of Staff. Your Chief of Staff is a critical part of your management team. The main rationale for the Chief of Staff position is that Ministers need a source of independent politically partisan advice that cannot and should not be provided within the traditions of a non-partisan public service.

The role of Chief of Staff is intended to take some pressure off Minister by ensuring that the Minister's office is well managed (i.e., correspondence is handled efficiently, and your travel and meeting schedule is well organized and in keeping with your priorities). These may seem like small administrative chores, but the demands placed on a Minister can quickly submerge you without a well-run office supervised by your Chief of Staff.

There are three key qualities for a Chief of Staff: (i) ability to work with the Minister and to assist the Minister in developing and managing his agenda; (ii) good political

judgement and ability to work within the political networks within the political networks within the Government, caucus and within the clientele of the department; and (iii) ability to manage the Minister's office and work cooperatively with the Deputy Minister and senior department officials. In addition to these three major requirements, candidates who already have a good knowledge of government or your particular policy field are a distinct asset.

In situations where the Minister is able to establish a three-person team (the Minister, the Chief of Staff, and the Deputy Minister) where each is able to bring their respective skills to bear on problems, they are generally very successful. In situations where the Chief of Staff tries to run the department or be an intermediary or pseudo Deputy Minister, major problems can emerge which ultimately affect the performance of the Minister.

I know that you will face many pressures to appoint party supporters or campaign advisors to this important role. I recognize the need for this as part of the political process, but it is very important to keep in mind that running an election is not at all the same as governing. A poor Chief of Staff can have a very negative impact on your performance and there are certainly cases where the Chief of Staff or executive assistant was a major factor in the demise of a Minister. Some of your senior colleagues will be glad to confirm what I have said about the importance of selecting an effective Chief of Staff. To assist you with your judgements on this, if I were you, I would seek the advice of an experienced and successful Chief of Staff to help you to screen candidates.

The Role of the Deputy Minister

If you haven't already met your Deputy Minister, he will probably call you today and offer to provide you with a briefing on the department and arrange to meet any administrative requirements you may have. I have no idea who your Deputy Minister is or will be. I can, however, tell you something about the average Deputy Minister in Ottawa. Most Deputy Ministers in Ottawa are somewhere between forty and fifty-five years of age and have around twenty to twenty-five years experience in the federal government in a variety of departments. Nearly all Deputy Ministers have central agency experience. They are

very well educated, intelligent and know a good deal about the policy and management process in government and the roles of central agencies such as Treasury Board and the Privy Council Office functions.

Undoubtedly, you will have heard many things about Deputy Ministers from your colleagues. Let me just say that you should begin your relationship with your Deputy Minister with an open mind – starting with the premise that he or she is there to help you and wants to serve and support you. Start out too, believing the best of him/her, as you do of others – that his is honest, diligent and decent. If after a couple of months you don't find that the Deputy Minister is doing his/her job, I would be surprised, but I would then encourage you to speak to the Secretary to the Cabinet about the problem. On a more practical level, you simply do not have the time to have problems with your deputy. It will make it more difficult for you to do your job. Similarly, your Deputy cannot afford to have problems with you or he/she will not be able to get anything done.

You may well have heard from some of your colleagues that the Deputy Ministers are politically partisan and that they cannot be trusted to serve a new government. That, pardon my language, is usually garbage. The overwhelming majority of Deputy Ministers want to serve their Ministers in a professional non-partisan way and they try to be extremely sensitive and supportive of Ministerial priorities. However, I do not want to mislead you. Deputy Ministers are not paid to say “yes” every time the Minister speaks. Deputy Ministers are, or should be, experts in the policy field. And, they know how the cabinet system works, how central agencies operate and are familiar with the policy process. For these reasons, you will often find that they will bring a different perspective to bear on decisions, and sometimes, you will find that this is irksome. You might ask, “Why is this guy always telling me what I cannot do or what problems will emerge if I do this or that? Why is my Deputy Minister so concerned about what Treasury Board thinks? Doesn't he work for me?”

The answer to these questions is simple. It is the Deputy's job to worry about these things. Deputy Ministers do not want to see their Minister get into trouble any more than you do. Part of their role in serving Ministers and the Prime Minister is to provide advice

about the management requirements of government and some of the policy problems that could emerge. It is also their job to help you come up with options that meet your requirements and help you to navigate through the reefs and shoals that have caused many a shipwreck for Ministers.

A good Deputy Ministers is one who can be responsive and supportive to the Minister's priorities and at the same time provide expertise in management, policy advice or relations with central agencies that enable the Minister to accomplish what he or she wants to do.

Deputy Ministers are trained to serve their Ministers and will do their utmost to support you and help you to carry out your functions effectively. There have been problems in the federal government with Deputy Ministers being unresponsive to their Ministers. But, Deputy Ministers rarely last very long if they don't serve their Ministers well. The best Ministers that I have observed have had no difficulty ensuring that their Deputy Ministers worked on their behalf. They simply spend the time required to seek the advice of their Deputy Ministers and to indicate to the Deputy Minister and the department their priorities and directions.

You will inevitably have disagreements with your Deputy Minister – strong disagreements. But always remember that a Deputy Minister who has argued strongly against a particular course of action can be counted on to implement the policy or program once a political decision has been made. Most Ministers accept that since the Prime Minister appoints the Deputy Minister, the Deputy Minister has a responsibility to the Prime Minister as well as to the Minister. In rare instances, the Deputy Minister feels he has to inform the Prime Minister that a particular action is ill-advised, illegal or improper. Ministers feel threatened by Deputy Ministers who go directly, or indirectly through the Secretary to the Cabinet, to the Prime Minister. This is understandable, and it should not happen except in extreme cases. My advice to you is that whenever your Deputy Minister says that he will have to go to the Prime Minister, you should take that as a signal that something is very wrong – or at least your Deputy Minister thinks something is very wrong. If after close scrutiny, you want to go ahead with your idea,

then take it to the Prime Minister yourself or get some additional advice from the Secretary of Cabinet or the Prime Minister's office.

This first meeting with your Deputy Minister should be the start of what I hope will be a very productive relationship. A former Minister once told me that after he had assumed responsibility for a department, he looked around and asked himself who could help him. He figured that parliamentarians had their own axes to grind and didn't know much about the area. His cabinet colleagues had their own problems to deal with. His political staff were as new as he was. And he was ultimately left with his Deputy Minister. Consequently, he worked closely with the Deputy Minister and achieved some major policy changes. A Deputy Minister can be your most important resource.

Even though Deputy Ministers are a critical resource, there are some things that Deputy Ministers cannot do very well and which they are precluded from doing under the legislation and traditions of the federal public service. As you know, the vast majority of Deputy Ministers are non-partisan professionals who have expertise in policy and management.

Their role is to serve the Government and their Minister. They do not, however, serve the elected party.

In order to provide the continuity of a professional public service, it is not expected that a Deputy Minister will advise you on partisan political issues. In fact, in my career I would regularly excuse myself from meetings where such partisan issues emerged. In addition, Deputy Ministers do not publicly promote an issue under partisan political debate in order to protect their neutrality and also to maintain clear Ministerial accountability for policy. New Ministers often find these distinctions annoying and then come to appreciate them after a few years experience. Some Ministers have, however, made the mistake of interpreting the resistance of a Deputy Minister to speaking in public on a controversial issue or to providing partisan advice as an act of disloyalty. This is not the case. It should prove to you that Deputy Ministers do not and will not engage in this type of partisan activity for any Minister of any government. Your Deputy Minister

has to be politically sensitive but non-partisan. You should rely on your Chief of Staff for the partisan advice that you require.

A good Deputy Minister develops an uncanny sense of judgement that allows him/her to quickly assess a decision in terms of the Minister's interests or priorities.

In order to develop and hone that capacity he must have regular contact with you. He can't know how to act on your behalf, as he is legally entitled to do, unless he knows you and how you think. You will be held accountable for your decisions – that is as it should be. But, you should hold your Deputy accountable for the quality of his advice – that also is as it should be.

Like all human beings, Deputy Ministers have their failings. But, keep in mind that they have risen through the ranks of the public service, largely, if not solely, on the basis of merit. The Public Service of Canada is a meritocracy. Deputy Ministers have had twenty to twenty-five years of experience and their mistakes are publicly visible as they too live and work in a fish-bowl. The critics of an apolitical public service take some pleasure in pointing out the rare case when a Deputy Minister has allowed himself to be politicized. On a change of government, these exceptions are fired. The Prime Minister will arrange for that, as he should. Unfortunately, Deputy Ministers who have been seen to provide professional support to their Minister in front of Parliamentary Committees or whose advice is not supportive of a new Minister's proposals are frequently accused of political partisanship. As I said, accusations that Deputy Ministers are politicized are usually garbage but when there is substance to the charge, the prime Minister will deal with the issue.

In accordance with the Peter Principle, Deputy Ministers sometimes reach the level of their incompetency. Once again, this is a matter you should take up with the Secretary to the Cabinet. If your Deputy Minister is incompetent, I would be very surprised if the Secretary to the Cabinet is not already seized by the problem.

My plea to you is that you not brush off your Deputy Minister's warnings as stemming from political roots or incompetency without carefully examining the merits of his case.

All of us get irritated when we tell a subordinate to do something and he gives us five good reasons why he shouldn't. However, always remember that Deputy Ministers get paid to tell Ministers about potential pitfalls. When the Minister decides to proceed, they will loyally carry out his instructions.

I now want to turn to some specific challenges that relate to managing and directing your Department.

Setting the Agenda

The first problem you are going to face is a truck load of briefings on issues you are vaguely familiar with. I understand from other Ministers that this is a very humbling experience. In passing you might take some comfort in the fact that Deputy Ministers, even after decades of experience in government, also find this to be one of the most difficult experiences that they have to face when they are appointed to a new department. Most Deputy Ministers do not feel comfortable with their knowledge of a new department for the first six months after their appointment.

It is absolutely essential that you learn about the ongoing responsibility and work of your department. Keep in mind that you became legally and politically responsible for what is happening the moment you were sworn in. It will be the "scandals" and "problems" related to the ongoing work which will distract people from the worth of your initiatives. And, the department depends on you to provide the essential political direction to their work.

New policy is usually rooted in the experience gained from the present policy. If you don't understand what is going on now, you will find it very difficult to fashion your own agenda.

My observations over the years have taught me two things about agenda setting. First, you have to establish an agenda between three and five items and you have to do that within the first two to three months. Otherwise, someone else will establish your agenda. An agenda that you may not want or like. Second, there are all sorts of ways to determine your agenda but in the final analysis you have to ensure that several key

players know this agenda and that they will cooperate with and support you in accomplishing it. This includes the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the Chief of Staff, and your Deputy Minister.

There are all sorts of ways to establish an agenda. Some Ministers come with an established agenda that they have developed as opposition critic for a particular department or from previous experience in the field. Other Ministers arrive in the department and listen carefully to department briefings and options until they find something that they want to run with. Some Ministers want to make a change, but they have found that the department is not capable of quickly responding to their new thrust in a particular area. These Ministers often utilize outside advisors or their Chief of Staff to help formulate a new policy direction.

I have seen successful Ministers in every one of the above categories. In fact, the most successful Ministers are the ones who are able to change their approach depending on the requirements of the portfolio.

The one constant in agenda setting is that Ministers cannot be successful if they do not exercise political judgement. They must carefully review the advice of the department or political advisors and their own earlier views in light of the political realities and needs of the moment. The major problems with respect to agenda setting emerge when the key individuals involved – Minister, Chief of Staff, Deputy Minister – do not work cooperatively to review the political, management, parliamentary and public aspects of a particular agenda item.

The most successful Ministers establish an agenda after having given careful consideration to a range of political, personal and bureaucratic considerations. If you think back on which Ministers have been successful in accomplishing their agenda over the past fifteen years, the same pattern repeats itself time after time. The Ministers with strong and manageable agendas, who have a good working relationship with their Deputy Minister, and who work hard to gain the cooperation of the department, caucus, other Cabinet Ministers and clients for the agenda are successful.

Coming from the private sector, you will find it simply amazing how much energy and effort you will have to devote to making a policy or program change. This is why I advised Ministers to keep their agenda small and clearly focused on the major political, policy or management questions of the department. Then, I suggested that Ministers delegate all the functions that are not critical to that agenda to others and make them clearly accountable to them for their performance.

Managing the Department

You should not try to run your department. You will turn into a bureaucrat if you do. But you do have to establish the broad expectations with respect to management, programs and policy within which the Deputy Minister can manage the department. When you develop a strong working relationship with your Deputy Minister you can delegate a great deal and know it is in good hands.

The problems between Ministers and Deputy Ministers emerge mostly when the Minister does not have an agenda, knows little about the department, is suspicious of the public service, but gets involved in an ad hoc way in many operational and management issues such as contracting, staffing or program expenditures. This often causes communications problems and can result in serious problems in managing the department.

There is an old quotation from the Nixon years that aptly describes this problem. "When operations flow from the top, policy flows to the bottom". The more a Minister gets involved in operational decisions, the more decisions will flow up to the Minister. As soon as political judgements are routinely added to administrative decisions, it is not possible for the Deputy Minister or senior officials to make management decisions without the Minister's input. In most medium-sized or large departments this quickly means one thing – overload. Ultimately the Minister is so swamped that he or she cannot spend the required time setting the agenda and defining the major policy or management thrusts for the department. This creates a vacuum in policy direction in the department which is eventually filled by officials who have to establish some sort of

guidelines for making decisions. Departments abhor a vacuum. If Ministers do not establish the direction, departments will by default.

Don't worry about delegating responsibility. Contrary to popular belief, Ministers have not resigned for administrative errors committed by department officials for over 100 years. The only exception to this is when the Minister is personally involved in the decision or lacked judgement in directing his or her officials. The minister should instruct department officials that they are to bring any problems or concerns in sensitive areas to his/her attention and that he wants to approve particular types of administrative actions. In addition, Ministers are expected to act swiftly to correct any mistakes that are made by officials.

Notwithstanding these caveats, Ministers should not take their responsibilities for department management lightly. It is true that in the public sector, good administration is not an end in itself. As the Glassco Commission pointed out years ago, good management is not necessarily good politics. However, administration and management have to be undertaken with appropriate sensitivity to the needs of clients and the policies of the Government.

You know very well that Ministers who have side-stepped the contracting process, for example, or given out grants which did not fit normal funding criteria have faced severe, sometimes brutal questioning in the House of Commons. I know that one of the reasons that you entered politics was to "clean up government". Thus, I feel comfortable advising you that the temptations will be great to favour those people who supported your party or to help someone who is particularly needy who you just happen to know. But the Canadian public is very intolerant of any type of actions by Ministers that can even vaguely be associated with "patronage". I have watched Ministers in the past reject the advice of their officials in instances like this, only to pay for it with their jobs a few months later when their decisions became public. You should make every decision in the belief that you will read about it in the morning paper.

Because of their long tenure in government, Deputy Ministers know about the complex bureaucratic system of central agencies, staffing and budgeting regulations, and cabinet

document processes, and they have had a lot of experience trying to assist Ministers in developing and changing policies. But, surprisingly enough, they often do not know a great deal about the nuts and bolts of their department, since they are frequently moved from department to department. However, they know where in the department to find the necessary expertise.

There are occasions when Deputy Ministers or officials will suggest directions to you that reflect their bureaucratic concerns and which do not meet your political priorities or which raise problems for you with caucus or election prospects. This is where you will have to exercise your political judgement and where your Chief of Staff can be very valuable in sorting out what is a department priority versus what is your priority as Minister. Your Deputy Minister will understand that governing involves more than efficiency.

To sum up I think there are five major things that make a successful Minister in the federal government:

- develop an agenda of three to five items which you feel comfortable with and which meets the requirements of the department and the Government and your clients. Define your role as Minister and allocate your time to achieving this agenda;
- establish a healthy open relationship with your Deputy Minister and Chief of Staff and help to build a good working team where there is healthy tension and respect among these major players, which enables them to reconcile management and policy concerns with partisan concerns and your needs and requirements as Minister;
- don't make the mistake of trying to manage the department or setting up a political staff which second guesses and mistrusts the bureaucracy. This will cause you nothing but trouble in the long run;
- take a leaf from the notebook of some previous Ministers and learn the department and what makes it tick and then find out what levers you have to pull or buttons you have to push that will help you to achieve your agenda. Some Ministers have made

considerable effort to meet with regional staff and department officials for precisely this purpose, and these types of initiatives create the kind of enthusiasm and dedication among staff that can help a Minister to get things done;

- establish a clear framework of expectations within which the Deputy Minister should manage the department on your behalf and hold him/her accountable for his/her judgement⁶

I wish you every success as Minister and I hope to see you on your next visit to the university. I would like to share with you your experiences. If I can be of any further assistance, don't hesitate to all.

P.S. I hope I have not offended you by my frankness. You should read the letters I send to newly-appointed Deputy Ministers!