

# **Belgian Politics Without Ministerial Cabinets?**

## **On the Possibilities and Limitations of A New Political Culture \***

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### ABSTRACT

Early 2000, a start was made with a sweeping reform of the federal political and administrative structures and procedures in Belgium. As a very important element of these reform plans, it was decided that the size of ministers' personal staff should be reduced quite dramatically. It even appears that the government intends to abolish the 'almighty' ministerial cabinets. In this article, we consider the possibilities and difficulties associated with the likely abolition in Belgium of ministerial cabinets. First we deal with the occurrence and the shape of ministerial staffs in other countries. Then we explore why Belgium's ministerial cabinets have come under such heavy fire. Finally, we try to demonstrate that ministerial cabinets not only display a whole array of dysfunctions, but that they also fulfil a crucial, functional, role in the Belgian policymaking process. This raises the question of who or what will take over their function. If their role is not assumed by other institutions or bodies, the abolition of the ministerial cabinets will not generate better governance, but quite the opposite.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the elections of Black Sunday <sup>1</sup>, the Agusta bribery scandal <sup>2</sup>, the Dutroux affair <sup>3</sup> and the subsequent White March <sup>4</sup>, and the dioxin crisis <sup>5</sup>, there have been loud calls in Belgium for a ‘New Political Culture’ (NPC). As a symbol of renewal, the coalition government of socialists, liberals and the greens - the first coalition in decades not involving the Christian democrats - intends to set its house in order. The Verhofstadt government has set itself the goal of turning Belgium into a model state again. The strength of the call for a NPC is, however, inversely proportional to the clarity of its content. Yet there is agreement among politicians, academics and journalists that modernising Belgium’s government apparatus, i.e. depoliticising it and improving its efficiency, should be considered one of the cornerstones of this NPC. It is a matter of fact that public services in Belgium have for decades been neglected and mismanaged. It is no coincidence that a start was made in February 2000 with the so-called *Copernicus* plans, a sweeping reform of the federal political and administrative structures and procedures. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and the Minister for the Civil Service and Modernisation of the Public Administration Luc Van den Bossche proudly announced their plans to drastically redesign the organisation of the federal government. The press described the ambitious undertaking as a ‘Copernican revolution’, a ‘risky move’, a ‘radical change’ and a ‘utopia’. In more general terms, one could say that the wind of modernisation, which has been blowing for some time in neighbouring countries, appears to have arrived in Belgium too. The senior civil service recruitment policy, the professional status of the civil servant, and the organisational structure of the departments are all up for review. Perhaps most importantly of all, it was decided that the size of ministers’ personal staff should be reduced quite dramatically (X 2000: 18-45). In fact, it appears that, in its efforts to establish a new, closer

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relationship between politics and the bureaucracy, and to involve the civil service more closely in policymaking, the government simply intends to abolish the 'almighty' ministerial cabinets.

Under the Belgian political system, a minister is entitled to a 'ministerial cabinet' consisting of a staff of personal advisers whom the minister appoints personally when he takes office and who are not part of the administrative hierarchy. They come and go with the minister concerned. They assist the minister in identifying and formulating problems, in outlining policy, and in everyday decision-making. In short, the cabinet acts as the minister's private council. In its Belgian shape, this phenomenon occurs hardly at all in other countries, if only because of the considerable size of cabinet staffs in Belgium<sup>6</sup>. The reformers argue that sizing down the ministerial cabinets to much smaller political advisory cells will be conducive to a better co-operation between members of government and the civil service. While this idea is not new, it has hardly ever been implemented. For years now - almost from the birth of ministerial cabinets - the issue has been a topic for fierce social debate in Belgium<sup>7</sup>. In the 1960s, a heated discussion took place among civil servants, politicians and academics about the position and the role of Belgium's ministerial cabinets in the policymaking process (Boom 1963; Crabbe 1960; Sarot 1967; Snoy 1962; Snoy et d'Oppuers 1974; Suleiman 1972; X 1962a; X 1962b). The commotion and criticism, though not always in the forefront of the political debate, have never ceased since. In recent years the media have once again turned the spotlight on the least positive aspects of ministerial cabinets. After the dioxin crisis of 1999, the call for 'better governance' became the major theme that ran as a thread through the media comments on the results of the national elections in June 1999. The two governing parties (socialists and Christian democrats) lost a large share of their vote, and an unprecedented coalition of liberals, socialists and greens came to power. As symbols of misgovernment and political patronage, ministerial cabinets came under fire. Their size and position was again heavily debated during and after government formation talks. One of the first acts of the newly appointed

federal and Flemish ministers was to formally reduce the size of their cabinets <sup>8</sup>. But once again, the staff reduction did not go beyond a few percentages. However, the measures announced in February 2000 are much more fundamental. The comprehensive plans covering both the administrative and the political aspects suggest that this time the government means business.

In this article, we shall consider the possibilities and difficulties associated with the likely abolition in Belgium of ministerial cabinets. First we shall deal with the occurrence and the shape of personal ministerial staffs in other countries. Then we shall explore why Belgium's ministerial cabinets have come under such heavy fire, both in the present and in the past. Finally, we intend to draw a more balanced picture of Belgium's ministerial cabinets. We shall try to demonstrate that ministerial cabinets not only display a whole array of dysfunctions, but that they also fulfil a crucial, functional, role in the policymaking process. This raises the question of who or what will take over their function. If their role is not assumed by other institutions or bodies, the abolition of the ministerial cabinets will not generate better governance, but quite the opposite.

## **2. MINISTERIAL CABINETS AND PERSONAL STAFF ARE NOT UNIQUE TO BELGIUM**

As in most political systems in Europe, the executive is the principal policymaker. In order that ministers should be able to fulfil this complex and important task, it seems only logical that they surround themselves with a team of reliable, competent advisers. However, the way in which this happens varies strongly from country to country, and is largely determined by the political and administrative system that is in place. There may, first and foremost, be differences in terms of the relationship between the civil service and the policymakers. In other words, the senior civil service

may (in theory at least) be neutral or it may be a politically appointed (and therefore rotating) bureaucracy. Furthermore, there is the issue of non-administrative staff: does it concern just a few individuals or fully-fledged ministerial cabinets? These two aspects, i.e. the position of the senior civil service and the characteristics of ministers' personal staff, are clearly interrelated, and yet they represent two distinct dimensions of assistance that ministers can receive in the outlining of policy. We shall elaborate on these two aspects using examples from a number of parliamentary (and one semipresidential) democracies in Western Europe.

In certain countries, including the Netherlands and the UK, the senior civil service performs the role of the primary ministerial advisory body. Dutch and British ministers do not have a shadow structure such as a ministerial cabinet at their disposal. In principle, they rely on their civil service. In these countries, the senior civil service machinery fulfils an administrative role, while it also offers policy recommendations and political advice. Their administrations are strongly committed to providing neutral assistance in executing the parliamentary will: a government with a majority in parliament should be able to count on automatic and unconditional loyalty from its civil servants.

Precisely the opposite situation exists in Germany and France, where politicisation of the higher civil service has simply been formalised: senior civil servants are appointed for a period of time and are expected to underwrite the political line of their minister or president. If the collaboration proves unsuccessful, these functionaries may be sacked. The purpose of this institution is to enable the political executive to get rid of persons in functionally important positions who do not enjoy his or her full trust (Mayntz 1984: 184). In Germany, the term *politische Beamten* designates a special group of civil servants who may be temporarily retired at any time, because they hold positions where full agreement with the goals of a given government is essential. These civil

servants consist mainly of individuals holding the rank of *Staatssekretäre* (the highest-ranked individual in a federal ministry) and *Ministerialdirektor* (that is, most divisional heads). If a political civil servant is sent into temporary retirement, he receives the pension that he is entitled to according to his rank and age. According to Mayntz (1984: 183-184), the ease with which political civil servants can be disposed of stands in sharp contrast to the job protection enjoyed by other civil servants, who can be dismissed only under very exceptional circumstances. This device of temporary retirement is frequently used, especially in the case of administrative state secretaries and after a change of government (Goetz 1999). As regards the number of direct appointments of outsiders to the top echelons in the bureaucratic hierarchy (administrative state secretaries and divisional heads), figures show that in the 1980s about a fifth of political civil servants were external recruits (i.e. individuals who were not previously employed in the Federal administration). Their numbers have apparently grown since (Goetz 1999).

In France, too, the highest civil servants are appointed *à la discretion du gouvernement*, i.e. the minister appoints them temporarily and he holds the authority to remove them. This applies to ministerial directors, departmental heads, assistant directors, and heads of ministerial field offices. For these senior positions, one usually selects civil servants from the *grands corps*, but the government may choose to recruit people from outside the bureaucracy (Hondeghe 1990: 72). These are, in any case, temporary, not career jobs (de Forges 1997: 148). The civil servant leaving such a position may rejoin the ranks of his corps or find a job in another ministry or elsewhere (Rouban 1999: 69).

In short: in these examples of formally politicised systems, the minister has the opportunity to put people of his personal choice in key positions in the bureaucracy.

Belgium and Italy occupy a very ambiguous position in between the neutral and the formally politicised types of civil service. As Brans and Hondeghe (1999) put it, the informal civil service

models clash with the formal Weberian one. In principle, both recruitment and promotions are apolitical. But in reality, both countries clearly do have a politicised bureaucracy (Pasquino 1996). The Italian senior civil service is sometimes referred to as 'an ossified world' (Cassese 1999) because of its rather static socio-demographic characteristics, but more importantly its ingrained reflexes and mentality. In Italy, political leaders and senior civil servants appear to have made a tacit agreement, under which the latter are guaranteed of their post and a career in exchange for loss of prestige and power. The senior civil service enjoys much autonomy with regard to personnel management, but must in exchange accept a secondary role in the policymaking process (Cassese 1984).

In Belgium, governing parties do their utmost to appoint 'friendly' civil servants to important jobs that become vacant during the legislature, but, bar exceptional circumstances, these senior civil servants are appointed for life and cannot be dismissed. According to an internal memo of a governing party at the time, in 1990, well over 60% of civil servants in the two most senior positions within the federal ministries were assumed to belong to the Christian Democrat camp, with some 20% Socialists and 10% Liberals. In 6% of the cases, one was unable to ascertain a political allegiance (Tegenbos 1990). In principle, civil servants are neutral, as in the Netherlands and the UK. However, the fact that they are appointed politically raises serious doubts about whether this is indeed the case. This ambiguity probably partly explains the presence of ministerial cabinets in the Belgian system. In this sense, the recent reform plans of the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Civil Service are genuinely revolutionary. The reformers are intent on switching to a fully-fledged system of mandates for senior civil servants. In Belgium, too, senior civil servants would then receive mandates for roughly the length of the government's term. Moreover, unlike in France and Germany, the freedom of a minister will be seriously restricted. A minister will be unable to appoint just anyone, but will be required to choose from a shortlist of candidates who have been screened by an independent jury and were found to be

competent. In other words, the Belgian government's reform plan envisages a 'strict' variant on the formally politicised system, which represents a major turnaround from the present unofficial and unchecked politicised system.

Besides assistance from the civil service machinery, ministers may also call on a personal staff to assist in policy planning. Studies have shown that ministers in most countries rely on such personal advisers for policy recommendations (Heywood and Wright 1997; Page 1992; Suleiman 1984b; Van Hassel 1975a). In the UK, Germany and the Netherlands the number of aids is limited. In the UK, ministers are assisted by so-called special advisers, which suggests that the British system also contains the seeds of (mini) Belgian-style ministerial cabinets: special advisers are recruited by ministers from outside the public service (e.g. from the world of business or journalism or the party-apparatus) in order to provide temporary assistance; they receive civil servant status; they are appointed directly by the minister and their contract does not expire as long as the minister by whom they have been appointed remains in office; unlike career civil servants, for whom impartiality and objectivity is a requirement, special advisers are generally politically biased and they are appointed without open competition; the tasks for which special advisers are recruited may vary, but they correspond to the type of tasks performed by the Belgian ministerial cabinets (advising ministers on policy matters, briefing the media, some are appointed for their technical expertise rather than their party political allegiance, ...) (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2000: 68). The main difference with the situation in Belgium is that there are relatively few special advisers, though their numbers are growing <sup>9</sup> (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2000: 69). British cabinet ministers may each appoint up to two special advisers.

German Ministers can rely on the support of so-called *Assistenzeinheiten* within their ministries. These political support units typically include the personal assistants to the minister, and they encompass at least three offices: the Minister's Office (Ministerbüro), the Office for Cabinet and



Parliamentary Affairs, and the Press and Information Office (Goetz 1999). Considerable variation exists though in the formal organisation of ministerial support staff. In several ministries, all political support units are formally integrated in a *Leitungsstab* that is outside the main divisional structure, while in other ministries, even the Minister's Office and the Office for Cabinet and Parliamentary Affairs officially belong to a line division (Mayntz 1987, cited in Goetz 1999). According to Goetz, the importance of these administrative political support units would appear to have grown over the years. He asserts that certainly the *Leitungsstäbe* are beginning to resemble ministerial cabinets (Goetz 1999).

In the Netherlands, too, ministers may appoint a limited number of personal staff who are at the same time part of the civil service structure. In contrast to the UK and Germany, though, these teams are recruited exclusively from civil service ranks. Moreover, the Dutch 'ministerial staff' is not so much involved in policy planning as in public information and in maintaining contacts with parliament (Ritzen 1998; Vanvelthoven 1987).

In some countries, the number of personal advisers to ministers is so great that to all intents and purposes they constitute ministerial cabinets, offering policy advice to the minister as institutionalised bodies. Wright (1996, cited in Goetz 1999) describes ministerial cabinets as "small (and sometimes not so small) groups of close, politically-sensitive and policy-oriented advisers which are recruited by the Minister and which expire on his or her departure"; their role is "to act as the eyes and ears of the Minister, to define and push through his programme, and to look after his parliamentary and constituency work"; they do not "fit into the normal departmental hierarchical structure". Ziller (1993) argues that two functions distinguish ministerial cabinets: first, they co-ordinate the policies and services of the ministerial departments, and second, they systematically follow up files that are dealt with by the administrative services, so that the minister can always rely on advice regarding these issues that is independent from those services.

According to Ziller, it is because of these functions that ministerial cabinets are more than the mere combination of a minister's private secretary, some expert advisers and a spokesperson. Such ministerial cabinets are found in Belgium, France and Italy, but also within relatively new institutions such as the European Commission, where each commissioner has his or her personal staff. The origin of the Belgian, French and Italian cabinets lies in the political authorities' mistrust of their own civil service (Cassese 1984; Thuillier 1982; Van Hassel 1994). All three these countries have a turbulent political past, with a succession of different regimes and relatively unstable coalition governments. As each new regime suspected the administrative elite - which had been appointed by predecessors - of political disaffection, it was, first and foremost, deemed necessary to man the ministerial departments with political allies. But as this often failed to satisfy policymakers' need for political support, the latter also wanted their own ministerial staffs composed of partisans to assist them in the planning and management of their policies.

The French system is regarded as the archetypal model of ministerial cabinets. Usually, the Belgian system is mentioned in one breath, though there are some differences between the two. In France, the cabinets have stronger ties with the civil service: the vast majority (80%) of cabinet staff are in fact civil servants (Mathiot and Sawicki 1999). The proportion of civil servants among cabinet staff in Belgium is far lower (67%) (Suetens and Walgrave 1999). This means that the French cabinets play more of a co-ordinating role, like a key to the civil service as it were <sup>10</sup> (Suleiman 1984a; Van Hassel 1975a). As in Belgium, cabinets in France form a link between politics and the bureaucracy, but unlike their Belgian counterparts, they have a dual structure: they consist of a political and a technical subcabinet, so that the technical aspect of policy formulation receives more attention. As regards (official) size, there are about 10 policy advisers per minister and per portfolio, which is comparable to the corresponding Belgian figures (cf. *infra*). As in Belgium, a cabinet assignment represents an interesting professional and even political springboard for civil servants (Suleiman 1984a: 120). As in Belgium, cabinets in France are

regarded as powerful decision-making centres where various influences converge. And as in Belgium (cf. *infra*), they are often accused of being ‘anarchic’, irresponsible or *petits barons*. But unlike in Belgium, ministerial cabinets in France are, in one way or another, considered indispensable in the public opinion. They are under much less social and political pressure than their Belgian counterparts (Van Hassel 1975a). We shall return to this point in the next section.

As for the Italian ministerial cabinet, Cassese asserts that it is essentially a correction mechanism that enables ministers to bypass the senior civil service. In this manner, the politicians respect the autonomy of the administrative elite to a certain extent, but at the same time they deny it its most important policy-related tasks (Cassese 1984: 64). Formulating draft legislation, for example, is the responsibility of the ministerial cabinet. The cabinet also maintains contacts with the other ministries. The number of staff (presumably per minister) of all levels varies from some tens to a hundred or so persons (Cassese 1984: 60).



**Figure 1**

**The organisational structure of policymaking support for ministers in international perspective**

		<b>SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE</b>	
		<b>formally politicised</b>	<b>formally neutral</b>
<b>PERSONAL ADVISERS</b>	<b>limited number</b>	Germany	UK Netherlands
	<b>ministerial cabinet</b>	France	Belgium Italy

For each of the countries discussed, figure 1 indicates whether a minister is dependent for policy planning on a formally neutral or politicised senior civil service on the one hand, and on a limited number of personal advisers or a ministerial cabinet on the other. The figure illustrates that, from an international perspective, there is a great diversity of organisational models for policymaking assistance to ministers. However, the configuration is determined by the political and social system, and the administrative structure within which it operates. In certain countries, the administrative elite is the principal source of assistance in outlining government policy (Netherlands, UK, Germany). Political injections in policymaking may then be provided by a limited number of personal advisers (UK, and to a lesser extent Germany and the Netherlands). A further possibility is the temporary appointment of senior civil servants (Germany, France). In countries where top officials are not the primary source of policy preparation, the position of the minister may be strengthened by an extensive personal cabinet that has power over the administrative machinery and that is partly or entirely composed of civil servants (Belgium, France, Italy).

### **3. MINISTERIAL CABINETS UNDER FIRE**

We have already ascertained that ministerial cabinets are not unique to Belgium. Though the Belgian cabinets are undoubtedly quite specific in nature, ministers almost everywhere are assisted in policymaking by a number of loyal aids. The question arises why the Belgian cabinets have come under such heavy fire: is this due to their singularity or to characteristics which they have in common with their counterparts in other countries? The criticism is manifold and it has come from different directions, but at its core lies a dual concern: it is argued that cabinets are too

large and that they impede normal procedures in a parliamentary democracy. We will only go more deeply into the second, more fundamental and multifaceted, criticism.

### **3.1. Cabinets shut out the civil service**

The most commonly heard criticism of cabinets concerns their relation with the civil service. There have always been strained relations between the civil service and the ministerial cabinets. This is not surprising, as the cabinets sprung from ministers' mistrust of their (politically appointed) departmental bureaucracy and shielded the minister from his civil servants (Van Hassel 1994: 405). In fact, there are two elements of criticism here: first and foremost, the cabinets monopolise all the important and policymaking tasks; furthermore, they are in effect a parallel bureaucracy where much of the executive tasks of the real administrative machinery are duplicated.

By claiming a monopoly on policy-preparing activities, the ministerial cabinets have seen to it that the actual civil servants are hardly involved at all in the policymaking process. Consequently, the latter frequently see their most competent and youngest colleagues leave the civil service to take up jobs at ministerial cabinets or elsewhere. This has resulted in a vicious circle: a demoralised bureaucracy will inevitably work more slowly and less efficiently, so that the minister will increasingly entrust crucial tasks to his personal cabinet and delegate even less to the civil service.

But cabinets not only monopolise policy-related work. They also carry out a variety of executive tasks, revealing themselves as a parallel administrative structure. With their own army of

secretaries, translators, telephonists, kitchen staff and chauffeurs, cabinets act as a kind of shadow bureaucracy, assuming tasks that are supposed to be performed by the civil service.

Not only are cabinets appropriating political and executive tasks from the civil service, they also lack the necessary tact to do so prudently and discreetly, and they even interfere in the internal affairs of the administration. Cabinet staff do not refrain from intervening openly and directly in the activities of subordinates, thus bypassing the established order and the administrative hierarchy. Direct interventions in civil service activities on the part of cabinets are rife, and they affect senior civil servants as well as lower-level staff. Numerous surveys among senior civil servants have shown such meddling in internal affairs to be a recurrent and sensitive issue (Depré et al. 1995; Hansenne et al. 1963, cited in Van Hassel 1974: 391).

Molitor (1983: 666) summarises the frustrations of the civil service forcefully:

*It no longer concerns a limited team of ministerial aids, but a real parallel bureaucracy or general staff that increasingly monopolises decision-making right from its preparatory phases, and which together with the other cabinets constitutes a network in which constant deliberation and negotiation takes place. [own translation].*

### **3.2. Cabinets erode the power of parliament**

Cabinets are also reproached for the fact that they maintain informal, privileged contacts with interest groups, and that in doing so they undermine the parliamentary democracy. Instead of appealing to the administrative departments and MPs, pressure groups raise matters directly with the ministers and their cabinets. It is argued that this perpetuates the reprehensible dominance of the executive over the legislative power. Dierickx and Majersdorf surveyed civil servants, MPs



and cabinet members about the frequency with which they had contacts with other political players, such as ministers, party leaders, pressure groups, etc. (Dierickx and Majersdorf 1994). While civil servants and MPs scored only moderately in terms of frequency of contacts with national interest groups, members of ministerial cabinets indeed proved to be much more active in this regard. The survey also shows that in international perspective, too, Belgian civil servants and MPs maintain relatively few contacts with interest groups. They score systematically lower in this respect than their counterparts in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, the UK and the US.

But that is not the only way in which the cabinets enhance the power of the executive. Attention is sometimes drawn to the staffing and financial imbalances between the government with its thousands of cabinet staff and parliament with just a few dozen advisers. Depending on which parliament they belong to, parliamentary fractions have one scientific assistant at their disposal per seat (Chamber of Representatives) or for every fourth seat (Flemish Parliament) <sup>11</sup>. Even if MPs can call on the research units of their respective parties, Belgian government ministers, with their staff of personal advisers, are still streets ahead when it comes to resources to draw upon in policy preparation, rendering of services, and following up regional files. As such, the ministerial cabinets are an instrument for maintaining the omnipotence of the executive power over the legislative power.

### **3.3. Cabinets enhance politicisation**

The depoliticisation of the civil service and, by extension, of Belgian society as a whole is considered to be one of the principal policy challenges in Belgium. Together with Italy, Belgium is regarded as the prime example of what is called a 'party-ocracy': political parties are not only

the most significant political actors, they also 'permeate' the state and society, assuring that their 'agents' occupy the key positions (Dewachter 1992; De Winter et al. 1996). In recent years, political tenors in Belgium have pledged to put an end to such practices, a process that was accelerated after the Dutroux scandal broke. The ministerial cabinets in particular are a thorn in the side of the reformers. Cabinets are, after all, branded as tools for political appointments. Ministers are accused of using their cabinets time and again for posting their sons and daughters and of appointing former *cabinetards* to all kinds of government or quasi-government jobs. A 1973 study into the influence of more than twenty factors on civil servants' professional careers revealed that civil servants felt that co-operating with a ministerial cabinet was indeed the number one requirement for gaining promotion (Depré 1973: 332). In a similar study conducted in 1990, civil servants still found that the shortest path to the top was via a ministerial cabinet (Hondeghem 1990: 318, 439).

### **3.4. Conclusion: cabinets concentrate too much political power**

An implicit concern that is contained in the debate on the relation between the civil service, the dominance over parliament and the politicisation of society is that ministerial cabinets 'have too much power'. Some feel that ministerial cabinets are virtually synonymous with political power. Due to their constantly expanding action radius, their considerable size and their central position close to a minister, the ministerial cabinets have revealed themselves as centres of power that have eroded the significance of other political institutions.

Cabinet advisers themselves, too, consider the influence of the cabinets to be great. Johnny Cornillie, the former chief of cabinet staff of the previous Minister President of Flanders Luc Van den Brande, stated in an interview:

*If you want to be actively involved in politics, it is often very frustrating to be an ordinary MP. Making the transition from being a chief of cabinet staff to being an MP represents an enormous step back in terms of involvement in policymaking. There are very few chiefs of cabinet staff who are prepared to make the step to parliament without guarantees of an imminent ministerial portfolio.*

(De Clerck et al. 1993) [own translation].

Besides the already mentioned criticisms, it is also claimed that the ministerial cabinets do not make proper use of their political power: they are said to pursue only shortsighted policies, and to aim exclusively at instant success. They are also reproached for occasionally covering up illicit or dubious forms of party funding. The crusade against the ministerial cabinets on which the new government has embarked is certainly well-chosen in terms of its symbolism. In June 2000, the government actually involved the population in its crusade by organising a public survey containing a question about the desirability of abolishing the ministerial cabinets. As one might have expected, a big majority approved of abolition, with 64% voting in favour. (Strikingly, though, quite a large proportion of respondents (28%) indicated that they had no opinion in the matter or they did not answer the question.)

#### **4. THE FUNCTIONS OF MINISTERIAL CABINETS IN BELGIAN POLITICS**

Now that has been established that ministerial cabinets are not unique to Belgium but that the seeds of cabinet formation are present almost everywhere, and now that has been elaborated on the many criticisms of Belgium's ministerial cabinets, the question arises why it is that, in spite of many years of severe opposition, cabinets have been able to continue to occupy such a prominent position in Belgian politics. In this section, we shall try to discover their functionality within the Belgian political system.

The point we are trying to make is that, if one intends to abolish Belgian ministerial cabinets, one must make sure that certain policymaking functions – and especially combinations of functions – which these government bodies have performed until today can be adopted in the structure and culture of the administration. Clearly we have thus taken a functionalist approach to the subject <sup>12</sup>.

One starting point for studying the functions of ministerial cabinets could be a universal typology of functions that need to be performed in any political system, as can be found in some standard functionalist works. The categories that Lasswell (1956) and Almond (1960) put forward in the 1950s and 60s are classic examples of such typologies. But Almond already pointed out that the functional categories which one employs have to be adapted to the particular aspect of the political system with which one is concerned (Almond 1960: 16). Lasswell, too, concedes that his analysis is merely a working sketch of possibilities, a reminder of ramifying complexity (Lasswell 1971: 85). We, for our part, are primarily interested in the policy planning aspects of the political system. More in particular, we set out to identify the needs of ministerial and governmental policymaking in a specifically Belgian context and how ministerial cabinets can provide assistance in this respect. Instead of testing one particular functional theory or typology, we therefore chose to select elements from a range of theoretical models that allow us to gain insight into the functioning of Belgium's ministerial cabinets.

The results of our search for scientific literature dealing specifically with the role and significance of ministerial cabinets in Belgium were rather disappointing. It is quite amazing how little research, especially empirical research, has been conducted on this issue <sup>13</sup>. Legal texts are of no use, as the description they provide of the purpose of the ministerial cabinets is extremely vague: they offer a broad outline of the formal tasks without shedding light on the latent functions that

ministerial cabinets fulfil. More in particular, the Royal Decrees that regulate the functioning of the ministerial cabinets stipulate that they are responsible for

*matters that are of such a nature that they might influence general government policy or parliamentary activities; research and studies that facilitate the personal assignment of the minister, submitting files from the ministerial departments, secretarial functions on behalf of the minister; dealing with letters addressed to him personally, requests for an audience, the press review.* (Royal Decree of 4 May 1999).

Yet, from the combination of the few sources on ministerial cabinets on the one hand and literature on governance, public administration and functionalism on the other, we were able to distil a number of hypothetical functions of ministerial cabinets. Summarised it amounts to the following: ministerial cabinets are communication centres where expertise, loyalty and flexibility are combined. In the following paragraphs we shall deal with these functions in greater detail.

#### **4.1. Cabinets are communication nodes**

Both Almond and Lasswell provide quite a useful starting point for this debate. They identify a similar function in all political systems, labelled *political communication* by Almond and *intelligence* by Lasswell <sup>14</sup>. Almond means by the term *political communication* just about any flow of information, knowledge, opinions, demands, directions and efforts to obtain response and compliance within the political system (Almond and Powell 1978). Lasswell, for his part, regards intelligence as the first of seven phases or functions in the political decision-making process. It includes the gathering, processing, and dissemination of information for the use of all who participate in the decision process (Lasswell 1971: 28).

Since the 1970s and 80s analysing policymaking from the perspective of networks has really come to the fore. From the 1970s, a number of important transformations took place that made it increasingly hard for Western governments themselves to mobilise all the necessary means to conduct efficient policy. The government has therefore become dependent upon co-operation with players that fall outside the traditional vertical hierarchy. Consequently, the interest from political scientists in policy networks has increased greatly <sup>15</sup>. The underlying idea is that a government will eventually fail to control the complexity of society and cannot but respond by forming coalitions with public and private players in ever-changing networks (Hanf and O'Toole 1992: 165-167).

In order to be able to outline policy, the minister must establish contacts with interest groups, MPs, parties, ... The tension that exists between the human limitations of a minister and the many social, political and administrative activities that his position entails requires a communication body (Crabbe 1960: 539). This is certainly the case in the social and political context of Belgium. The great cleavages that are so typical of Belgian society have meant that, since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919, no election bar that of 1950 has produced an absolute majority in the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate. In other words, Belgium is typically led by coalition governments. On the basis of the degree of conflict and the type of decision-making, Blondel would call them *limited coalitions*: governments that carry a great potential for conflicts due to the ideological divide between the coalition partners, their dissimilar platforms and divergent views on actual policies (Blondel 1988: 16-17). In a contribution on *cleavage management* in Rockman and Weaver's *Do Institutions Matter*, Gunther and Mughan describe how the profound mutual hostility of the rival subcultures in Belgium constantly threatened the stability of the Belgian state <sup>16</sup> (Gunther and Mughan 1993). Fully aware of these potential sources of conflict, the Belgian coalition partners indeed try to keep the situation under control through all kinds of mechanisms

that reduce the likelihood of confrontations. However, this requires much deliberation. It is in this 'streamlining' of political decision-making that the ministerial aids play an important role. Through their involvement in all kinds of committees, inter-cabinet working groups and informal contacts, the ministerial aids can look for consensus of opinion and compromise on policy matters. One could even argue that so-called 'pillarisation', which is the Belgian variant of a consociational democracy (Lijphart 1981), is the societal counterpart of ministerial cabinets. Just as ministerial cabinets are supposed to appease and bridge political or ideological rifts, 'pillars', i.e. ideologically inspired conglomerates of political and social organisations (Hellemans 1990; Huyse 1987; Walgrave 1995), used to serve as pacifiers. Certainly at elite level, differences of opinion were transcended, which frequently led to open negotiations and a willingness to compromise.

Moreover, the growing fragmentation of Belgium's party-political landscape has increased the number of coalition partners required to form a government. This has resulted in more potential points of conflict, and it has increased the need for deliberation. The new government coalition led by PM Verhofstadt consists of no less than 6 different parties. What makes the situation in Belgium even more complicated, however, is the level of decentralisation. Through a series of devolutionary reform measures (in 1970, 1980, 1988-89 and 1993), the country has evolved into a federal state in which the six constituting communities and regions have extensive powers. Clearly, the need for internal deliberation, and therefore networking, is considerable.

But ministerial cabinets also play a significant role in external deliberation and contacts outside the government. In Belgium, it is around the members of ministerial cabinets that so-called policy networks are constructed, i.e. networks that prepare and implement policymaking, as the research conducted by Dierickx and Majersdorf about communication patterns involving civil servants,

MPs and cabinet staff has demonstrated. In other countries, the middlemen of the political communication process are usually members of parliament and senior civil servants: via them, the desires of the people, local authorities and interest groups are passed on to the actual policymakers. But in Belgium, senior civil servants and MPs are on the fringes of these policy networks. Not they, but the staff of the ministerial cabinets address national and local politicians as well as interest groups and the population, and anyone else who means anything to the decision-making process (Dierickx and Majersdorf 1994: 85-86).

In 1998 we conducted a survey of all policy-level staff at the federal and the Flemish regional ministerial cabinets, focusing primarily on their socio-demographic profile and their work at the cabinet <sup>17</sup>. While the survey was not designed specifically for testing the hypotheses put forward in the present article, it can nevertheless provide some interesting data regarding the functions which we attribute to the Belgian cabinets. For example, we asked the ministerial aids what proportion of time in their previous working week they devoted to individual activities on the one hand and contacts and meetings on the other. It emerged that this political elite indeed spent almost an entire working day on maintaining contacts with various organisations and individuals. The average cabinet staff member devotes about 60% of his time to this aspect. The most frequent contacts are with colleagues at his own cabinet and with the minister (22% of his working time), followed by contacts with 'other organisations and individuals' (outside the cabinets and the administration) (18%), staff members of other cabinets (13%) and contacts with the civil service (13%) <sup>18</sup>. According to the survey by Dierickx and Majersdorf, which contained similar questions regarding the patterns of communication of a small group of cabinet staff, the group referred to as 'other organisations and individuals' consisted mainly of MPs of the ruling coalition, national interest groups and non-organised members of the public (Dierickx and Majersdorf 1994: 85).



Certainly, in the political context of Belgium, ministerial cabinets appear to be at the centre of policy networks, and their functionality seems to be largely a result of their appropriateness as communication nodes. Clearly, we have chosen to interpret the term communication in the broad sense, encompassing the gathering and dissemination of information, as well as co-ordination and deliberation.

#### **4.2. Cabinets have expertise**

The second obvious purpose of ministerial cabinets is the impressive concentration of expertise that they represent. Not without reason are ministerial cabinets sometimes referred to as brain trusts (De Winter 1981: 66). A minister, who must often act quickly and expertly, will try to include as many competent and expert individuals as possible in his personal cabinet. When asked in a 1972 survey what were the primary functions of a ministerial cabinet, cabinet personnel put ‘providing expert policy advice’ second (in a list of 8 functions) (Van Hassel 1974: 380) <sup>19</sup>.

Following Aberbach and Rockman (1992), we could regard ministerial cabinets as *externally based knowledge*; knowledge that is, in other words, contributed to the policy process by external indicators and suppliers. *Internally based knowledge*, by contrast, is embodied by the administration. The authors assert that neither type of knowledge and experience is more valid than the other. Each is helpful. But they serve different purposes. Externally based knowledge frequently breaks through biases in existing premises. There is, however, also knowledge of shared experiences and premises. The front end of policymaking though (decision-making as it is commonly referred to) seems to be most positively affected by values such as innovation, change

and action facilitation, and therefore by the role of external experts, according to Aberbach and Rockman. It is thus in the latter function that an important role is granted to ministerial cabinets.

One would expect then the average cabinet staff member to have enjoyed a high level of education, and this seems to be confirmed by our survey. Almost all staff members - some 95% in fact - hold a higher education degree, and 81% are university graduates. Of the latter group, about one in ten - some 7% of all cabinet staff members - hold a doctorate. There are probably few institutions besides universities with such a high proportion of doctors among their staff. Unfortunately, we were only able to obtain information regarding the level of training of civil servants for 1988. In that year, the proportion of level-1 civil servants with a university degree stood at 65% (Hondeghem 1990). More than 15 years earlier, at the beginning of the 1970s, the proportion of cabinet staff members with a university degree was roughly the same.

Furthermore, if one distinguishes between the *types* of degree held by cabinet staff members, it emerges that the largest group are law graduates (28% of all degrees), followed by social scientists (24%) and economists (15%). While the ministerial cabinets are manned predominantly by humanities graduates (88% of all cabinet staff), the majority of senior civil servants are exact scientists (56%). Apparently, then, the civil service requires more technically qualified personnel than the ministerial cabinets do. The cabinets, for their part, would appear to require staff who are able to reflect on policymaking and to think strategically. This is certainly a relevant factor in the distance between the cabinets and the civil service. Civil servants and cabinet staff members speak different languages and apply divergent paradigms.

In terms of expertise, job experience is perhaps even more important than education. In relation to professional provenance, our survey shows that the majority of cabinet staff members (67%) come from the public sector (mainly from ministries or quasi-autonomous public institutions, but also

from educational institutions, the magistracy, the army, the state police, the National Bank, and provincial and local authorities). One might expect public-sector employees to be knowledgeable and capable in areas and issues they are engaged in professionally. While the educational background of cabinet staff provided no direct indications of technical expertise - witness the large proportion of graduates from the humanities - their professional background suggests quite unequivocally that they do possess technical know-how.

### **4.3. Cabinets are loyal**

One could argue that it would be more appropriate for a minister to call on the civil service to provide the necessary expertise. Critics often point out that ministers call insufficiently on the ranks of civil servants. However, expertise is certainly not the only requirement for recruits to a ministerial cabinet. What is at least as important in the eyes of the minister and his party is the political loyalty of their staff.

The study by Dierickx and Majersdorf into the political culture of civil servants indicates that they tend to adopt a neutral position and try not to let their political preference interfere with their professional activities. They see themselves primarily as experts and as representatives of the state, and not as exponents of political demands or advocates of a political platform (Dierickx and Majersdorf 1994: 108-112). So why do ministers not settle for that?

The reason is that they require more: they want to be surrounded by supporters, not by more or less correct executors (Dierickx and Majersdorf 1994). This ties in with what Lasswell refers to as the *promotional function*, i.e. the act of adding agitational intensity to the dissemination of a value demand (Lasswell 1971). In order to enable a minister to take decisions, the preparatory phase of

policymaking should not be restricted to merely absorbing input from society<sup>20</sup>. Policy alternatives should be processed in such a way that the decision-maker is able to weigh them against each other and ultimately make a selection. In this process, ministers must always search for an equilibrium between the technical optimum and the politically feasible. They must also balance any action against its political backlash. All the more so in Belgium's coalition governments, where deliberation and political compromise are constantly required. Therefore, ministers need political advice, and this should preferably be provided by people who are on the same political wavelength. *Political* policy conception and decision-making' emerged in Van Hassel's study as the principal purpose of ministerial cabinets (Van Hassel 1974: 380). Belgian ministers themselves argue that, due to the party-political nature of certain appointments and promotions in the civil service, they are rarely able to count fully on the loyalty of their civil servants (Gemengde Commissie van onderzoek naar de werking van de Rijksdiensten en de parastatale instellingen 1952: 1761; Brans and Hondeghe 1999: 132). For this reason, they feel that policy conception must be taken over by their personal cabinets.

Loyalty is, of course, hard to measure, but on the basis of our survey it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the involvement of cabinet staff members with the party of their minister. It is clearly exceptional for cabinet staff not to hold a party membership card. No less than 86% of cabinet staff are affiliated to their minister's party. Van Hassel recorded an even higher proportion of party members (91%) in the early 1970s. So while there is some evidence of depoliticisation, the decline in party membership is rather modest. Coincidentally or not, it appears that the smallest proportion of party members are found in positions that are most content-oriented, such as the position of expert (77%) or special adviser (73%). By contrast, the highest proportion of party members is encountered in the more strategic or organisational posts, such as chief of cabinet staff, cabinet secretary, private secretary and spokesperson (between 92% and 100%). In

other words, the preparation of technical and content-related aspects of dossiers is often entrusted to non-party members, while the strategic aspects of policy and the confidential internal organisation of the cabinet is left in reliable party hands.

#### **4.4. Cabinets are flexible**

Another consideration is that the growing role of the state in social and economic matters requires flexible response mechanisms to rapidly changing needs. This role is highlighted particularly in the literature on contemporary forms of administrative organisation and governance.

Annie Hondeghem's research (1990) suggests that the Belgian civil service is a typical example of a closed career system. Individuals enter the system at a young age and they remain there throughout their professional careers, often within the same ministry. Sudden promotions to senior posts (so-called 'parachutings') are the exception rather than the rule. Hondeghem wonders to which extent this is to the detriment of the civil service's ability to innovate. Similarly, Hooghe (1996: 153) draws attention to the innovative function of cabinets. He asserts that if a young civil servant at the beginning of his career shows signs of creativity or dynamism, this is sure to have disappeared by the time he has climbed up the long hierarchical ladder of the administrative structure. The cabinets, on the other hand, constitute a unique mechanism for incorporating new people and new ideas much more quickly into policymaking than via an exhausting journey through the civil service.

As in a matrix organisation, a cabinet may be composed in accordance with the needs and the problems of the political agenda, regardless of the hierarchical and functional organisation of the

administrative machinery. It functions more like a taskforce with a direct command structure and committed personnel. This works much more smoothly, decisively and - importantly - more quickly than a rigid bureaucracy (Dewachter 1992: 236). As Kooiman (1993: 36) puts it, “*how can dynamic, complex and diverse social-political systems be governed in a democratic and effective way?*” His answer to this question is that “*governing and governance itself should be dynamic, complex and varied. These qualities not only apply to the objects to be governed, but also to those who govern and by necessity to the relation between them.*” Much more so than the administrative machinery with its bureaucratic organisation, the structure of the cabinets is conducive to flexible policy support. Also Self (1988) remarks that, in many countries, there is increasingly a need among political decision-makers for *controllable* structures that can back up policymaking. According to him, the control of bureaucracy by political leaders has inevitably receded and been modified because of the growth in the size and discretionary powers of bureaucracies. Political leadership, which works largely through 'conciliar' structures (such as legislatures and cabinets) cannot expand so easily as the 'pyramidal' structure of bureaucracies. Bureaucracy can easily produce more and longer pyramids if the resources can be found. Self argues that this is why political leaders have expanded their staffs of personal aids and advisors.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Dierickx and Majersdorf (1994: 113-119) assert that the existence of ministerial cabinets in Belgium corresponds to a need for a *crushable zone* between politics and civil service. Cabinets would appear to be an essential pivot between the political authorities outlining policy and the administration that is supposed to implement policy. They spring from the duality of the role of the minister as political head of the administrative machinery (Van Hassel 1975a: 467).

In its urge to perform and innovate, the present Belgian coalition government of liberals, socialists and greens has decided to more or less abolish the ministerial cabinets. This should not come as a surprise, as the ministerial cabinets have been meeting with harsh criticism for many years. The ministerial cabinets have become the symbol of the old political culture and everything that has ever gone wrong in the Belgian bureaucracy. The ministerial cabinets have been reviewed before, but any changes made so far have been rather marginal. This time, the reform plans are far-reaching.

Considering the functionality of the ministerial cabinets in political decision-making in Belgium, it would appear quite hard to find a suitable successor. There are candidates enough, including the civil service and parliament, but the question arises whether these political actors are able to provide the strong combination of functions that the cabinets have to offer. After all, it is precisely this combination of communication, expertise, loyalty and flexibility that makes cabinets so well suited to their purpose. The civil service has expertise, parliament can offer loyalty, and the research units of the various political parties can provide flexibility, but which other actor embodies all these qualities at once? Foreign examples illustrate that there are viable alternatives to ministerial cabinets, but it seems that, within these alternatives, the various functions are also fulfilled by different actors. It would therefore appear inevitable that the rich and varied legacy left by the Belgian ministerial cabinets will be divided between different heirs. The fact that the abolition of the ministerial cabinets will go hand in hand with a drastic reform of the administration suggests that the government certainly believes that the most substantial share is due to the departments. The administrative reorganisation and the introduction of a system of mandates for top officials are very far-reaching, and seem like a shift from one extreme (ministerial cabinets) to another (minister has very limited choice of senior civil servants).

Furthermore, a bureaucratic machinery that has been neglected year after year, that has become demoralised and, in some cases, feels politically hostile to the government will clearly need some time to cast off the past. The shock therapy that the Verhofstadt government is proposing definitely has merit in that it is intended to deal with the root of the problem, but it will no doubt be years before the successors to the ministerial cabinets match their policymaking abilities.



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## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The general election of 24 November 1991 marked the breakthrough of the extreme right-wing in Belgian politics.
- <sup>2</sup> A scandal revolving around kickbacks from Italian helicopter manufacturer Agusta to the Belgian government in order to secure a defence contract.
- <sup>3</sup> Marc Dutroux, who is now awaiting trial for the abduction and murder of several young girls, remained at large for a considerable period of time as a result of blundering on the part of police and judicial authorities.
- <sup>4</sup> The biggest protest march in Belgian history.
- <sup>5</sup> A food scare that was initially covered up, though it was eventually revealed that, due to inadequate government control and organisation, a whole range of foods, but especially poultry and eggs, had been contaminated with excessive concentrations of dioxins.
- <sup>6</sup> As we shall see later, there are also ministerial cabinets in Italy, France and the European Commission.
- <sup>7</sup> When Belgium was established in 1830, ministers had a personal aid at their disposal. From the second half of the 19th century, this staff gradually developed into the sizeable and influential ministerial cabinets that we know today.
- <sup>8</sup> Royal Decree of 4 August 1999; Decree by the Flemish Government of 27 July 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> The number of special advisers did not vary much for about 20 years. At the beginning of 1997, there were 38 in British government. However, by December 1999 the number stood at 74. This is mainly due to the fact that Prime Minister Tony Blair has a small army of 25 special advisers at his disposal.
- <sup>10</sup> French Ministers tend to call on members of the so-called *grands corps* to lead their cabinet, as this provides access to the network of the civil service elite. This is considered to enhance the management of their ministries.
- <sup>11</sup> In the Senate, the fractions do not receive assistants, but a certain budget on the basis of the number of seats that they occupy. More precisely, they receive BEF 1.5 million per senator. We have no data concerning support for the fractions in the parliament of the French-speaking community, the Walloon regional parliament or the parliament of the Brussels capital region.
- <sup>12</sup> In the new institutionalist approach, which came to the fore in the second half of the 1980s, there is, too, renewed interest in the significance of structural governmental factors in explaining political phenomena (Hall and Taylor 1996; March and Olsen 1984; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Shepsle 1989; Steinmo et al. 1992). The new institutionalist position is that 'hard' and 'soft' institutions have an impact on the manner in which policy is pursued and on policy output, as they have both a constraining and an empowering effect on the behaviour and strategies of actors in their striving for certain policy outcomes (Bursens 1999). However, in this perspective the organisation of the governmental apparatus is not so much an instrument for achieving greater policy effectiveness or legitimacy, as merely an element in the framework for describing the functioning of the political system (Toonen 1993). In view of our instrumentalist approach, the new institutionalist paradigm is thus less suited to the purpose of this article.
- <sup>13</sup> Exceptions are (a) the recent work by Dierickx and Majersdorf (1994), which deals with the Belgian civil service in general, and certainly (b) the research by the Louvain-based political scientist Hugo Van Hassel, who has published systematically since the 1970s on the topic of ministerial cabinets, but whose most recent work is not based on new empirical research: Van Hassel (1973; 1974; 1975b; 1988; 1994).
- <sup>14</sup> Lasswell's other six categories of functional analysis of the political system are: *promotion* (promoting policy alternatives) / *prescription* (the enactment of general rules) / *invocation* (provisional characterisations of conduct according to prescriptions) / *application* (the final characterisation of conduct according to prescriptions) / *termination* (the ending of prescriptions, and of arrangements entered into within their framework) / *appraisal* (the assessment of the success or failure of the policy). Almond distinguishes between the following input functions besides *political communication: political socialisation and recruitment / interest articulation / interest aggregation*. In addition, he identifies the following output functions: *rule-making / rule application / rule adjudication*.
- <sup>15</sup> See among others: Baaijens (1988); Hanf and O'Toole (1992); Kenis and Schneider (1991); Klijn et al. (1993); Scharpf (1991).
- <sup>16</sup> This threat was averted from the beginning of the 1970s by the practice of consociational democracy. For a detailed application of the consociational model to Belgium, see Arend Lijphart (1981).
- <sup>17</sup> The findings of the survey were published in Suetens and Walgrave (1999).
- <sup>18</sup> The sum of these percentages need not add up to 60%, as in the case of mixed meetings or contacts the percentage was added to the totals of each of the actors involved.
- <sup>19</sup> Van Hassel surveyed all policy-level cabinet staff who had either served under the first government Eyskens-Cools at the turn of the year (1971-1972), or had served under liberal ministers of the Vanden Boeynants-De Clercq government (1966-1968).
- <sup>20</sup> See Eastons conception of the political system, distinguishing *inputs*, which he divides into *demands* and *supports*, and *outputs*, which are authoritative decisions or policies (Easton 1965).