

The Role Of The Private Secretary

by Edward Bowles, a sometime Private Secretary

Lord Annan (no relative of the former UN Secretary General) tried to explain the UK system of Government to a befuddled American audience, whose interest had been whipped up by Peter Wright's book, *Spycatcher*. He said:

“The mandarins are the permanent secretaries who are at the head of each Ministry. The spies are the young civil servants who are the private secretaries of Ministers. Every meeting a Minister has is attended by his private secretary, who logs it; every conversation he makes on the phone is recorded; every appointment he makes in Whitehall is monitored. If you try to bend a Minister's ear, what you say will be round the civil service in 48 hours: the only way is to catch him at dinner in the evening when his attendant nurse from the Mental Clinic, his private secretary, is no longer observing his patient.”

As descriptions go, that is not altogether unfair – except to nurses at mental clinics. An equally entertaining view, expressed by Peter Hennessy, in his truly excellent book *‘Whitehall’* (not everyone's view of a rip-roaring best-seller, I admit) is that the unspoken job description of a Civil Servant, and in this context a Private Secretary, is to make a Minister, *‘however ill-suited he is for high-office, or however hopeless and helpless he is once office is attained, to seem and to be that much better and more competent than he actually is’*.

That, of course, is really very unfair to Ministers! The reason that I refer to these quotations is quite simply because there is no guidebook on what it is to be a Private Secretary.

That is not, I suspect, what you thought you'd hear. When I was first appointed, I hoped and expected that, for such a role, it would all be written down, worked out, in tablets of stone – after all this is the Civil Service that we are talking about. But no, nothing. However, on reflection, I believe that is entirely as it should be. You see, what lies at the heart of the job is a personal relationship like only one other in your life – that of your husband, or wife.

But don't just take my word for it: let me refer you to no less an authority than Benjamin Disraeli, sometime Prime Minister; who wrote:

“The relations between a Minister and his Secretary are, or at least should be, among the finest that can subsist between two individuals. Except the married state, there is none in which so great a confidence is involved, in which more forbearance ought to be exercised, or more sympathy ought to exist.”

Of course, that is a bit rich for most of the daily experiences of Private Office, which do not generally allow the luxury of time for reflections of the sort that generate the sentiment that Disraeli spoke about.

The Two Golden Rules

So, without any guidance, often no training or handover time, how on earth does one go about being - or learning to be - a Private Secretary?

For myself, I think that there are two golden rules: **the first** is ‘be yourself’. That may sound obvious, but it is not so easy in practice, I can assure you. The position offers many opportunities to become more than a little forgetful of your ‘mortality’.

People speak of ‘Private Officeitis’: it is a terrible condition, and once it has been contracted, it is virtually fatal – there is no known cure. The symptoms are easy to spot, but no one will tell you about them until the time comes for you to leave the cocoon of Private Office and return to the world of officialdom. Once you have lost your magic powers, your sins will be repaid tenfold by all the colleagues you have been rude to in your time as PS.

The second golden rule: never forget, however well (or badly) you get on with the Minister, he (or she) is, when all is said and done, a Minister of the Crown. Even if the individual does not stand on ceremony (and some do), you simply cannot afford to forget the true nature of the relationship. It is very simple: you are there to serve them, and they are entitled to your loyalty.

The Challenges

Armed with those two immediately forgettable ideals, one confronts the reality of the job: and there are two issues that hit you between the eyes.

The first is that you are expected to be an immediate expert not only on every aspect of the Minister’s portfolio, but also on the Ministerial Code, Parliamentary procedure, Cabinet Office rules on propriety and ethics, Northcote/Trevelyan and sundry other principles. In reality, you hopefully will know something of the first and have a vague idea of where you can find out about all the others.

The second issue is the sheer scale of the task. A typical day in private office will probably start with you listening to the Today programme (because you have to become a bit of an anorak, if not already one) whilst having trying to get out of the house, breakfast or no, to be in the office sometime before the sun rises. You can expect your day to end anywhere between 8pm and midnight. In the course of which you will receive several hundred e-mails, get copied into dozens of letters to or from other Ministers, digest an inch of press cuttings, and /or all the main newspapers, and be aware of every breaking news story. And that is not to mention the ‘Ministerial Correspondence’ – i.e. draft responses for the Minister to send to members of the public, which frequently could fill a box or two of their own, so many are they.

Then there is the constantly changing diary (and the ‘excuses’ one has to tell to, sometimes serially, disappointed people), the flood of submissions from your dear Departmental colleagues, and the flood of enquiries from those officials who – having spent several days slaving over their Submission – are keen to know that the Minister has, overnight, given their every word his careful consideration, weighed and balanced all the arguments, and has then produced a beautifully detailed and reasoned conclusion, which the dutiful private secretary will regurgitate verbatim for the official. That is, of course, exactly what happened in my time, but I fear the same may generally not be true elsewhere. And that is not to forget the speeches and letters to redraft, visits, meetings and phone calls to sit in on and record, and action outcomes of; and then there is the small matter of the constant diet of Bills, Debates, Departmental Questions and other Parliamentary affairs to steer your Minister through. And then one has the international travel to contend with. But the less said about that the better,

especially the exceedingly pressing and difficult week in Brazil, or India, where a certain amount of 'orientation' has to take place. And on top of that, there is the political life that the Minister lives, his constituency office, the people he dislikes, and the people he likes marginally more than those he dislikes, the ever present danger of the press, keen to publish an unhelpful diary piece.

Oh yes, and Ministers have a personal life too – occasionally, when you let them! If you are 'lucky' (and I use the term advisedly), prior to joining Private Office you may have had previous dealings with the Minister, and – as a consequence – the private office team you are moving to. Of course, you then find out what they really thought of you and your advice! There will also be other private offices (and Ministers) in the department that you will need to work with, together with the Press Office, Parliamentary Branch, Special Advisers, a Permanent Secretary, or two, Parliamentary Private Secretaries, Whips, other Members of Parliament, a whole army of officials you never knew existed – and the most important person of all: the Minister's driver.

And then you have the Box. The Red Box is the focus of life in Private Office. It is the means through which the world communicates with the Minister. And to get something into the box it has to go through the Private Secretary first – if at all. The Private Secretary's role is not, as some think – or would prefer – simply to fill up the box with whatever arrives in the in-tray. It is in everyone's interest that the PS tries to ensure that what goes to the Minister is the best that the Department has to offer; just as the PS has to try to ensure that what goes back to the Department from the Minister is his most considered opinion.

Of course, the extent to which the PS is able to influence the former is not necessarily the same as the latter. And it is important to bear in mind that matters that are in a Junior Minister's portfolio are delegated by the Secretary of State. Generally speaking, the Junior Minister has full authority to act in respect of those areas. However, in any Department, it is not uncommon for a matter to attract the interest of a Secretary of State. As such, a submission on it should normally pass through the Junior Minister, with his views either being added, or causing the paper to go back to the officials for further work, before onward transmission to the Secretary of State.

.In order that this process work smoothly, it really does need a full review by whichever PS has that policy area as his/her responsibility. It is not unknown for a Junior Minister and his Secretary of State to take a different view on a matter of policy. It would be unusual, however, for that to become public knowledge. Since, as the Government works on the basis of collective responsibility, if you are unable to persuade colleagues of the merits of your own argument, then the rule is you fall into line and support the prevailing view.

It is the job of the PS to ensure that any views expressed do not confuse officials, or – more to the point – enable them to play one Minister off against another. Not that anyone would want to dream of doing such a thing!

Expectations

When an official has sent a submission to Private Office, he or she should not necessarily expect that it will go to the box that same evening. It will go to the PS whose policy area it is, and will be seen by him or her according to its urgency: and just sticking a stamp saying 'urgent' on it (as some officials do) has no influence on that process at all. That PS will

generally add a short note for the Minister, drawing attention to the key parts of the submission –and expressing a view on the overall piece of work. The official should never know what the PS has said. And the Freedom of Information Act contains an exemption relating to matters concerning the workings of a Minister’s Office – so don’t try asking for disclosure! Indeed, it was because I had caught sight of some of the PS notes on submissions that I had sent up to the Lord Chancellor, in my previous incarnation, that one of the first things that I did when I became PS was to ensure that the Clerk in my team understood the need to remove my notes before returning the file to the official, endorsed with the Minister’s views.

Commons or Lords

There is a real difference between having a Lords Minister and a Commons Minister. We are all familiar with the arguments involved in the issue of Reform of the Lords, and I won’t rehearse them here, but the issue of democratic legitimacy, and accountability, make a real difference to the way in which Ministers from either of the two Houses go about their work.

As many of you will know, the atmosphere in the Commons is like being in a bear pit at the best of times, and sitting in the Officials’ Box alongside the Government benches, rather than up in the Gallery, means that you really do get to experience something of the hostility of the exchanges that take place.

The Lords, by comparison is a genteel place, with highly polished and polite exchanges. Only rarely does anger find a voice, and even then it doesn’t last long. Reflecting this, Commons Ministers are generally acutely aware of how the Opposition and the Press will look at a policy, and are generally extremely concerned to look out for the sort of thing that will create a bad story.

Another practical difference about having a Commons Minister is that he has to go to his constituency to attend to his surgery and generally keep the local people (and party) on side. This is difficult, because a Minister has so many other demands on his time. So the general rule is that Friday and Monday mornings are for constituency work and the rest of the time is the Department’s. Rarely does this cause a problem, especially if you have a good working relationship with the Minister’s constituency office.

Reshuffles

In the run-up to that great exercise in universal suffrage that is our General Election, life in Private Office takes on an altogether different meaning – for one it means you can take leave. Commons Ministers’ offices go into virtual hibernation mode, Lords Ministers (for all remain Ministers, even if no longer MPs) are slightly more active; but by-and-large all are thinking about what may result from the Election, and trying to make contingency plans.

The first thing that follows an election, for a successful incumbent administration, is a reshuffle. So let me share some of the thoughts of a former Private Office colleague who went through the 2003 reshuffle:

- Call present Minister (who is in Brussels) to tell her she maybe on the move
- Fret/fantasise about which MP or Peer you may be left with/allocated.

- Physically remove smirk from face of neighbouring Private Secretary, who already knows he is exchanging nightmare Minister for sweetheart Minister.
- Gasp in disbelief when find out from the TV (no one bothers to tell you) that department's name (which it has had for over 30 years) is being changed to something that resembles a script title from 'Yes, Minister'
- On discovering your allocated Minister, frantically look him up on the Internet to find out what he's done, constituency, where he went to school etc. This is if he/she is an MP, if a Peer who he/she used to work for and how they got their peerage, after all you may want one yourself some day!
- Try to call new Minister, who is on holiday in Budapest, so is a little bemused at having to talk to complete strangers about his various likes/dislikes and when is he coming back.

The other thing that your Minister is entitled to expect is complete discretion, even years after having parted company. But the experience of having been a PS is one that will remain significant, hopefully for mostly good reasons, even when others have faded. And you will see from the CVs of all the most successful Civil Servants, that each of them has served as a Private Secretary at least once, and some more than ten times.