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Mackenzie King and the origins of the cabinet secretariat

Abstract. While it has been generally known that the development of the cabinet secretariat in Canada within the Privy Council Office was strongly influenced by the British model, the nature of this influence has been obscure. Documents in the King Papers reveal not only that a study of the British organization was undertaken for Mackenzie King by Burgon Bickersteth, then warden of Hart House, in 1927, but also that the Prime Minister later discussed the question with the Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir, in 1935. The probable effect of the proposals made at that time on Mackenzie King's ultimate decision are examined, and thereby provide an illustration of his method of reaching decisions.

Sommaire. On reconnaît généralement la forte influence du modèle britannique sur le développement du secrétariat du cabinet dans le cadre du Conseil privé, mais on connaît mal la nature de cette influence. Des documents trouvés parmi les papiers de Mackenzie King révèlent qu'en 1927, Burgon Bickersteth, qui était alors le directeur de Hart House, avait entrepris une étude du système britannique pour le compte du Premier Ministre, qui en avait discuté plus tard, en 1935, avec le Gouverneur Général, Lord Tweedsmuir. L'auteur de cet article étudie l'effet probable des recommandations faites alors sur la décision finale de Mackenzie King, et de ce fait illustre les méthodes de prise de décision de ce dernier.

Mackenzie King was not a man to reach a decision in a hurry. The machinery of government did not interest him, and he held highly idiosyncratic views on many constitutional matters. His methods were intuitive, and he sought to adapt the machinery around him to the requirements of his own personal way of doing business. To him people were more important than institutions.

These characteristics are amply illustrated during the twelve years which it took him to satisfy himself that a cabinet secretariat on what he understood to be the British model should be established in Canada. He began by seeking the man who in his mind suited the job, but found only a memorandum which explained the duties of the proposed office. The matter receded from his mind until, back in office in 1935, he sought

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the counsel of Lord Tweedsmuir; but failing to find the right answer there he turned again to his search for the man rather than the office. Thus the origins of the cabinet secretariat are an illustration of King's method of making decisions.

By the time the question arose in Canada the British cabinet secretariat was firmly established, having survived a nearly successful attempt to abolish it at the end of the First World War. It needs to be remembered that in Britain the office had grown about the man who had been the first to hold it. Maurice Hankey shaped the office and created for it a role which made one wonder how it had been possible to get along without it. Inevitably, there was resistance. Asquith in 1914 had refused to have an official present at actual cabinet meetings because this was in conflict with 'established constitutional principles'.¹ At the end of the war the secretariat very nearly followed Lloyd George's war cabinet into limbo, for Bonar Law had publicly announced that he intended 'to bring that body in its present form to an end.'² But Hankey's skill and resilience saved it and he was to preside over it for another sixteen years.

After a decent interval, of something like a quarter of a century, after the creation of the office of secretary to the cabinet in Great Britain, a similar office with a similar role and title emerged in Canada. There are differences in the two situations, but a remarkable similarity in the nature of the office. The bureaucratic ideal depends on a separation of politics and administration, seldom realized in practice. But Hankey had created an office with a very special role and an almost unique prestige. Unlike most senior civil servants, the secretary to the cabinet is not constricted by the imperatives of a single department's role and policy interests. He represents the interests of government as a totality, and thus uniquely embodies the enduring interests of the state irrespective of changes of men and issues in government. In this sense he is perhaps the most non-political member of the highest ranks of the civil service, as well as the most prestigious.

There was no certainty that this unique and somewhat novel role could be transplanted intact into the rather different conditions of Canadian political life. That it was must be attributed in large part to the first Canadian secretary to the cabinet, Arnold Heeney. But he could not have done so without the acquiescence of Mackenzie King. For more than a decade before Heeney's appointment King had been thinking about the problem and had been given both advice and instruction about it.

1 Patrick Gordon Walker, *The Cabinet*, rev. ed. (London: Fontana, 1972), p. 47.

2 Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets*, Vol. II (London: Collins, 1972), pp. 302ff. The Beaverbrook and Rothermere press were carrying on a campaign against the 'unconstitutional' role of Hankey, who was alleged to issue orders to ministers, turning them into mere subordinates. There are currently in Canada echoes of the same argument against the role of the secretary to the cabinet.

Perhaps the most important piece of advice was the Bickersteth Memorandum.

The existence of this memorandum had been known in the Privy Council Office for many years, although it is probable that, like the rest of the King Papers, it was transferred to Laurier House after King's retirement in 1948. One of the first public references to the Bickersteth Memorandum is in Stephen Roskill's second volume of his life of Hankey:

In 1927 he [Mackenzie King] asked Burgon Bickersteth, then Warden of Hart House in the University of Toronto, to leave that post and come to Ottawa as his personal assistant, with a view to his becoming ultimately secretary of his Cabinet on the Hankey principle. King greatly admired the British system, though he did not really grasp the difference between the Private Secretaries at No. 10 and the secretariat at Whitehall Gardens. That same summer Bickersteth was in London, and Hankey and Jones 'did all they could' to help him in studying the work of the Cabinet and C.I.D. secretariat. The outcome was a long memorandum from Bickersteth for Mackenzie King on the British machinery, and the way in which it might be adapted to suit Canadian needs; and Hankey vetted the draft before it was despatched. Though Bickersteth turned down King's proposal of 1927, and a Canadian Cabinet Secretariat was not actually introduced until 1940, it was then based on the memorandum thirteen years earlier.³

This succinct summary of Bickersteth's role can readily be verified in the Kings Papers, except for the last sentence. Arnold Heeney's own account of the matter exists in more than one version but, as will be seen, he makes no reference to the Bickersteth Memorandum which he may not have seen at that time.

Bickersteth's involvement in the matter began when he received a letter from Mackenzie King, accepting an engagement to speak in a Hart House parliamentary debate which was to consider the resolution 'That this House views with favour the conclusion of the Committee on Imperial Relations of the recent Imperial Conference'⁴ on the evening of February 4, 1927. Bickersteth wrote promptly thereafter to the Prime Minister, pronouncing the debate an unqualified success. He felt that King had treated the whole affair as if it was the House of Commons itself, and the young men of Hart House had been high in his praise. King's deprecatory reply has all of the flavour of his diary style:

I cannot [he wrote] thank you too heartily for all your kindness in connection with my visit to Hart House, but also for the consoling communication received since my return. I say consoling advisedly as I have never in my life felt more chagrined than I did at my contribution to the debate. I had had a very fatiguing day, and did not notice how exhausted I was until on my feet, when

3 Ibid., pp. 431-32.

4 Public Archives of Canada, King Papers, MC 26 J1, Vol. 141, 120025-6.

I found myself so tired as to be unable to arrange my thoughts in any consecutive order or indeed to collect them all. I can only hope and pray that this was not as noticeable to others as it was apparent to myself.⁵

By this time it seems that King was already thinking of Bickersteth as a possible executive assistant. In any event, King had said in the House on April 13 that he was asking for an appropriation for an executive assistant or deputy minister for the Prime Minister, to perform the services rendered by Hankey or Thomas Jones to British prime ministers. It was evident that he thought of Hankey and Jones as personal assistants as well as members of the Cabinet Office, and did not perceive an inconsistency in the two roles. This ambiguity was to persist in much of the discussion with Bickersteth, although in the end the latter was to try very hard to resolve it.

Later, at the end of a visit to Toronto in which the Prime Minister had inserted a visit to Mount Pleasant Cemetery to view 'the graves of dear mother, father, little Bell & Max,' the entry in his diary concludes, 'On way to station I called on Bickersteth at Hart House & offered him the position of Executive Assistant to myself. I doubt if he will accept, tho I imagine the post has attractions for him.'⁶

On May 29 Bickersteth wrote that he was seriously considering the offer, but that he felt he was doing work of real national importance at Hart House and was reluctant to leave it. This was reinforced by uncertainty about the nature of the post he was offered. He went on:

Maurice Hankey is Clerk of the Privy Council, Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence and Secretary to the Cabinet. These positions give him a status which is unaffected by changes of Government. If something similar to his position is to be reproduced in Canadian public life it would seem to me essential that this new post must also be removed from party considerations. Frankly I do not see how this is possible.

There is also the further important consideration as to how far you would really be prepared to put responsibility into the hands of the man who is to become, as you yourself described it, a sort of Deputy Minister of the Prime Minister's department.⁷

Accordingly, on June 4, King turned to another of the candidates, one of whose virtues was that he was a grandson of Robert Baldwin. He cabled Baldwin, who was in London. 'I have never seen him, but all I hear of him is favourable - He may decline because salary too small or for other reasons.' But there was still hope that his first choice might reconsider. 'Bickersteth phoned yesterday or day before about offer I had

5 Ibid., 120031.

6 King Papers, MG 26 J 13, Vol. 23. 1927 Diary, Typescript page G 4826.

7 Ibid., Vol. 141, 120034.

made to him, he is undecided, but I can see is interested somewhat. He is to be with Vincent Massey over this weekend, that I imagine will settle him against coming here. Vincent won't wish him to leave Hart House, & will hardly encourage him to come with me. It is quite a chance how he wd work out. He might expect too much & be disappointed at opportunity. I am sure he cld do much if he came.⁸

King had urged Bickersteth to come to Ottawa for a weekend. This Bickersteth could not manage, but as he had been asked to sleep at Government House, he offered to spend most of the Sunday (June 12) at Kingsmere.⁹ This was arranged.

Bickersteth left Government House at three p.m. and came to Kingsmere, where they talked for a while on the verandah and then walked to Moorside for tea. 'Subsequently we climbed the mountain to get the view which was very fine today. Saw people cooking meals & lying about on top. Warned them to be careful of fire.' Later they sat by the fire after dinner at Kingsmere and 'talked till midnight about the position I have offered B & which he [is] considering most carefully. He made a few very pointed observations, - one being that a Clerk of the Privy Council who filled this position properly might take the major part of the role I had suggested. With this I entirely agree. He would accept that post at once, but it cannot of course be arranged.'¹⁰

On the 18th Bickersteth wrote in his letter of thanks how much he had appreciated his talks with the Prime Minister and being taken into his confidence and invited to be associated with him. But he did not feel that he would be available in the immediate future, and that other candidates should be pursued. Meanwhile, there was a further complication since he had received a cable from his father in England which caused him to worry about his mother's failing eyesight, and to plan a visit to see her during the summer. A further letter on June 21 expressed his distress that the press had somehow got wind of his possible appointment, although he himself had maintained the utmost discretion. He sailed for England on July 7, promising while there to interview Baldwin about the post and to find out what he could from Hankey and Thomas Jones (then Hankey's deputy) about how the British system worked.

The first part of the mission was a failure, for the appointment of Baldwin fell through. The second part was more successful. 'I have given much time and thought,' he wrote on August 8, 'to the preparation of a Memorandum on the possible introduction of certain features of the British Cabinet office into Canadian public life. This Memorandum, which owes much to talks with Maurice Hankey, Tom Jones, and others,

8 Diary, 4864.

9 Vol. 141, 120035-6.

10 Diary, 4870.

I hope to send you shortly after my return to Canada.' In the same letter he said that after long consideration he had decided to remain at Hart House and felt unable to assume the office of executive assistant himself.¹¹

The memorandum, which runs to seven foolscap pages, begins with a lucid summary of the various branches of the Cabinet Office, with their functions. In style it bears the mark of being closely based on one of Hankey's own memoranda. Then comes a section, headed 'Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office,' in which the first paragraph has a double stroke along the margin for emphasis, possibly inserted by Bickersteth himself.

Bickersteth was at pains to emphasize that the secretariat and the Prime Minister's Office were quite distinct in roles and personnel, as well as being located in different places. (This latter difference was to be maintained even after the destruction of Whitehall Gardens with the move of the secretariat into the Treasury Building in Great George Street.) The secretariat maintain a low profile, even to the point of having press statements issued through 10 Downing Street. And Hankey made a point of never being seen with the Prime Minister publicly, except when he was required to do so when he was attached to international conferences. The section concludes:

The duty of the Cabinet office is to provide machinery not to suggest policies. The officers of the Cabinet Secretariat do everything possible to sink their own personality. Their function is to co-ordinate; to register decisions, not to make them. It is only natural however that in virtue of the positions they occupy and the experience they have gained under various governments, their advice is not infrequently sought both by the Prime Ministers and by individual ministers.

How could these arrangements be initiated in Canada? The beginning could be modest, with the proposed executive assistant developing a knowledge of major policy questions through attendance at cabinet committees and interdepartmental committees, and reporting progress on these matters to the Prime Minister. What he should at all costs avoid is assuming the major duties in the Prime Minister's Office, such as dealing with people or letters on behalf of the Prime Minister, and the handling of relations with the press.

It would be hazardous to begin with a full-blown secretary to the cabinet. Even in Britain the change had been gradual and only made possible by the exigencies of war. In time the change would come, and the organization would only become wholly effective at that time. But Hankey's prestige came from other offices which he had held, such as Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, for which there was no Canadian equivalent, or Clerk of the Privy Council, which in Canada was

11 Vol. 141, 120048-9. The memorandum itself is in the same volume, 120051-7.

a post already occupied by E. J. Lemaire, and therefore not available for disposal.

Clearly what troubled Bickersteth most was the danger of confusion of roles. An executive assistant to the Prime Minister would no doubt resign with the Prime Minister, and this would undermine the whole strength of the organization which by its very nature must be built into a prestigious and permanent part of the public service. He concluded: 'Continuity is one of the most valued features of the British Cabinet office and it is questionable whether in Canada this should be left to chance. The endowment of the position from its inception with a definite status would appear to be the chief essential for its success.'

Had Bickersteth been willing to take the appointment himself he might have succeeded in adapting his role along the lines so clearly established by Hankey. Without Bickersteth, the project stood little chance. Mackenzie King believed in working through men, and had little trust in organizations as such. And he was not a man to move in a hurry. No step was taken to provide for the cabinet secretariat in the remaining two years before his defeat in 1930.

In any event, the matter appears to have remained dormant until King's return to office in 1935. Shortly thereafter the Prime Minister appears to have raised the matter with the new Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir. The latter's biographer, Janet Adam Smith, places the discussion 'early in the New Year,' but it is clear from the Buchan Papers that the discussion originated late in 1935.¹² On December 31, 1935, Tweedsmuir wrote to the Prime Minister:

I am very distressed to get the news this morning about your health. I do hope you will nurse your cold carefully and take no risks, for a tired man cannot afford to neglect any ailment. Don't, please, come to the levee tomorrow unless you feel quite well.

You did me the honour to ask me to offer you some suggestions about the reorganization of your office. I have prepared the enclosed little memorandum, which represents merely my first impressions. Perhaps it might be the basis of a talk when you have considered the matter from your own standpoint.¹³

The memorandum itself begins by pointing out that the British Prime Minister at that time had three different kinds of assistants. The first of these was a principal private secretary, who was normally seconded from promising civil servants for whom it was 'a stepping stone to a high de-

12 'Early in the New Year Mackenzie King, feeling rather overwhelmed by his duties as both Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs, asked Tweedsmuir to help him arrange his work better. Drawing on his experience of Ramsay MacDonald's problems, Tweedsmuir willingly drew up a memorandum suggesting various procedures which would lighten the load.' Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan* (London: Hart-Davis, 1965), p. 383.

13 Queen's University Archives, Buchan Papers, Box 7.

partmental post' who worked out of the Prime Minister's room at the House of Commons and 10 Downing Street. 'He arranges for all important interviews, writes all the more important letters, which the P.M. signs, and takes general supervision of the P.M.'s engagements. He is the medium through which the Palace communicates with him, and all government Departments.' In addition to the 'official private secretary' there was a second group of 'personal private secretaries' who looked after private engagements such as dinners, visits, and personal correspondence. These useful folk remained with a former prime minister even after he ceased to hold his high office. The third kind of assistance came from the Prime Minister's parliamentary secretary, who looked after his work in the House.

The defect in these arrangements, Tweedsmuir said, was twofold. The Prime Minister lacked a 'general intelligence officer' whose business it was to 'keep him informed about books or articles he should read, or people he should talk with, or new currents of popular opinion.' Further, there was no one to act as liaison with the government departments over which the Prime Minister should exercise general oversight. To the extent that this was done, it rested with Sir Maurice Hankey whose long experience had given him unique authority. However, 'it is difficult for him to be a real liaison with Departments, since he has no status vis-à-vis the Prime Minister.' Tweedsmuir went on to add that in 1934 MacDonald had 'found the situation so difficult that he discussed the question of making me a member of the Cabinet without portfolio, to act as his personal assistant.' This presented difficulties, but it was arranged that Buchan should 'do the work privately, as I had been doing for some time for Mr. Baldwin himself.' This was done for eighteen months, 'the whole thing kept, of course, very private.' But it was not a very satisfactory arrangement, since relations with the departments 'had always to be very delicate and difficult.' For this reason Buchan (whose peerage came with appointment as Governor General in 1935) had suggested at the time that the Prime Minister's Office be reorganized with a *chef du cabinet*.

Tweedsmuir therefore proposed a somewhat similar arrangement to Mackenzie King. The reasons for it were even more compelling, for Canada had 'no Hankey as a permanent reservoir of knowledge, and you have not a sufficiently developed Civil Service to make it easy to second the right people when you want them.' In addition, the Prime Minister's burden was heavier because he also held office as Secretary of State for External Affairs. What was needed therefore was 'a permanent principal assistant of a very special type.'

The duties of the office should be threefold: he should head the Prime Minister's Office, dealing with all appointments and all correspondence. 'Ordinary letters should be answered by his assistants, more important

letters should be prepared by himself for the P.M.'s signature. The P.M. should never have to write official letters on his own account.' He should organize the Prime Minister's day, protecting him from unnecessary engagements. He would not accompany the Prime Minister on tour, or to political meetings. His second function was to act as intelligence officer, reporting on important books and articles in the press, and preparing memoranda on subjects about which the Prime Minister should be informed. The third function would be to act as liaison with all departments, including even External Affairs.

It is clear that this conception of the role of a Prime Minister's Office reflects very much the rather informal structure of British cabinet government before the Second World War. The enormous power and prestige of the British permanent civil service in the century after the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of 1854 had led to the eradication of political office-holders from outside the civil service within the penumbra around ministers of the Crown, so that even the minister's private office was staffed by promising young men temporarily seconded from the permanent bureaucracy. This, of course, was not true in Canada, where from the beginning ministers had the statutory right to appoint private secretaries from outside the civil service.¹⁴

The vacuum created in Britain had been filled in a typically British way through the growth around the Prime Minister of a shadowy group of useful people, mostly with sufficient private means to enable them to carry on this service without salary and perhaps in the hope of some ultimate reward in the honours list. One of the most notable of them had been Philip Kerr (later 11th Marquess of Lothian) who had served Lloyd George with skill and devotion. Buchan himself, as he explained to King, had also spent some time in the same role with both Stanley Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald. It is only in recent years, chiefly under Harold Wilson, that salaried offices staffed by temporary political appointments have become fairly common in Britain. Inevitably they have been resisted as 'unconstitutional' intrusions on the unsullied channel of communication between the minister and his officials.

Tweedsmuir's proposal, in effect the creation of a small political establishment under a *chef du cabinet* on the French model, was prescient and foreshadows the modern role of the Prime Minister's Office as developed to its fullest extent under Mr. Trudeau. Readers of Marc Lalonde's description of the office will recognize many of the functions described in Tweedsmuir's memorandum.¹⁵ Those familiar with administrative de-

14 See J.R. Mallory, 'The Minister's office staff: An unreformed part of the public service,' *CANADIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION*, 10, no. 1, p. 25.

15 Marc Lalonde, 'The changing role of the Prime Minister's Office,' *ibid.*, 14, no. 4, p. 509.

velopments in Ottawa since 1935 will also note that the Governor General had not been in Canada long enough to sense that it would be possible for Mackenzie King to develop an indispensable adviser and general liaison officer in the ubiquitous Dr. Skelton, his Under Secretary of State for External Affairs. Furthermore, King had a hatred of spending public money in a way that appeared to undermine his own self-image of frugality, and he was able without visible expense to provide himself with a useful cadre of assistants by the secondment of bright young men who had been recruited into the Department of External Affairs. Such a one was J. W. Pickersgill, whose diplomatic career proper – on his own admission – lasted only a matter of weeks.¹⁶

On January 6, Mackenzie King's diary records a conversation with the Governor General on the topic. 'I showed and left with him a typewritten copy of activities, etc. His concluding remark was that it was impossible for any human being to cope with that amount of work. That a complete reorganization was necessary. He did not seem to have any person in mind for a Chef du Cabinet, (it was quite evident that Bickersteth had been talking with him). He asked if Bickersteth could not suggest someone. I told him, like Massey, he had indicated that he could, and would, but never did.'

They went on to talk about the problem of organizing work properly, that Baldwin never attempted to work at his office but always worked at Number 10. King mentioned that Borden and Bennett had spent much time at the office, but Tweedsmuir 'said that was the lawyer's habit, but not suitable for a Prime Minister who should be giving his time to thought and study.' They spoke of the difficulty of preparing material quickly for emergency purposes, such as the death of the Duke of Connaught or the King, and Tweedsmuir offered to do some of that since 'he had little to do at Government House, and it was very easy for him to prepare material of that kind.' At the end of the paragraph King noted without comment: 'He was quite shocked when I indicated to him that no minutes were kept of Cabinet Councils and that Ministers were not supplied with relevant papers, etc., before discussion of questions in the Cabinet.'¹⁷

Again, as in the case of the Bickersteth memorandum, nothing of much import emerged immediately. However, external events soon made it necessary to focus on a different aspect of the problem, namely, the cabinet secretariat. As the likelihood of war increased, it became more apparent that steps must be taken to strengthen the central arms of government. In 1936, after much prodding from the senior military advisers of the government, a Cabinet Defence Committee was established,

16 J.W. Pickersgill, 'Bureaucrats and politicians,' *ibid.*, 15, no. 3, p. 418.

17 King Papers, MG 26J 13. Vol. 123. Typescript Diary, January 6, 1936.

though it was not very active until near the outbreak of war.¹⁸ And the Prime Minister was beginning to think that he had at last found the man for whom he had been searching for so long.

Mackenzie King was acquainted with Arnold Heeney's father, with whom he delighted to have long discussions on spiritual matters. In this way he came to know the son, who was in practice with a sober Montreal firm and a lecturer in law at McGill University.

In later life Arnold Heeney once said that, when the offer came from the Prime Minister, his first problem was to find out what the duties of a secretary to the cabinet could be. The McGill law library yielded little information, but he found what he needed to know by going to a downtown bookstore and buying a copy of Jennings' *Cabinet Government* (first published in 1936). A much more considered version is contained in his memoirs. He hastened to consult an old friend, then teaching history in Montreal, and later himself a senior officer of the Department of External Affairs:

Typically, Terry MacDermot took time and effort in formulating his judgment. He was intrigued by the proposal, at once full of ideas and eager to help. Soon after I received the Prime Minister's letter he came out to Como one evening and we had a long talk. From the outset he favoured acceptance. The offer was flattering and, in his opinion, the possibilities substantial if I were prepared to take the chance. He had gone to great pains in digging into the history of the British position and had brought with him references to and citations from a number of works on cabinet government. I should study these with care so as to be able to reply knowledgeably to the Prime Minister and to set down precisely the terms and conditions which govern my appointment¹⁹

When one recalls the lengthy *pas de deux* which the Prime Minister and Bickersteth had executed around the topic, this was wise advice. Heeney was a clear-headed and careful man, and there would be times in the future when he must have felt the same misgiving expressed by Bickersteth as to whether King, having appointed him, would ever bring himself to fully entrust him with the duties which the office implied.

In a letter to the Prime Minister dated 24 August, 1937, Heeney set out his understanding of what had been agreed. He would accept the post. The letter continued:

Since your letter to me of July 13th, in which you first put the proposal before me, its conditions have been developed and altered somewhat in the talks we have had together at Kingsmere, and, along with Dr. Skelton, at Ottawa. For this reason I should perhaps describe briefly my understanding of the position

18 C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), p. 69.

19 A.D.P. Heeney, *The Things that are Caesar's* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 45.

which I am to occupy and its intended development. It may be summarized briefly as follows:

As soon as I am able to leave my present position I will be appointed Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister. As such I will act as a liaison between the Prime Minister and the other Ministers of the Crown, assist the Prime Minister in general and particularly with the business of the Cabinet and exercise a general supervision over the work of the Prime Minister's Office

Prior to any general election I will be given the alternative of regular appointment to the permanent Civil Service either as Clerk of the Privy Council or First Secretary in the Department of External Affairs The choice between these two posts will be determined according to their suitability to the performance of those functions which you have in mind.

It will be the intention to develop in Canada the kind of post formerly held in the United Kingdom by Sir Maurice Hankey namely that of Secretary to the Cabinet. While it is understood that such a position could not be brought into being at once, this objective will be kept in mind and in the event of my proving suitable, the post will be created and I will be appointed. [The right-hand margin of this last sentence has been stroked in ink for emphasis].²⁰

Nothing could be much clearer than that. Nevertheless, events did not unfold without persistent efforts to push the Prime Minister to act. This was not because he was still uncertain what the post involved. Heeney knew that 'by the time King approached me on the subject, the idea of "a Canadian Hankey" was well established in his mind. He had discussed it earlier with at least one other candidate, Burgon Bickersteth ... and probably with others.'²¹ Finally, King could delay no longer.

My appointment to the Privy Council Office was made literally on the eve of the general election of March 1940. Mackenzie King had delayed earlier action ostensibly on the improbable ground that his colleagues might resent having an official present as secretary in ministerial meetings. My reminders of his undertaking to have me named before elections took place did nothing to lubricate our personal relations nor did the fact that, *faut de mieux*, I was already being pressed into service of war ministers by the force of events. It was in King's nature to withhold decisions on such matters to the last possible moment. In the end, however, all went well. My presence at meetings of the Cabinet War Committee were legitimized by my being given the dual title of 'clerk' and 'secretary'²²

The order-in-council covering his appointment, after reciting the increased work of the cabinet arising out of the war, and the need for additional duties in preparing agenda and records, which could most conveniently be carried out by the Clerk of the Privy Council, went on to describe these duties in precise detail. The similarity in wording to the description contained in Jennings is, as Heeney once observed, not accidental.

20 King Papers, MG 30 E 45 Vol. 1 (pages unnumbered).

21 Heeney, *Things that are Caesar's*, p. 73.

22 Ibid., pp. 63-64.

Thus, at long last, the cabinet secretariat was launched, and the foundation laid for the central role in cabinet government now played by the Privy Council Office. That the organization grew in stature, developed its impersonal and non-political character, was in no small measure due to the character of its first incumbent.

Such a development was by no means likely. Indeed, the way in which the Canadian cabinet system had developed placed the odds fairly heavily against it. The traditions surrounding the office of Prime Minister in Canada in the past had tended to emphasize a personal and political kind of office organization. The creation of a Canadian cabinet secretariat recognizably similar to its British counterpart was the result of the fact that Heeney was indeed 'a Canadian Hankey.' Bickersteth had the vision to understand the nature of the office and the need for it. If he did not convince King, he at least laid the foundations of the argument which in the end enabled Heeney to get his way.

It is less certain that Bickersteth would have been as successful had he taken the post in 1927. The painfully difficult adjustment to the need of a cabinet secretariat in Britain might have failed had its necessity not emerged under the imperative of war. The urgent requirements of the Second World War were equally necessary for Heeney to create an agency in the same image.