DEAR MINISTER

An open letter to an old friend who has just been appointed to the federal cabinet

By Gordon Osbaldeston

Congratulations on your appointment as a Minister and a Member of the Privy Council! I received your letter yesterday. Because I have known you since our university days, and because I am retired now from the public service of Canada, I believe I can give you what you requested – a frank and accurate appraisal of what makes ministers successful, and a few rules of thumb for carrying out the duties of your important and challenging position.

I expect you will receive this letter a few hours after you and your colleagues have been sworn in at Government House. Having attended several such occasions in the past, I have always been deeply impressed by the significance and meaning associated with the oaths that ministers take. Their vows symbolize and reinforce the individual and collective responsibilities of ministers, and demonstrate how deeply these traditions are rooted in our parliamentary-cabinet system of government.

Upon swearing the oath of a privy councillor, and your oath of office, you have become a member of the Privy Council, and you have accepted the onerous responsibilities that go with your portfolio, including the obligation to carry out the legislative responsibility to manage and direct your department. You also have agreed to work as part of a team of cabinet ministers, and to maintain your oath of secrecy with respect to cabinet deliberations. This commitment to secrecy is a time-worn tradition in the parliamentary-cabinet system of government that has enabled governments to maintain sufficient cohesion to be able to survive a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, and thus to govern. You will find that this oath exacts a price of ministers, which is sometimes hard to bear.

When you became a member of the Privy Council, you joined a very exclusive club. In the history of the federal government, there have only been 592 privy councillors, and only 220 are living at the present time. In the old days, the Privy Council actually acted as adviser to the Queen. Today, the Privy Council is largely a symbolic institution which meets on such rare occasions as the Queen's visit in 1967, our Centennial Year. The cabinet has become the powerful advisory body. As you will learn, the only lasting privilege extended to privy councillors is the lowering of the flag on the Parliament Buildings upon their death – not a privilege one wants to enjoy too early!

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a minister of a department, I urge you to learn how to use the different kinds of expertise that you will find there – the substantive and professional expertise of your deputy minister, and the partisan political expertise of your chief of staff. The two kinds of expertise are quite different, and should be made to live within their own limits. But make no mistake, you need both.

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

One of the most difficult problems that ministers face is controlling their time. If you find you are working 70-80 hours a week, you are in good company. All ministers find it difficult to balance their various roles: parliamentarian, cabinet minister, party member, and elected member from a particular constituency. As a result, they are unable to devote much more than one third to one half of their time to department business, and surveys indicate they seldom spend more than three hours a week with their deputy minister.

In order to perform all their functions, ministers have to:
1. Rely extensively on their deputy ministers and their chiefs of staff;  
2. Quickly determine how they are going to relate to cabinet, Parliament, clients and the department; and  
3. Decide how much time they are going to devote to each.

A good deputy minister will constantly chastise a minister who is overtaxing his physical resources. An exhausted minister is a dangerous minister—both to himself and to the government. My advice to you is to make time for some regular exercise and sufficient rest. Occasionally you will have to be "bloody minded"—say no, and go home to bed.

**The Prime Minister and Cabinet**

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

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

The first few months will be the most dangerous for you. Many people—bureaucrats and the clientele of the department—pressing you to make decisions, which have been held up pending your appointment, will face you. It is natural that this should happen. However, you don’t know the department and will not fully understand the issues at this early stage. Therefore, you will not be able to judge the matters brought before you effectively, from the political perspective. Don’t make any more decisions than you have to in the first few weeks.

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

I hope there is no need to tell you to make certain that your personal affairs are in order, and that you are clear of all real and/or perceived conflicts of interest. And for heaven’s sake, don’t redecorate your office or order a new car— you will read about the cost in tomorrow’s newspaper! By the way, never authorize any purchase unless you do know the cost. Otherwise, you may find that some admiring aide has ordered you a $5,000 desk—try explaining that to your constituents! You may find the media attention lavished
on these relatively minor issues annoying. Just remember, people believe that if you show common sense in small matters, you will probably act sensibly when it comes to big issues.

The overall approach to governing and cabinet decision making in any government depends a great deal on the management style of the prime minister and his senior ministers. However, I can offer you some general observations which seem to apply to most governments.

A minister is usually expected to figure out for himself or herself what to do with his or her portfolio within the context of party policy, the prime minister's priorities, and the overall thinking of cabinet and caucus. Given that the prime minister usually has his plate full and other ministers are busy trying to figure out their own portfolios and achieve their own agendas, ministers are usually left to exercise their own judgment much of the time. There is a very strong "sink or swim" element that pervades the role of a cabinet minister.

Since you have had a lot of experience in the private sector, you might be surprised that a prime minister would appoint the head of a billion dollar department and give him or her little or no specific direction. In business, there would be extensive preliminary discussions about the business plan and long range expectations in terms of return on investment, diversification, etc. Even if this were desirable in government, it is simply not feasible.

The federal government is the equivalent of a $100 billion company which is larger and more complex than the top 20 Canadian companies combined. It is impossible for the prime minister to figure out what is required for each particular department, except in the most general terms. Outside of a few key priority areas which are important to the prime minister and the government as a whole, it is ultimately the minister's responsibility to establish what is required, and to bring suggestions forward to the prime minister and cabinet.

A major challenge for ministers is to discover the line between taking initiatives which are within the proper sphere of action of the minister, and consulting or achieving the approval of cabinet or the prime minister. In new governments, this is a particularly difficult line to draw because everyone else is also doing the same thing. My best advice for you is to avoid falling victim to either of two extremes – either initiating new policies or programs which affect the government or other departments without adequate consultation, or consulting on everything and anything to the point of organizational paralysis.

Above all, do not fall into the trap of thinking that the way to be successful is to end-run the minister of finance or to spring surprises on colleagues who oppose what you want to do. It may work once or twice; but that is a recipe for failure, in the longer run. By continuing to communicate with your cabinet colleagues and by carefully observing the priorities of the prime minister, you will learn, over a relatively short period of time, when you have to go to cabinet or to the prime minister, and when you do not.

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

Parliament

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

I encourage you to be open with your parliamentary colleagues and your caucus. Make them aware of what you are doing and what issues you face. But it is important to realize that the parliamentary committee is not ultimately responsible for discharging your responsibilities. In the final analysis, the role of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition is to oppose the government and to criticize and embarrass ministers. Parliamentary committees may be able to play a useful role in addressing some of the issues that you face, but it is more likely that they will run on their own agenda for their own reasons and you must be careful not to be snared in a mesh from which you cannot escape.

I think it both wise and practical for you to try to work cooperatively with your committee in the spirit of reform, but please ensure that you run your own agenda. In the final analysis, it is you, not the parliamentary committee, who is responsible for your portfolio. It is you who will be held accountable for the exercise of your responsibilities by the prime minister, your caucus, Parliament itself and the people. When things go wrong you cannot blame the parliamentary committee or anyone else. The responsibility is yours. So exercise your authority and responsibility, while gaining from the work and insights brought to the issues before you by the parliamentary committee.

My final note on Parliament is that you will be greatly tempted to send your officials to represent you at parliamentary committee hearings. Given the tremendous time demands that you will face, this is both inevitable and necessary. However, you must work with the committees and with your officials to develop a clear understanding that you are the minister and that you speak for the department on both management and policy issues. If your officials are placed in a position where they feel accountable to parliamentary committees, they will experience divided loyalties that will make your job much more difficult when you want them to follow a particular course of action. You may have to remind all concerned, including the parliamentary committee, that your officials work for you!
The Staff

Successful ministers know that they must effectively utilize the two people who report to them most directly – the deputy minister and the chief of staff. It will take you some time to establish your operating style and to define how you want to work with your deputy minister and chief of staff. I want to comment on the roles of these individuals, and to offer you some advice on how best to utilize them.

Selecting a Chief of Staff

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

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

These are three key qualities for a chief of staff:

1. Ability to work with the minister and to assist the minister in developing and managing his or her agenda;

2. Good political judgment, and ability to work within the political networks within the government, caucus and with the clientele of the department; and

3. Ability to manage the minister's office and work cooperatively with the deputy minister and senior department officials.

In addition to these three major requirements, candidates who already have a good knowledge of government or your particular policy field are a distinct asset.

In situations where the minister is able to establish a three-person team (the minister, the chief of staff, and deputy minister) where each member brings individual skills and experience to bear on issues, they generally are very successful. In situations where the chief of staff tries to run the department or be an intermediary or pseudo deputy minister, major problems can emerge which ultimately affect the performance of the minister.

I know that you will face many pressures to appoint party supporters or campaign advisors to do this important role. I recognize the need for this as part of the political process, but it is very important to keep in mind that running an election is not at all the same as governing.

A poor chief of staff can have a very negative impact on your performance; and I know of examples where the chief of staff or executive assistant was a major factor in the demise
of a minister. Some of your senior colleagues will be glad to confirm what I have said about the importance of selecting an effective chief of staff. If I were you, I would seek the advice of an experienced, successful chief of staff to help you to screen candidates.

**The Role of the Deputy Minister**

If you haven’t already met your deputy minister, he or she will probably call you today, and will offer to provide you with a briefing on the department and arrange to meet any administrative requirements that you may have. I have no idea who your deputy minister is or will be. I can, however, tell you something about the average deputy minister in Ottawa. Most are somewhere between 40 and 55 years of age, and have around 20 to 25 years experience in a variety of federal government departments.

Nearly all deputy ministers have central agency experience. They are very well educated, intelligent, and knowledgeable about the policy and management process in government and the functions of central agencies such as Treasury Board and the Privy Council Office.

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

You may have heard from some of your colleagues that deputy ministers are politically partisan, and that they cannot be trusted to serve a new government. That is usually garbage – pardon my language! The overwhelming majority of deputy ministers want to serve their ministers in a professional non-partisan way, and they try to be extremely sensitive and supportive of ministerial priorities.

However, I do not want to mislead you. Deputy ministers are not paid to say "yes" every time the minister speaks. Deputy ministers are, or should be, experts in the policy field. They know how the cabinet system works, how central agencies operate, and are familiar with the policy process. For these reasons, you will often find that they bring a different perspective to bear on decisions, and sometimes you will find that this is irksome. You might ask, "Why is this guy always telling me what I cannot do, or what problems will emerge if I do this or that? Why is my deputy minister so concerned about what Treasury Board thinks? Doesn't he work for me?"

The answer to these questions is simple. It is the deputy's job to worry about these things. Deputy ministers do not want to see their ministers get into trouble any more than you do. Part of their role in serving ministers and the prime minister is to provide advice about the management requirements of government, and some of the policy problems that could emerge. It is also their job to help you come up with options that meet your
requirements, and to help you navigate through the reefs and shoals that have caused many a shipwreck for ministers.

A good deputy minister is one who can be responsive and supportive to the minister's priorities, and at the same time provide expertise in management, policy advice or relations with central agencies, which enables the minister to accomplish his or her objectives.

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

Inevitably, you will have disagreements with your deputy – strong disagreements. But always remember that a deputy minister who has argued strongly against a particular course of action can be counted on to implement the policy or program once a political decision has been made. Most ministers accept that since the prime minister appoints the deputy minister, the deputy minister has a responsibility to the prime minister as well as to the minister. In rare instances, the deputy minister feels he has to inform the prime minister that a particular action is ill advised, illegal or improper.

Ministers feel threatened by deputy ministers who go directly, or indirectly through the secretary to the cabinet, to the prime minister. This is understandable, and it should not happen except in rare cases. My advice to you is that whenever your deputy minister says that he will have to go to the prime minister, you should take it as a signal that something is very wrong – or at least your deputy minister thinks something is very wrong. If, after close scrutiny, you still want to go ahead with your idea, then take it to the prime minister yourself or get some additional advice from the secretary of cabinet or the prime minister's office.

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

Thus, a deputy minister can be your most important resource. However, even though deputy ministers are a critical resource, there are some things they cannot do very well, and which they are precluded from doing under the legislation and traditions of the federal public service. As you know, the vast majority of deputy ministers are non-partisan professionals who have expertise in policy and management. Their role is serve the government and their minister. They do not, however, serve the elected party.
In order to provide the continuity of a professional public service, it is not expected that a deputy minister will advise you on partisan political issues. In fact, throughout my career I would regularly excuse myself from meetings where such partisan issues emerged. In addition, deputy ministers protect their neutrality and maintain clear ministerial accountability for policy by avoiding promotion of any issue under partisan political debate.

New ministers often find these distinctions annoying, but come to appreciate them after a few years' experience. However, some ministers have made the mistake of interpreting the resistance of a deputy minister to speaking in public on a controversial issue or to providing partisan advice as an act of disloyalty. This is not the case. It should prove to you that deputy ministers do not and will not engage in this type of partisan activity for any minister of any government. Your deputy minister has to be politically sensitive but non-partisan. You should rely on your chief of staff for the partisan advice that you require.

A good deputy develops an uncanny sense of judgement that allows him/her quickly to assess a decision in terms of the minister's interests or priorities. In order to develop and hone that capacity, he must have regular contact with you. He can't know how to act on your behalf, as he is legally entitled to do, unless he knows you and how you think. You will be held accountable for your decisions – that is as it should be; but you should hold your deputy accountable for the quality of his advice – that also is as it should be.

Like all human beings, deputy ministers have their failings; but keep in mind that they have risen through the ranks of the public service largely, if not solely, on the basis of merit. The public service of Canada is a meritocracy. Deputy ministers have had 20 to 25 years of experience and their mistakes are publicly visible – they, too, live and work in a fish-bowl. The critics of an apolitical public service take some pleasure in pointing out the rare examples of deputy ministers who have allowed themselves to be politicized. On a change of government, these "exceptions" are fired. The prime minister arranges for that, as he should.

Unfortunately, deputy ministers who have been seen to provide professional support to their previous minister in front of parliamentary committees or whose advice is not supportive of a new minister's proposals are frequently accused of political partisanship. As I said, accusations that deputy ministers are politicized are usually garbage; but when there is substance to the charge, the prime minister will deal with the issue.

In accordance with the Peter Principle, deputy ministers sometimes reach the level of their incompetency. Once again, this is a matter you should take up with the secretary to the cabinet. If your deputy minister is incompetent, I would be very surprised if the secretary to the cabinet is not already seized of the problem.

My plea to you is that you not brush off your deputy minister's warnings as stemming from political roots or incompetency without carefully examining the individual merits of the case. All of us get irritated when we tell a subordinate to do something, and are given five good reasons why this should not he done! However, always remember that deputy ministers get paid to tell ministers about potential pitfalls. When the minister decides to proceed, they will loyally carry out his/her instructions.
I now want to turn to some specific challenges that relate to managing and directing your department.

**Setting the Agenda**

The first problem you are going to face is a truckload of briefings on issues you are only vaguely familiar with. I understand from other ministers that this is a very humbling experience. You might take some comfort in the fact that, even after decades of experience in government, deputy ministers also find this to be one of the most difficult experiences they encounter when they are appointed to a new department. Most deputy ministers do not feel fully comfortable with their knowledge of a new department for at least the first six months following their appointment.

It is essential for you to learn all about the ongoing responsibility and work of your department. Remember that you became legally and politically responsible for whatever is happening the moment you were sworn in. The “scandals” and “problems” related to the ongoing work will tend to distract people from the worth of your new initiatives – be watchful. And the department depends on you to provide the essential political direction to their work. New policy is usually rooted in the experience gained from the present policy. If you don’t understand what is going on now, you will find it very difficult to fashion your own agenda.

My observations over the years have taught me two things about agenda setting. First, you have to establish an agenda of between three and five items, and you have to do that within the first two to three months. Otherwise, someone else will establish your agenda – an agenda that you may not want or like. Secondly, there are all sorts of ways to determine your agenda; but in the final analysis, you have to ensure that several key players know this agenda, and that they will cooperate with and support you in accomplishing it. This includes the prime minister, the cabinet, the chief of staff, and your deputy minister.

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

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

The one constant in agenda setting is that ministers cannot be successful if they do not exercise political judgement. They must carefully review the advice of the department, of political advisers, as well as their own earlier views, in light of the political realities and needs of the moment. The major problems with respect to agenda setting emerge when the key individuals involved – minister, chief of staff, deputy minister – do not work
cooperatively to review the political, management, parliamentary and public aspects of a particular agenda item.

The most successful ministers establish an agenda after having given careful consideration to a range of political, personal and bureaucratic considerations. If you think back on the performance of ministers who have been successful in accomplishing their agendas over the past 15 years, you will conclude that the same pattern repeats itself time after time. The ministers with strong and manageable agendas, who have good working relationships with their deputy ministers, and who work hard to gain the cooperation of the department, caucus, other cabinet ministers and clients for agenda setting and implementation, are successful.

Coming from the private sector, you will be amazed to discover how much energy and effort you must devote to making a policy or program change. This is why I advise you, a new minister, to keep your agenda small and clearly focused on the major political, policy or management questions of the department. Then, I hope you will heed my suggestion that you delegate all the functions that are not critical to that agenda, to others; and make other people clearly accountable to you for their performance.

Managing the Department

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

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

There is an old quotation from the Nixon years that aptly describes this problem: "When operations flow to the top, policy flows to the bottom."

The more a minister gets involved in operational decisions, the more decisions will flow up to the minister. When political judgments are routinely added to administrative decisions, it becomes impossible for the deputy minister or senior officials to make management decisions without the minister's input. In most medium sized or large departments this swiftly leads to one thing – overload. Ultimately, the minister becomes so swamped with work that he or she cannot spend the time required to set the agenda and define the major policy or management thrusts for the department. This creates a vacuum in policy direction in the department, which is eventually filled by officials who have to establish some sort of decision-making guidelines. Departments abhor a directional vacuum. If ministers do not establish the direction, their departments will, by default.

Don't worry about delegating responsibility. Contrary to popular belief, there have been no resignations of ministers for administrative errors committed by department officials in
more than 100 years. The only exception has occurred when the minister has been personally involved in the decision, or lacked judgement in directing his or her officials. The minister should instruct department officials that they are to bring any problems or concerns in sensitive areas to his/her attention, and make it clear that he or she wants to approve particular types of administrative actions. In addition, ministers are expected to act swiftly to correct any mistakes that are made by officials.

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

You're aware that ministers who have sidestepped the contracting process, for example, or given out grants which did not fit normal funding criteria, have faced severe, sometimes brutal questioning in the House of Commons. I know that one of your reasons for entering politics was to "clean up government."

Thus, I feel comfortable advising you that there will be many temptations to favour those people who supported your party, or to help a particularly needy person you just happen to know. But the Canadian public is highly intolerant of any type of actions by ministers which can be associated, however, vaguely, with "patronage." I have observed ministers reject the advice of their officials in instances like this, only to pay for it with their jobs a few months later when their decisions became public. You should make every decision expecting that you will read all about it in the morning paper!

Because of their long tenure in government, deputy ministers know about the complex bureaucratic system of central agencies, staffing and budgeting regulations, and cabinet document processes, and they have had a lot of experience trying to assist ministers in developing and changing policies. But, surprisingly enough, they often lack knowledge about the nuts and bolts of their own department, due to frequent moves from one department to another. However, they know where to find the necessary expertise within the department. There are occasions when deputy ministers or officials will suggest directions that reflect their bureaucratic concerns, but which do not meet your political priorities or which raise problems for you with caucus or election prospects. This is where you will have to exercise your political judgment. Your chief of staff can be of great assistance in sorting out what is a department priority versus what is your priority as minister. Your deputy minister will understand that governing involves more than efficiency.

To sum up, I'd like to offer you five major suggestions that can contribute to your success as a minister in the federal government:

1. Develop an agenda of three to five items which you feel comfortable with, and which meet the requirements of the department and the government of your clients. Define your role as minister and allocate your time to achieving this agenda.

2. Establish a healthy open relationship with your deputy minister and chief of staff, and help to build an effective working team whose members respect one another. This
will enable these major players to reconcile management and policy concerns with partisan concerns and your needs and requirements as minister.

3. Avoid making the mistake of trying to manage the department or setting up a political staff, which second-guesses and mistrusts the bureaucracy. This will cause you nothing but trouble in the long run.

4. Take a leaf from the notebook of some previous ministers and learn about the workings of the department and what makes it tick; and then find out what levers you have to pull or buttons you have to push to help you achieve your agenda. Some ministers have made considerable effort to meet with regional staff and department officials for precisely this purpose. These types of initiatives create the kind of enthusiasm and dedication among staff which can help a minister to get things done.

5. Establish a clear framework of expectations within which the deputy minister should manage the department on your behalf, and hold him/her accountable for his/her judgement.

I wish you every success as minister – I know you will do well. Come to see me when you next visit the university. I will be very interested to hear about your experiences, if you care to share them. If I can be of any further assistance, don't hesitate to call.

Best wishes,

Gordon

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

Gordon Osbaldeston is now at the University of Western Ontario's National Centre for Management Research and Development. Educated at the universities of Toronto and Western Ontario, he entered the federal public service in 1953. His senior positions included Deputy Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, Secretary of the Treasury Board, Deputy Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce, Secretary of the Ministry of State for Economic Development, Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet.