INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on
Government Coherence: the Role of the Centre of Government
Budapest, 6-7 October 2000

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GOVERNMENT COHERENCE: THE ROLE OF THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

1. This meeting convenes senior officials from the Centres of government in OECD countries, that is, depending on the country, Cabinet Secretaries, Chiefs-of-Staff or Secretaries-General. It will be held on 6 and 7 October in Budapest, at the invitation of the Minister in the Hungarian Prime Minister’s Office.

2. The meeting will be composed of three sessions of half a day each, on the following issues:
   - First session: Government coherence: the role of the Centre of government;
   - Second session: Hungary facing the challenges of modernisation;
   - Third session: Free discussion by the participants on issues of common interest chosen by them.

Government coherence: the role of the Centre of government

3. The environment in which governments are developing and implementing public policies is changing rapidly: financial markets are increasingly globalised, the public demands more of a say in public policymaking and expects more and better services from government, many administrations are undergoing decentralisation and the balance of powers between different actors (the Executive, the Legislative and civil society) is shifting. These changes have an impact on the coherence of public policies and of the government itself. Governments have at their command important administrative, intellectual, economic and political resources to respond to these changes. They have put in place processes and institutions for co-ordinating decision-making processes, but are these tools sufficient in and of themselves for assuring coherence of government action?

4. This discussion will allow participants to better define a practical concept of coherence: in the real world of governance, it is not an ideal objective, but rather an attempt to limit incoherence in policymaking. The discussion will identify major issues which arise in pursuit of coherence, such as the types of communication networks needed to ensure the sharing of information both across and within administrative structures of government. This will be an opportunity for countries to exchange experiences about the most effective strategies for strengthening the coherence of government action. Finally, the discussion will allow participants to evaluate the role of the Centre of government in the effort to strengthen coherence: is it the principal actor, an actor among many or a facilitator of coherence?

5. The Public Management Service (PUMA) proposes to develop an activity on strengthening the coherence of public policies in order to respond to the needs expressed by members of its working groups and networks (the Senior Budget Officials network and the Centres of Government network, most recently during its free discussion session last year in Naples). PUMA plans, in a first phase, to undertake case studies of initiatives aimed at enhancing policy coherence; to look at how to better align strategy, budget and management and to examine coherence in the co-ordination of regulatory reform between levels of government. In order to reinforce the relevance of this activity for decision-makers, PUMA would like to involve them as much as possible in the development of these activities. Members of the Centres of
Government network are among those who are the most directly confronted by questions of coherence. They have raised the issue of coherence on several occasions, especially in their discussion on the challenges of globalisation and internationalisation of internal policy and the multiplication of actors involved in public policy-making.

Hungary facing the challenges of modernization

6. The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister will make a presentation and lead a discussion covering two related issues:

(i) Hungary has recently undertaken several actions to address some of the issues of public management and governance that challenge many countries, including those peculiar to transition: anticipating the role and competencies of the Centre of government; establishing the Centre and giving it the resources and processes to allow it to meet its mission and adapting the Centre to broader societal trends (for example, taking into account changes in civil society, adapting and modernising the administration and improving the quality of public policy decisions).

The discussion will give participants the opportunity to respond by drawing parallels with their own experience and allow an exchange of perspectives on the organisation and the functions of Centres of government in OECD Member countries.

(ii) An example of the challenges confronting Hungary is the modernisation of the public administration and its use of new information and communication technologies (ICT). Hungary is aware of the challenges and potential of ICT and will give a presentation on how they are used in order to better communicate with civil society and private enterprises. This should again prompt a wide-ranging discussion of the impact of ICT on the processes of government and its external relations with parliaments, civil society and the public, both in the policy field and in the delivery of services.

In order to facilitate the participants’ preparations for this session, the Hungarian authorities are preparing a document which will be sent to them in due course. It will present the Hungarian institutions and their workings in order to contribute to a fruitful exchange of views and comparisons.

Free discussion session on issues of common interest

7. For the second consecutive year this session, on no pre-determined theme, will focus on questions relating to concrete situations which the majority of the participants have experienced. The discussion will take place in two parts:

(i) Relations between governments, legislatures and civil society. Mr. Luciano Violante, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Chairman of the Working Group on the Quality of Legislation of the Presidents of Parliaments of the countries of the European Union, will begin the discussion by addressing the relationship between governments and legislatures, including issues such as information provided to legislatures by the Executive and the evolution of the role of legislatures, in particular with regards to government oversight. He will also examine the relationship between legislatures and civil society. Participants will add their perspective with regards to governments’ relationship with legislatures and with the civil society. The discussion will permit a better understanding of how
governments are accountable to each of these two other policy actors and will look at the role of the Centre of government in helping them to achieve accountability.

The OECD (PUMA) contributes to the work of the *Working Group on the Quality of Legislation* which brings together the Presidents of Parliaments of countries of the European Union. A Secretariat document presenting the initial results of a questionnaire completed by the legislatures of OECD Member countries, in the framework of that collaboration, will be made available to participants in order to prepare the discussion.

(ii) The second half of the discussion will develop around the introductory presentation and address further issues raised by the participants. In order to facilitate this session, the Secretariat will contact the participants beforehand to make a list of issues of the greatest interest to them and will suggest how the issues might be grouped so as to facilitate a coherent presentation and discussion. This discussion will allow participants to identify the most burning issues faced by Centres of government, such as the interface with the private sector and the evolution of the role of the State.