Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government

Decision making in an environment of uncertainty and change

Tokyo, 26-27 October 2017

Agenda
Many countries appear to be locked in ‘low growth’ mode, very distinct from cyclical variations or crisis-driven shocks. If this scenario is the ‘new normal’, then it has huge implications for economic and social policy, highlighting controversial debates such as the future of work, robotics, inter-generational equality and integration of migrants, as well as hard political choices relating to the financing of pensions and welfare systems or regulation of the labour market. How governments respond will have an important influence on political and social stability in our countries, not to mention the achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goals.

At the same time, governments also need to persuade increasingly sceptical and vocal populations that they are making the right choices. This communications imperative has become more difficult in a space that is now crowded with a myriad of competing sources of information, not all of them reliable or verifiable.

The key features of the challenges we face are complexity and uncertainty. The response by government is both a political and an administrative task. As such, the centre of government will and should play an important role in developing the evidence and framing the choices at the political level and leading implementation by the public sector and its partners.

This meeting will explore, from different angles, the critical role and functions of the centre of government in today’s high-pressure policy environment, from thought-leader and creative thinker to pragmatic consensus-builder and communicator.

**WEDNESDAY 25 OCTOBER 2017**

**19:00** Welcome reception

**THURSDAY 26 OCTOBER 2017**

**9:15-9:25** Welcome
- Mr. Tomohiko Taniguchi, Chair
- Ms. Mari Kiviniemi, Deputy Secretary-General of the OECD

**9:25-9:45** Keynote address - reflections by Japan

Presentation on current Japanese policy on managing uncertainty and the role of the centre of government.
- Mr. Katsunobu Kato, Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan

**9:45-12:30** Session One: Creative thinking

This session will explore how centres of government identify and prepare information about threats and challenges to support decision-making and how that process can integrate innovative and creative solutions.

Following the global financial crisis almost ten years ago, and with the extra
impetus of a series of unexpected events over the past 18 months, many governments are reviewing the tools at their disposal to anticipate geopolitical, economic, social and environmental shocks. These tools are now recognised as being essential elements of a modern decision-making system and efforts are being made to take advantage of new technologies, new data and new approaches to anticipating and managing change. Given that reports on diverse aspects of human life, from climate to nuclear threats, digitalisation and the future of work, paint a picture of accelerating change and unpredictable direction of travel, there is a new premium on finding creative solutions, which poses a particular challenge for bureaucratic organisations. At the same time, this ‘creative process’ has to respect ever-shortening deadlines if it is to be timely enough to influence political decisions.

Questions for discussion:

- How can evidence on economic, social and environmental change and uncertainty be better integrated into policymaking?
- How can the centre promote creative solutions in a context of change and uncertainty? How can these ideas be packaged for decision-makers and how can they be disseminated across departments and agencies?
- How can the centre nurture new innovative approaches to dealing with change such as foresight, systems thinking, behavioural insights? What is the experience with Innovation Labs and similar incubator-type structures?

12:30-12:45  Group photo

12:45-14:15  Lunch

14:15-17:00  Session Two: Decision making

This session will explore the different approaches taken by centres of government in supporting the government’s decision-making process. Whether one agrees or not that uncertainty is more acute today than in the past, uncertainty cannot be eliminated and, as such, it needs to be understood and, as far as is possible, managed. The stakes for governments are high. The effectiveness of government policies, legislation, regulations and institutions will depend on how well they anticipate or react to change. But how to integrate uncertainty – the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns – into decision-making?

The OECD survey of the role and functions of the centre of government illustrates clearly the pivotal role played by the centre in promoting quality decision-making. If done well, the result is a central decision-making system that is able to access and use relevant evidence, including creative and innovative ideas, weigh different
views and opinions and arrive at ‘best available’ decisions in a timely manner. The issue is to what extent the level of uncertainty and risk that pervades today’s policy environment is such that the decision-making system of which the centre is a key part needs to adapt. However, adapting to uncertainty implies a state of constant alertness and agility that can be difficult to build into the DNA of a bureaucracy.

**Questions for discussion:**

- Is the structure of centres of government still adequate to support policy making in a context of rapid change and uncertainty? What have recent crises taught us about the strengths and weaknesses of the centre?
- Are the centre’s basic tools – Cabinet briefings, standing committees, cross-departmental co-ordination meetings, and so on – still the most effective ways to reach quality decisions and promote consensus?
- What new procedures or capacities might be needed? How can the centre pilot new ways of working in a context of well-established tradition and routine?

19:00-21:00  **OFFICIAL DINNER**

**FRIDAY 27 OCTOBER 2017**

9:30-12:30  **Session Three: Communicating**

The first two sessions deal with the process of gathering evidence and using it to make correct decisions. An equally important part of the role of the Centre of Government is in communicating decisions both across the government and to the public. This is a delicate task as in many cases it involves admitting to uncertainty, which is not always easy for government leaders who have been elected to be the guardians of citizen’s physical and economic well-being. An underlying assumption of the move towards open government is that governments should engage in a dialogue with citizens, rather than trying to conceal uncomfortable truths or to tell people only what they want to hear. This dialogue is becoming a genuinely two-way communication as new technologies allow citizens and their representatives to reach out directly to government.

Government communications today operates in an environment that is evolving incredibly rapidly. Two features of the current information and media landscape stand out: first, the speed at which information is circulated, through instant news media and social media, and, second, the risk and uncertainty produced by the circulation of potentially false information. Communication by government in an environment of uncertainty and change inevitably involves stepping into intense and often polarised public debates, for which the use of evidence and the process by which decision has been taken are crucial to the credibility of the government’s message. Nonetheless, the smartphone-based reading habits of most citizens mean that government has to go to its audience in new, more direct ways to get these messages across.
Questions for discussion:

- How should government communications address uncertainty and change? What are the trade-offs between openness and prudent management?

- How is the technological revolution in media and communications influencing how governments communicate? Are communications strategies from the center able to keep up with the pace of change?

- What new communications channels are proving most effective, and how do these link with more traditional activities of press offices such as regular press conferences, media briefings and press releases?

12:30-14:15 Lunch