



33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government

# VISION, LEADERSHIP, INNOVATION: Driving Public Policy Performance

Vienna, 8-10 October 2014

## Summary



BUNDESKANZLERAMT  ÖSTERREICH

The 2014 meeting of the Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government, hosted by Mr. Manfred Matzka, Director General of the Austrian Federal Chancellery, brought together representatives from 34 countries, the European Union and the World Bank to discuss **vision, leadership** and **innovation** at the Centre of Government. The discussion was supported by a new OECD report *Centre Stage: Driving Better Policies from the Centre of Government*, which is based on a survey of roles and practices in 35 countries.

## **Vision**

The success of a government rests on its ability to define a vision for the country that reflects an electoral mandate and that is typically designed to increase well-being, prosperity and international competitiveness. How this vision is developed and articulated varies across countries, and is changing with the times. Indeed, in opening the session, the Chair wondered whether there was still a place for vision, or if pragmatic concerns and the media had taken over. In the years following the economic crisis, concern with budgets dominated in most countries, crowding out any other vision. However, those days appear to be over, and governments are seeking to be more forward-looking and strategic. As shown in the *Centre Stage* report, nearly all countries have some sort of strategic vision document.

Participants noted that this vision has different, interlinked dimensions, including a long-term vision for the nation, usually going beyond growth objectives to embrace well-being and sustainability goals, and a vision for what the government of the day wants to achieve. Leading off the discussion, Canada suggested that there should also be a vision of the public service, how it supports the government and how it should evolve. Members also discussed how these different dimensions fit together. For example, if the political vision and public service vision are not aligned, it might be more difficult to build collective commitment or to implement the vision.

The government no longer has a monopoly on defining the vision. A vision can have different origins: it can be led by a dynamic head of government, as in the case described by Japan, but can also be citizen-driven. For instance, Germany described the Federal Government's broad consultation with citizens to define long-term societal objectives. The meeting highlighted several other examples of centre-led initiatives to gather the views of citizens on their main preoccupations and aspirations for the future. While such efforts could risk raising expectations that cannot be fulfilled, members also noted that, in practice, bottom-up visions can help validate and legitimise government policy.

Vision depends on two crucial factors that were mentioned repeatedly in the debate: trust and communication. If citizens don't trust the government, they won't trust its vision. Taking steps to strengthen trust in government more generally will help to ensure greater buy-in on more strategic goals. Communication and ownership are also important. If the vision has a strong narrative, connects to citizens' lives and is well communicated, then it can help generate support for difficult reforms. A particular problem faced by policymakers is that the reform process and its translation into real benefits for citizens is often too slow, undermining confidence and enthusiasm for longer-term visions. There can also be multiple visions – across coalition parties in government, national vs. European – that need to be integrated.

## **Leadership**

Leadership is crucial to drive policies that contribute to a strategic vision. In a complex and challenging policy environment, characterised by low levels of trust in government, leadership is an essential attribute of effective government. Delegates noted that the room for manoeuvre of governments has probably diminished at both the national level, because of budgetary pressure, and at the international level, because of globalisation. In lead-off remarks, Finland suggested that the notion of leadership as a

“hero on a white horse” was less relevant today than the ability to unify, deploy resources, promote cooperation, and identify emerging issues. In essence, as illustrated in the introduction by the United States, leadership at the Centre of Government means setting goals to give an impulse, and then getting departments to implement the necessary regulations and policies. The Centre guides in terms of substance and helps departments understand how to align policies with broader objectives. As the *Centre Stage* report noted, cross-ministerial policies are on the rise, and in most countries the Centre is responsible for policy co-ordination and can encourage ministries to work together. The Centre also has a role to play in leading by example, promoting efficiency and good policy management by departments. In both substantive and managerial terms, the Centre’s leadership is crucial to successful government.

The discussion also focused on the practicalities of leadership in modern democracies. For example, electoral cycles and the need for the Centre to manage sometimes frequent changes in government can disrupt both substantive and managerial coordination. In over half of the countries surveyed for the *Centre Stage* report, the head of the Centre is replaced after each election. Several examples were cited of new governments bringing new working methods, priorities and expectations for the executive as a whole and for the institutions at the Centre of Government. A key issue is to ensure that the civil service and the political staff do not become disconnected, working as separate entities at the Centre. Delegates presented interesting examples of training offered to new ministers, state secretaries, political advisors and senior civil servants to help them adapt to their new environment and work well with the civil service.

## **Innovation**

The discussion of innovation showed that the public service is certainly innovative, even if it is perhaps still risk averse. As pointed out by the United Kingdom in lead-off remarks, innovation is not just about more and more technology – “going digital” is not the same as having an innovative culture. However, technology can be used to change the way government works, both with citizens and internally, as was illustrated by Estonia’s description of “e-Estonia”. There were many impressive examples of extremely high levels of e-service take-up, but there have also been mistakes, and the era of “high-velocity data” makes the environment particularly complex and delicate. The more technology we have, the easier it is to push out information to citizens, but for Centres of Government with limited resources this poses challenges in terms of managing information flows. The discussion confirmed that many Centres of Government actively promote innovation in their public services, with an emphasis on encouraging a culture of innovation and providing a stable frame for policy innovation and creativity.

The Centre can provide an impetus – particularly when it partners with specialist agencies that can identify talented people, good ideas and “roll-out” techniques. Some countries have successfully used innovation focal points or dedicated units to drive public sector innovation; at the same time, being the innovation leader is expensive and time-consuming. In summing up the meeting, OECD Deputy Secretary-General Mari Kiviniemi stressed that, perhaps most importantly, the Centre needs new skills and working methods when it takes a lead role in innovation. Members mentioned several times that they increasingly depend on the young people, often social media and data management professionals, who make these innovative systems work in practice.

## **A new mandate for 2015-2019**

The meeting also discussed the new mandate of the Network, which emphasises its role in supporting high-quality decision making and policy implementation. This new mandate expresses the Network’s consensus that the Centre of Government now plays a more proactive role in better policies, and that this makes the Centre an even more vital component of good governance in OECD and non-OECD countries.



