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SCHARFF: This is Michael Scharff; the date is April 3, 2013. I am speaking with Gord Evans. We're at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. Mr. Evans, thank you so much for your time this morning.

EVANS: *Thank you Michael.*

SCHARFF: For our listeners would you be able to tell us briefly how you became involved in supporting and studying cabinet office effectiveness?

EVANS: *Sure. I guess it all begins when I worked in the government of Ontario in Canada. I worked in the cabinet office there for eight years. I had the obscure title of Deputy Clerk of the Executive Council, which basically meant that I was the person who sat in on the cabinet meetings and committee meetings and took the minutes. Also I was the person who was in charge of coordinating government planning and the overall policy management and the machinery of government stuff.*

Having done that for eight years I thought it would be time for a career switch and I thought it would be interesting to go out and work internationally with cabinet offices around the world and see how that would work. I found however when I first left that there wasn't a lot of work in this area. It was largely unknown this obscure thing called the center of government, and cabinet office which is so important to anyone that works in government somehow hadn't permeated the donor community.

Fortunately for my career, the World Bank was just coming to the same conclusion that things like prime ministers and cabinets and cabinet offices should be something that was looked at. So I was able to link with them and help them develop an approach to it. So that was in '98. Here we are fourteen, fifteen years later and I've been working in I guess 25 or 30 countries since then.

SCHARFF: So on the top of cabinet office effectiveness I wonder what are the most common reasons that a head of state would want to improve the effectiveness of their cabinet office?

EVANS: *It affects them personally. If it is not working, their lives become a living hell. To a prime minister time is a finite resource. If they're spending six and a half or in the case of Afghanistan twelve hours in a cabinet room having endless debates and meaningless presentations, it drives them crazy. So they want their time used well. They want to have it focused on decision-making. They like to know that the things they care about, someone in government is doing it. So they need all this machinery of government to work reasonably well for them, to help them govern.*

How can you get a prime minister interested in this seemingly obscure type of activity? The answer is it affects them very intensely on a personal level, so it's easy.

SCHARFF: Thanks for that. Just building off of that, I wonder in your view, what are the three or four main steps or changes that usually produce the biggest improvements in cabinet office performance?

EVANS: *Like anything the answer will be it depends. Not every prime minister is going to devote their personal time to this. It has to come from them. In a sense, let's start in the case where the prime minister really wants something to happen, really is having trouble with their agenda or something like that, you might attempt a more*

ambitious reform in that case because you know the prime minister is going to be behind it and ministers will pay attention and they will do something.

If however, the prime minister thinks basically things are okay and he is focused on other issues, maybe domestic issues or international issues, and he has a lot to do, in that case the more effective reforms are going to be more at the administrative level. Again that's the "it depends." In terms of ones that are really affected, again it depends on what is there in the country at the time. If it is a country like we've talked about earlier today, some fragile states or some states that are just coming to terms with being a new quasi-democratic government, in those cases where things are fairly chaotic then it is going to be the very rudimentary things that make the biggest changes.

A well-managed cabinet meeting, a manual that allows ministries to prepare policy papers or draft legislation in a consistent manner, good flowing of documents, good distribution of documents, all these sort of very rudimentary things.

SCHARFF: So those would be the administrative level changes you speak of.

EVANS: *That would be very, very important in those types of cases. In the case of a prime minister whose agenda isn't getting through it's going to be something very different. It is how government plans work, how it links to the budget process in particular, how donor money is channeled through into priorities. It is how ministers—do they actually do what the prime minister is hoping the minister would do or do they just go off and do their own thing. What are the collective accountability mechanisms? So it is a much more complex set of reforms that people do there. In those cases the things that have made the most difference are just simply making sure that the center of government that supports the prime minister fully understands and works closely with the ministries to make sure that these things are monitored and managed on an ongoing basis.*

SCHARFF: I want to ask you about the biggest implementation challenges you've seen across countries as they pertain to cabinet reforms. Maybe the way to approach that question is to actually break it down by the two subsets of reforms you've just spoken of in your previous answer. Taking the first of those, ambitious, higher-level, more challenging reforms and then talking about the administrative reforms. So for each of those what do you see as sort of the biggest challenges that come into play when attempting them?

EVANS: *There are a couple of levels. Let's start with the lower level ones, the administrative reforms. The biggest challenge there quite often is just simply there aren't enough people in or working with the cabinet office. There aren't say cabinet officers and liaison officers in ministries. So if you don't have the institutional infrastructure to do it, there is only so much you can do. I've seen cabinet offices as small as two people. Obviously that is going to affect the scope of what is feasible—you can still do things with two people but it is much more limited. The higher up reforms are the more complex ones where you run into more problems. You can become overly grandiose in your designs, especially in very poor countries where the donor community is very, very influential. They're talking them into doing whole of government reforms or big comprehensive public administrative reforms. It quickly becomes overwhelming—the absorption capacity across government becomes almost impossible. They get inundated with it.*

On the one hand, donors are telling them to set priorities; on the other hand, they're telling them to do three hundred things. So there is a bit of a contradiction there. The other problem that is often overlooked is you'll get a core of reformers at the center of government which works very well in terms of getting the reform designed and approved, but then it all falls apart at the implementation stage which is back to your question.

That's because either the capacity isn't there in the ministries or the knowledge isn't there or the ministries have not understood the reform— what is more common is that there is usually more capacity than people imagine, but the ministries themselves have never been brought along. They're barely aware that this reform is happening. They live in their own universe there. That in itself slows it down. Also some of these reforms, like anticorruption strategies or poverty-reduction strategies, they affect ten, fifteen ministries and the complexity of doing this kind of horizontal policy in new governments can be again overwhelming. So the design may just not fit with the ability of ministries to actually deliver.

SCHARFF: You mentioned that there are times ministries are just not aware of the ongoing reform, they're not brought along, to use your terminology. Are there any specific examples looking back on your work where this has been the case or in other words specific examples, strategies that you've seen to be able to get the word out there and make ministers and their staff aware of the change?

EVANS: *I don't know that I want to name a particular country, but again it gets down to prime ministerial enthusiasm or presidential enthusiasm. Often the reform, again it may be driven by the World Bank project or something like that. There would be a reform team and they'll work with themselves and they'll come up with all these things, new sort of approaches. But if they haven't had ministry representatives on the team, if the prime minister hasn't been sort of fronting this as something that he or she really wants to do, hasn't been telling the ministers that it is going to be part of their job that they're going to do it. If the ministries and the ministers don't sense that it actually is important to the prime minister they'll just tune it out. They're busy people. These projects come and go, especially in the developing countries where donors are all over the place. They come and go. They fade into the mists of time. They develop sort of a defense mechanism against being inundated with all these things from the center.*

So unless that reform can really make its case to the ministries, that it is something that is going to be there for a while and the prime minister really cares about what will happen to it. Again, to some degree, other things may be critiqued. They should have had a better communication strategy and all this kind of stuff but they usually always have a communication strategy. The reality is, the ministries just tune it out unless there is a true conveyance from the prime minister that they're going to do that and he is interested in it.

SCHARFF: As you know ISS has conducted several case studies about adoption of delivery units and delivery units will vary across countries. Some have a broader scope of responsibility than others for instance. I'd like to ask if you'd share your thoughts and your views about when delivery units are most likely to work and when they tend to fail or lose support.

EVANS: *Again, country context is important here. The famous delivery unit is Tony Blair's UK (United Kingdom) one although there have been things like it before and many things like it afterwards. But in the developed countries, you have to realize that the general monitoring of ministry performance within the center of government is more of a delegated function. Most times you don't have a unit in*

the center of government that monitors ministries. The Ministry of Finance does and there are performance contracts with deputy ministers and sometimes with ministers. There are accountability mechanisms, there is data openly available if anyone wants to check it. There are cabinet office people that stay in close touch with the ministries so you don't really have to have a monitoring unit there all the time.

In developing countries on the other hand there is almost always a desire to have, or they do have, a monitoring unit because there there is a feeling that unless ministries are reminded or that there is a follow up system, things just won't get done. There was this World Bank study that has been cited where they showed that in one African country 75% of the cabinet decisions hadn't been implemented. So there is a big difference there. If you create a delivery unit in a developed country it is because you are making a statement that for a finite period of time, not permanently, the government wants to focus on some priority of the President or the prime minister. Usually they are complex priorities that involve multiple ministries. That unit is there to symbolize that they really care about those things and that ministries should also care about those things. Then they work to make sure that happens.

Again, in developing countries that unit will already be there tracking all sorts of stuff so what it has to evolve into is in addition to this, it takes on a special priority tracking role. In the poorer countries where the donors are dominating the policy landscape because they're funding it, that unit will also get enmeshed in donor liaison and working with the donors to see how the money flows. In the more middle-income countries, like the Baltics for instance, it's different. There they can actually create delivery units that are similar to the developed country ones where they actually focus on priorities and things like that.

SCHARFF: How about if you're setting up a delivery unit in a parliamentary system versus a presidential system? Do the opportunities and the challenges vary between the two?

EVANS: *This gets into—it is a little different. Again within parliamentary systems you have to probably divide it into majority government parliamentary systems and coalition parliamentary systems. In a majority government system it is reasonably easy to do in the sense that that unit will be operating clearly under the prime minister. Every ministry will be attuned to making sure what the prime minister wants to do, that that happens. In the divided coalition system, where there is a strong coalition partner it might be a little different in the sense that each ministry may be under a different party. So the ones that aren't under the government parties may be more suspicious that that delivery unit is just simply representing their opponent. So they'll want some kind of validation from their own party that this is okay. It just makes it a little more complicated. Its not that it can't work but you have to recognize the additional steps and hoops that are involved.*

In a presidential system, a pure presidential system, I don't think it is any more difficult to set up and operate because the departments are under the President's authority but they'd have to have obviously a much stronger liaison function with the legislative branch because the legislature has much more influence than in a pure parliamentary system.

SCHARFF: I'm curious which strategies you've seen a head of state employ in selecting top priorities, particularly in a situation when he or she is governing by coalition and needs to satisfy the many different and what are sometimes competing interests.

EVANS: *Again, the whole issue of priorities is one of the most abstract discussions you can have in government because it can mean so many things. Just to give one example. When I was in one of the emerging European countries, , they had some document they had committed to that had 638 priorities in it. Then they had their European Union document which had 432 if I remember. So they had well over a thousand priorities. It becomes rather contradiction in terms.*

In terms of actually narrowing it down to something more focused they do it in a lot of ways. A lot of times it will come from their campaign platform. In very poor countries it will come as a result of negotiations with the donor community and the IMF, World Bank, because so much of the budget is provided from them. Again they're often expressed in different ways. In some cases the President or the Prime Minister may make an annual address. In some cases the President or the Prime Minister will let the budget do the talking so the budget priorities become the country's priorities.

In other cases they may work it through a cabinet process and coming out of that they may say these four or five areas are priorities. In another case—again I'm just going on, there are many, many ways to do it—they may simply try to influence the budget process by saying we would like to see money flow to defense or from defense to—they may do it by sector. They won't really get into specifics, they'll just say we're going to emphasize health and put more money into the health sector, or we need to put more money into defense or whatever.

Then of course the reality is that while they're governing, priorities come up all the time. It is not really analyzed very often but the crisis management aspect of center of government is quite often overlooked but that's how priorities are set. That's true in any country. Hurricane Katrina became a priority; it wasn't in the campaign platform obviously.

SCHARFF: It seems all the priorities—one approach that we often see is setting very broad sector, improve health, and coming up with three or four really broad and then articulating specific promises as time goes on. But it is both selling it to your, potentially to your coalition partners but just as if not more importantly selling it to the public as well. So the more simplistic terms you're able to use at least for the public's perception it is helpful. Then you can have your behind the scenes—.

EVANS: *That's sort of a technocrat's strategic planning system where you divide things into sixteen sectors and have four cross-cutting sectors or whatever. Each one of them will have two or three strategic goals and then it breaks down into objectives and then there are all sorts of activities and budget stuff that goes on to make it happen. But in a sense, that system, although it looks very organized is not a priority system. That is just a way to organize everything that is done in government.*

The priorities that actually become meaningful are where the prime minister or the President would say, "I want to do this." Something very concrete. I'm going to build either a highway from here to there or our emphasis is education and we're going to train 10,000 teachers and establish a new university, something concrete. When you set those broad priorities ministries are very adept at adapting everything they would do normally and just pretending it falls under these broad areas—like to modernize the civil service.

SCHARFF: In your experience, which strategies work best for enhancing the quality of policy papers particularly when the capacity at the ministerial level is quite low, another challenge that we see in a lot of places?

EVANS: *This is always a tricky thing. In so many developing countries they don't have a history of policy development. There are two types of systems I can think of in which this happens. One is simply where the government is very new and hasn't really developed its own machinery of government yet. It is something evolving, it just isn't there. The other, a lot of systems, particularly in Eastern Europe and some in Asia are just incredibly legally-based. They tend to put everything in a regulation—everything is done through laws. So you would have—in some eastern European countries you used to have 400-500 laws each year coming from the government, going through parliament.*

So if everything is a law, then policy becomes something meaningless. They don't even understand what it would be. You have to separate those two types of systems. In the ones where policy is just evolving, what you have to do is those very basic reforms described earlier, working with cabinet office or a cabinet secretary to develop something basic, like a policy manual. One thing I've seen done in some countries, you test it on the ministers themselves. They're your customers. In designing it, you're not doing that to please ministries or please yourselves, you're trying to produce a document that can be used by a cabinet to make decisions. So it is a really good idea to test, to find out what types of documents will appeal to the ministers and the Prime Minister.

SCHARFF: What does that test look like?

EVANS: *There are different ways to do it. You might pick a couple of ministries that you know are pretty good, have some good policy people and you develop a couple of policy papers with them. You work collegially. Then you float it up, you can take it to the cabinet or give it to the Prime Minister and say, "does this give you the kind of information you want?" You let them critique it. Then you have a feel for it. Then when they're sort of happy with it, then you might write a cabinet manual that would then tell ministries how policy papers will come forward in the future and yet that point you should be thinking about strongly engaging the ministries in some kind of internal training program to get them up to snuff. Again depending on the capacity in the ministries, you'll have to adapt it accordingly.*

Some governments create policy units or policy monitoring units in each ministry. Others sort of just phase it in. Where you start with the important ministries, have them do policy papers. But the whole point is just to routinize the flow of these decision-making documents, because that's all they are, from the ministries to the government.

Again when there are a lot of donors running around in countries, which of course is often the case, you would appeal to the donor community to ask them. Instead of sending 75-page glossy strategies to cabinet for them to approve where the ministers don't even have a clue what they're approving, that they work with the ministries to produce policy documents along the same lines as the government requirements and those go up. With all that money behind it, often they could be quite good and they serve as examples too.

So you share it around. It's just a culture that develops over time. Hopefully it survives the transition of government and then everyone, all the ministers are just used to it.

SCHARFF: It seems what is really important, or one of the aspects that is really important in this policy paper process is that the ministers are able to sort of digest and

understand and grasp the issues before they come to the actual cabinet meeting which itself could be almost a pro forma discussion/vote on the issue but there needs to be a preparatory phase prior to that and it differs by country but enhancing the quality of these papers.

EVANS: *It's not just the papers. The other thing is the actual architecture of the decision-making structures. You can't—I'll start with that one. You can't just have a cabinet. Well you can but in principle things just shouldn't flow from ministry to cabinet. What most governments do, because otherwise they will be meeting for twelve hours. What most governments do is set up some kinds of sub-committees where say for instance there will be a social policy committee, an economic policy committee, maybe security and governance. Something along those lines, where the ministers can first debate amongst themselves, because most policies of one ministry will affect other ministries. So you put together the ministries that are most likely to affect each other. Those papers initially go to those committees. They digest them and the cabinet office people help with this. They're very important in many systems.*

Basically you, we use the term pre-cooked. There has to be agreement. By the time it goes to cabinet, all the ministers are agreed on it. Because cabinet office has been involved they'll alert the Prime Minister if they see any problems. Sometimes cabinet office will set up some kind of dispute resolution mechanism. The whole point is to try and get agreement before it gets to the cabinet table and has to take up the Prime Minister's time.

For things that the Prime Minister really cares about, the Prime Minister may sit on his or her own cabinet committee for priorities or something like that and those things might flow through that. That is one where the Prime Minister in a sense wants to spend his or her time. These committees are set up in a way that it is a forum, where you can debate policy. You can read through the options and discuss it at more length. Cabinet is much more perfunctory if it is going to work well, we approve this or we don't or we're sending it back.

SCHARFF: Right, right, exactly. On the topic of ministerial performance contracts a number of countries have gone ahead and adopted them. Could you say a few words about how these contracts work and how well they work in your experience?

EVANS: *Again it varies. In Canada years ago there was something called—one of the prime ministers just personally wrote a one-page letter. It was called letter to the minister. In that case it was his expectations of each minister. They would meet once a year to discuss it. These were not public; it was considered confidential. That was the mechanism. In most systems you can see whether the minister is performing or not because the prime minister will replace them, it is pretty clear, or shuffle them to a less important post, promote them to a more important post, that kind of thing. It is not a public process.*

In some countries though, especially in some developing countries, they've gotten, not quite carried away but enthused about having ministerial contracts. Often these are public. I remember in one country I was working in in Eastern Europe the prime minister would hold a press conference once a year and go through each of his ministers and say: this one did well on this, this one didn't do well. It kind of worked in a sense since the prime minister was sitting there and getting all sorts of coverage, the ministers who didn't do well had obvious incentives to do better in the following year.

SCHARFF: What about the context of this particular country led the prime minister to decide I have to make this more of a public spectacle versus quiet one-on-one conversations with the ministers. I'm wondering what the rationale, what the strategic decision-making is.

EVANS: *It probably was cultural. It was a former communist country. Again going from a totally closed political system, they in a sense went much further than the developed countries in being open. Those countries now, if you look at Latvia for instance, they post policy papers on line before they're even reviewed by the government. We would never do that in a developed country. So they in a sense have become hyper-open countries on these types of issues at least. So it was part of that new sense of openness. The prime minister thought this would be great. He was happy to. Again it was coalition government. Sometimes politics comes into this. I didn't check to see if all the poor performing ministers were from other parties or not but that was part of it. It was just part of the so-called commitment to openness. They're trying to get into the European Union so they thought this would play well with the EU colleagues.*

SCHARFF: Are there places where these performance contracts simply don't work?

EVANS: *Yes. but it's generally not that the performance contracts don't work, it is that the system itself is not performing. There are infinite reasons for that happening. For one thing some of the most common ones are that the commitments themselves have not been—okay, if I had to pick one—the commitments themselves have not been properly linked to the budget. So the funds just simply aren't there to deliver the promise. They do policy papers but they're not fully aware of how much it is going to cost to implement them.*

A second reason is just simply, the most common reason is, underestimating how much time it takes to do things. Everyone loves to—like the World Bank will set their three-year matrix and they'll say by year three all these reforms will be in place. That's just because their loan term is three years. In reality it is going to take ten years to do it. People forget that you have to draft a law and then it has to go through parliament and then you have to do regulations and then you have to set up delivery units in the ministries, and blah, blah. It can take five, ten years to deliver something.

Those are two of the reasons that explain why so often it doesn't work. When it does work it is because the countries have understood the sort of choreography between money and policy.

SCHARFF: Alternation of parties in power means that one head of government or head of state must hand off to "know how" to another. I'm curious what are the most common problems that you see that would impede a successful transition and whether there are some remedies that can help?

EVANS: *Sure. The biggest problem is, especially in developing countries, is highly politicized systems. By that I mean, —the United States, I think in the developed world, is the main example where 10,000 civil servants will suddenly be out of a job when the new government comes in. That's all fine because you have all these think tanks that 10,000 can flow back into and all is well. But they don't have that in developing countries. So if you basically fire all your top management down to your director level for instance, it is going to take time—there is the hiring process, you're going to have people who aren't fit for the jobs, they have no experience. It is going to take them two years to figure out their new jobs even if they're bright people. So that is one big issue.*

The second big issue is there is not a mechanism to really transmit information to the new government. For instance in a developed country like in Canada the cabinet office—three months before an election will start organizing briefing manuals for a new government, budget briefings, little very simplistic things like minister guides on how to find their office, procedure manuals. On their first cabinet meeting they understand how it will work. Even if the same government wins, it is not as important but there are all sorts of new ministers. So there is a whole machinery that goes into planning the transition. So you don't have this experience in many developing countries.

You just suddenly have this new government that turns up in their offices. They don't know what is happening. There is no one there to brief them. It is sort of chaos for a while and it takes a while. In Ghana for instance, and in Africa there have been a lot of transitions of government, they have started introducing these sorts of measures. So the transition from one government to another has been much smoother than in other African countries.

SCHARFF: Who has been responsible in the Ghana example for introducing those?

EVANS: *It was through a Canadian project that it was done but the people who were responsible were people in the President's office and the Cabinet Office. That's almost always who coordinates this. They simply thought it would be a good practice to do so they did it. I believe the government that came in afterwards probably has done the same thing because there have been elections since then.*

SCHARFF: Interesting. As we work our way to a conclusion, I wonder in the time that you've worked in this field, what are the main ways that the collective wisdom or thinking about this subject has changed, the subject being center of government reforms.

EVANS: *We will need to separate center of government reforms from the center of government, I mean, the center of government is an institution. It is remarkably stable from decade to decade. Forty years ago, a bunch of people, anywhere between twelve and thirty, depending on the country gather in a room, they meet every week. Papers flow up to them. They make decisions. They have a few political advisors, a small to medium-sized administrative office to support them. None of that has changed all that much in over forty years.*

When I look at by comparison what happened in the public finance field with all the changes in accounting approaches and all this kind of thing, it hasn't undergone the same degree of change as other areas of government. So what has changed in the center of government in recent years? There has been obviously a lot of computerization that is helping, although that's not really changing things so much as it is just simply helping. You now have e-cabinets where the ministers come in and a laptop pops up and papers are there. So it is more efficiency measures than actually changing the way in which the center of government works.

In terms of the reforms themselves, in terms of developing countries, it is a relatively new field in the sense that the first ones that I was aware of with big projects were in the mid to late '90s. It hasn't been going on so long that this field has changed much. Also as a field it still doesn't have that niche that say civil service reform or public finance reform has. Although center of government reforms are in between 25 and 50 developing countries, it is not like a natural field the way the other ones are. So it happens but it is somewhat under-the-radar.

In fact your Princeton case studies are probably—along with the Sigma Collection which was in the late '90s, early 2000's, the only two bodies of literature that have documented center of government reforms.

SCHARFF: Interesting. Finally in conclusion just to go back to the discussion of cabinet reforms, one challenge for a head of state and the reform team that goes about implementing these reforms is the question of how do we sustain this once were gone; once my, as head of state, my administration is no longer in power. Are there ways to think about the question of how do you ensure that when you undertake the reform you put in place certain elements that are sustainable? Whether that is simply designing certain systems that are likely to carry on, whether that is changing the expectations, perhaps at the ministry level so that people demand that these reforms continue? Could you talk to that?

EVANS: *That's basically it. You institutionalize it, to some degree. Some prime ministers and some presidents may not care that these things are sustained once they're in power because they would like to remain in power. But that aside many of them do take the bigger picture and again, there is the question of how do you institutionalize things. Well in some countries, the ones that are very legalistic, you'll want to pass a law because laws are everything. In other countries that are less legalistic you might just get by with a cabinet manual.*

The whole point of it is that you have a core group of people in a cabinet office and in ministries and it is just the way you do things. You become routinized with it and that becomes the process. It is not a reform, it is just simply the way things are done. So a new government comes in, they're going to ask you how do you do things. You say, well this is the way we do things. So unless they have a different idea, they're not going to throw it out.

I mean we're not talking about partisan positions and policy issues, we're talking about the way information is structured to flow to a decision maker. In each government they'll change the committee structure or they'll do this or that. There are always changes they'll make, or they'll set up some special office in the center for some priority, like a delivery unit or something. The overall process, if you've managed to routinize it during your reform period will more or less just carry on.

Now having said that, every single government, including developed and developing governments get lazy. It becomes over bureaucratized, it becomes disconnected from decision making. Finance goes off in its own direction and it kind of starts falling apart. Then whenever that happens it is going to be someone's job, some new prime minister or president will come in and be fed up with it and say I want to fix it. So you do it again. So it is just a cycle, it's not really a linear process that gets formalized forever.

You have to get past that. You have to have that critical mass of people in permanent civil service positions that just see it as the system and will present that to anyone coming in.

SCHARFF: Thanks so much for your time. This has been really insightful, I appreciate it.

EVANS: *My pleasure.*