Over the past three years, the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD) has designed, developed and implemented high level retreats for new cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries in the Caribbean Region. This has been as a direct result of six new governments being elected within this three-year period. What was significant was that the outgoing governments had been in office for a minimum of seven years and a maximum of fourteen. This meant that new governments were in fact ‘new’ after being in opposition for a lengthy period of time and had to take office with a new team of Ministers who were also taking office for the first time.

Model for high level retreats

The Commonwealth Secretariat has been known and recognised as a trusted partner and for responding quickly to member countries’ needs. Therefore, it was no coincidence that the Secretariat was approached for this type of confidential assistance by the new governments. GIDD therefore used its in-house expertise to design and develop a flexible model for these high level retreats. After the necessary consultations, a model consisting of the following five core elements were put forward:

1. The interface between cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries
2. The role of the cabinet minister and permanent secretary
3. The roles of the cabinet and the cabinet secretary
4. Leadership and accountability
5. Policy development and management.

Embedded in the model’s design was sufficient time for in-depth and frank discussions. The design was so flexible that it left scope for other elements to be incorporated based on country specific needs. Among the optional topics discussed at the various retreats were:

- Public-private partnerships
- Performance management
- Citizen-centred service
- Turning policy into law – the Bill Process.

The implementation of the design consisted of two days for cabinet ministers, two days for permanent secretaries and a fifth day for the combined group of cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries. The opening of the retreat took place on the eve before the commencement of the retreat, and the following day the retreat began as early as 08.00. In doing so we were able to cut out the opening and welcoming ceremonies and get going on the business of the retreat. The model evolved and developed after lessons were learned from the three high level retreats that took place in three different countries within a year. What we found was that the opening and welcoming ceremonies lasted several hours.
and ate into the retreat's time. Hence we modified our model accordingly, and will continue to update it to enhance its relevancy. So far, we have used this new model in three countries with remarkable success.

Issues raised

The issues discussed at these retreats were usually those faced by the governments of the Caribbean Region. Governments have to operate in a changing environment where there is a global climate for greater openness, transparency, accountability and citizen-centred service. They also have to do more with less, and face the attendant problems of increasing crime levels and unemployment in the region. Governments are also being called upon to operate with greater flexibility and responsiveness in policy implementation in order to adapt to the rapidly changing national, regional and global demands.

Dominating the discussions were usually the roles and responsibilities of the new minister and the interface with the permanent secretary. In all this, trust was a major issue and emphasis was put on the principles governing the behaviours of ministers and public servants. Public servants should not act contrary to the Public Servants Code of Conduct and should avoid conflicts of interest. A point of departure was to remind ministers and public servants that there can be judicial reviews and that decisions are subject to review by the courts, so poor decision-making can be embarrassing to the government. Particular attention was also given to the types of comment made in public or documented in papers sent to the cabinet – there had been recent cases of litigation involving governments in the Region, and ministers and public servants were requested to take heed.

A great deal of time was also spent on the Cabinet Office and its central role in government. This office should play a role in portfolio co-ordination, since there is scope for overlap and duplication. Another important role of the Cabinet Office is managing transitions in government, either within the same political party or with a new political party.

GIDD’s capacity-building tool for new Cabinet Secretaries

GIDD has developed a capacity-building tool for the new cabinet secretary and at its launching at the recent Commonwealth Caribbean Cabinet Secretaries and Heads of Public Service Annual Consultative Meeting held in Belize City in June 2010, a cabinet secretary lamented that he wished he had had such a tool when he took up his post some years ago in Dominica.

One capacity-building tool is the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Handbook for Cabinet Secretaries, which provides a reference point for the new cabinet secretary. It gives a background to the cabinet office and highlights the roles and functions of the cabinet secretary. It deals with such issues as the challenges of managing relationships between ministers and permanent secretaries, and how to build trust in order to deliver results.

GIDD has also developed a strong team of former cabinet secretaries, ministers and in-house staff to act as facilitators for these high level retreats, and continues to work with new governments who wish to strengthen their Cabinet Offices, in addition to building professional capacity in other areas.

Issues discussed during high level retreats

The following issues helped bring clarification and satisfaction to both ministers and permanent secretaries

- The disadvantages of having an over-bloated public service and in some cases a parallel public service, where people are hired on contract and are not in the mainstream of the public service. There are various reasons attributed to this, including the challenges new ministers face in pushing forward the plan of the new government.

- The roles and functions of the minister, the adviser to the minister and the permanent secretary.

- Ministerial responsibilities, which include the collective responsibility versus individual responsibility.

- Relationship with other ministers and the public service generally; and the relationship with the constituency and party activities.

- Issues surrounding the roles and functions of the Cabinet Office. (What was presented was the choice between the minimalist and maximalist structures, and states should choose the structure that best suits their needs.)

- The role of the cabinet secretary and the effective use of cabinet committees.

- The absence of workable performance-management systems for all public servants, including permanent secretaries.

- The strengthening of policy development and the absence of implementation and monitoring systems.

- Constitutional reform. This is a relatively big issue, as most countries cannot make progress on their public service reform agenda. This is apparent when exercising the roles and functions of the Public Service Commission.

- Striking a balance between immediate political interests and the long-term development plan for the country.

- The formalisation of the role and functions of the Permanent Secretaries’ Board.

- The assumption that there is neutrality in the public service in small states and the practice of rewarding loyalty over competency.

- Leadership and integrity.