

THE ESSENTIAL

CIVIL  
SERVANT



EDITED BY SIMON PETHERICK

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# Preface

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Civil servants are like the weather and the government of the day – everyone has an opinion about them. The opinion is often uncomplimentary, which is a fact of life that most civil servants come to accept with time; just as they realize that they will never feature as the heroes in romantic novels or as the stars on prime-time TV chat shows.

In fact, as the great Sir Edward Bridges made clear, civil servants are quite capable of dealing with public perceptions of their role; it could be said that this *sang-froid* is the characteristic that best defines them.

But there are limits. Not many civil servants would agree with Erasmus on the three qualifications of a good civil servant: ‘that he should be faithful, ugly and fierce’. At least, they probably wouldn’t agree on all three.

Instead, most would agree with the principle laid down in the Old Testament, that ‘there is safety where there are many counsellors’ (Proverbs). Safety for whom, the cynic might ask?

As the selections in this volume show, there is a general consensus around the world about the civil servant. Holding public office, no matter how lowly,

will always bring with it a measure of public ribbing. But beneath the wit, there is usually the tacit recognition of the value of the civil servant, whether he be a postman or an ambassador. Somehow, life in any country seems less manageable without civil servants.

But then, they would say that, wouldn't they?

Simon Petherick