Human Services includes 11 operating divisions—called administrations, agencies, centres, and services—within its skin (Box 17.4). The autonomy of bureaus within American departments derives from their direct funding by Congress. It is a major and underestimated reason why American presidents experience such difficulty in imposing their will on Washington’s administrative process.

Even in governments with more hierarchical departments, it would be naïve to suppose that working practices correspond exactly to organization charts. Rarely does information move smoothly up and down the administrative pyramid. For instance, the many divisions in Germany’s 14 federal ministries possess a concentration of expertise that enables them to block, or at least circumvent, reforms proposed from on high. A monopoly of knowledge creates the potential to neutralize change. In most liberal democracies, divisions within departments also possess their own ethos derived from long experience with their subject area. This entrenched in-house view breeds a natural cynicism towards the latest political initiative, and helps to account for the frustration many ministers feel in steering their department in new directions.

**Non-departmental public bodies**

So far, we have considered government ministries and the divisions typically nested within them. But there is another type of public organization that is growing in importance: the non-departmental public body. The essential feature of these entities is that they operate at one remove from government departments, with a formal relationship of at least semi-independence. Such bodies occupy an ambivalent position, created and funded by the government; however, in contrast to divisions within a department, they are free from day-to-day ministerial control. Once appointed by the government, the members of such boards are expected to operate with considerable autonomy.

Throughout the democratic world, these non-departmental bodies are expanding in number, complicating not only the academic task of mapping government, but also the practical job of ensuring that the government as a whole acts coherently. Modern governance cannot be understood without delving deeper into the ecology of these non-departmental organizations.