Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics

This book argues that the Canadian centre of government has evolved a great deal during the past 20 years. It presents a study of how the central agencies have changed between the 1970s and 2000. Donald Savoie adopts the position that prime ministerial power has been enhanced in recent years. However, a similar position was adopted by Thomas Hockin years ago. This suggests that issues in public sector management are also the subject of continuous debate. The case for the power of the prime minister is presented in Chapter 2, “The Centre Is Born” (pp. 20-45); Chapter 3, “Render Unto the Centre” (pp. 46-67); and in Chapter 4 (pp. 71-108). These chapters are further supported by a separate focus on the Privy Council Office (pp. 109-55); Finance (pp. 156-92); and the Treasury Board and the Public Service Commission (pp. 193-238).

The background to the changes in the past 30 years can be related to the leadership of Pierre Elliott Trudeau in 1968-79 and later between 1979 and 1984. The study examines the roles of the core central agencies: the Prime Minister’s Office, the Privy Council Office, the Treasury Board Secretariat, and the Department of Finance. The enhanced position of the Privy Council Office and the Department of Finance are significantly emphasized.

With respect to the power of the prime minister, Savoie concludes:

The prime minister is the key player in selecting which people will be empowered. The Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to Cabinet, key staff members in the Prime Minister’s Office, the Minister and Deputy Minister of Finance, two or three ministers, and some deputy ministers are extremely powerful in Ottawa circles because the Prime Minister prefers it that way (p. 359).

The author effectively employs the technique of interviews and shows the effects of one who has had access to the system. He emphasizes the importance of interviews in the study of Canadian public sector management relative to other countries (pp. 364-65). Various studies of the central agencies have demonstrated this pattern in Canada. Savoie discusses the most recent changes, especially during the 1990s.

Part II of the book deals with the role of the prime minister and the central agencies. The study points to the inequality of ministers within the Cabinet. Furthermore, the study points to the dominant role of the prime minister in the system. The prime minister has a distinctive role in the appointment of ministers, the Clerk of the Privy Council, and deputy ministers. The prime minister and, to a lesser extent, the minister of finance and the president of the Treasury Board Secretariat dominate the system (pp. 71-238).

In his chapter on departments, Savoie indicates:

In earlier chapters we have seen that whenever the prime minister wishes to focus on an issue, he or she will get their way. In addition, it is clear that he and his Minister of Finance have a free hand to establish their own priority projects. The Prime Minister’s priorities will always see the light of day pretty well as they were first envisaged. As for the rest, the centre of government monitors, decides and lays the groundwork for a consensus to emerge to resolve outstanding issues or to decide on a course of action (p. 317).

Thus, a major departure from previous examinations of the central agencies is the assertion made “Primus: There Is No Longer Any Inter or Pares” (pp. 71-108). Chapter 4 suggests “that prime ministers leading a majority government can drive virtually whatever initiative or measure they might favour. Cabinet and Parliament are there, but with a majority of seats, a prime minister can manipulate
them when it comes to issues that matter a great deal
to him” (p. 106). Having established this conclu-
sion, the author discusses the individual roles of the
following organizations: the Privy Council Office;
the Department of Finance, and the Treasury Board
and the Public Service Commission (pp. 109-238).
Accordingly, the author presents a contemporary
study of central agencies. Some of these issues were
addressed in the Politics of Public Spending by the
same author.

The interrelationships between the central agen-
cies have been most intricate and complex and they
have been addressed by several research studies
ranging from the Glassco Commission in the early
1960s to the PS2000 Task Force in the late 1980s
and early 1990s. At the time of writing, these rela-
tionships are still being modified; especially the re-
lationships between the Treasury Board Secretariat,
the Public Service Commission, and line depart-
ments (pp. 193-238). From this perspective, the
study provides useful information for a meaningful
discussion of the complex relationships which can
take place between these public sector organizations.
It makes a major contribution to our knowledge of
the system.

The discussion of the above is subsequently jux-
taposed against the role of ministers and departments
in public sector management. In this regard, this
study can be meaningfully assisted by more detailed
case studies of departments (see pp. 274-310). At
this point, the author grapples with an old debate
concerning the actual relationship between central
agencies and line departments in public manage-
ment. There are different views in the public ser-
vice with respect to the relative power of the cen-
tral agencies in relation to line departments. The
controversy continues in 2000 and beyond. Savoie
concludes that the power has shifted to the prime
министр and to the minister of finance and the presi-
dent of the Treasury Board. However, experienced
officials in Canada and abroad have cautioned
against generalizations. One can recall the debates
that took place during the Trudeau years with re-
spect to the relationship between the Prime Minis-
ter’s Office, the Privy Council Office, and the De-
partment of Finance. Pursuant to the report of the
Lambert Commission, the Department of Finance
has performed a dominant role in public management.

The review of departments is captured between
Chapters 9 and 11, where the analysis indicates that
there are competing views concerning the relative
roles and power of central agencies versus line de-
partments. These chapters make very interesting
reading about the politics of public bureaucracy. In
Chapter 9, an interesting analysis of staff-line rela-
tionships is presented (pp. 276-83). There is histori-
cal evidence to support the periodic emergence of
strong ministers and departments (pp. 274-310). For
example, the 1993 reorganization established some
super ministries such as Human Resources Devel-
opment Canada, which perform major coordinating
roles in public sector management.

There is also the issue of horizontal roles in
government which continues to be a problem. This
debate has taken place with respect to fiscal policy
and human resources management (p. 61). The de-
bate over the relationship between the Treasury
Board Secretariat and the Public Service Commis-
sion provides an example of the latter challenge
(pp. 193-238). There is also the issue of the need to
improve policy capacity within the public sector.
This has been addressed in the annual report of the
Clerk of the Privy Council.

**Governing from the Centre: The Concentration
of Power in Canadian Politics** is an important study
which captures several of the most recent develop-
ments in public sector management in Canada. The
book should be required reading for both teachers
of public administration and for practitioners in the
public sector. It is a natural sequel to another by the
same author entitled *Taking Stock*, which catalogued
several recent changes in public sector management.
This book, *Governing from the Centre*, is one of a
series of studies that deal with problems of contemporary public sector management reforms. The analysis presents information which points to the complexities inherent in contemporary public sector management. The concentration of power cited raises questions concerning the recent assertion that responsive government means putting the needs of citizens first. It also deals with the perennial issue of centralization versus decentralization in the public sector management. This study describes the role of central agencies under the contemporary approach to public administration labeled, “New Public Management.”

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