

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

by Donald Savoie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

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 conclusion, 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 agencies 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 relationships are still being modified; especially the relationships between the Treasury Board Secretariat, the Public Service Commission, and line departments (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 juxtaposed 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 management. There are different views in the public service with respect to the relative power of the central agencies in relation to line departments. The controversy continues in 2000 and beyond. Savoie concludes that the power has shifted to the prime minister and to the minister of finance and the president 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 respect to the relationship between the Prime Minister’s Office, the Privy Council Office, and the Department 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 departments. These chapters make very interesting reading about the politics of public bureaucracy. In Chapter 9, an interesting analysis of staff-line relationships is presented (pp. 276-83). There is historical 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 Development 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 debate over the relationship between the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Public Service Commission 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 developments 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 cen-

tralization 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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