**Graham White, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, 2004, Canadian Democratic Audit**

**Approach**

Neo-Institutionalism

**Thesis**

“Although the more strident alarms about the threat to Canadian democracy represented by this concentration of power [in the PM] can be discounted, measures to curtail the power of first ministers would clearly enhance the quality of democracy in this country.”

**Contribution**

Critiques the “Governing from the Centre” thesis of Savoie by showing that while the PM can occasionally rule autocratically, such is not the norm and they remain constrained by cabinet.

**Key Arguments**

*Nature of executives*

* White looks at the “core executive” – all organizations that coordinate central government policies and decide on conflicts between different elements of government. Includes cabinet, central agencies, DMs, and political staff in line departments.
* Cabinet never intended to be democratic – emerged from King’s advisors.
* Now build on the system or representative democracy and should respond to the will of the people
* Must make decisions without endless consultations – having power not necessarily undemocratic.
* By international standards Canadian executives are unusually powerful.

*Evaluating democracy in executive*

* Given the huge power of executives, even small changes enhance democracy.
* Changes to democratize decision making do not need to impact on responsible government.
* Public participation in cabinet decisions is generally limited to the participation of their elected representatives – i.e. cabinet members themselves and government MPs through caucus.
* Responsiveness of the core executive depends on the extent of the influence by caucus and other MPs, as well how issues are raised for consideration, how decisions are made, and the impact of bureaucrats and political on filtering demands through the system.
* Inclusiveness of cabinet seen in extent to which it reflects the demographics and regions of Canada – the “representational imperative” – and whether these considerations affect decisions.

*Responsible government (RG)*

* Has four main principles:
  1. Monopoly on executive power - Only the executive, not Parliament, can control the bureaucracy, raise taxes or propose spending. Inherently limits democracy. However, convention ministers must be MPs adds to democracy since they must face election and answer questions from MPs
  2. Cabinet’s responsibility to the House - Confidence votes demonstrate the separation between the executive and legislative branches. In reality the legislature (except Nunavut and NWT) is dominated by cabinet through party discipline
  3. Cabinet solidarity - Cabinet solidarity enhances democracy by providing clear accountability for decisions; it undermines democracy by preventing the public airing of different views.
  4. Ministerial responsibility - provides clear accountability. However, it can hurt democracy by 1) preventing the bureaucrat responsible for a mistake from being publicly held to account; 2) only holding the current Minister to account for a predecessor’s mistake.

*Makeup of Cabinet*

* Ministers often chosen because of the “representational imperative” not on merit – this hurts democracy since cabinet is bigger and less competent than necessary, strengthening the PM
* Provincial ministerial careers are also short – average 3.9 years, with only 24 months in a given portfolio. Quick rotation makes them weaker than the PM.
* Democracy hurt by Ministers lack of previous legislative experience - between ¼ to 1/3 of provincial ministers had never been elected before appointment and 75% had never been in opposition.
* As of 2003 only 23% of cabinet ministers were women. No comparable data for ethnic background.
* Internationally Canadian cabinets are unusually large (15-25 ministers)

*Cabinet structure and support*

* “Canadian cabinets tend to be powerful, secretive, bureaucratic bodies dominated by the first minister and composed of elected but often inexperienced legislators from the governing party, chosen in part for socio-demographic and regional diversity”
* Cabinets have no basis in formal law, allowing them to be structured and operate in almost any way.
* Canada has a single-tier cabinet, with most ministers being included in cabinet meetings.
* Cabinet meetings are highly structured, with precise rules for debate and the submission of documents
* Decision making practices vary widely (e.g. Committees may either make decisions or only advise, policy and financial decisions may be made together or separately).
* Prime Minister decides what “consensus” has been reached by cabinet.
* Cabinet gets support from three groups – DMs, central agencies and personal political staff.
* DMs have managerial skills rather than policy expertise and are shuffled regularly. They are appointed by the First Minister, but Ministers rely on them extensively
* Central Agencies theoretically support all of cabinet but primarily focus on the First Minister
* Cabinets are highly secretive – documents are exempt from most freedom of information requests.

*Concentration of power*

* Smith (1977) argued that Trudeau adopted Presidential practices without the checks and balances
* Savoie (1999) continued, describing shift of power from cabinet to PM.
* Some even argue Savoie underestimates the concentration of power by focusing primarily on policy, with government communications and spin being highly centralized.
* However, Savoie does not look at the broader context – what he describes could be a symptom of one party dominance
* Bakvis (2001) notes that PMs have long been powerful, but contends that trend seen by Savoie could be sign Chretien delegated more powers to Ministers, with less needing to be discussed at cabinet.
* Others point out the PMO has limited capacity to manage more than a few issues.
* Much of the central agencies’ time is consumed just with coordination and can be in conflict with each other undermining their support. Finance Ministers can also be powerful in their own right.
* Caucus showed that it could remove Chretien.
* Outside checks have also increased through aggressive media and interest groups.
* However, Premiers are able to centralize power in their own offices – e.g. Ernie Eves even set up a parallel finance ministry within the premiers office
* Selection of leader by vote of party members protects PM from cabinet pressure – therefore democratizing leadership elections has “compromised the overall quality of Canadian democracy”
* Election has also made it easier for the PM to fire Ministers – many more than in UK or Australia
* PM also gains power over MPs through need for party leader to sign nomination forms.
* Canadian PMs serve longer and are less likely to be ousted by their party than in UK or Australia.

*White’s conclusion*

* Hard to evaluate autocracy of the PM since cabinet decisions are closed. Some sources say Trudeau, Mulroney and Chretien were not as dictatorial as has been claimed. Same for several Premiers.
* White points to the PM’s greater ability to persuade instead of rule arbitrary – e.g. PMs’ lack of portfolio responsibilities allows them to prepare more for cabinet, increasing their influence. Also able to manipulate the agenda.
* White concludes that PMs can be autocratic sometimes, but these are exceptions rather than the rule.
* “Identifying the occasional episode in which a first minister acts in an imperious manner is by no means confirmation that he or she is consistently and fundamentally autocratic.”
* However, he agrees with Savoie that PM wields a great deal of power and reforms are needed.

*Provincial comparisons*

* Provincial executives smaller and less institutionalized, with fewer resources from central agencies
* Smaller issues and number of people involved mean that Premiers even more powerful than PM
* Premiers may even take on their own portfolio responsibilities.
* Federal cabinet is no longer seen as an executive or decision-making body, but provincial cabinets may still be. Provincial cabinets also dominate their legislatures more completely.

*NWT and Nunavut*

* Employ “consensus government” with Premier and Ministers elected by a secret ballot of MLAs,
* It is like a permanent minority government, with private members having significant impact.
* While premier assigns portfolios, has much less power than in the South.
* However, even here MLAs outside of cabinet complain ministers are unresponsive.

*Suggestions for reform*

* Strengthen Parliament and Legislatures as recommended by Docherty (2004)
* Fixed election dates
* Involve private members more in cabinet processes (e.g. caucus committees)
* Restrict appointments to experienced MPs
* Expand access to cabinet documents
* Increase accountability of Ministerial staff
* Given caucus more control over party leaders and reduce leaders control over nominations