**Donald Savoie, *Governing from the Centre*. 1999**

**Approach**

Neo-institutionalism

**Thesis**

The powers of the PM and the central agencies have grown over the last 30 years at the expense of cabinet and parliament. The PM can drive the policy changes that he wants on a few priority issues, but the system serves to preserve the status quo in most other areas.

**Key arguments**

*Central agencies*

* Originally grew in size for the war effort and subsequently in response to Keynesian economics.
* Objective was to bring a more organized approach to decision making and better coordinate activities between departments.
* In 1960s Glasco Commission called for central agencies to interfere less in departmental decisions
* However, the centre has since grown both in size and influence
* All central agencies have a direct link to the PM – at times seen as extensions of PMO
* They have broad mandates and few actual program responsibilities, letting them focus wherever they need to (especially crisis situations)
* Job is to protect the PM – Ministers can fall, but if the PM falls then government goes too.
* Will take control of situations if mistakes are seen to have been made.

*Drivers of the growth at the centre*

* Trudeau thought cabinet too large for making decisions and that some ministers and their departments were too powerful – wanted the capacity to challenge departmental advice.
* He also wanted the capacity to intervene on any issue that might affect national unity.
* Also a desire to counter the growing power of the media to politicize issues.
* There is no way to predict exactly what issues will attract media attention - can involve a lot of money or little, be national or local in scope, be based on policy or administration (e.g. replacement of windows in a government office tower).
* Globalization has increased role of the PM abroad in negotiating agreements, and increase the number of issues requiring the PMs attention.

*Prime Minister*

* PM has influence because he is: elected leader of the party by party members; chairs cabinet meetings; establishes cabinet procedures; appoint cabinet ministers and DMs; controls patronage appointments; sets the government agenda in the Throne Speech; shapes the fiscal frameworks; represents Canada abroad; sets the mandates for ministers; settles interdepartmental conflicts; and is the focus of the national media.
* Elections also focus enormously on PM and party leaders
* PM deals directly with premiers and will make bureaucracy respond to their concerns.
* As centre has grown, the Cabinet has lost influence – declined from being a decision making body under Pearson to a focus-group under all subsequent PMs
* PM is the boss – dominates the levers of power and can shape all political and administrative actions.
* Will sometimes kill a proposal before it is even discussed in cabinet.
* PM has access to policy and advice from PMO and PCO that cabinet does not.
* Opinion polls mean PM does not need to rely on regional ministers for advice.

*Policy making*

* Two types of policy decisions:

1. Those by the PM/centre that are implemented quickly with few subsequent changes;
2. Those put forward by regular cabinet ministers that are subject to the formal process and changed to enable consensus.

* The PM can only have a few priorities. To implement his agenda the PM must pick a handful of initiatives and keep focused on them (e.g. Chretien’s Program Review).
* Line departments respond when they receive “*clear* and *consistent* political direction” from the PM.
* The “system” manages the other proposals coming through formal channels from cabinet ministers.
* Only decisions made by the PM are likely to be bold – bolts of lightning that make change
* Those going through the process are watered down to ensure consensus and perpetuate the status quo.
* Even strong cabinet Ministers are unable to launch bold new policies without central support.
* The centre no longer seeks to perform policy coordination for good government but to “keep a lid on things” and protect the government from embarrassment.
* Government departments are closely watched to prevent surprise scandals, but this conflicts with the ideas of empowering managers contained in New Public Management.
* The PM can also take control of any issue at any time if he wants/needs; particularly to deal with a scandal or crisis.

*Constraints on the PM*

* Limited time (must deal with briefing material, meetings, representing his constituency)
* Can only dismiss a few ministers at a time for fear of losing authority.
* Must maintain at least some caucus support – although it has a very limited ability to influence the PM except during minorities.
* Parliament – Question period may trip up PMs on occasion
* Media – can draw attention to issues, stir up scandal, create pressure for quick decisions (“Government is defeated by sound bites, not policy”)
* Must maintain balance in cabinet representation (e.g. region, gender, etc.)
* PM only one of many first ministers when meeting with premiers.

**Contribution**

Charts the accumulation of power in the PM and the central agencies. Highlights how the central agencies operate in an environment that stresses 1) the promotion of the Prime Minister’s agenda, and 2) the preservation of the status quo and the prevention of mistakes. Has some links to Cairns “The Embedded State” in that both identify the problem of bureaucratic inertia. However, Cairns blames the inertia on the state’s entanglement with civil society, while Savoie blames bureaucratic risk aversion.