H.D. Munroe, “Style within the centre: Pierre Trudeau, the War Measures Act, and the nature of prime ministerial power,” *Canadian Public Administration* 54:4 (December 2011)

**Overview:**

Response to work that suggests the Cdn PM wields increasingly autocratic power since the Trudeau day sin the late 1960s (Savoie, etc). Aucoin’s analysis of PM managerial styles suggests there may be more scope for individual agency than a narrow reading of Savoie would imply. Paper looks specifically at the War Measures Act in 1970 as a case study – suggesting that PM power is shaped significantly by personal style. Uses an extreme example (if it doesn’t happen here, shouldn’t happen anywhere) to showcase that the “elected dictatorship” of PM is not an inevitable consequence of current configurations of power.

**Backgrounder:**

Paper provides nice overview of the debate as it has developed:

* On one side you have tropes as PM as autocrat, Canada as “elected dictatorship (Hockin, 1997; Savoie, 2008)
  + Savoie: over past 40 years, power has become concentrated in hands of PM, resulting from centripetal political pressures – to the danger of Cdn democracy
* On the other – you have suggestions that this lens is exaggerated (Bakvis, 2001; Matheson, 1976):
  + Bakvis (2001): asserts popular notion of PM as autocrat exaggerates the power of the office – in part b/c Cdn federalism acts as a significant restraint on PM action
* Suggests that while the fact that Trudeau made widespread changes to central machinery of govt, it remains unclear what the effects of these changes have been on the power of the office of PM
  + Savoie (1996): changes under Trudeau signaled move to “court govt” in which PMs govern by fiat not only b/c they can, but also b/c they *must* – due to fed-ism pressures, 24/hr news cycle, globalization, all creating both opportunity and incentive
  + Aucoin (1986): suggests Trudeau’s changes reflect personal style of rational management
* Savoie suggests 2 elements to changing PM power:

1. Cabinet has joined parliament as an institution being bypassed
2. Trudeau is the architect of this sea of change
   * + - These 2 pieces are challenged by Munroe

**Case Study**

Uses extreme case – where one would expect significant PM intervention for a number of reasons (mainly because it was Trudeau, who started it all)

Conclusions:

* Two findings suggested:
  + Though Trudeau wielded far more power over Cabinet than the notion of “first among equals” suggests, he exercised that power in way consistent with Aucoin’s characterization of his approach (commitment to rational management)
  + While fed-ism does tend to increase power of PMs vis-à-vis their cabinets, it is also a source of constraint on PM action in larger, national context (in line with Bakvis)
* Careful to note that these findings do not invalidate Savoie’s overall argument (his thesis spans 40 years and 2 countries), it nonetheless points to some of Savoie’s imprecise characterizations – especially the “since Trudeau” timeline
* Suggests that personal mgmt styles be added to Savoie’s analysis

Whether Cdn PMs are autocratic or collegial is ultimately a matter of personal style, not institutional structure