G. White, “The ‘Centre’ of the Democratic Deficit? Power and Influence in Canadian Political Executives,” unpublished ms

**Overview**

Paper links two larger concepts – democratic deficit (Nevitte) and centralizing government (Savoie) in this analysis. Paper argues that Cdn analysts have not been sufficiently careful in setting their criteria for the definition and measurement of the democratic deficit in terms of political executives, esp. first ministers.

**Background**

* “Democratic deficit” routinely applied to any perceived flaw in modern political-governance regimes, but issues of definition loom large
* We all “know” that power is becoming increasingly/dangerously centralized in PM and courtiers surrounding him, few of whom are elected – but *how* do we “know” this? – though critiques are extensively researched they tend to be weak on the difficult questions of definition/measurement
* Democratic deficit: term is evocative – though might be more accurate to describe situation in Cdn politics as a ‘democratic debt’. And it is difficult to measure this, as what constitutes ‘democracy’ is constantly in flux
  + For example – compare Lord Bryce’s characterization of Canada as an “actual democracy” in 1921 (it wasn’t)
* Westminster parliamentary system is by its very nature characterized by extensive concentration of power – and it has evolved that way over *centuries*. Politically, premiers in pre-Confederation Canada may have been ‘first among equals’ but from Sir John A MacDonald forward, the Cdn PM has had no equal in Canada
* Does this imply a massive/insurmountable democratic deficit? Not at all. Cdn first ministers face significant constraints, both formal and informal:
  + Field for picking cabinet is narrow and the cabinet must be representative (regions, languages, ethnicity, gender, etc)
* How do we measure autocracy of system? Not easily: research into cabinet processes is fraught with difficulty
* Savoie is unquestioningly correct that power is heavily concentrated at the centre, though without a precise benchmark it is less clear that the degree of concentration has increased significantly as he argues
  + Stephane Dion writes “the works of Savoie and Simpson are at times captivating, but to my mind they do not prove the thesis of an increasing concentration of power as the years go by… Perhaps in an age of the ‘decline of deference’ – it is less a case of increasing concentration of power than increasing sensitivity to and declining tolerance of concentrated power”
* Possible solutions include: (1) fixed election dates to establish level playing field; (2) changes to leadership selection process; (3) ensuring minority govts; and (4) involving backbenchers in cabinet decision making

**Conclusion**

Chapter’s principle argument is that the Cdn academic (and journalistic) community has not been sufficiently precise about identifying and measuring the democratic deficit – at least insofar as the power of the first minister is concerned. But, that we are not sure how serious the problem is (or whether it is growing) does not mean that we shouldn’t be thinking of solutions: