P. Thomas, “The Role of Central Agencies: Making a Mesh of Things,” Bickerton and Gagnon, eds., *Canadian Politics* 3rd ed.

**Overview**

Chapter provides an analysis of central agencies – providing reader with a basic understanding of central agency influence. Thomas concludes with the “fact” that the centralization inherent in the structure and practice of cabinet-parliamentary govt guarantees that the small circle of central agencies and the people who work in them will remain powerful players in the policy process for years to come (appears to reject taking a normative standpoint on whether this is a good or a bad thing).

**Background**

* The job of central agencies is to make a mesh of things – to ensure that a central framework of policy and administrative values guides the multitudinous and diverse range of activities undertaken by govt
* Their purpose is to promote horizontal policy and administrative coordination
* In essence, CAs set the parameters of permissible activities
* 3 features distinguish central agencies from line depts. – (1) CAs have more direct and continuing legitimate authority to intervene and direct activities of depts. than other coordinating bodies; (2) CAs have relatively greater number of opportunities to intervene in policy and admin processes of other parts of government (due to their location in policy process); and (3) CAs are potentially able to wield more influences than central departments over the behaviour of other entities due to their organizational proximity to PM and Cabinet
* 4 CAs are: PMO, PCO, Treasury Board Secretariat, and Dept of Finance
* Rise of CAs associated with Trudeau, though trend had begun during the tenure of his predecessor

**Future Prospects of CAs**

* **­**Since 1962, there have been reports/calls for greater delegation to line departments - 1995 task force report “Strengthening our Policy Capacity” called for greater policy leadership and coordination from PCO and for a strengthening of policy communities at the departmental level.
* But this is unlikely to happen for a number of reasons:
  + Intellectual contradiction within the debate – there are simultaneous moves to centralize power (NPG), while calling for decentralization (NPM) to line depts (Aucoin’s argument)
  + CAs will resist wholesale decentralization – Cas see themselves as having a policy and legal mandate to involve themselves in departmental matters and there is little incentive to relax their controls (not to mention the enormous culture shift that would be required)

“CAs are a necessary part of modern government and they will not fade into insignificance despite all the calls today for a reduction in their importance”