P. Weller, “Cabinet Government: An Elusive Ideal?” *Public Administration* 81:4 (2003)

**Overview:**

Article explores proposition that cabinet govt is dead by examining the ways in which cabinet govts have been conceptualized and ultimately arguing that the lack of precision in the debates undermines much of the criticism. Looks at Canada, Australia and the UK.

**Background:**

* Common diagnosis by many academics is that cabinet govt is dead – Tony Blair and Chretien have virtually dispensed with support of cabinet and subsequently rule with fewer constraints (are the epitome of prime ministerial power)
  + Mirrors Jeffrey Simpon’s 2001 book *The Friendly Dictatorship* (which builds off Savoie)

The Academic Debate:

* Cabinet govt as the focus for discussion of responsibility and accountability – a constitutional theory or legal approach:
  + Cabinet as the focus of the application of 2 basic constitutional doctrines: collective and ministerial responsibility to parliament and the electorate
* Cabinet as formal administrative institution, based on rules and routines – public admin or positional approach:
  + Cabinet began as informal meeting of ministers, but evolved due to pressure of business and demands on time of ministers, coordination of submissions, etc. Approach is the *traditional institutional* study of the structure/organization of an established body
* Cabinet as forum for policy decision-making (requiring best info available and coordination to make sure decisions are well informed – public policy or functional approach:
  + ‘Pragmatists’ – cabinets are principal decision-making body in the polity
* Cabinet as political battleground, as a contest for position, power, policy and reputation, and in which incentives and resources are best means for explaining action – political science approach:
  + This is where much of the debate on cabinet govt takes place
* Cabinet as a system of govt:
  + Rhodes (1995) developed concept of core executive to explain how cabinet decisions are made (including key advisors/civil servants who are often more important than junior ministers).
  + As an analytical device for understanding the centre of govt, the concept of the core executive has value. *However*, by incorporating the cabinet in the wider scenery as just one component, it ignores that fact that in many ways cabinet *is* different – appointment to cabinet a sign of success for ministers, it is the target of ambition, cabinet decisions have weight and legitimacy within bureaucracy
  + Different criteria may lead to different judgments about whether the cabinet is working
* Cabinet govt has never been a synonym for *primus inter pares*. PMs have always been able to win – and where they choose to exercise their authority depends on what they want.
* PM’s tactics change to suit circumstance and personality
* Argues that the concept of cabinet govt is too central to our form of government to be defined out of existence – what is required is a concept that can incorporate the different academic approaches
* Weller recognizes one of the key problems with the “governing from the centre”/“friendly dictator” arguments – that while PMs may have appeared to gain power, it may be “greater influence over less.” Move to reliance on markets has been a bi-partisan shift, governments deliver less, even as they commission and pay for more. Central banks have greater independence, international agreements move policy power from national level to supranational level
* Weller urges academics, that if they insist on declaring cabinet government dead, then it behooves them to identify the criteria they regard as essential to the proper working of cabinet government, and the conditions that must be satisfied in order for cabinet govt to thrive