**Question In a series of books over the past decade, Donald Savoie has argued that the principal institutions of Canadian governance have become deeply flawed. Outline Savoie’s main arguments and evaluate them.**

Over the past decade, Savoie has published a series of books concerning (primarily) the evolution of federal institutions. The main thrust of the arguments made in all three books (to be discussed here) is that federal institutions are becoming less democratic, with fewer checks and balances on power. In his book *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*, Savoie argues that power has shifted away from cabinet and towards central agencies. Specifically, the most extensive shift of power can be seen with the centralization of power in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), the Privy Council Office (PCO), and Treasury Board (with the potential as well to include the Department of Finance). As a result of these shifts, opposition parties, caucus members, and a good proportion of cabinet members are being made weaker in their power and influence. Savoie builds a second, though not unrelated, argument in his book *Breaking the Bargain: Public Servants, Ministers, and Parliament.* In this book, the central thesis is that changes within the government – with respect to bureaucratic administration and management – have resulted in the disappearance of the “knowledgeable bureaucrat.” These bureaucrats (once) had significant experience in line departments, had an extensive knowledge of one subject matter, and were able to respond “no Minister” when appropriate. Changes with the introduction of New Public Management, and with the centralization of power, have resulted in the extinction of this species of bureaucrat.

Finally, these two theses are merged within Savoie’s latest book *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom*. With this book, Savoie points to the rise of “court government” or the “court party” (not to be confused with Morton & Knopff’s conceptualization with the court party with respect to the Charter in Canada) in both Canada and the United Kingdom (thereby adding a comparative element to this argument). This court government is characterized by four key components: (1) court government provides quick and unencumbered access to the levels of power that make things happen in policy, and administrative oversight for the PM; (2) court government suits the PM and his/her courtiers because it enables them to get things done quickly, see results, and manage the news media; (3) within the court party, not all ministers are created equal; and related to this (4) power is centralized in the hands of the Prime Minister, a few key cabinet ministers and advisors, as well as a few key Deputy Ministers (few of which have the institutional memory to ensure things go smoothly).

These are Savoie’s main arguments. However, there are some serious limitations to these arguments, from both a methods and an empirical perspective. On the centralization of power argument, three counter-arguments can (and will) be made: (1) prime ministers in the past were also quite powerful; (2) prime ministers are not *that* powerful; and (3) we cannot really know *how powerful* the prime minister actually is.

The first response to Savoie’s argument is to suggest that Prime Ministers in the past (and more generally, the centre of government) were also quite powerful. Prime Ministers of the past had more powers, and potentially more oversight, then they do today. The classic one would be the power of disallowance that PM’s had over provincial bills. The adoption of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* may also work to limit the power of governments/PMs in some respects, while the increased decentralization of the federation through decisions made by the JCPC have also decreased the oversight that Prime Minister’s have over affairs of state which are ***now*** deemed to be within the provincial realm. From a methodological standpoint, it does not truly hold as to why Savoie chose to begin by looking at the changes brought in by Trudeau as the beginning of his empirical narrative. Savoie considers Trudeau to be a major player in the catalyzing the shift toward greater prime ministerial power, and as such begins his analysis of that centralization with Trudeau. However, this means that the research lacks the requisite component of being able to compare the environment before and after the intervening variable of interest, and it is thus impossible to say that the post-Trudeau era looked significantly different than the pre-Trudeau era.

The second response to Savoie’s argument is to suggest that in fact Prime Ministers/the centre of government is not *that* powerful. Indeed, this is the argument put forward by Munroe in his article regarding the War Measures Act. The premise of the article is an attempt to falsify Savoie’s thesis. Essentially, he purports that *if* Trudeau was a major centralizer, then it would follow that he himself would centralize power within his own cabinet. Secondly, these patterns of centralization would be especially pronounced in a crisis situation. Munroe’s argues that in the case of the October Crisis, this was largely not the case, thereby falsifying Savoie’s thesis. Axworthy complements this consideration in his article *Of Secretaries to Princes* in suggesting that though the Prime Minister does have a lot of control/oversight – that this is severely limited. Axworthy argues that in a four year term, the Prime Minister has to the time to focus significantly on only four or five key issue areas, and no further. Cabinet may take on an additional 25-30 key issues over the course of those four years, but in no way does the PM have full oversight.

Three other considerations come into force when thinking about the true power of the prime minister, in light of broader domestic and international trends. The first is pointed to by Stephane Dion (in Graham White’s chapter) when he notes that Savoie’s thesis is not proven, and that in an age of the “decline of deference” perhaps it is less the case of an increasing concentration of power, but rather an increasing sensitivity to and a decline in tolerance for (already) concentrated power. The second is suggested by a more general scrutiny of action in media, news, and by the public (perhaps linking back more closely with the decline of deference). Finally, the PM and central government is constrained by global trends – globalization has shifted a number of key issues upwards to the supranational level (Skogstad, 2008), in essence removing them from the policy portfolio of the central government.

Finally, it is hard to say exactly *how powerful* the Prime Minister and central agencies are. To begin with, Savoie does not truly define power, and thus it is difficult to measure what power is and how the extent of that power has changed. Moreover, as political scientists, we are offered only a very small view of the role and actions of central government, and thus only have access to a small sample of the central government’s exercise of power. This makes it very difficult to measure the changes.

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On the changing nature of the role of the bureaucrat, two very similar arguments can be made: (1) the professionalized public servant is a relatively new phenomenon in governance in Canada (and in the industrialized world more generally); and (2)

Finally, we can assess Savoie’s thesis on its more normative claims. Assuming that he is correct that there has been a rise of a court government (with all of the attributes that he points to as noted in the start of the question), is this bad for Canadian democracy? Axworthy and Thomas would argue that no, this is not the case. Thomas, on the furthest interpretation views centralization as a “fact” that is inherent in structure and practice of cabinet-parliamentary government and that central agencies are a necessary part of our modern government that will not fade in significance despite calls by some (Savoie included) to reduce their importance. Meanwhile, Axworthy touts the benefits of a partisan PMO – arguing very much in their favour, noting their necessity in carrying out the strategic vision of the government of the day. While he cautions against blurring the lines between partisan staff and the non-partisan public service, he would seem to argue that in fact this centralization of government is necessary for the efficiency of the democratically elected governing party.