

## **Modern PMs growing ever more powerful, Liberal insider holds 'Court government' means near-total control rests in one pair of hands, author contends**

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### **Abstract (Summary)**

Mr. [Donald Savoie] doesn't expect his book will go over well with many of his friends and acquaintances in the corridors of power. "I will lose my standing in court, I am pretty certain of that," he said. "But so be it. If I can't take the liberty to write what I think is there, then I shouldn't be an academic."

### **Full Text**

(1031 words)

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The Globe and Mail

Ottawa -- The iron grip that Canadian prime ministers exercise over their governments has transformed even the cabinet into little more than a focus group for the leader, Liberal insider and academic Donald Savoie concludes in a new book due out this week.

The traditional concept of prime ministers as firsts among equals -- *primus inter pares* -- is a relic of the past, Mr. Savoie observes in a provocative 362-page study documenting the concentration of near-absolute political power in a single pair of hands. Instead, power resides in what he calls a "court government" that revolves around the prime minister.

"Cabinet has now joined Parliament as an institution being bypassed," writes the University of Moncton scholar and departing president of the Canadian Political Science Association.

The book, *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*, argues that Canadian prime ministers have fewer checks

on them than counterparts in Britain and Australia, making them among the least encumbered leaders in the democratic world.

Mr. Savoie catalogues a continuing diminution of the powers of individual cabinet ministers and cabinet as a whole that began in the Pierre Trudeau years and is proceeding apace. The levers of power at the disposal of a modern Canadian prime minister, he writes, "constitute a veritable juggernaut of power."

The court now in control generally comprises several key advisers in the Prime Minister's Office, the Clerk of the Privy Council, the Minister of Finance and his deputy minister and a handful of other political advisers, who may or may not coincidentally be cabinet ministers, according to Mr. Savoie.

"No matter the circumstances, the Prime Minister remains 'the boss.' Prime Minister [Jean] Chrétien is called the boss, while he, in turn, invariably referred to Pierre Trudeau as 'le boss.' "

Mr. Savoie's own background as a minor member of the Chrétien court makes his conclusions all the more interesting. One of four outside advisers to Mr. Chrétien's 1993 transition team and a mover and shaker in New Brunswick Liberal circles, he has enjoyed access to senior government officials and ministers in preparing his portrait of court government.

In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Mr. Savoie said he set out to write a book on modern approaches to public-sector management. But he shifted focus when an unnamed minister in the Chrétien government lectured him that the cabinet no longer operates as a decision-making body, but rather serves as a focus group for the Prime Minister.

"That rattled me," Mr. Savoie said.

Other present and former ministers in the Trudeau, Brian Mulroney and Chrétien cabinets confirmed that "major or extremely controversial issues are often resolved by the prime minister, a few key advisers and a few senior ministers outside the cabinet committee system."

Mr. Savoie doesn't expect his book will go over well with many of his friends and acquaintances in the corridors of power. "I will lose my standing in court, I am pretty certain of that," he said. "But so be it. If I can't take the liberty to write what I think is there, then I shouldn't be an academic."

The book details the myriad ways a prime minister lords over his cabinet -- from controlling their appointments in the first place to single-handedly divining their will on controversial issues. Cabinets do not vote on such matters as whether to cut unemployment insurance, buy helicopters or send troops to the Balkans, he explains. They discuss these matters -- that is, if the prime minister's officials decide to put them on the cabinet agenda -- and then the prime minister gets to "call the consensus."

He quotes unnamed officials who attend cabinet meetings telling him it is not unusual for the call to be made in favour of an apparent minority around the table. "You must understand," one minister told him, "that consensus means any group of ministers that includes the Prime Minister."

He cites two historical events above all in leading to this consolidation of prime ministerial power. The first was the centralization of government decision making instituted under Mr. Trudeau in 1968, ironically to assist collective decision making. The second was the election of a separatist government in Quebec in 1976.

"For the first time in our history, we realized we could lose Canada," Mr. Savoie stated in the interview. With the stakes so high, prime ministers began turning to even tighter coteries of advisers and to professional bureaucrats schooled in avoiding mistakes.

Certainly there are constraints on prime ministerial power in Canada -- such as lack of time to manage much and the constitutional prerogatives of the provinces -- but these tend to be fewer than those on a British or Australian prime minister, he argues. Leaders in those countries, for example, are selected by their own caucuses, which therefore hold some sway over them. Canadian prime ministers are elected by their parties as a whole. Conservative MPs in Britain sacked Margaret Thatcher, a truly powerful prime minister, in 1991, an action the book says would be unthinkable in Canada.

#### PRIME MINISTER'S LEVERS

Names cabinet ministers

Chairs cabinet meetings

Can dismiss ministers

Writes so-called mandate letters setting out ministerial marching orders before the cabinet is even appointed

Establishes cabinet committees

Appoints all deputy ministers (ministers don't choose their own deputies)

Decides the cabinet's agenda

Is briefed on ministerial positions before the cabinet meets

Calls the cabinet consensus

Controls patronage appointments

Writes the Speech from the Throne setting out the government's strategic direction

Signs off on budgets

Commands national media attention

Manages relations with foreign leaders

Manages relations with provincial premiers

Has the single largest concentration of political advice in Ottawa -- 80 to 120 people in the Prime Minister's Office -- at his personal disposal. *Staff*