Book Review


By Patrice Dutil

Review by Christopher Cooper
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The centralization of power thesis is one of the best-known tenets in Canadian political science. Patrice Dutil’s *Prime Ministerial Power in Canada: Its Origins under MacDonald, Laurier, and Borden* makes an important empirical contribution to this debate.

While Donald J. Savoie was not the first to claim that the prime minister’s power has become centralized since the late 1970s, his name has become most associated with the thesis. Readers of *Canadian Public Administration* likely know Savoie’s assertion very well: “no one, at least in government in Canada, believes any longer that the prime minister is *primus inter pares*” (1999, 13).

The thesis, however, is contentious. Dutil’s recent book joins the ranks of the skeptics, and by empirically analyzing the work of Canada’s first three long-serving prime ministers, makes a convincing case that the nature of governance in Canada has long been dominated by the head of government. Dutil supports his argument with a variety of creative indicators, including how MacDonald, Laurier, and Borden dealt with crisis, used patronage and orders-in-council and managed their daily routines.

After reading Dutil’s book, however, I believe that the centralization of power thesis remains an open question. Without having examined more contemporary prime ministers with the same empirical measures used to investigate MacDonald, Laurier, and Borden, we cannot judge whether the level of power exercised by prime ministers has increased further still.

For instance, in *The Institutionalized Cabinet* (1995) Christopher Dunn showed that a dominant first minister in an *unaided cabinet* defined the early period of governance until approximately the Second World War, when power was increasingly shared alongside cabinet members an *institutionalized cabinet*. At almost 400 pages, however, Dutil’s choice to limit his analysis to three prime ministers is understandable given the detail he gave to each prime minister.

Overall, I found Dutil’s book an excellent and captivating read. Scholars and casual readers alike interested in how Canada’s early prime ministers governed, worked and exercised power, will find Dutil’s book highly insightful.
References
