



At the Centre of Government: The Prime Minister and the limits on political power

Dr. Ian Brodie

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9:00am – 4:30pm

Summary (Abstract)

In this workshop, Dr. Brodie will draw on his extensive experience both as a political scientist and as a key player at the centre of government. Based on this experience, Brodie will begin by breaking down the generally accepted idea that power is, in the Canadian context, centralized within the Prime Minister's Office. As he has laid out in his book by the same title, Brodie will explore the various arguments made about the centralization of power in the PMO, beginning with academic writings on the topic and challenging those arguments based on his real-time experiences and expert observations.

Brodie challenges the centralization of power argument by exploring the various ways in which the actual workings of government and role of the PMO are misunderstood. To illustrate the extent and limits on the PM and the PMO's power, Brodie will begin by walking participants through the historical roots of Cabinet and responsible government. To better understand the complexity of the centralization argument, Brodie will turn next to a discussion of the Prime Minister's various roles, beginning with the constructing of Cabinet. He will then shift the discussion to the important and extensive work that government must do in order to engage with *all* members of Parliament as well as corral the various ministerial agendas into one clear *government* agenda. Finally, Brodie will address the potential pitfalls of failing to provide strong partisan leadership at the centre.

Armed with these important insights, participants will then work in groups, each acting as the PMO but tasked with a different government role (constructing Cabinet, being First Minister in the HoC, assembling a government agenda, or acting as party leader). Their challenge will be, in the context of the 2019 Federal Election, to put forward a new campaign platform which will clarify how each role will be carried out by the next government (from promoting the benefits of the status quo to proposing constitutional reform for a change to the limits on power).

Brodie will conclude the day, based on the group discussions and his gathered insights, with a defense of the current state of constitutionalism in Canada and the ways in which government can still improve.





Outline

Background

- The road to the PMO and role as Chief of Staff

Governing from the Centre – “the PM as a Dictator”

- A provocative argument ...
- Challenges to the argument

Cabinet Government

- Origins of Responsible Government
- Responsible Government and the centralization of power

At the Centre of Government – The Complex Roles

1. The PM and the Cabinet
 - The utility of Cabinet Ministers
 - Constructing the Cabinet (size, selection, etc.)
 - The way it works and the distribution of power
2. The PMO and Parliament
 - A look at the inside
 - Some challenges
 - Why Parliament matters
3. A Government Agenda
 - A Cabinet minister’s ‘dual role’
 - Corraling Ministerial agendas
4. Leading the Party
 - Criticisms of political parties
 - Why parties matter

Lunch 12:00-1:30pm

Group Work

- Divided into four groups (each assigned a different role, as outlined in the morning), participants must put forward a new campaign platform for their political party that conveys the importance of their own particular role to the voting public. They must illustrate how that particular role will be carried out by the next government and whether or not they propose that their own party, if elected, will change the way that governing is done, how, and why (from promoting the benefits of the status quo to proposing constitutional reform for a change to the limits on power).

Required Readings*

Brodie, Ian. 2018. *At the Centre of Government: The prime minister and the limits on political power*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press:

“Getting to Government: An Autobiographical Note” pp. ix-xvii.

<http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EF31DF>

“Governing from the Centre: How we came to see the PM as a Dictator” pp. 3-12.

<http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EF31E0>

Savoie, Donald J. 1999. “Introduction”. In D.J. Savoie, *Governing from the Centre: The concentration of power in Canadian politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 3-16.

<http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EF31B0>



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- Savoie, Donald J. 1999. "The Rise of Court Government in Canada." *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 32:4, pp. 635–664. <http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EF31B2>
- White, Graham. 2012. "The 'Centre' of the democratic deficit: Power and influence in Canadian political executives". In P. T. Lenard, & R. Simeon (Eds.), *Imperfect democracies: The democratic deficit in Canada and the United States*. Vancouver: UBC Press, pp. 226-247. <http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EF31DB>

Additional Resources

- Brodie, Ian. 2018. *At the Centre of Government: The prime minister and the limits on political power*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://www.mqup.ca/at-the-centre-of-government-products-9780773552906.php>
- Savoie, D. J. 1999. *Governing from the Centre: The concentration of power in Canadian politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <http://0-www.deslibris.ca/mercury.concordia.ca/ID/417903>

* If you are registered for non-credit and are unable to access the required readings above, please email us at wssr@concordia.ca

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