

The Central Executive in Canadian Government: Searching for the Holy Grail

Chapter Summary

To discuss the relevance of the central executive role in Canada's federal government, the author poses two questions: Where is the federal central executive headed in Canada? Has the federal Cabinet moved to a new stage in its development? In an attempt to answer these questions, this chapter reviews the role of the central executive by discussing the critical aspects of political power and authority. To begin this analysis, the author reviews and discusses the agencies that comprise the central executive, which include the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Premier's Office, the Privy Council Office (PCO), the Executive Council Office at the provincial level, the Department of Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, and other relevant central agencies and departments.

It is important to note that Canada's federal cabinet has enormous power but the source of this power and authority does not exist in a constitutional sense. The Cabinet roles have evolved through convention over time due to factors relating to parliamentary performance in Britain and its former colonies. The author examines the differences between the concept of authority that is exercised by the dignified executive and the real power that is held by the efficient executive. The dignified executive includes the Queen, the Governor General (federal), the Lieutenant-Governor (provincial), and the Privy Council (federal), along with the Executive Council at the provincial level. As well, the efficient executive includes the Prime Minister (federal), the Premier (provincial), the Cabinet, and the public service. This distinction leads the author to a discussion identifying the similarities and differences between the federal and provincial governments, drawing attention specifically to conventional and political powers and cabinet formation.

There have been several specific stages in Canada's cabinet development, both at the federal and provincial levels. In particular, there have been shifts from a traditional to a departmentalized cabinet, an unaided Cabinet and an institutionalized Cabinet. These differences relate to the different types of minister's roles at both the federal and provincial levels, as well as the similarity of Canada's territorial government, specifically in the Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT), and Nunavut.

The evolution of government and cabinet, in particular at the federal level, has called into question the role of the Prime Minister, the PMO, the Cabinet, and the cabinet committees. Recently, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made the claim that "Cabinet government is back" which has supported the enhanced role of the cabinet committees at the federal level. Although many authors have critiqued this claim, the evolving role of the central executive has piqued the interest of academics, scholars and practitioners when trying to understand and examine the roles of the central executive and cabinet in Canada.

Annotated Weblinks

- 1) https://lop.parl.ca/About/Parliament/senatoreugeneforsej/book/chapter_6-e.html.

How Canadians Govern Themselves offers a comprehensive list of all of the major players that participate in and contribute to the major political institutions of Canada.

- 2) <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/ministries>.

This site identifies and lists the federal ministry (cabinet) of Canada, including the Prime Minister and all of the ministers and their respective portfolios.

- 3) <https://lop.parl.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/prb0901-e.htm>.

This report identifies the roles and responsibilities of Canada's central agencies, including the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office, the Treasury Board Secretariat and the federal Department of Finance.