

The Tories' neater, less effective federalism ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

In 2005 Stephen Harper, then leader of the opposition, proposed a new kind of federal-provincial dynamic he called "open federalism." If elected, Harper promised, the Conservatives would act as partners with the provinces not as puppet masters. They would quash the Liberal practice of imposing an agenda through transfers with strings attached, and would bring an end to the bickering that had characterized federal-provincial relations for decades.

Harper vowed that a Tory administration would provide "full co-operation ... with all other levels of government, while clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each."

All this sounded good particularly to Quebec, which had long called for transfers without conditions. Voters in that province helped propel the Conservatives to victory in 2006.

But eight years later, and at the close of this year in particular, Ottawa's promise of "full co-operation" looks darkly comical in retrospect.

Surely, for instance, full co-operation would require at least a willingness to meet. Yet for over a year, Harper has refused to rendezvous with the premier of Ontario, the head of Canada's second largest government, despite repeated verbal and written pleas from both Kathleen Wynne and her cabinet. Nor has he convened a first ministers meeting since 2009, leaving the premiers to sort out the future of health care, pensions, job grants and other intergovernmental issues with an empty chair at the head of the table.

The political reasons for not attending these meetings are obvious. Premiers do tend to gang up on prime ministers. But Harper's absenteeism also reflects his government's oft-expressed view of the federal role in areas of provincial jurisdiction: namely, there is none.

So, for instance, the federal government has disowned any responsibility for shaping our health system. Earlier this year, the 10-year, \$41-billion health accord signed by Paul Martin's Liberals and the provinces expired. Rather than renegotiate the deal, Ottawa promised to continue to increase transfers - though at a lower level after 2017 - while eliminating all conditions. And it arrived at its new funding formula unilaterally, without consulting with the provinces.

The problem is that the continued effectiveness of medicare depends on federal leadership. Only Ottawa can establish pan-Canadian standards that ensure provinces aren't pitted against each other. Otherwise, any jurisdiction that might choose to privatize, for instance, would very likely siphon talent from the other provinces. Moreover medicare will have to be reformed to keep pace with medical and demographic change, lest quality erode. If a central government doesn't oversee that change, then the provinces and territories will - in 13 different directions, resulting not only in fragmentation but profound inequities.

Social policy, too, has been reshaped by the government's propensity for federal devolution. The Tories' decision in 2006 to cancel the child care agreements with every province, to take the most obvious example, left any future arrangements to the provinces themselves. That's well and good, unless we see child care as an essential service to which all Canadians deserve comparable access.

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- reprinted from Toronto Star

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/01/tories%E2%80%99-neater-less-effective-federalism> [2] https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2014/12/29/the_tories_neater_less_effective_federalism_editorial.html [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism>