



## The “Royal We”\*

By all accounts, Canada’s Premiers had a jam-packed agenda at their recent meeting in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The discussions included skills training and the disputed Canada Job Grant, the need for a predictable formula for infrastructure financing, the transportation of natural resources, an inquiry into missing Aboriginal women and cyber-bullying. Several major policy areas were flagged for additional work.

Despite the wide-ranging agenda, another message emerged loudly and clearly from last week’s meeting. The Premiers would very much like to have a national partner with whom they can engage in conversation. They need someone at the other end of the table to help formulate pan-Canadian responses to the myriad challenges the country faces.

For its part, the federal government says it prefers to stay out of provincial business (which makes all the more questionable its intrusive Canada Job Grant program). On occasion, it does engage in bilateral discussions with individual provinces on selected issues.

But there is little sense of national with this national government. Ottawa argues that it is better to let both orders of government – federal and provincial – take care of their respective areas of business.

There are several problems with this position.

Virtually all of the issues on the provincial list touch federal portfolios either directly or indirectly through their links to justice, transportation, communication and Aboriginal affairs. The Premiers are asking Ottawa, for example, to include cyber-bullying in the *Criminal Code*. Infrastructure repair and construction necessarily involve a federal partner. Many of the required areas of work related to highways, rails and waterways, for instance, transcend provincial barriers and are rooted in national geography.

The two ships-that-never-meet-in-the-night approach to government might be more palatable if there were a sense that Ottawa, for its part, had a clear agenda on which it is working. This is not now the case.

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The provincial plate clearly is full – with challenges related to education, training, health care reform and an aging population, to name just a few current priorities. The federal cupboard, by contrast, appears bare. Its tiresome focus on crime, the military and all things royal are not the issues that touch real needs.

Ottawa used to take a far more active interest in collaboration to improve the quality of life of Canadians. The National Child Benefit introduced in 1998 was a stellar example of cooperative federalism. Ottawa agreed, after extensive study and negotiations, to assume the delivery and cost of provincial welfare benefits paid in respect of children. For their part, provinces agreed to invest the resulting millions of windfall dollars into additional cash payments and/or family supports for low-income households with children.

The federal government also worked closely with provinces and territories in the late 1990s to produce the ground-breaking vision paper *In Unison: A Canadian Approach to Disability Issues*. Quebec did not participate in the discussions but supported the intent of the initiative.

*In Unison* identified several clear goals related to disability supports, employment opportunities and income security. *In Unison* obliged all governments in Canada to work toward ensuring the full inclusion of persons with disabilities. Equally important, it encouraged all governments to work *together* to achieve these goals.

After several years of negotiation, Ottawa and the provinces signed ground-breaking agreements on early childhood development and child care in 2000 and again in 2003. They made a commitment to invest jointly in crucial services to promote healthy development in the early years. Unfortunately, the current federal government decided not to sustain its contribution after the expiry date of this collaborative arrangement.

One might say there was a prevailing sense at the time of the “royal we.” This notion had nothing to do with pledging allegiance to the Queen – or even to a new royal baby. Rather, it had everything to do with a sense of national commitment and the need for all governments to talk together and, better still, work collaboratively to enhance the well-being of Canadians.

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