

## *REINVENTING CANADIAN FEDERALISM*

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Those of us who are (or will be) candidates for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada are happy to focus on subjects most Canadians can identify with or support -- the environment and education are clear favourites.

Federalism, however, is tougher.

Historically, federalism has engendered serious and often emotional debate, and we're cautious about raising the issue now. But address it we must. It is critical to our discussions concerning the direction and future of the Liberal party; it is critical, also, for the future of Canada.

By federalism, I don't mean simply re-jigging the equalization formula, or addressing the so-called fiscal imbalance. These are, of course, extremely important issues. But the continuing discussion over who is to pay for what is related to a larger question: What is, or should be, the role of the federal government?

We have a prime minister who not long ago recommended a "firewall" around Alberta. He has recently offered more independent activity for Quebec -- including, for example, a separate voice at UNESCO. A number of provinces are looking at strategies for health delivery that could contravene the Canada Health Act and, in effect, create distinct provincial regimes. Are we heading down a path toward increased de-centralization in Canada? If so, is it wise?

I have lived and worked in both Ontario and Alberta (as well as abroad), and have had the opportunity to travel extensively across this wonderful country.

With our geography, and a population highly varied thanks to generations of immigration from all parts of the world, we in Canada benefit from multiple layers of identity: urban/rural; "new"/"old"/ aboriginal; English/French; male/female; Christian/Jewish/Muslim/Hindu/atheist; Quebecois/ Albertan/ Newfoundlander; Liberal/Conservative -- and those are just examples. Add all of the combinations and permutations, and the list goes on forever. But we all share an underlying identity -- we are all Canadian.

And the best part is that in Canada, we don't have to choose. Being Quebecois or Albertan is not inconsistent with being Canadian -- on the contrary, we are fortunate to be able to have, to benefit from, and to celebrate both.

But what does that have to do with federalism? In my view, Canada does need a strong central government, with a responsibility to ensure minimum Canadian national standards of health care and education; minimum national levels of protection for our environment (which transcends political borders in any event); a coherent, strong voice on the international stage; a high standard for human rights and quality of life; high standards for early childhood learning -- all of which translate into high national levels of opportunity for all Canadians.

We also need a strong federal government to ensure certain national programs that build on our history and help maintain that unique Canadian identity. A good example is recognizing the French and Quebecois role in our history, and the benefits of bilingualism. I am very grateful for such attitudes, being an Anglophone who is bilingual thanks to French immersion at school in Ontario. These are all key components of being Canadian.

This does not mean that the federal government should be involved in the delivery of services that, constitutionally, belong under provincial jurisdiction.

The key is that those national standards be met. We Canadians all have a responsibility, through the federal government, to ensure that the financial realities of meeting them are addressed. We must engage in the discussions over fiscal imbalance and equalization with honesty, and a clear understanding of our respective Canadian responsibilities -- to ourselves and each other.

Nor does this view of the federal role mean that provinces should be excluded from participation in international matters where the issues are relevant to them, or from engaging fully in the debates and decision-making needed to achieve national goals. Indeed, we need a much greater culture of consultation among the federal and provincial governments with respect to both international trade and national programs.

The federal government will do its job best when it has asked the right questions, ensured participation and, where possible, obtained consensus from the provinces. After taking into consideration that participation, Canada will then be able to speak with a much stronger single voice and be able to take decisive, positive action on things that matter to all Canadians.