

*MORE THAN THE SUM OF OUR PARTS*

*Martha Hall Findlay - MP, Willowdale*

*National Post, August 12, 2008*

No sooner did Quebec announce that it would negotiate a labour mobility deal with France last month, than federal Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon magnanimously declared that the federal government would "allow" Quebec to do so. Naturally, Quebec Premier Jean Charest responded that, in Quebec's view, the province didn't need the federal government's approval. And so, once again, the national conversation has turned to federal-provincial relations. How perfectly Canadian.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's "smaller" view of government has prompted much discussion of the devolution of powers to the provinces. For example, Globe and Mail columnist Lawrence Martin suggested that, contrary to popular opinion, Harper does have a vision for the country -- one of a "federation of fiefdoms." A supporter of this more de-centralized approach suggested recently that Canada has "moved beyond its vulnerable adolescent era." As the kids grow up -- provinces in this case -- they can be "trusted with more responsibilities."

To me, this smacks of the very paternalism that has clouded this debate for far too long.

We are all adults and should treat each other as such. My views have nothing to do with paternalistic concerns about "trust" or "responsibility." My views have

everything to do with how much more we Canadians can do -- how much more we Canadians can be.

I believe in a strong Canadian government. I proudly believe that this wonderful country is far more than the sum of its parts. Both the notion and the reality of Canada involve far more than one level of government looking after the military, the currency and the post office, while 13 others simply go their own ways with everything else.

It's a question of economics, yes. But it's also a question of attitude and of heart.

Economically, Canada is already small -- tiny, in the global context. And with increasing globalization, we face challenge enough in terms of leverage and clout in trade, economics, the environment, human rights and the like. Can any one of our provinces or territories do more, or better, on its own?

Certain one-off deals may be possible with less federal involvement. Some provinces may be able to accomplish limited goals in specific situations, but not on any long-term, sustained basis, and not for the bigger issues that transcend provincial boundaries.

I can understand Quebec's decision to negotiate directly with France, given its need for French-speaking professionals. But where does that leave the Canadian francophone communities outside of Quebec -- those in, for example, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Ontario? The question is not whether Quebec made the right decision on labour mobility. The question is: Where was our federal government, and why was it unwilling to advance an arrangement that could benefit all Canadians?

These days, both our federal and provincial governments seem uninterested in co-operation and unconvinced of its virtues. Our current Prime Minister is the one, after all, who said that Atlantic Canada had a "defeatist attitude," who

wanted to build a firewall around Alberta and who has encouraged comments like "Ontario is the last place to invest." This negative, unco-operative attitude is damagingly divisive.

We face deteriorating health care, job losses from an economic downturn, over 800,000 children living in poverty, growing international challenges, pressing needs of the environment and more. We want and need national standards, national expectations and a national consensus on how to achieve our vision. And consensus is not something that can be dictated.

A wise friend noted that all forms of federation, large organizations, even corporations, work best when there is a clear and shared overarching purpose, combined with the empowered freedom to innovate and to respond to local conditions.

Canadians don't want, to use Ken Dryden's perfect word - a "pinched" Canada. We want to feel good about this country. We want our governments, all of them working together, to step up and truly fulfill our national potential. We can accomplish so much more together than apart.

**Attitude is everything, and it's time in Canada for the politics of the possible.**