

# Bridge Building and the New Federalism

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## Abstract

*The "Common Ground: Renewing the Federal Partnership in Quebec and the West" workshop explored, among other things, the prospect for building new bridges between Quebec and the West. This prospect raises two interesting conceptual questions: what is being used to build the bridge, and who is doing the building? My contribution to this bridge-building discussion focuses less on the building materials and more on who is doing the building, and on the durability of the bridge in the face of emergent challenges.*

## Introduction

The articles by Harvey Lazar, Edward McWhinney, Eric Montpetit, John Richards and Paul Thomas identify many of the construction materials and suggest that, on balance, the Government of Canada has added significantly to its stock since the election of the Conservative minority government in 2006. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's loosely defined notion of "open federalism" and his more specific initiatives with respect to the vertical fiscal imbalance, constraints on the federal spending power, and the parliamentary recognition of the Québécois as a nation within a united Canada are all significant additions.

Whether the materials are sufficient is a judgment that will be made almost entirely in Quebec through the complex interplay of provincial and federal election results. Although historically western Canadians might have yelled "too much," today they are largely disengaged from and disinterested in this debate. The recognition of the Québécois nation, for example, caused barely a stir in the West; provincial governments said little, and even the radio talk shows pursued other topics. Whereas in the past western Canadians placed a great deal of stress on symmetrical models of federalism, rejecting any notion of asymmetrical federalism for the equality of provinces, today the greater flexibility of Harper's "open federalism" may have considerable appeal. What Montpetit terms "disjointed incrementalism" might fly in the West, although this is a term that defies ready public understanding.

One of the most interesting things about this project to bridge Quebec and the western Canadian provinces is that neither Quebec nor the West has been involved. There have been no intergovernmental forums called together by the Prime Minister, no First Ministers' Conferences or analogous opportunities to bring the parties together around a table, identify conflicts, and

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forge common ground. Indeed, Stephen Harper's government has generally eschewed formal intergovernmental gatherings, opting instead for parliamentary initiatives such as that to recognize the Québécois nation. Nor has the Council of the Federation rushed in to fill this intergovernmental gap. The Council does meet, but does so with virtually no public visibility or noticeable effect. Certainly the Council is not seen as brokering any new deal, substantive or rhetorical, between Quebec and the West, or indeed even suggesting that such a deal is necessary or possible. If the construction of a bridge between the two regional communities is underway, nobody has noticed in either Quebec or the West.

This is not to suggest that Quebecers have failed to notice the Prime Minister's ardent courtship of Quebec opinion and the Quebec vote. There has been nothing low-profile about this courtship, and its merits have been widely discussed within Quebec. However, few if any Quebecers have seen this as an attempt to build a bridge between Quebec and the West. Rather, they see it as an effort to increase Quebec's comfort within Confederation, to address Quebec's longstanding concerns, and to recognize nationalist aspirations within a more classically defined federation. In short, there has been no recognition that a bridge is being built; all the attention is on what was being built on the Quebec shore. If it is a bridge, it is one back into the Quebec heartland and not one that reaches out to western Canada. Harper's efforts are seen to be all about Quebec, and not about Canada.

Much the same understanding characterizes the West, keeping in mind Paul Thomas's reminder that the West is a very diverse region where agreement among provincial governments on a common set of political principles and priorities can never be assumed. Like their counterparts in Quebec, western Canadians have seen the Prime Minister's construction project first and foremost as an attempt to strength his electoral appeal in Quebec, and second to increase Quebec's comfort level within Confederation. The two regional communities share the same perception; neither sees even the faint outline of a bridge. The focus of attention is on Quebec alone, and not on that province's relationship with the West apart from the possibility that Harper himself is seen as the West.

Now, one might have thought the perception that the Prime Minister was building not a bridge but a Quebec beachhead would have raised the ire of western Canadian voters. Instead, the regional reaction has been a mixture of disinterest and indifference. This reaction can be explained in at least four ways. First, and likely least important, the West's economic prosperity may have fostered a generosity of spirit absent in past attempts to redesign the federation. Second, there is a general although not unqualified trust that Harper will not sell out the West in the long run. Third, western Canadians recognize that their electoral support cannot deliver a majority Conservative government, and if this is what the majority of voters want, they have to accept the fact that the Conservative base in Quebec must be expanded. Like it or not, the road to enduring national power leads through Quebec. Fourth, Quebec has been largely off the screen for western Canadians who pay little attention to what is happening in Quebec and believe that what happens is of little consequence for their own long-term prosperity. Conventional national unity debates are seen as a thing of the past, not the future.

Thus Harper's moves on the Quebec front are largely unfettered by western Canadian voters or their provincial governments; the Prime Minister has been given or has assumed a very long leash in his efforts to transform the Canadian federal system. He is free to deal with Quebec on

its own terms without having western Canadian voters or provincial governments looking over his shoulder.

In summary, neither Quebecers or western Canadians have been aware that a bridge was being built, and provincial governments in Quebec and the West have not been part of the construction crew. If the desire is in fact to build a bridge, and not simply a stronger electoral base in Quebec, then the only bridge builder is Harper and the bridge exists only within his own mind. Of course, this is not a bad location for any such bridge, and even if the goal of a bridge is apparent only to the Prime Minister, the structures that he has been putting in place have concrete reality. Nonetheless, it is almost as if the bridge is being built under a blanket; it is not a secret agenda, but rather a structure whose intent is not visible even if the building blocks clearly are. To mix metaphors, while the ground is being prepared for a new regional relationship, the seeds of that relationship have not yet been planted, much less have they sprouted.

## **The Future**

It is appropriate to ask, therefore, if this bridge can be built and unveiled soon enough and with enough strength to withstand a change in government? Will the decentralist girders that the Prime Minister has put in place remain if a more centralist government comes to power, such as we would see in the form of a Liberal/NDP coalition? Harper's strategy of replacing intergovernmental negotiations with parliamentary initiatives depends to a large degree on the partisan composition of Parliament and the parties that animate it. If truly national political parties can be reconstructed, then those parties and the Parliament within which they operate may have the capacity to broker new federal relationships spanning Quebec and the West. Parliamentary forums may replace intergovernmental forums, at least to the point of constitutional reform, should such reform be necessary. However, if a regionally fragmented party system continues, the premiers may necessarily, even if reluctantly, be brought back into play.

The more important question for me is whether the bridge will be strong enough to withstand a potentially acrimonious national debate about global warming, the redistribution of resource wealth, Senate reform, or quite likely all three at once? These are complex issues that play out very differently across Canada's regional landscapes, and they are bound to challenge the very notion of common policy ground.

The answer to this latter question may depend on the speed and intensity of the issues. For example, increasingly grim economic news may reduce the wind in the sails of the climate change debate, and as a consequence differences between Quebec and at least parts of the West – Alberta and Saskatchewan – may count for less as voters hunker down to protect their RRSPs first and the global environment second. In a similar fashion, \$200 a barrel oil will be less problematic for the Canadian federal system if it slowly creeps in by 2025 rather than landing with a thud next year. As for Senate reform, movement on this difficult front may stall in the case of another minority government or die completely with a change in government.

Here it is worth noting the skepticism of both Lazar and Richards with respect to the durability of recently introduced fiscal arrangements. If the resource boom morphs into a structural realignment of the Canadian economy, if the Ontario bedrocks upon which the equalization system has been built erodes in the face of American protectionism and global competition, the strains on the federation could be intense. Richards points out how central equalization programs have been to the federation while also noting the implicit design assumption that Ontario cannot be a “have not” province. If that assumption is called into question, the entire equalization edifice may topple.

At the same time, the common ground that Harper has tried to create through a more decentralized state that recognizes Quebec’s specificity is not one that will rest easily with those determined to pursue a more radical environmental agenda, or with those who believe that a healthy federation cannot tolerate growing regional disparities in wealth and economic opportunity. If Harper’s bridge is required to carry too much traffic too soon, before his “open federalism” becomes the new normal, it could spell collapse.

To this point, few people in either Quebec or the West realize that a bridge, or at least a potential bridge is being built between Quebec and the West. Nor, for that matter, do they see the need for such a structure. Hopefully, this bridge can be unveiled and publicized before substantive regional conflict emerges over such issues as global warming, wealth equalization or even Senate reform. If we don’t need a constructive dialogue between Quebec and the West today, we certainly will in the years to come.