

Modern challenges require new, more collaborative form of federalism

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In a [column posted earlier this week](#), I argued that our federation is entering a new phase in which federal/provincial entanglement will grow rapidly. This, in turn, calls for a new and more collaborative approach to federalism. Now I'd like to illustrate these points with an example.

As our population ages, the labour force is shrinking and Canadian governments are turning to immigration to help rebuild it. Policy-makers agree this is a critical part of any viable strategy for our continued prosperity.

It will succeed, however, only if new Canadians can travel about the country to find work in their various fields of expertise. Unfortunately, this is a problem. Their degree, diploma or certificate from their home country must be approved in Canada. Certification often takes years and there is a huge backlog of cases. We've all met the taxi driver with the PhD in engineering, who can't get a job because his degree hasn't been recognized.

In response, the Forum of Labour Market Ministers recently signed an agreement to begin [building a new certification system](#). It's more than just an upgrade of the old provincial/territorial systems.

The new vision is of a single, decentralized network, involving all 14 governments, as well as hundreds of stakeholders. It will be bound together by shared goals and principles and managed through collaboration.

The last point should raise some eyebrows. As even a casual student of federalism knows, our governments are often deeply distrustful of one another's intentions and motives, especially in federal-provincial dealings, where political interference and bureaucratic foot-dragging are legendary.

Why, then, would governments want to make something so important hinge on collaboration? The answer is that there is no other way to make the proposed system work. There are just too many players and issues.

If governments want to drive this project through to completion — and remember, our economic future depends on it — the bottom line is that the culture around federalism must change.

There is a ray of hope here. To the federal government's credit, in the first phase of this project it has shown an uncharacteristic willingness to play a new and very different role.

I recently did some interviews for a [case study on this topic](#) and I was struck by how conscious federal officials were of the collaborative nature of the process, and how respectful they were of the emerging culture around it.

Unlike the more confrontational style of traditional federal-provincial relations, they agreed that their role was to act more as a facilitator and enabler than a patriarch. By providing funding for the process, expertise and administrative support, research and policy development, they saw themselves as the grease that keeps the cart's wheels turning.

Moreover, no one I spoke with saw the role of facilitator as less important than those the feds assumed in the past. On the contrary, they viewed it more as "leading from behind," as one official put it. "There are important Canada-wide interests and perspectives here that must be addressed," he explained, "and no other level of government is as well positioned to ensure this happens."

So, in this process, none of the officials thought their job was to defend the "federal perspective" against the provinces. Rather, their role was to help ensure that solutions to Canada-wide issues came from the bottom-up.

They did this by engaging stakeholders and governments, rather than browbeating them. As a result, when solutions were reached, everyone felt a sense of ownership.

This is a striking departure from the traditional patriarchal role the feds have played in big intergovernmental processes. In past, they saw themselves as the guardians of the national interest, which usually meant they saw their role as arguing for some kind of "national standards."

The current process turns this upside down by calling on the feds to help stakeholders arrive at standards that are "pan-Canadian" rather than national, in the sense that they arise from the dialogue process, rather than being imposed on it.

I want to draw three lessons from this.

First, when it comes to highly complex tasks like building this new system, the officials I interviewed were very much on the right track. A more collaborative approach must be bottom-up. There is no other way to make collaboration work.

Second, collaboration is all about trust and building relationships. This requires a lot of hard, often unglamorous work out in the trenches. The meetings and research, the development of various tools and databases, the awareness-raising and skills development—these are all part of the work that must be done to build the relationships needed to make a project like this a success.

Finally, without strong and committed political leadership, this kind of groundwork is unlikely to get done, especially in a time of deep fiscal restraint. My fear is that in this project around certification such work will be seen as just one more “process,” which the government can live without.

Let me conclude simply by saying that failing to support this process would be a mistake that all of us will have to live with.

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