

# Does Harper's classical federalism hold water?

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The Harper government recently announced that after 2016-17 increases in health-care funding will be tied to economic growth. Lots of people have defended this decision on the grounds that the feds are [taking a more classical approach to federalism](#).

In this view, if the provinces expect to run health care, the feds should be free to decide how far they will fund it. Provinces should accept this, concludes the argument, because classical federalism is all about respecting each other's autonomy, unlike the paternalistic brand of federalism practiced by, say, Pierre Trudeau.

On first glance, the argument seems plausible enough. After all, the government's own agenda does seem pretty focused on federal responsibilities, such as foreign affairs, defence and crime. Why not just leave health to the provinces?

The answer is that the feds can't just withdraw from Health. As [Andre Juneau notes](#), lots of federal responsibilities, from regulating drugs to First Nations, overlap with or impact directly on Health.

This is only the tip of the iceberg. If federal involvement in health seems to be shrinking, below the surface federal/provincial entanglement is entering a whole new phase.

To see why, imagine a premier who is considering ways to get health spending under control. Should he/she invest in preventing illness and promoting wellness? These days, almost everyone will say yes, including those who are cheering for classical federalism. After all, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, right?

In fact, as a policy goal, wellness runs counter to the whole spirit of the 1867 constitution. If the constitution's framers had tried to include it, they would have found that it fits into neither the federal nor provincial list of powers. It would have to be a shared power, like immigration.

The reason is that wellness is a holistic way of thinking about health, which, by definition, links it to other policy fields. For example, an effort to promote wellness might focus on where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, our income and education level, gender and culture, or our relationships with friends and family. In short, wellness is a way of connecting health to just about [every aspect of our lives](#).

The lesson for classical federalism is that wellness reflects a fundamentally different approach to health policy, one that cannot be stuffed into a watertight compartment. In this view, the only way the feds can withdraw from health is if both levels of government agree not to promote wellness. If one side does, the initiative will quickly work its way into the other government's affairs. But, far from wanting to avoid wellness, almost everyone agrees it is the way of the future.

This kind of entanglement is hardly limited to wellness. The holistic view is now central to policy work in virtually every major policy field. Sustainable development, for example, is a holistic way of thinking about resource development. It says that policy-makers must link economic considerations with environmental and social ones.

It's not an exaggeration to say that holistic goals such as wellness, sustainable development, life-long learning and collective security will define 21st century governance. Recognizing this makes the claims about reviving 19th century classical federalism look either naïve or disingenuous. I'm inclined to the latter. Let me explain why.

In this new, more complex and interconnected world, governments are realizing that collaboration, rather than unilateralism, is the key to success. The Harper government is no exception — at least, not when it comes to foreign affairs.

At the international level, the old watertight view rests on principles like the sanctity of borders, the protection of national economies, and the primacy of national interests.

By contrast, the holistic view supports the growth of international institutions, globalization, collective action, and respect for human rights.

By these standards, Harper's international view is decidedly holistic. It is also collaborative, as we see from his willingness to participate in the UN coalitions in Afghanistan and Libya, as well as other international initiatives.

This doesn't mean Harper will or should collaborate on everything. Each government makes its own choices. On the environment, for example, he is unwilling to join a coalition unless it includes the US, China and India. Whether this is right or wrong, I leave for another day.

My point is that Harper understands that a middle power like Canada can be a real player on the international stage only if collaboration or multilateralism is the basis for decision-making. We don't have the size or muscle to assert our will unilaterally. This is one reason he gets on well with a progressive like Barack Obama. The president takes a collaborative view of international affairs and that works well for Canada.

Now, while I believe Harper favours collaboration in foreign affairs, I recognize that this contrasts sharply with his approach to domestic politics. Harper's style here at home is far more unilateral. I suspect this explains the talk around wanting to revive classical federalism. It allows the government to portray its tendency to unilateralism as a kind of respect for the provinces.

I disagree. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, a respectful approach to federalism would be based on the same spirit of collaboration that Harper supports and benefits from at the international level. I'll have more to say about a collaborative approach to federalism in a follow-up to this column, later this week.

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