

## Foreign policy and the provinces - a new federalism?

Embassy, Canada's Foreign Policy Newsweekly

[www.embassymag.ca](http://www.embassymag.ca)

8 November 2006

By David Dymont

*Dr. David Dymont a researcher at the University of Ottawa was on the recent CDFAI panel mentioned in the article. His Ph.D. was on the international activities of provinces. He is currently writing a book called Same Piece of Real Estate? Canada and the US.*

Naturally in analyzing a country's foreign policy the focus is on the central government. But in Canada, more than in most federations, the role of the member governments must be considered.

Last week the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) held a conference in Ottawa called Foreign Policy Under a Conservative Government: An Interim Report Card - the conference were former US ambassador Paul Cellucci made headlines about the Northwest Passage under the control of Canada.

One of the panels was titled Provinces and Foreign Policy: A New Federalism?. The Quebec piece was largely covered by Louise Beaudoin, one of that province's leading separatists and a former Quebec minister of International Relations.

The story of the federal dimension of foreign policy under the Harper government is not a significant departure from past practices. It is in part an extension of how Canadian prime ministers have viewed the roles and responsibilities of provinces

generally. Prime Minister Pearson in the 1960s was severely challenged by Quebec and Trudeau's rise to power was largely due to the perception that he could contain Quebec. Mulroney who replaced Trudeau in the 1980s felt that Trudeau's approach had been unnecessarily restrictive. Orientations on this issue have waxed and waned with Chrétien taking the view of his former boss. And Martin and Harper more inclined to Mulroney's approach.

Martin first opened the door to a Quebec delegate on the Canadian delegation to UNESCO during a campaign stop in Quebec City during the federal election of 2004. But it was Harper who acted on it in May of this year. It was this decision which prompted the CDFAI to have a panel on the provinces at their conference.

Quebec's new role at UNESCO seems to be proceeding smoothly except that the Quebec government has yet to appoint its representative. Surprisingly things are going less smoothly with Alberta - specifically on energy issues. This is unexpected, as Prime Minister Harper not only comes from Alberta but from Calgary.

In 2004 the Council of the Federation was created to enable the provinces to meet amongst themselves without the presence of the federal government. At Alberta's urging the Council advances that "provinces have a formal role to participate in international activities in their jurisdictions" and it calls for a "formalized written agreement on their involvement in international negotiations, agreements and forums".

Some officials describe energy as Alberta's UNESCO. The province producing the majority of Canada's fossil fuels is encouraging the federal government to give it a role in such energy related forums as the Canada-US Energy Working Group and the North American Energy Working Group of the Security and Prosperity Partnership. In the Speech from the Throne of April this year the new

government says it "will facilitate provincial participation in the development of Canadian positions that affect areas of provincial responsibilities".

Despite what are sometimes the exceptions of Quebec and Alberta the provinces and the territories are largely content with the conduct of international activities by the federal government. They rarely have the inclination or the capacity, except for Ontario, to project themselves independently.

The provinces contribute to Canada's foreign policy. For example, the end of Prime Minister Chrétien's huge Team Canada trade missions left a vacuum, extended by recent minority governments whose ministers have been less able to travel. Frequent trade missions by provincial premiers and ministers especially to China and increasingly to India, while exhausting for federal officials, have filled a void.

Increasingly provinces when they open an office abroad, and there will soon be almost 50, do so as co-locations within Canadian missions. Provincial officials report this arrangement energizes Canadian government activity and happily magnifies the expenditures made by the provinces abroad.

While the Harper government's intent in the recent Throne Speech to expand the role of provinces in foreign affairs is clear one detects some slippage from the text advanced by the Council of the Federation. This is not surprising given that the guiding principles of the federal government in its management of the provincial dimension of foreign affairs is that the equity of provinces be maintained and that the role of the federal government not be undermined. There is a tension between these principles and the undertaking largely in response to Alberta. A tension which the Harper government may not be able to sustain.