

# REFORMING OUR POLITICAL DISCOURSE: THE NATIONAL INTEREST IN A TRANSNATIONAL WORLD

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## THE CHANGING FACE OF FEDERALISM

The modern nation-state is the result of a link forged between two originally distinct concepts: "the nation" and "the state." The underlying idea is that each nation has its own history, language and culture, and hence its own "national interest." Moreover, nations have a "natural right" to protect and promote their interest, that is, to exercise their *sovereignty*. In theory, then, the nation-state is the home of a culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation; it is a sanctuary in which the group can collectively pursue its shared aims, values and interests without interference.

However, modern states rarely fit this model of a "nation-state." Many are linguistically, ethnically, and regionally diverse. Canada is a case in point. The adoption of a federal system in 1867 can be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the theory of the nation-state with the various forms of diversity in the new country.

When drafting the BNA Act, the Fathers of Confederation apparently thought those interests related to diversity were (more or less) local, identifiable and separable from those that citizens of the new state would hold in common. They concluded that they could draft a division of legislative powers between Parliament and the provincial legislatures which would adequately reflect this division of interests. Each of the two orders of government would be sovereign in its own sphere. Classical federalism was thus based on a distinction between a national interest (to be promoted by the federal government)

and a more local or regional one (to be promoted by provincial and local governments).

What appeared in 1867 to be a relatively tight compartmentalization of responsibilities and powers has become transformed over the years into a complex web of policies and programs entangling federal and provincial governments. In response, observers began to view federalism as a dynamic system in which a constant balance must be struck between two different, and often competing, sets of social and political forces: the centralizing ones of national integration; and the decentralizing ones of local integration. The national-local distinction thus becomes relative and mutable rather than static.

Even though views of it evolved over the years, the national-local distinction has remained the normative basis of Canadian federalist discourse. However, this discourse may be on the threshold of a new development.

There is currently much speculation about the way globalization is reshaping social and political life in western democracies.<sup>1</sup> In federal states like Canada, one consequence seems to be that the terms of political debate no longer fit comfortably into the traditional categories of local and national. A new third category of what we can call *transnational interests* seems to be evolving.

In its original context — that of international trade and banking — globalization refers to the free circulation of goods and capital without the intervention of states. But a second set of global forces is now emerging. These are often collected together

under the label "new social movements." Such movements include international environmental groups like Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, human rights groups like Amnesty International, and the women's movement. (Such organizations are not entirely new, of course, but they are entering a new phase, as we discuss below). The objectives, political logic and degree of influence of these two sets of forces are very different. Indeed, many of the new social movements distrust the trend toward economic liberalization, which they see as a potential threat to the environment, and to the traditional livelihood of the least well-off in many countries.

Nonetheless, the two groups share at least two features. First, the emergence of both the "new economy" and the "new social movements" as global forces is a result of the communications revolution of the past two decades. Remarkable leaps in computer and telecommunications technology — including everything from fax machines, e-mail and Internet to the Cable News Network and international banking systems — have made it possible to develop and maintain what are sometimes called "virtual communities." These communities are composed of individuals from around the globe who are linked together by common economic or social interests.

The new technology has provided the infrastructure for an international communications network that has vastly improved the organization of such communities and thus allows them to function as (relatively) cohesive political units, responding to day-to-day events in countries around the world.<sup>2</sup> In the past, these international groups communicated by mail, telegraph or cable-based long-distance telephone calls. As a result, geography alone kept them diffuse and disorganized and prevented their members from becoming effective political actors outside of their immediate political surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

Second, from the point of view of governments, the interests around which these groups coalesce have a peculiar and important feature: they are essentially indifferent to the political boundaries that define nation-states. By definition, they transcend national boundaries. Indeed, the promotion of these interests inclines toward the elimination of such boundaries, or at least a reduction in national sovereignty. As a result, advocates are placing increasing pressure on governments to cease treating issues involving these interests as though they were the internal affairs of this or that nation-state, the way most view, say, decisions on how to structure social programs or set income tax rates.

British Columbia provides a convenient example of how certain kinds of transnational interests are changing the way we view Canadian politics. In the past, if one wanted to understand the political life of that province, there were two directions in which to look. One could look at the state of its relationship with other governments and regions in the Canadian political community. Thus one would ask about such things as the interplay of local and national economic policy; relations with Quebec; interprovincial trading relationships; and conflicts over jurisdiction. Or one could look at "local issues" within the province's borders. Thus, one might look at regional disparities; the level of unemployment; the state of economic infrastructure, such as highways and airports; and the availability of natural resources.

Nowadays to understand B.C. politics one must also look beyond its borders to the Pacific Rim; nor can one ignore such things as, say, environmental issues in Brazil or Europe. This is not to say that external relationships were hitherto unimportant to B.C. That province has always been heavily involved in trade; and international movements have been around as long as the province. Transnational interests, as such, are certainly not new. But they may be crossing a critical threshold. What seems to be changing is the way British Columbians identify with them. Thus trade and environmental issues are assuming a profile in that province that is often only awkwardly described as national or local. Increasingly, those who promote such interests view themselves as agents and members of a larger, transnational movement or "community of interest." Moreover, the intended audience often lies outside Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, political issues are increasingly framed in global terms. One hears of the need to "respect common human values," to be "internationally responsible" and "open to change," to show concern for "future generations" and to adopt attitudes and practices appropriate to life in the "global village." As the linkages with organizations and movements beyond our national borders evolve, new transnational loyalties and commitments are forming. As a result, a new global political culture is emerging based upon the promotion of transnational interests. In a province like B.C., the new loyalties and commitments that will arise could soon rival — even surpass — in importance many of the traditional ones which British Columbians feel as members of Confederation.<sup>5</sup>

This globalization of political discourse is not simply the accidental or contingent result of economic and technological change. It also reflects the logic of our prevailing liberal-democratic ideology. Liberalism has always leaned toward cosmopolitanism. That is, liberals have tended to assume that an (objective) account can be given of the general needs and interests of persons on which to base certain universal principles of justice, freedom and equality. Globalization is giving new life to this idea.

We believe that Canada's traditional bipolar political discourse is not rich enough to explore the logic of these new relationships. The existing discourse must be restructured around a *trilateral division of interests*, to allow Canadians to better distinguish transnational from national and local interests, assess how they interact, and debate how an appropriate balance might be struck between them. In the remaining space, we will look briefly at how this trilateral division might affect the way the concept of the national interest is used in Canadian political discourse.

## DEFINING THE NATIONAL INTEREST

In recent years, the "national interest" has been invoked to justify a host of actions, including international trade agreements; deregulation of airlines; bailing out of bankrupt industries; distribution of emergency funds to farmers and fishermen; participation in international relief and peace-keeping operations; and changes to the fiscal transfer system.

The concept of the national interest is basic to Canadian political discourse. Indeed, the assumption that there *is* a national interest underwrites the legitimacy of the decision-making process and the authority of the federal government. Were there no distinctly national interests, there would be no reason to maintain a national level of government. If we had only local and transnational interests, then the political powers which are currently exercised at the national level could be either devolved to the provincial or municipal level so as to better promote local interests, or transferred to the transnational level, to such institutions as the United Nations or GATT, so as to better promote transnational interests.

Of course, the federal government does promote transnational interests in the environment, human

rights, and free trade. But these transnational interests are not inherently tied to the current boundaries, or even to the very existence, of the Canadian state. Given the increasing importance of international social movements, trade agreements and human rights bodies, these transnational interests might not be harmed if Canada were to become absorbed into another country (or if Canada were to divide into two or more separate states). Hence, these interests cannot provide the rationale for the Canadian state, or serve as the basis for national unity within Canada. It only makes sense to maintain Canada as a distinct political entity on the assumption that we have genuinely national interests, in addition to our local and transnational interests.

Yet many current discussions of the "national interest" do not clearly distinguish between national and transnational interests. Under a trilateral scheme, to say that certain interests are "national" would be to claim that they are distinctive to Canada, and hence make a special contribution to maintaining the sense of national identity and unity. National interests are the interests which Canadians share *as Canadians*.

What are these "national" interests? They include a particular way of sharing natural resources (ie. regional equalization), the maintenance of common cultural practices and the development and enjoyment of common languages (ie. multiculturalism within a bilingual framework), and a particular international role (ie. as a small-power peace-broker within the United Nations, with special ties to the Commonwealth and *la francophonie*). As "national objectives" these reflect certain distinctive interests which the citizens of Canada share with one another, beyond the transnational interests we share with the citizens of countries around the world.

It is these interests which would be most seriously jeopardized if Canada were to be absorbed into another country, or subdivided. The fact that the Canadian state is uniquely positioned to promote these interests enables it to fill a special 'niche' in terms of the identity and interests of its citizens.

To say that certain interests are "national," then, is to claim that they make a special contribution to maintaining the sense of community in, or the political viability of, the Canadian state. This is to be contrasted with the political, economic and moral logic of transnational interests which, as we have seen, is largely indifferent to the boundaries of existing

political communities. The promotion of freer trade, respect for human rights, and care of the global environment are supported by international networks and an emerging international political culture. These "global objectives" will continue to be promoted whether or not Canada exists. However, many genuinely *Canadian* interests — such as linguistic duality, provincial autonomy, and regional equalization of services — will not.

By separating out national and transnational interests, we force ourselves to define more clearly what special role the Canadian political community plays in the lives of its citizens; what genuinely "national" objectives it is uniquely positioned to promote.

We believe that there are important national interests which underwrite the existence of the Canadian state, and that the viability of the country depends upon the state's power to play a positive role in promoting these objectives. But this raises an important question: what if the promotion of transnational interests conflicts with state-sponsored measures aimed at protecting the Canadian community? There is no reason to think that promoting national objectives will require any violation of human rights. But there may be conflicts between national objectives and our transnational interests in trade, mobility and environmental protection.

For example, the promotion of free trade may conflict with government policies regarding subsidies to cultural industries. The United States views these policies simply as a form of unfair subsidy for domestic Canadian industries, and so has sought to prohibit them under GATT and NAFTA. Yet many Canadians believe that the promotion of a common culture is a legitimate — indeed essential — part of our "national interest." Similar debates have arisen over regional equalization policies: are they an unfair subsidy of domestic industries, or a legitimate national interest?

As the debate over NAFTA shows, views are already polarized between those who think policy should be shaped more by global objectives, and those who think it should reflect national ones. But the debate is not likely to stop there. As globalization advances, a similar debate is likely to arise in a wide range of areas, including immigration, the environment, economic policy, peace-keeping commitments, language and social policy. Policy-makers and jurists will be forced to make important

choices regarding how national and transnational interests are to be integrated and balanced.

Consider immigration. Suppose the United Nations sponsored a debate over what criteria ought to govern immigration policy. The arguments advanced would likely fall into two broad categories. On the one hand, some would urge that a just approach should be firmly anchored in human rights and universal principles of freedom and justice. This would generate a pretty liberal "open-doors" policy. For one thing, immigration is one way to achieve greater equality of opportunity among the world's poor and oppressed. Moreover, open borders increase individual mobility for all people. Our transnational interests and principles, therefore, support open borders.

On the other hand, some (including, one expects, most western nations) would urge that such a policy must be firmly anchored in a respect for national sovereignty. They would insist that a country's policy must also reflect the "national interest" of the receiving country. For example, attempts to maintain English and French as common languages in Canada might be unsustainable if we had fully open borders.

This raises the question: to what extent are Canadians willing to forego transnational interests in individual mobility and freer trade in order to maintain a common culture, common languages and regional equality in Canada? An uncritical tendency to elevate global objectives above national ones could undermine the sense of community on which a large, regionally, culturally and linguistically diverse country like Canada rests. On the other hand, the importance of promoting "global objectives" should, by now, be clear to all. The difficult task will be to find the right balance.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The need to clarify these trade-offs is greater than ever. Before the era of globalization, a very robust conception of national sovereignty assured that the responsibility for promoting both national and transnational interests was the prerogative of the state. In practice, this meant that the state could always retreat from certain transnational goals if they jeopardized national objectives. As imbalances in policy-making became evident, trends could be reversed or shifted one way or another to balance out the promotion of various types of interests. This sort of flexibility was crucial to maintaining the sense of community in diverse countries like Canada.

However, this approach is no longer viable. The more interdependent the world becomes, the more governments are committing themselves to international norms and organizations. This reduces the scope for national governments to reverse long-term policy-making trends to which they have become committed at the supra-national level. This means it will be more difficult to compensate later on for present failures to adequately promote national objectives crucial to the sense of community.

Drawing a clear distinction between transnational and national interests certainly will not solve all the problems. But, in placing the burden on political leaders, policy-makers, jurists and advocates to clearly explain how their proposals affect the interests of *Canada*, it may help us to see more clearly what exactly is at stake in some of these conflicts and hence to better evaluate the options. □

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#### Endnotes

1. See, for example, Michael Walzer, "Between Nation and World" *The Economist* (11 September 1993) at 49-53.
2. Of course, the degree of cohesion within these movements can be exaggerated. These movements seek to build coalitions across national borders, but some people worry that this globalization of issues often involves a misleading "decontextualization" of issues. The women's movement, for example, has been divided over the "essentializing" of women's issues which ignore race, class, and linguistic differences. Differences in race, language and culture make coalition politics difficult, and the likelihood of such conflict is enhanced when geographic boundaries are crossed.
3. One thinks, for example, of religious missionaries or of the international communist movement.
4. For example, during the recent demonstrations against logging in Clayquot Sound, many of the protesters weren't British Columbians, or even Canadians. Conversely, B.C. environmentalists are often more concerned with influencing European public opinion than with lobbying Victoria or Ottawa.

5. One thinks of B.C.'s response to the Charlottetown Accord and of its support for the Reform Party in the last federal election.
6. Again, there is no suggestion here that Canadians should compromise their respect for human rights, either domestically or abroad. The question is what, in a free and democratic society, counts as a reasonable limit on individual freedoms, e.g., to what extent do considerations of the "national interest" justify limiting, say, the free movement of capital, goods, services and labour either within the country or across its national borders?

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