

# ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Robin V. Sears



A succession of provincial premiers have departed the scene in the last year, and more may be on the way out in this one. British Columbia's Gordon Campbell, pushed out by his own party and caucus, will be the first to go this year, and Ontario's Dalton McGuinty faces uphill odds in his bid for a third term this October, while in Quebec Jean Charest's approval ratings plummeted to rock bottom in 2010, with no prospect they will revive any time soon. Today's premiers stand on the shoulders of giants such as Peter Lougheed, Bill Davis and Robert Bourassa, stalwarts of the federation who could together successfully take the measure of Ottawa. They have no equivalents on today's federal-provincial stage.

Plusieurs premiers ministres provinciaux ont quitté l'arène politique l'an dernier et quelques autres pourraient suivre leur exemple en 2011. Le premier départ de l'année sera celui de Gordon Campbell, de la Colombie-Britannique, qui s'est fait indiquer la sortie par son propre parti. Suivront peut-être Dalton McGuinty, qui devra remonter en Ontario une pente abrupte pour obtenir un troisième mandat en octobre, de même que Jean Charest, dont la cote de confiance auprès des Québécois a touché le fond en 2010 et n'est pas près de remonter. Les premiers ministres actuels évoluent dans l'ombre de géants comme Peter Lougheed, Bill Davis et Robert Bourassa, anciens piliers de la fédération qui pourraient ensemble se mesurer à Ottawa. Mais ils n'ont aujourd'hui aucun équivalent sur la scène tant fédérale que provinciale.

As successive prime ministers have relentlessly drawn more power to their office, draining independence, vitality and creative energy from Parliament, cabinet and the civil service, one set of political players has consistently frustrated their agendas.

For 50 years, it has often been premiers and their key advisers who have been the only real check on the awesome political power of a Canadian prime minister. Like the Prime Minister's Office, the Office of the Premier has grown in power in every major province.

Their ability to block the overreach of Pierre Trudeau or any of his successors has rested on two pillars: their personal political authority and their ability to make common cause with similarly effective partners. Medicare, bilingualism, the National Energy Program, the Charter, Meech Lake, Charlottetown and Kelowna were all shaped or shut down by variations on these shifting powerful alliances.

That era may be coming to an end.

If, as seems likely, Stephen Harper is returned with at least a stronger minority government in an election in the next 6 to 18 months, he will face a considerably diminished set of rivals in the key provincial capitals. Even if a Liberal-NDP coalition were to oust the Conservatives following a less successful Tory campaign, their very different national

agenda would face provincial governments far less capable of shaping or resisting change.

The reasons for this sudden shift are several, and this alignment may not last. At least one is more permanent, however, and should be of concern to those who believe the genius of Canadian federalism is its subtle balance of forces.

The idea of consulting publicly with premiers, which led to the "FPTO industry" — the federal, provincial and territorial organizations and inter-governmental relations sector — had its origins in the postwar era. First over specific policy issues — pensions, medicare and bilingualism were early subjects during the Pearson years — then in broader departmental arenas and finally on the whole range of constitutional divides, the idea of interministerial conferences as public events was born.

The Victoria conference of first ministers, 40 years ago, is usually seen as the launch event for the next generation of constitutional battle. This was a political war conducted in front of television cameras, often several times a year, for decades. It spawned its own industry of lawyers, consultants and constitutionally expert civil servants across Canada. Pierre Trudeau came to detest the ritual combat, Brian Mulroney often enjoyed his mastery of it, and Jean Chrétien abolished it.

Public interministerial conferences are now rare, First Ministers' Conferences (FMCS) extinct. Their critics railed

against the showboating and the expensive rituals often devoid of substance. They had one unforeseen impact that led to their demise: they made national figures of provincial premiers and their senior ministers. John Robarts became a national icon at the Confederation for Tomorrow conference, Allan Blakeney and Peter Lougheed starred as relentless champions of provincial resource rights in quiet fisticuffs with Trudeau — they held out for, and got, the notwithstanding clause in the Charter of Rights. René Lévesque's smoke-wreathed glower became an almost comforting convention of these affairs. Needless to say, this did not amuse the Sir Humphreys in the PMO and Privy Council Office, so they ended it.

In one respect, therefore, it is unfair to compare the rather more pallid successors in the various premiers' offices of today with the giants of that era. Today's leaders rarely get much face time with the Canadian people beyond their own borders. Still, with or without spotlights and makeup, it would be hard to dismiss the statesmanship and authority of a Bill Davis or a Robert Bourassa. Such was the regard and affection for Bourassa that at his death in 1996, Mike Harris arrived at his funeral at Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal accompanied by every former living premier of Ontario.

And those premiers who succeeded them in this decade, far less frequently seen in political combat on the national news — Gordon Campbell, Jean Charest, Danny Williams, Dalton McGuinty, Gary Doer — remained national political figures despite the absence of the FMC forum. Most have already departed, the rest will soon be gone. Though the mantle of power can be transformative, it is less than awe-inspiring to consider the challenge to federal power that their successors will represent for a renewed Stephen Harper.

Premiers like Stelmach, Selinger and Alward — who are these guys? — are relatively new but nonetheless unknown. Even competent Maritime leaders such as

Shawn Graham, Robert Ghiz and Darrell Dexter were overshadowed by the theatrical brilliance of their Newfoundland colleague, the now departed Danny Williams. It's not clear that they will rise to prominence as champions of regional interest in his absence.

Only Saskatchewan's Brad Wall, among the newbies, has made a strong impression on the national stage, first with his rhetorical gifts and then with his successful campaign against the BHP Billiton hostile takeover of Potash Corp.

Wall has stepped ably into the shoes of Tommy Douglas and Roy Romanow and Allan Blakeney as a smart, engaging, tough champion of western interests. His predecessors each benefited from strong partners and wingmen from the adjacent provinces.

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Wall may be on his own more than they were in the next round of resource and carbon taxation and foreign investment bargaining with Ottawa.

The duality of Ontario and Quebec as the flywheel of Confederation is likely to wind down for some years ahead. Jean Charest will likely retire, to be replaced by the Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois in the bunker at Quebec City. Tim Hudak has most of the smart money on him as Ontario premier come October. An alliance against Ottawa between Harrisite Conservatives and hardline sovereignists is a little hard to envision, although it's true that Harris and Lucien Bouchard got along famously.

Gordon Campbell was an enormous asset to his generation of premiers, respected in Ottawa by Liberal and Conservative prime ministers alike, seen

as an able and trusted deal maker by his regional peers. Though BC politics is always full of surprises and astonishing twists, it seems unlikely that the leadership struggles of either the NDP or the Liberals will throw up a leader as quickly comfortable and confident on the national stage.

**I**mportant national decisions on health care reform, on pension funding, on First Nations development and on foreign investment loom, decisions that in a previous generation would have been shaped by national debate, often in front of Canadians in their living rooms. This time the prospect is that the Privy Council Office will prepare bottom-line positions for the Prime Minister. He will do a series of bilateral deals, often sweetened with side benefits for specific partners. The premiers not able to be so seduced will be left shouting on the sidelines.

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the making of a new interprovincial and territorial institution. As an institutionalization of the older, more informal annual premiers' conference, it ironically gave licence to the federal decision. "Well, you kids have your own club now, so please...enjoy!" has been the reaction of Ottawa to this effort to recreate a national forum, as the feds knew it would have neither profile nor political weight, absent a federal partner, and under both Paul Martin and Stephen Harper, they have chosen to remain absent.

The one attempt at an FMC by Martin, his health care summit of September 2004, began behind closed doors at the National Conference Centre and ended up with a deal being cut late at night over takeout pizza at 24 Sussex. The resulting 10-year \$41-billion Health Accord saw all the

money flowing from Ottawa to the provinces at a guaranteed rate of increase of 6 percent a year — twice the normal growth rate of the economy.

Martin bought a decade of peace on health care funding by acceding to the provinces' collective demand that he reverse some of the downloading of his earlier years as finance minister. Prime Minister Harper may not lose much sleep over the reaction of Premiers Marois and Hudak to his refusal to renew the massive cash injection.

Canadians may witness the beginning of the defederalization of the country — to coin a clunky term — in this process. It was possible for Peter Lougheed to kill the National Energy Program because he rallied every premier west of Ontario, and most of their citizens, to fight Ottawa's attempted theft of their revenues. How would Premier Stelmach do in a fight over a national carbon tax?

Most observers of Canadian democracy, across party lines, have expressed concern about the accretion of power in the PMO within the context of federal institutions. Little attention has been paid the increasing tilt toward Ottawa on the federal-provincial axis. This development is more ironic as Stephen Harper was meant to be a BNA federalist, a classical federalist with respect to the division of powers in sections 91 and 92 of the Constitution.

Not enough weight was given to a competing thread of his DNA, the desire for an absolute mastery of power.

His collision with Danny Williams was a dramatic illustration of this tension. His BNA conviction should have pushed him into favouring a deal respecting provincial rights. It was his rage at being challenged by a provincial "ally" that made his decision. His need for some base in Quebec, in combination with his nominal acceptance of its "nationhood," should make him a partner with even a PQ premier. Don't be surprised if federal power and his determination to wield it trump those principles.

The Prime Minister has a second shield of so far impenetrable armour not available to any of his provincial competitors: a powerless party, cabinet and caucus. Never in Canadian history has a prime minister been so free of any resistance, or even serious debate, among his allies and supporters about his agenda and his strategic choices. Those senior ministers who have risked their future by weighing in against prorogation, or abolishing the census, were quickly rebuffed. It seems likely that more will follow Jim Prentice into early retirement as a result. When Brad Wall called on the Saskatchewan Conservative MPs to support him in the potash battle, their collective silence was deafening, although it has been reliably reported that when the issue came up in caucus in November, all 11 Conservative backbenchers spoke against the deal, and the two cabinet ministers preserved ministerial solidarity with their silence. Later that same day, Industry Minister Tony Clement killed it.

By contrast, no provincial premier has even the security of his own predecessors, let alone Stephen Harper's unchecked power. Ed Stelmach is the

democratic political combat debases politics in the eyes of Canadians. It also increases the determination of leaders' office minions to crush dissent. Critics of Harper's mailed-fist approach to party and caucus discipline are surely correct about its impact on considered decision making and on the respect of Canadians for their democracy. But many provincial premiers would love to borrow his political armour, just to luxuriate in the invincibility that comes with it.

**T**here is a saying among observers of hardline regimes that brutal governments are brittle and crack unpredictably. It's hard to see what the fault lines for the Harper administration might be.

The weakening of the federal-provincial consultative process means Harper faces less threat from an alliance of premiers than any prime minister in decades. The weakening of the political authority of his potential challengers at home and nationally further diminishes the power of these adversaries. Finally, his command-and-control PMO at the

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butt of regular internal backbiting. Gordon Campbell was forced out by his internal enemies. Danny Williams' and Gary Doer's successors sit on far shakier thrones.

It is worrying to see the slow rise of winner-take-all politics in a number of provincial parties. It would have been unheard a generation ago for former cabinet colleagues to launch attacks on their own leaders and parties as bitter and public as those that Premiers Stelmach, Campbell and Charest have endured this past year.

This Third World, "death to the enemy" — even to a competitor in my own political family — approach to

centre of a cabinet and caucus of rock-solid loyalty makes any risk of internal rebellion seem remote.

For those anxious about the unleashing of the infamous Harper "hidden agenda" in the event that he wins a majority, there is perhaps a reason for deeper angst. Given the enfeebled state of his provincial opponents, delivering on that agenda may not require one.

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