

## Provinces flex their muscles

Martin's health-care pact with the premiers sets a precedent for other inroads on unity

Times Colonist

*September 25, 2004*

It was during the run-up to the ill-fated Meech Lake accord that a Conservative party delegate demanded at the national convention why Quebecers should be treated differently.

"They still bleed when they're cut, don't they?" she demanded.

Yes, they do. But thanks to the health accord that Prime Minister Paul Martin has worked out with the premiers, they might be fixed up a little differently.

This agreement, as Martin acknowledges, ushers in the era of "asymmetric federalism" in Canada. The principle, espoused by politicians like Pierre Trudeau, that the central government must be strong in order to hold the country together, has been abandoned.

The idea that all provinces should be treated equally -- with an exception being made for Quebec's distinct cultural and linguistic interests -- has also been dismissed.

In allowing Quebec Premier Jean Charest to sign a separate deal with Ottawa on health care, even though he tries to assure us it's identical with the one signed by the rest of the premiers, Martin has invited other provinces to seek their own peculiar arrangement with the feds as well. The consequences could be far-reaching.

Liberal Senator Serge Joyal predicts that in future federal-provincial encounters, there will be no one speaking for Canadians as a whole, any more. Liberal MP Maurizio Bevilacqua says Ottawa will become no more than a tax-collector for the provinces and their municipalities.

Roy Romanow says flatly that asymmetrical federalism "breaks up the country." Allowing provinces to make their own deals with Ottawa for ideological or political reasons, he says, "is not my notion of building a unified Canada."

Now Joyal may be no more than a throwback to Trudeau Liberalism, and Bevilacqua, who was left out of Martin's cabinet, may be a disgruntled Liberal. But Romanow is not simply the guru of public health care in Canada. He's a former NDP premier of Saskatchewan and has seen action in the trenches in the battle between Ottawa and the provinces.

And within days of the health accord being signed, we're seeing where Quebec's side deal is leading. Charest calls it "a principle, a grid that will be useful in the future." That cunning old separatist, Jacques Parizeau, has praised Charest for moving his province toward "the ultimate objective."

Mario Dumont, the leader of Action Democratique du Quebec, buoyed by his party's victory in a byelection just days after Charest's so-called coup in Ottawa, is calling for Quebec to adopt a separate constitution, collect federal taxes and break federal laws if necessary to develop its hydro-electric potential. And, just to make it smart, adds the province should violate the Canada Health Act and support private health care.

"We will take care of our affairs," says Dumont. "Ottawa will not dare to get in our way."

Well, that's pretty obvious. Canada's Heritage Minister, Liza Frulla, declared this week while attending a UNESCO meeting, that the health deal implies that her Quebec counterpart could speak on behalf of both Quebec and Canada at international gatherings.

Environment Minister Stephane Dion, formerly the federal minister responsible for national unity, says the provinces should have input into foreign policy so long as they allow Canada to "speak with one voice."

OK, so both Frulla and Dion are Quebecers, but as federal ministers they might be expected to be a little more cautious in welcoming the new federalism.

And we can't count on the opposition parties to stand up for a strong central government. The Bloc Quebecois is committed to breaking up the country altogether. The Conservatives campaigned in the last election for greater provincial powers. The New Democrats think they have gains to make in Quebec.

We expect a minority government not to be as strong as a majority government.

But this one seems prepared to roll over and play dead whenever a provincial premier -- particularly one from Quebec -- barks.

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