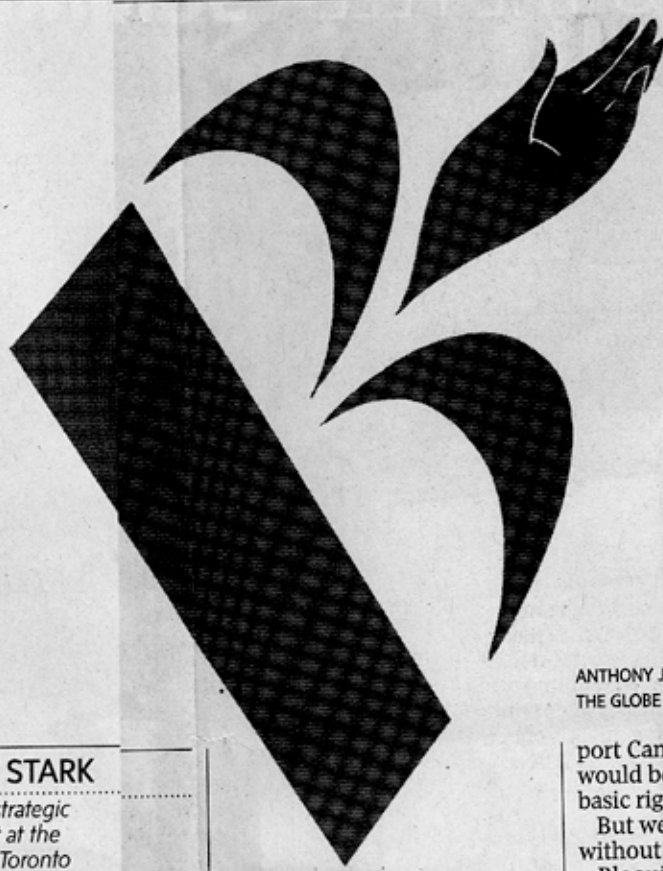


## FEDERALIST PRINCIPLE AT WORK

**ANDREW STARK**

Professor of strategic management at the University of Toronto

There has been much talk recently about whether Canada is doomed, at least for the foreseeable future, to a series of unstable, short-lived minority governments. As long as the Bloc Québécois holds a lock on 40 to 50 seats in Parliament, neither of the two main political parties will have an easy time winning a majority.

True, if either had reliable coalition partners to prop it up, then minority government would not necessarily mean short-lived government. But the idea of the Bloc as a coalition partner – as last year's unhappy experiment shows – is a non-starter. Hence, we seem fated not just to minority governments, but to governments that focus far more heavily on short-term electoral success than the country's long-term needs.

What to do? One of the reasons the Bloc is able to fight elections with such vigour is that the federal Treasury provides quarterly allowances to parties based on their share of the popular vote. As long as a party earns 2 per cent of the vote nationwide – or 5 per cent in the ridings where it chooses to run candidates – then it collects \$1.95 a year for each vote it wins. To the Bloc, which garnered 10 per cent of the national popular vote in last year's election, this means about \$3-million annually – about 77 per cent of its funding.

But there's something jarring about this formula. After all, in other arenas of our political life, we Canadians have always moderated the principle of popular vote, of apportioning power in decision-making structures according to raw popular support, by a federalist principle.

For example, when it comes to constitutional amendments, ratification by provinces representing 50 per cent of the population is not enough; an amendment must pass muster in at least seven provinces, which requires it to win support in multiple regions of the country. When it comes to Parliament, the popular principle does not completely hold sway even in the House of Commons. Smaller provinces enjoy greater representation than their population alone would justify, thereby encouraging governments to play to more than one region.

When it comes to election law, then, why shouldn't we also moderate the principle of popular vote with the principle of federalism? Why not require

## Knock a chip off the old Bloc

Political parties should be required to win votes in more than just one province to receive the federal allowance

that any party eligible for an allowance win, say, a minimum of 2 per cent of the popular vote in at least two regions of the country? Or 5 per cent of the vote in ridings in which it chooses to run, provided that this threshold 5 per cent was earned in more than one province's ridings? In the last election, the Conservatives, Liberals, NDP and Greens all managed this. Only the Bloc didn't, because it runs candidates exclusively in Quebec.

Implementing such a rule would not stop the Bloc from running a full slate of candidates in Quebec, only from having access to the federal allowance to do so. Nor, in fact, would it prohibit the Bloc from running candidates outside Quebec, perhaps on a Canada-wide platform of radical decentralization, and collecting an allowance if it managed to get 2 per cent of the vote in the West, say, in addition to its traditional support in Quebec.

There is an important difference between restricting funding to federal parties and restricting it to federalist parties.

The first – requiring that any party eligible for federal tax dollars win votes in more than one region – would be in keeping with the norms of Canadian federalism. The second – requiring that any party eligible for federal tax dollars sup-

ANTHONY JENKINS/  
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

port Canadian federalism – would be incompatible with basic rights.

But we can easily do the first without the second.

Bloquistes would presumably object on the grounds that 40 per cent of Quebecers – translating into 10 per cent of Canadians – voted for the Bloc, so fairness requires that these voters not be "disenfranchised," that the Bloc get its pro rata share of federal financial support.

Such an argument, though, would risk collapsing under the weight of its own irony. For Quebec's leaders have sought to protect its unique minority culture, over many decades, precisely by rejecting the principle of apportioning power or resources on the basis of raw popular numbers, without a due respect for the federalist principle.

That is why, for example, former Quebec premier Robert Bourassa sought to dilute the rest of Canada's popular majority by a Quebec veto over changes to the federal Constitution, requiring any amendment to win threshold public support in both Quebec and the rest of Canada. He also sought a guaranteed proportion of seats – again, mitigating the popular vote with a principle of regional distribution – for Quebec in the federal Parliament.

To ask that the federal Treasury support a party that is available only to Quebecers is like asking it to support courts, parks, highways or other public bodies and spaces that are accessible to Quebecers only, something that no sovereignist politician has ever sought or expected.

True, the Treasury may channel funding for certain kinds of private entities to Quebec companies only, as for example with the Economic Development Agency for the Regions of Quebec, although Ottawa generally offers comparable programs elsewhere. Given their integral role in government, though, political parties don't resemble private so much as public entities – entities that, if the federal taxpayer is going to fund them, should be open to all Canadians.

We should, at the very least, engage in an honest debate about the party-allowance formula, and whether it should be more federalist and less purely numbers-based in its orientation. Yes, the politics of doing so would be daunting. But it might also be the first step toward returning to Canadians a critical option: electing governments that can take a longer view of the serious issues that confront the nation.

» Andrew Stark is a former policy adviser in the Prime Minister's Office under Brian Mulroney.

## B.C. CONFLAGRATIONS

## Get fired up over badly managed forests

**REESE HALTER**

Founder, international conservation institute Global Forest Science

As fires rage across southern B.C., homeowners and taxpayers wonder if there's a plan to deal with tinder-dry, beetle-infested forests.

Hundreds of thousands of homes across the province's southern half straddle the urban/wild interface, from picturesque Lake Okanagan, to the densely populated North Shore of the Lower Mainland, to Whistler, a site of the 2010 Olympics.

As climate models have predicted, smaller snowpacks, earlier spring melts, longer, drier fire seasons, retreating glaciers and the largest native mountain pine beetle infestation in modern times are the telltales for the perfect storm of the mismanaged bone-dry B.C. forests. Residents are rightfully furious the lessons of the hellacious 2003 fire season appear to have been disregarded.

The meagre clearing done at Kelowna's outskirts didn't reduce fuel loads, recently resulting in lost homes, looting and the evacuation of thousands of residents. Now, Lillooet has been evacuated.

For some 85 years, the B.C. Forest Service has imposed a Smokey Bear fire policy, interrupting the natural fire cycle and deliberately preventing wildfires. All the forests in British Columbia and throughout the nation have evolved with fire; many tree species rely upon it for survival.

The beleaguered forest industry has, for the past 90 years, dismantled most of B.C.'s 50 million hectares of working forests. With slumping world economies, it has dislocated tens of thousands of workers and isn't able to help foot B.C. residents' firefighting bill of more than \$100-million. These are the very taxpayers who own the Crown land from which the forest industry has profited so handsomely.

Forest ecosystems, like humans, continuously undergo change. Fire is one of nature's agents of change. By purposely stopping fire from occurring, the B.C. Forest Service has altered the structure and composition of forests.

In southern B.C., hundreds of millions of overmature, tinder-dry lodgepole pines surround some communities – for example, Kelowna and Lillooet. Lightning-induced fire, every 35 years or so, would normally preclude conditions such as are now being faced but outdated management policies have clearly upset nature's balance.

In addition, droughts have weakened billions of mature pines. Those that haven't died lack goeey pitch, their only defensive mechanism against native bark beetles: The trees are sitting ducks for the insatiable insects.

Bark beetles are another of nature's agents of change; they are on a tear. Since fire has been suppressed from the landscape, and lethal frigid temperatures in November have not occurred for the past 15 years, billions of bark beetles are swarming in a feeding frenzy of biblical proportions.

The hundreds of millions of dead standing pines are acting as kindling and fuelling megafires like those of 2003.

Unusual times call for unusual actions: B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell would be well advised to consider following a precedent New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson – a fellow member of the Western Climate Initiative – implemented to remove millions of dead pinyon pines in his state and protect homeowners. Mr. Richardson mobilized prison inmates to clear the incendiary dead trees from forestlands.

The costs of having inmates assist in removal of dead trees, as well as thinning out overcrowded forests in southern B.C. around communities, is a fraction of the expense of the other options, including: raising new taxes, the labour bill for having foresters do the thinning, hundreds of millions of dollars spent fighting wildfires or the price tag for replacing homes destroyed by fires. And this doesn't consider the human lives senselessly lost.

The choice for removing the explosive forest kindling is clear: Would you rather your tax dollars be spent paying \$1 an hour to inmates or \$30 an hour to professional fallers?

» Reese Halter's upcoming book is titled *The Incomparable Honey Bee*.