



**President's page**  
George Anderson

# Words count in federations, where 'shared-rule' is a misnomer

**A**CROWD GATHERED RECENTLY IN Brussels to demonstrate the need for the country's politicians to form a government after months of fruitless negotiations. One placard read: "One Flemish plus one Walloon equals two Belgians."

This apparently simple point actually goes to the heart of the difficult politics that have emerged in Belgium. All elected politicians are identified exclusively with one linguistic community or the other. All political parties are either Flemish or Walloon. Cabinet must be composed equally of representatives of the two communities. And many decisions at the centre require both communities to agree.

Belgium's constitution opens with the declaration that the country is "a federal state made up of communities and regions" – a stark contrast to the ringing opening of the U.S. constitution: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union..."

One of the most popular capsule descriptions of federalism is that it combines regional self-rule with shared-rule at the centre. This applies particularly well to Belgium, which has decentralized many decisions for self-rule by its regions and linguistic communities, while having elaborate mechanisms of shared-rule at the centre.

But does it truly help to distinguish between self-rule and shared-rule among the orders of government in most federations? What does shared-rule imply? That the regional units participate in some central decisions, as in Germany? Or that linguistic or cultural communities have defined roles in sharing central decisions? While some such arrangements might exist in various federations, they are, at best, only part of the story.

"Shared-rule" does not capture the reality of how central governments function in most federations, whose central

governments are made and unmade through direct elections. The whole electorate constitutes a community which exercises "self-rule" in its own right.

Part of the genius of federalism is that it can accommodate and give institutional expression to "nested" identities of citizens. Public opinion research has shown how complex political identities are. When, for example, Catalans are asked to define themselves, there is a rich range of responses, from "Catalan only", "Catalan first, then Spanish", "both equally", "Spanish first, then Catalan", to "Spanish only." We can map such responses between sub-national units within and across federations. They tell us a lot about the likely dynamics of a federation – centralizing or decentralizing; symmetric or asymmetric. Of course, religious, linguistic, class or caste identities can also be important for political purposes.

In most federations, the majority of citizens identify with both the national (federal) identity and their regional communities – the states, provinces, cantons, *Länder* etc. A federation needs a critical mass of citizens in most parts of the country to have a national, as well as a regional, identity, if its unity is to be secure.

Of course, identities are not static. Citizens of the European Union have taken on a greater European identity, alongside their national identities. But the EU remains heavily based on shared-rule between governments because its citizens are not sufficiently strong in their European identity to be ready for significant European "self-rule" with a directly elected federal government.

True federal government involves a commitment to a national political community that is more than the sum of the constituent communities. It involves national self-rule as well as national shared-rule. This is why I avoid the self-rule/shared-rule formula when talking about federalism.

**George Anderson** is the president and chief executive officer of the Forum of Federations.

## Federations

A publication of the Forum of Federations

**SENIOR EDITOR** Rod Macdonell

**ASSOCIATE EDITOR** Carl Stieren

**COPY EDITORS** Ernest Hillen and Robert Winters

**EDITORIAL/ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT**

Rita Champagne

**LAYOUT** Yani Roumeliotis

Federations is published three times per year by the Forum of Federations. Subscription rates are C\$25 per year in Canada, US\$25 per year anywhere else in the world. Contributions of articles are welcome. Contact the Editors at the coordinates below. The Forum of Federations cannot guarantee the return of unsolicited manuscripts.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Arnold Koller, Chairman (Switzerland);  
Violta Ruiz Almendral (Spain); Samuel Assefa (Ethiopia); David Cameron (Canada); Kim Campbell (Canada); John de Chastelain (Canada); Wolf Linder (Switzerland); Wolf Okresek (Austria); Amitabha Pande (India); Johanne Poirier (Canada); Roger Wilkins (Australia).

### OTHER EDITIONS

French: Fédérations  
Le fédéralisme de par le monde, quoi de neuf  
Russian: Федерации  
Что нового в мире федерализма  
Spanish: Federaciones  
Lo nuevo del federalismo en el mundo

Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to:

### FORUM OF FEDERATIONS

325 Dalhousie, Suite 700  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7G2 Canada  
Tel: 613-244-3360  
Fax: 613-244-3372  
[forum@forumfed.org](mailto:forum@forumfed.org)  
[www.forumfed.org](http://www.forumfed.org)

Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement  
no. 40745010



[www.forumfed.org](http://www.forumfed.org)