

BY ROD MACDONELL

**I**N THIS ISSUE OF FEDERATIONS WE HAVE PUT TOGETHER FOR YOU A mix of compelling news stories and a series of thematic articles about local government in five key federal countries (see pages 11-22).

Our cover story is about Cristina Kirchner, an experienced and deft politician in her own right, taking over the presidency of Argentina from her husband, Néstor, in an electoral victory last October.

Ms Kirchner will not be governing alone though. The writers of the article, economists Miguel Braun and Martin Ardanaz, note that presidential power in Argentina is counterbalanced by powerful governors and strong federal institutions.

Our article about Nepal is a first in this magazine, mainly because the country, sandwiched between China and India, only recently transformed itself from a kingdom and adopted a federal constitution, a provisional one at that.

The writer, Alaya Bhardra Khanal, the acting editor of the Himalayan Times, explains how the country's recent troubled history has brought it to the brink of federalism, a system that could gain traction among the country's diverse ethnic groups.

In Nigeria, the people expect President Umaru Yar'Adua to provide an adequate supply of drinking water, electricity, health services, educational facilities and roads. He has yet to fill this tall order.

Journalist Martins Oloja, the public affairs writer with Nigeria's Guardian newspaper, writes that a "dysfunctional federal system and the lack of a culture of public service have made

democratic institutions unaccountable" in Nigeria.

In Indonesia, the centre has been cautiously ceding powers to the provinces and the country has remained intact. Ridwan Max Sijabat of the Jakarta Post observes that in contrast to the recently deceased president Suharto, the non-confrontational style of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has allowed the decentralization process to continue in an orderly fashion.

In neighboring Malaysia, Sonia Randhawa, of the Centre for Independent Journalism, explains that the ruling coalition, which has held power for 45 years straight, has faced down two recent political demonstrations with thousands of protesters demanding electoral reform and an end to alleged ethnic discrimination. Contrary to the trend in many contemporary federations, the federal government in Malaysia claws powers away from the states.

Back in the United Kingdom the piecemeal devolution of power is bedeviling, according to the analysis of Charlie Jeffrey, a professor of politics at the University of Edinburgh. There are still gaping holes, such as determining the role of the ancient Parliament at Westminster.

Federations magazine regrets the passing of political journalist Bénédict Vaes, 60, of Belgium last November. Ms Vaes, of the newspaper *Le Soir* in Brussels, co-wrote the article "Social security brings Belgians to Brink" in the last issue of Federations magazine. Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt said that "Belgians will miss Bénédict and her ability to connect the people to the politics (of the country)."

## IN THE NEWS

### US states' health care blocked by federal law

A federal law is preventing several US states and cities from offering universal health coverage to their residents. Some state health-care plans require employers to offer health coverage to their employees or put money into a public fund that would help pay for uninsured residents. However, a federal law now prevents states from compelling employers to provide benefits such as health coverage. This controversy has resulted in a legal battle in San Francisco that could very well determine the extent to which states can impose coverage for uninsured residents.

### A new era of co-operation in Australia

Australian federal and state industrial relations ministers met in Melbourne in

February to negotiate the details of doing away with the controversial WorkChoices program of former Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National government. The meeting was held in the wake of the election of Kevin Rudd's Labour government in November 2007. The WorkChoices program makes it difficult for labour unions to organize and bargain collectively.

### Canadian provinces propose plan to fight climate change

British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, four Canadian provinces that account for more than half of the country's greenhouse-gas emissions are proposing a national plan on climate change that could eclipse the federal government's national plan to cut emissions. The federal government's plan imposes targets on industry, but the four prov-

inces are proposing a cap-and-trade system that would limit the amount of greenhouse gases individual polluters can emit. The environment is an area of shared jurisdiction in Canada.

### Nigerian local government holds election in disputed border area

Municipal elections were held in the new Bakassi local government area of Cross River State on Jan. 26, 2008 despite a Nigerian federal High Court injunction. The area is part of the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula which Nigeria had agreed in 2006 to hand over to Cameroon. The injunction barred the Cross River Independent Electoral Commission from holding an election in the municipality. The High Court is considering filing contempt charges against the chairman and members of the Commission.