

Forum of Federations

700-325 Dalhousie Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7G2 Canada
Tel.: (613) 244-3360 Fax: (613) 244-3372
Email: forum@forumfed.org

Forum des fédérations

700-325, rue Dalhousie
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 7G2 Canada
Tél.: (613) 244-3360 Téléc.: (613) 244-3372
Courrier électronique : forum@forumfed.org

Young Professionals Program

Roundtable Four - Presenter's Report:

"The International Activities of the Ontario Government"

The conference began with a young professionals program - a day consisting of four presentations. The first three were largely conceptual, and the conference organizer requested the final presentation stray from its advertised billing of "How can effective mechanisms of intergovernmental relations alleviate some of the tensions inherent in federal systems of government?" and deal in more concrete terms with the international activities of constituent units. Thus providing a bridge to the more practical presentations to follow over the next two days in the Core Practitioners' Program. The nature and range of Ontario's international activities were the topic of this presentation¹ - Ontario having the largest constituent government in one of the most decentralized federal systems. And this was the context in which mechanisms of intergovernmental relations were discussed.

There are two paradigms that inform the study of constituent unit (CU) international activities. One sees the international system in terms of complex interdependence and a pluralism of actors while the other is sovereign state centric. The first views the international activities of CUs as a legitimate, normal, and in positive terms. The latter view has no place for CUs and understands

their international activities as a challenge to central government. The study of Ontario's international activities clearly fits into the complex interdependence, pluralist theoretical perspective.

Why do CUs get involved internationally? There are explanatory factors at the global, federation, and constituent unit levels. At the first level are the forces of globalization, at the second are for example encouragement or discouragement from the central government, and at the level of the constituent unit amongst other factors can be the economic health of the unit and the idiosyncrasies of its premier.

Having introduced some of the theory and the notion of explanatory factors the presentation turned to the international activities of the Ontario government in the issue areas of economic development and trade, international assistance, and regional transborder environmental relations. Ontario's economic development and trade activities have waxed and waned largely as a result of the explanatory variable known as the economic health of the unit. Paradoxically when there have been few activities and offices abroad the response in times of economic hardship has been to increase activities and to open new offices. Then during a subsequent recession the response has been to economize by reducing the number of activities and offices. During the economic downturn of the early 1990s all of the offices were closed. At their height (just prior to their closing) the province had 19 offices abroad and over to 600 people working in a highly uncoordinated fashion on a range of international undertakings.

An explanatory factor at the federation level that has from time to time been evident in the opening of the province's offices abroad is encouragement and discouragement from the federal government. Ottawa encouraged Ontario's

¹ The presentation was drawn from the author's Ph.D. dissertation "The Reluctant Traveller: Understanding the International Activities of a Non-protodiplomatic Component Government: The Case of the Ontario Government from 1945 to 1995", 1996, Université de Montréal.

presence in Paris and Brussels to diminish the significance of Quebec's offices there. Ontario was encouraged by the federal government to enter into a twinning relationship with Jiangsu Province in China to advance the Canadian national interest. And, on two occasions Ottawa has strongly discouraged Ontario from opening an office in Washington, D.C..

The province has been involved in international development assistance, which takes two forms: disaster relief and development assistance. Ontario's relief in response to disasters is often predicated not so much on the size of the disaster but on the size of the population in the province whose origins are in the country effected. The focus of Ontario's international development assistance has been in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Attempts have been made by civil society to have the province formalize and expand its assistance but these have been resisted in favour of close collaboration with the Canadian International Development Agency.

The final area of Ontario's international activities involves regional transborder environmental relations. These can either be direct, or indirectly through the mechanisms of the Canada-US relationship, particularly the International Joint Commission which was established in 1909 to deal with border issues. Ontario works directly with the nine Great Lakes US states in controlling air and water pollution and particularly with Michigan, New York, and Ohio. Its relationship with Minnesota largely involves resolving disputes associated with sport fisheries management along their boundary of rivers and lakes.

Ontario's international activities have been managed largely by two bureaucratic units one in the Ministry of Intergovernmental Relations and the other in the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade. Their relationship has not always be easy and the latter has tended to dominate as its resources are much more extensive. The coordination of Ontario's international activities has necessitated mechanism of intergovernmental relations (the advertised topic of

this workshop). These include a consultation process with the federal government in the negotiation of trade agreements, a program called "Info Flow" that directs relevant information from Canada's offices abroad to the provinces, and a Counsellor in the Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C. responsible federal-provincial coordination.

This has been a very brief overview of a much larger work. Ontario's international activities have been conditioned by the context of global, federation and CU level explanatory factors, their net effect is the province has proceeded in an ad hoc fashion, with little policy direction, to be drawn into a wide range of international activities.

-30 -

By: David M. Dymont, Ph.D., Université d'Ottawa