

**EQUALITY OR ASYMMETRY?
ALBERTA AT THE CROSSROADS**

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In recent decades, Alberta political leaders have championed the principle of provincial equality. Whether it be in the 1982 constitutional amending formula, the demand for a “Triple E” Senate, or the visceral fight against the “distinct

federal transfer programs. Last October's First Ministers' Conference on Equalization appears to guarantee that this figure will continue to grow. In the current fiscal year, Alberta will watch its \$9.3 billion dollars in oil and gas royalty revenues be swallowed up by the \$12 billion dollars it will transfer to Ottawa. Alberta's fate appears to be the opposite of Quebec's: the more it contributes financially, the less it receives politically.

If this is all Alberta has to show for three decades of championing provincial equality, it is hardly surprising that Alberta Premier Ralph Klein has left the door open to Quebec's new initiative on asymmetrical federalism. If asymmetry turns out to mean only sweetheart side-deals for Quebec, then this door will soon be slammed shut. But if the principle of asymmetry can be developed in a manner that means a more flexible, less centralized form of federalism for all provinces, then Alberta may well become an important ally for Quebec, and vice-versa.

I am one of a number of Albertans who have already advocated choosing this new option. We have proposed a series of provincial initiatives known collectively as the "Alberta Agenda." These include withdrawing from the Canada Pension Plan and creating a provincial pension plan; canceling Alberta's contract with the RCMP and creating a provincial police force; taking over collection of personal income taxes; making more frequent use of the section 33 Notwithstanding Power to override adverse Supreme Court Charter decisions; and re-claiming provincial control of health care.

These policy reforms have three things in common. They are neither radical nor unconstitutional. They are all being done already by either Quebec, Ontario, or both. Second, they would decrease the presence and influence of the federal government in the lives of Albertans. Third, with the exception of health care reform, they can each be done unilaterally, without permission or agreement from Ottawa and other provinces. Taken together, these reforms would represent the beginning of what asymmetrical federalism might look like in Alberta.

To date, most of these proposed reforms enjoy only modest popular support – in the 40 to 50 percent range.⁴ Premier Klein has publicly voiced his skepticism, and a recent government MLA task force recommended against most of them.⁵ But the Task Force tabled its report before the First Ministers' Conference embraced asymmetrical federalism, and before Alberta's November election. In that election, three of the nine members of the task force, including the Chairman, were defeated. The upstart Alberta Alliance Party, which embraces the "Alberta Agenda," won 10 percent of the popular vote and elected one MLA. There is now a new Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, who has the responsibility to accept or to amend the task force report.

Future events will also be factors. If Prime Minister Martin keeps his promise to ignore Alberta's recent Senate elections and fills the three current vacancies with non-elected, Liberal favourites, Albertans' interest in alternative measures may increase. Similarly, if Mr. Martin and the Liberals win the next federal election by using Alberta as a political whipping boy on any number of issues – health, Kyoto, homosexual marriage – changes in public opinion within Alberta may result.

Less tangibly, the "more Alberta, less

