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## DIGGING WELLS OR BUILDING FENCES? ANALYZING FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DYNAMICS

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IN AUSTRALIA, IN THE VAST OUTBACK, THERE ARE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS MILES of farming country with no sign of any fences, despite the fact that the area houses some of the largest cattle ranches in the world. The reason is that it is impractical and quite costly for ranchers to build fences to keep their cattle from wandering away. Instead, farmers dig wells or watering holes. Their cattle naturally gather around these wells because they want to remain close to the source of life, water. This enables farmers to keep an eye on their herd without having to monitor a large perimeter.

Governments, too, create wells around which civil society actors congregate. They do so by the way they resource organizations and legitimate some activities and not others. Governments also impact the political discourse by creating spaces, forums, consultations, or other institutional arrangements to discuss particular policy issues. These institutional arrangements, or “wells” for the purpose of our metaphor, create gathering places where policy debates can take place and ideas are shared and, as such, create fertile ground for social change. By structuring these consultations and providing funding for specific projects, governments affect the ideas and frames that gain salience within the universe of political discourse at any particular point in time. But organizations can also shape the policy landscape by participating in the process of agenda-setting and through deliberation.

In this article, I use this metaphor to analyze the involvement of civil society groups in multi-level governance in Canada. It serves to highlight the role of the federal government in improving access to resources and empowering organizations to contribute to policy, and as a convener to catalyze new ideas in the social policy field. Through its programs and activities, the federal government has a long tradition of calling on voluntary organizations to increase their use of research to bring the best evidence to bear on policy problems.

In his excellent book *Interests of State*, Leslie A. Pal (1993) illustrates how the relationship between the federal Department of Secretary of State and groups concerned with official languages, multiculturalism, and women’s issues in the 1980s, was driven by the national unity agenda and state interests. Advocacy organizations representing minority groups received direct funding that enabled them to participate in policy debate and contribute to the development of a pan-Canadian sense of citizenship (see also Jenson & Phillips, 1996). Consultations with key stakeholders were also routinely organized by legislative committees and civil servants to ensure that a broad range of Canadians had been rep-

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resented and provided with an opportunity to input into policy. These programs became an important gathering place around which social policy actors congregated.

Again in the late 1990s, the federal government sought to facilitate the collaboration and coordination of a wide variety of social policy players across multiple levels of government. Be it around the urban agenda, the homelessness agenda, the childcare agenda, to name a few, the federal government organized a number of institutional forums and mechanisms to foster dialogue. In these new gathering places, voluntary organizations had many opportunities to be engaged in policy, as did new players like the municipalities and communities (Phillips, 2006). In addition, the federal government channelled resources to the development of particular forms of knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed for the construction of policy (Boismenu & Graefe, 2004). Research and evidence based practices were prized skills at the time and, in an explicit move on the part of the federal government, many new funding initiatives were established to encourage the development of social science research in the voluntary sector (Laforest & Orsini, 2005). Gerard Boismenu and Peter Graefe (2004) argue,

These investments promise to create a form of “social demand” for new policy directions and decisions, a demand that the federal government can partially control through the deployment and mandating of these foundations/institutes. In other words, the federal government is creating a series of expert interlocutors with whom it can debate policy options. This can play a crucial agenda-setting role, particularly since these ideas and directions are legitimized using the scientific reputation and stature of the specialists. (p. 11)

Similarly, the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), which began in 2000, institutionalized a coordinating mechanism between the federal government and the voluntary sector and became an important gathering place for discussing their mutual relationship. This period of deliberation and dialogue led to a reshaping of the terms of access to the policy arena. At the core of this push towards common tools for policy dialogue is a paradigm shift in terms of thinking of the role of voluntary organizations and their contribution to the policy-making process (Laforest, 2011; Phillips, 2009). Rather than moving towards a more complex appreciation of the role of the voluntary sector in policy – as one would expect with the VSI, given the greater devolution of responsibility to voluntary organizations in service provision that has occurred under neoliberalism – the federal government agenda toward the voluntary sector narrowed to focus mainly on service delivery.

As these examples illustrate, the wells created by the federal government over the years have served as a natural pole of attraction for collective action around social policy matters and have affected in a very real way the nature of policy debates in Canada. The many opportunities for engagement at the federal level have meant that representational activities and collective identity-building initiatives have historically been tied in a significant way to federal government resources in Canada.

What I want to suggest, however, is that over the past couple of years, these wells, which have played such an important role in nourishing policy debates, have dried up. We need to recognize that Canada’s social policy context has changed quite dramatically. Indeed, we are experiencing an important shift in policy styles and in forms of governance since

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the election of a conservative government in 2006. Perhaps most significantly, the federal government has been content to let provinces address policies that fall within their own jurisdictional powers. It has also adopted a limited and piecemeal approach to consultation, which now occurs mainly by invitation or online.

In this new context, the federal government does not see the need or the rationale to serve as a catalyst for dialogue and debate in the social policy arena, and to support voluntary organizations and think tanks in the field. Not surprisingly, funding cuts to voluntary organizations have deepened since 2006. The combined effect of the new institutional constraints on the policy capacity of voluntary sector organizations to participate in policy is likely to be enduring. Perhaps one of the most problematic issues to arise is that the current federal political landscape is now barren (Laforest, 2012). National organizations have been particularly vulnerable to the closing off of these gathering spaces because their primary mission is generally political representation. Very little service delivery actually occurs at the federal level. As a result, many voluntary organizations have been left in an extremely precarious situation.

#### **WHY SHOULD WE CARE?**

Our political landscape in Canada has radically changed. Now that the wells have dried up, the social policy landscape at the federal government is desolate. It means that the fertility of policy debates has weakened and the health of the policy process is compromised. The federal government has a responsibility for creating a healthy engaged society where people's interests are represented. The impact of the loss of these organizations on Canadian political life, on the constituencies that they represent, and on the content of social policy discussions, is significant. National organizations such as these provide a voice for local and provincial organizations and chapters in the political arena. Their demise necessarily weakens associational networks, which are important conduits for fostering political understanding and engagement. Voluntary organizations form part of a broader institutional infrastructure that helps multi-level governance by providing channels where local ideas/interests can be shored up into broader policy discussions.

If Canada evacuates these spaces for debate and deliberation around social citizenship, then the danger is that instead of digging wells, we may end up building stronger fences. Fences make us feel safe, but once fences are built, they form clear demarcation lines between insiders and outsiders. If we develop policy according to fences, we risk spending most of our time setting boundaries and maintaining the fences, rather than sharing and collaborating. For a country like Canada, which is defined by its diversity, such an approach may mean that those who are not "insiders" and who do not gain access may see their preferred frames disregarded. It may also mean that we end up adopting a more short-term issue specific lens and missing the broader interconnected nature of social policy dynamics. As a society and a collectivity, we may all lose out.

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