
This Thing Called the Social Union

Judith Maxwell

"I saw you on TV last Thursday," said my neighbour. "It was good. But . . . what were you all talking about?"

And, what, she might have added, have politicians and the media been talking about so frenetically since November 30? It is a fundamental cornerstone of our national identity. It can and should give Canadians a sense of hope, a sense of security, and a sense of belonging.

The Social Union is about How Canadians Take Care of Each Other.

It concerns all the social programs we depend upon at some time in our lives: health care, education, post-secondary education, social services, social assistance, employment insurance, personal tax policy, old age security, the guaranteed income supplement, the Canada and Quebec Pension Plans. Some pieces are provincial, and some are federal. Together they constitute the social safety net.

Most recently, for example, federal, provincial and territorial governments created the National Child Benefit, where the federal government makes a payment to poor families with children on the understanding that provinces will provide other supports and services which are essential to healthy child development. It shows cooperative federalism works.

The Social Union is the Way Federal and Provincial Governments Work Together.

In the past decade when governments were short of money, they fell into the habit of acting unilaterally. The federal government cut transfer payments to the provinces; the provinces made unanticipated changes in programs or plans which broke agreed principles (e.g. the B.C. decision S since reversed S to impose a residency requirement on people applying for social assistance).

Much of the focus in this round of discussions is on rebuilding trust by improving the machinery of federalism. How will decisions be made? How will priorities be set? Who can call the meetings? How often will they occur? Who will be accountable for what? Under what conditions can one order of government launch new initiatives that affect the other?

But there is far more at stake here. Federal and provincial leaders are also forging the basic principles that will guide the evolution of social programs in the future: How we will fight child poverty; How medicare will adapt to new patterns of clinical practice; How Canadians will be assured access to education and training; How the elderly will be supported and cared for.

The Social Union is the Implicit Contract between Citizens and Governments.

In 21st century Canada, citizens want to understand and be listened to. They work hard and pay their taxes on the understanding that governments will provide services that help them to build a secure life for themselves and their families. They want to have a voice in those decisions.

When governments fail to work together and fail to listen to citizens, the safety net tends to shred. Programs are not up to date, coverage is not coordinated, and people fall through the cracks. It becomes difficult for people to move from one job to another and from one province to another because of inconsistencies in coverage or the loss of social rights.

In short, the social union is about a lot of things that really matter to Canadians. Let's hope our political leaders get it right.

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