



# Can federalism help to manage ethnic and national diversity?

BY JOHN MCGARRY

**The** answer depends on whom you ask. If you ask most citizens of India, Canada and Switzerland, they would say yes. Many people in other countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia are resistant to the idea of accommodating national and ethnic communities through federal institutions. For them, federalism is a dirty word.

In Western Europe, the French are also hostile to federalism. Americans, those who live in the world's first and longest-enduring federation, like federalism but tend to be against using it to give self-government to distinct peoples. They consciously drew the internal boundaries of their own federation to avoid this. Today, when many international experts recommend federalism for other countries, such as Iraq, it is also a non-ethnic model they usually have in mind: a federation in which internal boundaries intersect with rather than coincide with ethnic and national boundaries.

## **Post-communist break-ups**

The widespread opposition to multinational (or multi-ethnic) federalism is connected to the belief that it does not work. It is thought that giving self-government to distinct peoples unleashes centrifugal forces that result in the break-up or breakdown of the state. Critics of multinational federalism like to point, in particular, to the experience of post-communist Eastern Europe. While all of communist Eastern Europe's unitary states stayed together after 1989, all three of its multinational federations (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) fell apart. The federations also experienced more violent transitions than the unitary states.

Before this, multinational federations that were formed in the wake of decolonization had a similarly abysmal track record. They fell apart in the Caribbean (the Federation of the West Indies); in east Africa (the East African Federation and Ethiopia); southern Africa (Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland); and in Asia (Pakistan, the Union of Malaya). The Nigerian federation managed to stay together, but only after a brutal civil war and decades of military dictatorship.

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It would be difficult to argue, in the light of this evidence, that federalism is a panacea for ethnically and nationally diverse states. It also seems clear that giving national groups their own federal units provides them with resources that they can use to launch secessionist movements, should they choose to.

But does the evidence also indicate, as some critics suggest, that multinational federalism will not work in any circumstances?

Plainly, the answer is no.

Critics point to evidence of failure, but there are also important success stories.

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Two of the world's oldest federal states, Canada and Switzerland, effectively give self-government to their principal ethnic, linguistic or national communities. More recently, Belgium has reorganized itself as an ethnic federation, and Spain has also assumed several multi-ethnic federal traits. Most notably, India, the post-colonial world's most successful democracy, and the world's largest, is also an "ethnofederal" state.

## **Not genuinely federal, economically weak and undemocratic**

Astonishingly, critics of multinational federalism usually fail to note that the major federal failures, including the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Nigeria, were, in practice, sham or pseudo-federations. In several cases, they were forced together. They were often, in practice, tightly centralized states. They lacked democracy. This last fact alone meant that their governments were unrepresentative of their populations, and that there was no possibility of dialogue or cooperation among their different national communities. It is hardly surprising that their minorities broke free when the opportunity arose.

All of the communist and post-colonial federations that broke apart were economically weak. Because of corruption or the shortcomings of central economic planning, they could not provide a reasonable or growing standard of living for their populations. Relatively enterprising regions of these states, such as Slovenia or the Baltic republics, found this particularly difficult to deal with.

## Canada: Two official languages protect minorities

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had to share when they were in a better situation than the others. But, sometimes, for economic or social reasons – language, history, culture – a province or state might be tempted to say that this autonomy is not sufficient. Some might say “We must become a sovereign state now.” And this is something that we need to understand, particularly in Canada.

Those who believe in the federal system need to show people who want to separate and those who want to express themselves within their federation that federalism is flexible enough because it is a compromise and because it is also strong enough to create a central government. But we also want to show them that with time they can benefit not only socially, but economically and that they will be better off as part of a federation rather than deciding to create their own new country and the international implications of that decision.

It is not easy to respect the equilibrium, this balance. We, as Canadians, know that it is not easy. For decades we experimented with this balancing act, this equilibrium. Of course, we lived through the Quebec referendums on Quebec separation (1980 and 1995), but we also saw significant economic crises in 1975 and 1976 during the Alberta oil crisis when Alberta nonetheless had to put its own provincial interests aside to make things better for the whole of the federation.

What is cultural diversity? It’s respecting cultures, it’s respecting what we should respect, as part of a whole, without needing to assimilate with the whole, but integrating oneself. And the difference between assimilation and integration is so important when we are talking about federalism. That’s what makes all the difference. Federalism integrates. There is a major problem if it assimilates.

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Critics of multi-ethnic federalism would be on stronger ground if they could show that any of the federal failures could have been democratically governed as unitary states or as American-type federations. However, there is little evidence to support such a view. Even Lenin, who was strongly opposed to multi-ethnic federalism, understood that accepting it was the only way to hold the Soviet Union together. Tito was similarly forced to adopt federalism in Yugoslavia against his first preferences.

While only federations broke apart in communist Eastern Europe, this glosses over the more basic fact that these were also by far the most nationally diverse states. This explains, after all, why they were federations in the first place. It makes at least as much sense to argue that the instability of these federations resulted from their diversity as from their ethno-federal institutional structures.

### **Federations with one major group**

Also, the failed federations all lacked a dominant ethnic community that constituted an overwhelming majority of the federation’s population and that might have been capable of holding the federation together in a crisis.

The United States, the oldest federation, was constructed around a dominant group of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. It can be argued that the Russian federation is more stable and secession-proof than the Soviet Union because Russians have a majority of 81.5 per cent in the Russian federation; they had only 51 per cent in the USSR. Together these qualifications show that multinational federalism is not bound to fail. But there are some conditions that would make success more likely.

A federation with a dominant ethnic community has some advantages: such a majority has the strength to resist secessionism yet it may also feel secure enough to make concessions to other groups. Multinational federations without one strong group can sometimes be unstable because other peoples are more likely to think they can prevail. This means that we cannot extrapolate Russia’s future from the experience of the Soviet Union, because one single group – Russians – are far more dominant within the former than they were within the latter.

If a federation has a dominant majority group, how can a minority group be best protected? One approach is to ensure that the federation is decentralized. Another is to see that the majority group is dispersed across several federal units. In this scenario, at least some of the majority units may come to have similar interests with the minority’s unit on at least some issues. This will help to prevent the sort of zero-sum politics that sometimes occur between majorities and minorities in unitary states or in federations that have only two units. In Canada, for example, the French-speaking province of Quebec regularly makes alliances with some of Canada’s nine English-speaking provinces, particularly with Ontario. This is an important factor underlying Canada’s stability.

### **Power sharing at the centre**

Another key condition for success: a federation is more likely to endure if all groups are represented within the

federal government. Supporters of multi-ethnic federalism usually defend it as a method for giving autonomy to distinct peoples.

Sometimes, it is argued that a virtue of federalism is that it allows groups that are excluded from the centre to console themselves with regional power. Such reasoning ignores the fact that federalism is about “shared rule” as well as “self-rule,” and that all federations entrust important powers to their federal governments. A group that finds itself outside the federal government will have less stake in the federation and more incentive to secede. There is evidence from all the successful federations that power-sharing practices at the federal level are crucial, and there is evidence from the failed federations that power-sharing was absent.

It is also helpful to have political parties that can attract support across the country. Both Switzerland and Canada have country-wide parties that are also multilingual. Canada’s Liberal, Conservative and New Democratic parties organize across the federation and operate in both official languages. The major Swiss parties – the Social Democratic Party, the Swiss People’s Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Radical Party and the Green Party – are all country-wide parties with candidates from Switzerland’s different linguistic groups. However, it is important to understand that while parties may organize across a federation, there is no guarantee that they will be successful in every region, unless there is a pre-existing consensus.

### **Democracy, rule of law and free choice**

Authentically democratic federations are more likely to succeed than sham or pseudo-federations. An authentic democratic federation allows the representatives of its national communities to engage in dialogue and bargaining about their interests, grievances and aspirations. Such

dialogue is a prerequisite for the development of co-operative practices.

An authentic democratic federation is also based on the rule of law; that is, the constitutional division of powers and the rights of minorities are respected. The federations that failed were, at best, in the process of democratizing. In no case were they established democracies. This does not mean that democratic federations will always succeed. It suggests, however, that we should not immediately assume that Canada, Belgium, India and Switzerland will automatically go the way of the failed federations.

Federations that are established voluntarily are likely to last longer than those that are forced together. Voluntary federations, established as a result of negotiation between leaders of the various groups, are more likely to be considered legitimate by their citizens than are federations that have been imposed. They are also more likely to foster traditions of accommodation.

The successful multinational federations, including Canada and Belgium, arose from voluntary agreements. Most of the failed federations, on the other hand, began without the consent of all their communities. This condition does not augur well for Bosnia-Herzegovina, which owes its origins to the internationally imposed Dayton Accords. Prosperous multinational federations are more likely to have a bright future than those that are in difficult economic situations. We should not exaggerate the importance of economic factors when matters of identity are at stake, but the plight of the failed communist and post-colonial federations was plainly exacerbated by their inability to provide materially for their citizens. ☺

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