

Reflections on the Conference Process from the former Premier of Ontario
and Current Member of the Parliament of Canada

The Second International Conference on Federalism at St Gallen, Switzerland, took the Spiral of Learning concept to a new, practical level, where both the journey and the destination mattered. There was inevitably a tension between *experts* and *practitioners*, but that is in the nature of the beast, and both benefited from their necessarily different perspectives. The conference was a determined effort to put the medium and the message together. More rigorous structure and a greater effort at training facilitators meant that from the small group sessions to larger forums there was a constant effort to assemble conclusions and make sure debates and discussions didn't just drift off into the air (although there was inevitably some of that!).

One of my central beliefs is that the sharing of experiences provides one of the best ways for people to learn. What was happening in this conference was more than just conversation, or listening to speeches. It was at once more organized and focused than that, and took dialogue to a new level. The different work and dialogue sessions were forums in the true sense, a place where exchange and learning takes place. The idea was that practitioners needed to talk to each other, that those involved in the theory of federalism needed to talk to practitioners, and that young people needed to be brought into the mix to reinforce the sense that learning never stops and the next generation has an assured place at the table. The way federal governance got discussed in this event has been a reflection of the federal idea itself: a dialogue of equals, respectful, civil, around a common focus of interest. The principle of every exchange was to learn how to improve, based on the simple premise that we all have something to gain from an exchange that is at once focused and tries to reach conclusions.

The series of international conferences has now grown to a well-respected triennial event series whose participants span the globe, and whose venues—so far Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, India, and Ethiopia—reflect the same diversity. None of us, either individuals or countries or organizations, are islands unto ourselves. We learn from others, and that process of learning needs a little structure and discipline to be effective. Our mistakes can be even more important than our successes, and a real conversation around a common problem can be more effective than a self-indulgent speech. But the key to effectiveness is follow-up and follow-through, not just the epiphany of discovery, but seeing how discovery and insight can actually be applied in the real world—and how the effort of applying these insights itself produces new ways of seeing the world.

Bob Rae, Toronto, Canada, December 21, 2009