K. McRoberts, “Unilateralism, Bilateralism, and Multilateralism: Approaches to Canadian Federalism,” in R. Simeon, ed., *Intergovernmental Relations* (Toronto UTP, 1985)

**Overview:**

Purpose of the essay is to explore Cdn federalism within 3 basic models of IGR: (1) unilateralism – in which each level of govt acts independently of the other; (2) bilateralism – in which the federal govt collaborates with provincial governments on an individual basis; and (3) multilateralism – in which the federal government acts jointly with all/most of the provincial govts. The paper concludes that over past few decades, Cdn federalism has undergone profound transformation that has placed a premium on federal-provincial collaboration and imposed new costs on unilateralism (such that “classic federalism” no longer really exists)

**Background**

* Examines these 3 models based on 3 criteria: (1) effectiveness of policy formation and implementation; (2) the accommodation of underlying diversities in Cdn society that are necessitated by federalism; and (3) the attainment of such democratic ideals as parliamentary control of the executive and accountability of governments to citizens

Unilateralism

* Some policy areas continue to under this norm – usually due to the federal government being able to monopolize due to clear constitutional mandate or unreadiness / unwillingness by provinces to engage in that area (i.e. monetary policy, defence, external tariffs)
* May still seem (from certain perspectives) to be more advantageous than collaboration – it at least avoids executive federalism which has been blamed for the breakdown in parliamentary control
* However, without fed-prov collaboration, there is bound to be duplication and waste (or “double unilateralism”)

Bilateralism vs. Multilateralism

* Bilateralism can take on 2 forms:
  + Negotiation and agreement occurs with one province alone
  + Ottawa enters into parallel agreements with most if not all of the provinces
* Multilateralism consists of an agreement between Ottawa and at least two provinces together
* Both forms are likely to give rise to asymmetrical federalism
  + In terms of democratic ideals, such asymmetry seems undesirable, however, it has been almost tailor-made for Canada’s political system which requires the accommodation of societal diversity (which McRoberts notes has been an endemic problem in Cdn politics)