

### Book Review: Starr, R. 2014, Equal as Citizens: the Tumultuous and Troubled History of a Great Canadian Idea

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## ***Book Review***

# **Starr, R. 2014, *Equal as Citizens: The Tumultuous and Troubled History of a Great Canadian Idea* Formac Publishing Company Ltd, Halifax 312 p.**

*by Megan Aiken*

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"Equal as Citizens" is author Richard Starr's most recent contribution to Maritime political literature. Starr challenges the dominant neo-conservative thought on federalism and brings a refreshing spotlight to Canada's issues surrounding equality - not necessarily equality in the liberal democratic sense, rather equality for citizens regardless of their province of residence. Starr writes that "this book tells the story of how and why [equal citizenship] was articulated [at confederation] and how it has become sidetracked," (15). Furthermore he aims to lay out some ideas "on getting the conversation back from the neo-cons and province-builders onto the subject of what a long-ago New Brunswick premier [J.B. McNair] called "a common Canadian citizenship," (15). In 300 pages, Richard Starr almost accomplishes just this.

The book is structured into 19 chapters, not including notes and an index, that follows a chronological order beginning in 1855 with Charles Tupper and Samuel Leonard Tilley (17), to Pierre Trudeau during his second term in the 1980's, to the current Harper era and the "mother of all federal-provincial battles" over equalization (267). Each chapter is divided up, for the most part, into ten-year periods. One can see, through this easy-to-follow structure, how disputes over railways and taxation turned into this country's first forms of federal transfer payments and how these developed over time.

It becomes apparent toward the end of the 20th century how the terms equity and equality began mixing, and transfer payments were no longer necessarily about transferring money from the richer to poorer provinces in order to foster the opportunity for equal policy, but rather administering those transfer payments more equally between the provinces regardless of their situation. The current situation is now one where there are vast disparities between provinces; in many cases, the wealthier provinces have more social services and better healthcare or education than the less wealthy (Maritimes); Starr argues briefly that this could contribute to the East to West outmigration epidemic seen currently (252). While many may attribute this crisis in federalism to neo-conservatives and the Harper government, Starr says this is not necessarily the case and that there have been disparities in federalism since confederation; many have used federal transfers as a way of giving back to their home province and roots (218). Over time, this has created disparities between the provinces in terms of equal health-care, for example, which has arguably been less effective in the past two decades, since changes to the pogy system.

Starr writes with a clear and persuasive voice, with wording that should not be difficult, aside from a potential inundation of historic and political figures, and historical tales dating back to the pre-confederation era. Many times, if a new concept or phrase is introduced, he gives clear but concrete definitions so as to not confuse the reader. He also makes use of tables sparingly but effectively; they are almost always used to illustrate differences between provinces over time. For example, he uses a table to explain change per capita of federal transfers from 2005-6 to 2007-8 in order to show how, for the most part, federal

transfers have long-since abandoned the original notion of transferring money to the poorer provinces. Starr also does a good job with thoroughly explaining the tables and describing what they mean. The included index is also very helpful, as there are so many historical figures and events being references throughout the pages it's easy to lose track, at times.

No book, however, is without its weaknesses. One major weakness is that, while Starr gives many suggestions on how the federal government could work to alleviate the consequences of transfer payment development over the years, I would argue that some of these suggestions are more band-aid solutions and don't necessarily address the root cause. Suggestions like implementing a country-wide carbon tax and legislating healthcare standards for all provinces has the potential to create only more disparity, and does not address the fact that equalization now translates to equality through equity. It seems as though his best suggestion is also his most underplayed: he says that policy makers and politicians need to "[reframe] the discussion" surrounding transfers, by challenging neo-cons and asking whether or not "governments in Canada are living up to their constitutional commitments to equal citizenship and equal opportunity," as set out in Section 36 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the equalization mandate (278).

Another weakness could be the author's bias and viewpoint, or his approach to the situation. Starr does not hide his Maritime heritage, and tends to use many examples from PEI, Nova Scotia, or New Brunswick when the opportunity arises. However, at the same time the reader gets the idea that the Maritimes provinces are victims; I don't believe that's something Starr was necessarily aiming for as he wrote, and I also don't think that's the way to bring in a wider audience or to convey the argument being made. In later chapters, and in the introduction, Starr creates an us versus them dichotomy, it seems, when writing about Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the neo-cons, as though they're some distant and foreign enemy. In his final suggestions, Starr urges Canadians to challenge "the neo-cons," (278).

There are many possibilities for this book's contribution to the field: when it comes to federalism, it is rare to have Starr's Maritime perspective. Furthermore, the book gives a comprehensive history of federal-provincial relations since before Canada was a country, with many examples specific to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Starr specifically challenges Macleans magazine and neo-conservative think tanks who assert that federal transfers breed dependency and contribute to disparity (9). Starr makes the dull topic of federalism and issues within Canadian federalism interesting enough to make the reader truly care about the state of equalization, transfer payments, and federal-provincial relations