Key Messages:

- A federal constitutional and spending role in several policy areas has complicated coordination with the provinces, resulting in a tangle of federal and provincial programmes. Limiting its role to coordination, the EU has had more success coordinating social policy on a pan-European basis among its members.

- Insular institutions in Canada have excluded civil society actors from policy-making, limiting the scope for coordination and mutual learning, as compared with the more open approach of the Commission.

- Canadian social policy would benefit from borrowing benchmarking, public reporting, peer review, and institutionalized interaction between levels of government, although the chief barrier to this is a lack of political will and public awareness. However, Canada may need to approach non-state actors differently than the EU providing a separate forum for exchange and learning of policy implementation.

This brief is intended to synthesize the findings of articles by Wood, Haskel, Marier, and Townsend, which look at intergovernmental coordination in specific areas of social policy in Canadian Public Administration, June 2013 Volume 56 No. 2, entitled Comparing Modes of Governance in Canada and the EU: Social Policy in Multilevel Systems. Examining employment, postsecondary education and pension policy, they find that despite similar motivations behind reforms in the 1990s, the level of coordination and the inclusiveness of policy-making have developed very differently in Canada and the EU. Section 1 examines the role of policy legacies in explaining these differences, while Section 2 examines the effects of institutional differences. Section 3 finds that despite important differences between the two cases, for these authors there are still important lessons to be learned from the EU.

Section 1: Policy Legacies

The Canadian federal government evolved a significant role in labour market policy and pensions in the post-War period (Wood, 290; Marier, 324) as a result of constitutional amendments moving authority to it from the provinces, as well as by federal spending. The federal role in postsecondary education evolved primarily through use of the federal spending power (Haskel, 312). However, in all three policy areas, very little significant legislation existed at the provincial level at the time when federal involvement began. In contrast the EU has neither legal authority nor spending power, and began its attempts at coordination in these areas long after policy had matured in the Member States.

Moreover, while a strong federal role in Canada would seem to auger well for policy coordination, in fact, the existence of federally administered programmes has had the opposite effect. Indeed, use of the federal spending power in labour market policy has created a tangle of federally funded programmes alongside provincial ones which calls out for greater coordination, but which has not bred it (Wood, 290). Likewise, in postsecondary education, while provinces communicate regularly amongst themselves this process does not include the federal government (318-9).

By contrast, it was the Commission’s legal and financial weakness that inspired it to rely upon coordination (Wood, 301; Marier, 325). Interestingly, Wood notes that in the EU, the centre’s sole role as a coordinator has made for a much clearer and less contested division of roles between the EU and the Member States than in Canada (299). For Townsend,

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1 This brief was prepared by Ivan F Dumka with feedback from Donna Wood and the authors.
this results in an environment far more conducive to coordination and mutual learning (341). In fact, Wood notes that in Canada, it has (still) been federal funding that has triggered coordination, but not mutual learning or shared goals (299).

Section 2: Institutional Differences

Secondly, these authors highlight important institutional differences between Canada and the EU. Indeed, while Member States are represented in the EU’s Council of Ministers, Canadian provinces are not represented in this way in the federal government. Indeed, so shielded from provincial influence, it is this insular nature of the federal government that has allowed it to maintain a dominant position in pensions (Marier, 326), for instance. By contrast, representation of the Member States in EU institutions makes relations between them far less fractious, and while Canadian provinces actively fight federal leadership, this adversarial dynamic is not evident in the EU (Wood, 301).

Canadian institutions are also well insulated from civil society actors, although they are increasingly involved in policy implementation (Townsend 342). However, a keen awareness by the Commission that it was not designed with democratic legitimacy in mind has led it to actively involve outside actors in policy-making, whereas this has not occurred in Canada (Townsend, 344). Thus, policy coordination is far less participatory in Canada than in the EU (Wood, 296).

This has important implications for the effectiveness of public policy. Townsend finds that effective learning requires civil society involvement (Townsend, 346). Indeed, pensions aside (Marier, 324), the inclusion of EU-level groups has stimulated the growth of national-level groups and networks between them (Wood, 295), while policy-coordination in Canada is executive dominated with few structured ways for civil society to have input (Wood, 292). Unlike in the EU, Townsend finds that the focus in Canada on government-to-government relations has limited the effectiveness of public services (345-6). Likewise, Townsend finds that in Canada, insular intergovernmental relations limit the opportunities for mutual learning (345-6), and that governments are rarely the chief beneficiaries (348).

Section 3: What can we Learn?

Despite important differences between Canada and the EU, Wood argues that Canada should borrow objective-setting, benchmarking, and dissemination practices from the OMC to improve monitoring and accountability (298). Townsend also advocates borrowing from the OMC, but envisions a much smaller role for governments, arguing for mutual learning using peer exchanges and performance improvement practices resident in many OMCs among non-state actors (346). Even in pensions, monitoring and peer review have given governments in the EU a better feel for the scale of their problems (Marier, 335). Furthermore, a more institutionalized role for civil society groups would improve the prospects for coordination and learning (Wood, 300; Townsend, 346). Likewise, regular interaction between levels of government, borrowed from the OMC would improve the coherence of Canadian social policy (Wood, 293).

Nonetheless, perhaps the most significant impediment to borrowing from the European experience is lack of interest by government and the public. While processes borrowed from the OMC might make for better policy in Canada, there currently appears to be no urgency for reform and no will to negotiate between different levels of government (Wood, 302).

Bibliography:

Haskel, Barbara (2013) ““Where there’s a will...”: Reforming postsecondary education in Canada’s and the European Union’s decentralized systems”, Canadian Public Administration, Vol 56 No 2, pp 305-22

