Every so often in this space, you'll see pointed commentary about the wastefulness of the Canadian government and the economic harm caused by our politicians' free-spending ways.

While such criticism is all too often justified, it's also fair to acknowledge that smaller government is not always better.

The latest evidence comes from three economists who explain why we should value the ironic but fruitful symbiosis between big government and freer global trade.

As countries have increasingly adopted the free-market prescription of opening up to international trade, many lubricated the way by accepting the cost of a social safety net that blunted trade's harsher impacts.

We take this for granted in Canada, where a generous system of employment insurance is supplemented by retraining programs and other safety nets that support many of those who fall victim to globalization's negative impacts.

While such programs are not always efficiently run or as effective as they might be, there's a strong ethical argument for them.

After all, if open trade makes a country wealthier, then the minority who are laid off by firms that can't compete ought to share in this prosperity through programs that help them adjust.

Beyond this, several U.S. academics have pointed out that there's an eminently practical reason for countries to spend on such programs: If workers whose jobs could be at risk are guaranteed some degree of help, they are less likely to support protectionist policies.

Indeed, one argument suggests that in this context, big government can be a good thing in itself. Since government jobs are secure, a bigger government payroll should reduce the proportion of voters who feel threatened by freer trade.

Even if you're skeptical that it's worthwhile to put everybody on the government payroll just to buy voter support for the undeniable benefits of freer trade, the argument for more
than minimal spending on safety nets seems strong. And now it has been reinforced by a study that makes a strong link between bigger government spending and lower levels of protectionism.

Economist Anna Maria Mayda of Georgetown University, along with two collaborators from Ireland, Kevin O'Rourke and Richard Sinnott, examined attitudes in 18 European and Asian countries toward job risk and protectionism.

They found that among those who felt most strongly that government should protect them from risks like job or income loss, protectionist sentiment varied according to the size of government spending in their country.

As people's concern about such risks increased, the intensity of protectionist sentiment grew less than half as much in Sweden, the country in this sample with the highest level of government spending, as in Indonesia, the country with the lowest. Spending was measured as a percentage of total economic output.

The correlation isn't perfect and it's doubtless affected by other influences, like culture, but it's highly suggestive.

For example, one could argue that Sweden is traditionally a trading nation with an outward-looking business culture. But look at France, where political discourse seems more inward-looking, but which has nearly as low a tendency for citizens to turn toward protectionism. It's interesting that France spends nearly as much on government programs as Sweden.

Protectionist tendencies aren't limited to poor countries like Indonesia, either. Prosperous South Korea, which also spends relatively little on government, has nearly as high a tendency toward protectionism.

In the end, it might be hard to justify big government for the sake of bigness, but it is useful to be reminded that sometimes, government spending can be not only useful, but even pro-growth.