

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN THE CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF LABRADOR

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During the last twenty years, citizens in most Western democratic societies have voiced increasing frustration with their perceived detachment from the governments they ostensibly elect. This experience resonates with many Labradorians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Governed within one of the most hierarchical and centralized polities in the Western world, Labrador's experience with government has historically been one of benign neglect and financial appropriation (Noel 1971; Cohen 1972; Felt, forthcoming). But times in Labrador are showing signs of change.

Citizen demand, large mineral discoveries with the expectation of more to come, higher levels of education among citizenry, the negotiation and settlement of Aboriginal land claims, and new philosophies of government, born largely from the fiscal crises of the late 20th century, are leading to more participatory forms of government. The general result has been a more responsive electorate that governs through consultation and collaborative processes. While one should be cautious not to overstate the extent of governmental democratization, the process of governing in Labrador has never been more promising or complex.

From 1998 to 2005, the Strategic Social Plan (SSP) provided an arms-length institutional form to involve citizens in the development and implementation of social policy relevant to their unique circumstances. Regional Economic Development Boards (REDBs), Development Corporations, municipal federations like the Combined Councils, and a host of other largely voluntary organizations have arisen in Labrador as vehicles for channeling local views. While the results appear mixed (Felt and Rowe 2008), some important successes in terms of political representation have nonetheless been achieved.

Territorial and status claims made by Labrador's

Aboriginal peoples have also altered Labrador's political landscape. The Labrador Inuit land claims agreement signed in 2005 resulted in the formation of the Nunatsiavut Government and is now heralded worldwide as an example of indigenous political empowerment. The Innu Nation is also well advanced in its own land claims negotiations and expects a final agreement to be in place in the coming years. Recently, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized the Aboriginal rights of the Labrador Métis Nation (LMN) and has required the Provincial Government of Newfoundland and Labrador to enter into meaningful consultation with the LMN over the proposed hydro-electric development of the Lower Churchill River.

While it is arguably the case that the formal relations between the federal, provincial, municipal, and Aboriginal governments in Labrador have undergone positive change, it is also true that the legacies of centralized government remain ever present and deeply embedded in Labrador's local and municipal affairs. For Aboriginal peoples who see comprehensive land claims as a means of implementing new forms of government that are consistent with their own culture and institutions for decision-making, the entrenchment of the

federal system may prove limiting in the extent to which Aboriginal governments are empowered to propose and implement real change. This political complexity, with a large number of political actors, some local and others more distant, raises a number of important questions. For example, how will the most critical decisions affecting Labrador's future be made – will decisions be 'home grown' and reflective of local interests or imposed by distant political centres with differing and perhaps

diverging interests? Given constitutional decisions regarding Aboriginal land claims and the formation of bi-lateral and 'Nation-to-Nation' political processes, what opportunities exist for Aboriginal governments to become truly self-governing? While a brief paper like this does not allow for a comprehensive review of these questions, we do attempt to shed light on some of the more salient factors that may influence future governance in Labrador. We also try to identify possible trajectories and potential pit-falls that may challenge emergent political processes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Before delving into these issues, it is important to first clarify the distinction between 'government' and 'governance'.

Much of what we call government, in fact, now occurs outside of it. Political scientists have coined the term governance to capture this wider process. Unlike government - formal organizations defined by legislation such as Parliament and the Houses of Assembly - governance is more encompassing. It denotes a larger process and systems through which societies and organizations, formally governmental as well as non-governmental, make important decisions, determine whom they involve in the process, and how they ensure accountability for the decisions they make (Bowles and Gintis 2002). In a general sense, governance is a web of organizations and relationships, formal and informal, through which people establish priorities, mediate conflict, and build a common future. Governance also reflects the increasingly important role that individuals

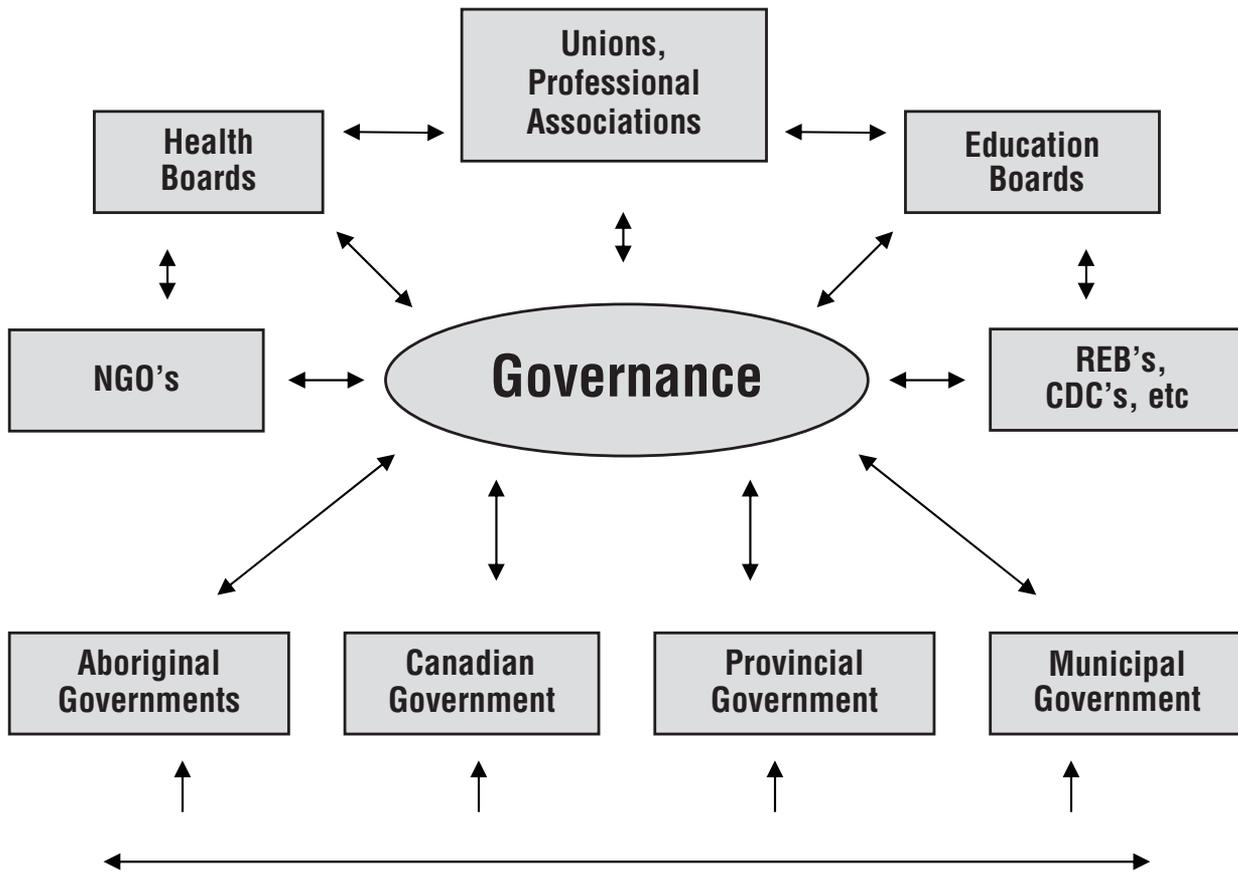
...will decisions be 'home grown' and reflective of local interests or imposed by distant political centres with differing and perhaps diverging interests?

and organizations external to government play in influencing conflict mediation, societal objectives, resultant policies, and how government initiatives are carried out in an era of New Public Management (NPM) in which formal governments shrink and increasingly devolve program implementation to non-governmental bodies (Bovaird and Loffler 2001). Robert Putnam (2001) and Michael Woolcock (2001) have used the term 'social capital' to capture the role of

interpersonal relationships within this larger issue of governance. Governance therefore represents the broader social fabric of organizations and sentiment necessary for more expansive participation in decision-making, within the constitutional limits established by law. Government and governance should thus be seen as interdependent and reinforcing, as illustrated in Figure 1.

As governance in Labrador becomes increasingly decentralized, we must also be mindful that securing the right to govern requires the ability to govern and perhaps no other factor is more critical to effective local governance as is fiscal autonomy. While decentralization requires a genuine transfer of administrative responsibility, the reliability of financial support is equally critical to successful governance (Natcher and Davis 2007). This will no doubt prove true in Labrador as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments face many new and demanding challenges in the years to come. The challenge of securing the necessary financial resources to govern effectively is common among the 60 or more countries throughout the world that are currently devolving governing authority to regional or local levels (Colfer and Capistrano 2005). In most cases, the transfer of governing authority has not been accompanied by the appropriate financial resources to govern effectively (Enters et al. 2000). By failing to allocate sufficient resources, tension between levels of government often builds, with local authorities finding themselves in "financial strait jackets" when it comes to policy implementation

Figure 1. Government and Governance in Labrador.



and administration (Prince and Abele 2002: 2). In cases where financial resources are made available, the high degree of conditionality attached to funding often limits the ability of local governments to implement alternatives to existing government programs, thereby perpetuating the interests of others in distant centres (Natcher and Davis 2007). The result is a system of governance that flows from the top down with local constituents further removed from decision-making processes.

For Aboriginal governments, this form of dependency is particularly limiting. Jorgensen (2007) defines Aboriginal self-government as not only an assertion of rights and responsibilities over lands and people within their borders, but having the capacity to manage service delivery, develop and pursue long-term strategies for community development, and negotiate new

relationships with other governments. Thus the ability to carry out self-governing responsibilities requires significant and secure financial resources. Yet, being financially dependent on other levels of government, be they provincial or federal, all too often redirects accountability away from Aboriginal governments and their citizens to Aboriginal governments and the agencies they are financially beholden to. This form of dependency then limits the extent to which Aboriginal governments can engage other levels of government on policy issues that affect Aboriginal interests (Cornell and Kalt, 2007). Lacking the financial independence to implement self-defined change, Aboriginal governments may find little opportunity to exercise authority beyond self-administering existing government programs and services. This may occur at the expense of designing their own development strategies and

concentrating on pressing civil affairs. While self-administration may be an acceptable interim measure for some Aboriginal governments as they develop internal capacity, if allowed to perpetuate, self-administration may remove the opportunity for Aboriginal governments to implement new forms of government that are reflective of Aboriginal values and institutions. Thus, by adopting and administering the same programs and institutions that were in place prior to securing self-governing authority, Aboriginal governments may run the risk of perpetuating colonial legacies that have long dictated Aboriginal affairs.

Aboriginal governments in Labrador are well aware that change will not occur overnight or by simple prescription. Because Aboriginal systems of governance have to a large extent been undermined by centuries of colonial administration, many elements unique to Aboriginal cultures have been weakened and in some cases lost over time. As such, one cannot expect traditional Aboriginal institutions of governance to resurface automatically in the wake of government withdrawal, or, as the colonial experience has shown, to be imposed from above (Natcher and Davis 2007). Rather, success will depend on the rebuilding of trust in Aboriginal authority and generating and sustaining effective forms of inter-governmental relations with neighboring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments.

It is important to emphasize that effective governance is neither automatic nor problem-free. Rather, it is shaped by the traditions, cultures and the social locations of all parties. Where differing political cultures coexist, and participatory traditions of government nascent, such as Labrador, even those sharing the same general geographical boundaries may have to pursue very different paths to governance. The federal and provincial governments, who have long treated communities and municipalities as little more than service providers (Whalen 1974), will need to continue on their path of participatory governance or risk invoking renewed criticism for being impervious to local involvement and fostering conditions of political dependency (Natcher et al. 2004). In this era of New Public Management, Labrador's municipal governments

must also prepare for heightened responsibility. This will include looking inward and making strategic municipal reforms (Felt, forthcoming). Labrador's Aboriginal governments, who are pursuing their own political agendas, will need to coordinate with other levels of government, including municipal and regional governments, in order to identify and implement effective mechanisms for inter-governmental relations and legislative coordination. If successful, governmental reform will allow all Labradorians to work together to resolve, or at least manage, issues of common concern. These reforms can also facilitate more effective communication and cooperation between levels of government and create conditions for diachronic change that can result in mutual learning, respect, and trust over time. Down the road, these reforms will be critical to the future of Labrador and its system of governance. Success, by all significant indicators, will be measured over the long-term and will be dependent on the level of commitment shown by all levels of government as well as the shared sense of responsibility among all who call Labrador home. Simply stated, no one government, group or individual can afford to be a spectator during this period of change. In the end, all Labradorians will need to come together if effective governance develops in 'The Big Land.' 

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I think about the Dionne Quintuplets sometimes. Coming five at a time, as if they knew they'd have to keep each other company forever.

I hope for a nice boy who will like me for who I am and not expect too much. Two lungs and one heart is how we're born. But anyone looking at a picture of me now could never guess that there is anything at all different about the way I am.

Once you've been here for weeks, that turn into months, that turn into years, it doesn't seem possible that you will ever get to go home again. But stranger things have happened. Like a baby being fished up from out of a net. My Mom was down on the wharf, pregnant with me, raking in the fish, when she went into labour. She slipped on the fish guts, but like all babies who are ready, I came anyway, heedless, head-strong and hearty. I popped from out of her warm body. I slid along the slimy wharf and fell right down over the side of it. Right down into the dark cold water. Down, down, down, coming to rest in a net of living cod. Dad pulled me out and lifted me up. Little sister, little daughter, little mermaid with no tail.

Little girl with one lung, taking her first breath. Dad will take the Newfie Bullet to come get me when the time comes. We will be served china tea cups with hot water and tea tied up in bags. We will untie the bags of tea and let the leaves swim free.

I have a friend. He's a boy. He's downstairs, on the second floor. We take turns, visiting each other in the evenings. To say goodnight. He likes me for who I am. I've written Mom and Dad about him, of course. He only has one lung. On the right. I only have one lung. On the left. So, between us, we've got two lungs, and two hearts. Enough to have a family, we think. Enough to take on the weight of air, and anything else that life on dry land has to offer.

He plays the cor-deen. The one left behind plays the other one home. A person with one lung can have babies. I read it in the "Believe it or Not". 

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