

# Mother should I trust the government?

Some #thinkBIG2018 reflections on our political state

BY DREW BROWN

When *Atlantic Business Magazine* hosted its regional #thinkBIG2018 thought leadership workshops last September, attendees at every session expressed a strong desire for increased regional and economic collaboration (with an inherent “government should do something” call to action). The universal conclusion, however, was that such action is highly unlikely because government is both too unresponsive to citizen demands and too cumbersome to allow for much private initiative. In other words, even if most of us know where we want to go (and how we want to get there), we’re worried that the bus is either going to break down or the driver won’t take directions. (And if you’re especially cynical, both.)



April 5, 1932: A crowd gathers at the Colonial Building in St. John's, N.L.. They were there to present a petition calling for an investigation into alleged corruption by the Prime Minister, Richard Squires. Photo: Provincial Archives Division/The Rooms



The initially peaceful protest disintegrated into violence as the crowd surged into the Colonial Building demanding answers. When police tried to force them back, the protestors started throwing things at the building, breaking most of the windows (damage seen opposite page). Photos: Provincial Archives Division/The Rooms

At the centre of our particular political malaise are the twin challenges of scale and distance. While there is a definite desire to pare back the regulatory burdens of government, there is also recognition that Atlantic Canada is sparsely populated and geographically dispersed. This means that industrial and regional collaboration requires a state apparatus large enough to manage and coordinate all these divergent (and occasionally conflicting) interests. As the level of government scales up in jurisdictional authority, however, it tends to recede in citizen accessibility. Part of this is physical distance (your provincial legislature is likely farther removed than your municipal council office, and both are a long way from Ottawa) but much of it stems from the inherent tensions in our political system.

What's really at issue here is the basic question of democracy: whether or not people can effectively rule themselves. We live in a representative democracy based on the principle that the organization, oversight, and operation of our societies are so complex and/or otherwise time-consuming that most ordinary people cannot (or should not have to) do it themselves. Instead, we elect people to thoughtfully deliberate, legislate, and govern on our behalf so that we can go through life more or less untroubled by the problems of organizing society.

One of the classic criticisms of this type of arrangement is that it risks establishing a disconnect between citizens and their representatives. Poorly-designed (or neglected) democratic institutions create citizens who don't bother engaging with politics outside of voting once every four years (if they vote at all). They can also give rise to a political class more interested in pursuing its own self-interests than representing and safeguarding those of their constituents. As you might expect, these two problems have a tendency to start feeding into one another. As one #thinkBIG2018 panelist succinctly put it, "we tend to get the government we pay for."

So what are we to do about these difficulties? Historically, the answer was the political party. Parties get a bad reputation these days, but they are supposed to be a democratizing force in our political system. Parties are organizations that connect citizens to the process of governance. Participating in policy debates helps people articulate their interests and collaborate with others while grassroots engagement sets the guiding vision to which party politicians, chosen by members, pledge to adhere. Parties are supposed to be as much about space for political and democratic education as they are about action, always for the benefit of ordinary—if extra engaged—citizens.

Of course, this is a far cry from the way most of our political parties seem to operate. Few parties allow their membership to actually determine policy. (You may recall that when federal Liberals met in Halifax last year, their membership voted in favour of decriminalizing all drug use in Canada—an idea Prime Minister Justin Trudeau refuses to pursue.)

Nor are all members necessarily equal, given the limited (or non-existent) regulation of campaign financing in Atlantic Canada. Only New Brunswick and Nova Scotia limit provincial political donations, capping individual contributions at \$6,000 and \$5,000, respectively. Prince Edward Island is in the process of bringing in laws that would limit individual, corporate, and union donations to about \$3,000 each, but this is a very recent development. In Newfoundland and Labrador there are no limits at all, and none are in the works; as a result, more than 95 per cent of both Liberal and Progressive Conservative funds in 2017 came from corporate and union donations, with the top 10 donors to the governing party shelling out roughly \$20,000 apiece. If he who pays the piper calls the tune, it's unlikely that those supporters kicking in a collective total of less than five per cent of the money get to hear their song requests.

You can understand, then, how some conclude that parties are unaccountable organizations that do more to stymie thoughtful, engaged citizens than foster them. One popular solution is to just scrap them altogether. This is the way we run municipal governments in Canada, and it's also how the Northwest Territories and Nunavut manage their regional affairs. This appears to be a compelling solution, because it puts an automatic end to partisan bickering in Question Period and turns all politicians into de facto Independents. This would force our representatives to have real thoughts of their own that they can respectfully communicate with their colleagues, rather than simply hurl abuse or clap like a trained seal whenever the party whips the vote. Competing caucuses will no longer be what drives politics; instead of a soundbite-driven bloodsport, you get legislators working together to arrive at a necessarily collaborative solution.

The downside is that this does not necessarily free political bodies from petty, trumped-up conflicts; one need only follow the antics of N.L. town councils in Witless Bay or Wabana to see some worst-case scenarios for non-partisan politics. While it would eliminate partisan bickering, it may actually exacerbate personality conflicts. Without a party's institutional backing, the only meaningful differences between individual candidates will be their (real or perceived) personal attributes. Insofar as municipal politics appear to be more functional than their provincial or federal counterparts, that likely has less to do with the absence of parties and more to do with the physical scale of the polity involved. So while it's an attractive option, it's not clear that abolishing parties in and of itself would necessarily be a silver bullet for democratic reform.

But we're on to something; things seem to function better when there is more engagement and contact between citizens and their representatives. Municipal leaders tend to be more responsive and dynamic precisely because of their proximity. Perhaps, then, we need to bring these two solitudes together. But how?

I want to propose two institutional solutions that would lead to more engaged citizens and more responsive politicians.

The first is electoral reform. Our present system—popularly known as first past the post (FPTP), technically known as single member plurality—is designed less for deliberation and more for action. Currently, the candidate with the most votes wins, even if, as in a three party-plus contest, this results in a winning candidate receiving much less than a majority of ballots cast. In many cases this means you have politicians representing districts where anywhere between half and

two-thirds of voters preferred somebody else—sometimes serving in similarly FPTP-inflated governments, pursuing policies that most people did not actually endorse. As you can imagine, governments produced this way have little incentive to govern for anyone outside their voting base.

It seems to me that more responsive governments would emerge through an electoral system which produces results more in line with the wishes expressed in the votes actually cast. There are a number of alternative systems, like ranked ballots or proportional representation, which have different strengths and weaknesses depending on how outcomes are prioritized in a given polity. Some Canadian jurisdictions have studied the issue and brought it to their voters for consideration. This includes P.E.I., which held a non-binding referendum on reform in 2016 and currently plans to hold a second one, seeking a clear mandate, concurrent with its 2019 provincial election. Regardless of success, getting voters to think critically about the act of voting itself is a worthwhile civic endeavour all on its own.

A similar reform would involve introducing recall legislation. This is a mechanism which allows more direct citizen intervention in government, primarily by reminding politicians that they work for their constituents and not the other way around. Should a representative stray too far from the express wishes of their constituents (through inaction, floor-crossing, ceding independent thought to the party communications office, etc.), the citizens can organize a petition forcing that individual to resign or otherwise contest a new vote. Politicians wary of being recalled, then, are forced to prioritize the interests of their district above the interests of the party whip. Backbenchers will be pressured to show that they actively bring up constituent concerns in caucus instead of coasting along on a leader's coattails. Anyone looking to make an unpopular decision will be required to meaningfully justify it. It will, in short, require provincial politicians

to take their jobs as representatives more seriously.

Of course, these are fairly ambitious political renovations. Even if we had the collective will immediately on hand, this would take some time to implement. So what should we do in the meantime?

Fundamentally, it all comes back to the basic insight that we get the governance we pay for. We are trying to navigate the 21st century with a set of 18th-century institutions. And in Atlantic Canada, our history is one where comparatively small, distant communities had to cope with the impacts of decisions made elsewhere—in London, or Ottawa, or Wall Street, or even simply behind closed doors in the premier's office or restaurant backroom. This is the top-down setup that we need to flip.

Atlantic Canada remains small and, in many ways, institutionally underdeveloped. At the same time, #thinkBIG2018 workshop participants recognized that the people in this region punch well above their weight in terms of innovation and economic contribution—in spite of our hoary politics. The key to making that energy go further is to put in the work of engagement and participation. Build things up from the local level: community action turns to regional action turns to provincial, federal, international action. Get informed and hold your candidates' feet to the fire—or become one yourself.

This is the great paradox at the heart of all this. We are always in search of “someone” to do something, a “them” who can fix things for us. But in a democracy—if that is what we wish to preserve—that “someone” can ultimately only be the citizens who bother to show up and be counted. As it turns out, we are the ones we've been waiting for the whole time.

#### FEEDBACK

✉ [dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com](mailto:dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com)  
🐦 @AtlanticBus; @drewfoundland; #nlpoli

