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# A Contented Oyster Never Made a Pearl

The Need for Adaptive Leadership to Deal with Changing Governance Models

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## **Governance: The Foundation of Effective Democracy**

Governance is the political process through which a society makes its public policy choices. Thus, it goes to the heart of how a free and democratic society empowers and enables citizens to have effective and accountable participation in the development of the society they share. It is the way laws are made. It is the way public policy issues are brought on the political agenda. It is the way authority is distributed and exercised in our society, not just in our government. Governance is the way influence and persuasion is applied to the political process. It is the means we use to prioritize and make tradeoffs on values based decisions. Governance is the continuum from partisan politics to public policy; from discussions to decisions; and finally to the crafting and passage of laws and regulations. In essence, our governance models help us reach the balance between protecting the rights, roles and responsibilities of the individual while serving the common good.

## **Governments, Governors and Governing: Getting it Right.**

So beyond a sense of civic duty and statutory responsibility, why should school trustees and school boards care about governance?

Because the pace, scope and nature of societal change is going to make school boards much more important and vital to the future of Alberta.

School trustees are destined to be at the intersection of major changes in the way citizens engage themselves in issues; the way top-down governments respond to bottom-up demands; in the way that centralized and decentralized power structures meet and often clash.

I know that's not how many School Trustees would naturally see themselves. I hope to convince Trustees that they personally and their school boards generally are in a remarkable position to respond to the governance challenges and opportunities presented by current and coming societal change. So bear with me as we explore this dynamic, and somewhat scary, future.

Let's start with three building blocks of governance: representative government, elected or appointed governors, and the act of governing. I want to focus on the mortar that holds these building blocks in place, not the blocks. The mortar is the relationships and spaces between the blocks and how they interact in the political and public policy world. Key questions are where and what is the relative authority and responsibility amongst the three building blocks? And how do those relationships help and/or hinder public education.

School Boards lost the power of taxation in Alberta years ago. However, School Districts continue to provide public education services and School Trustees are still elected, not appointed, to represent local interests. This situation may create tensions at times between the provincial government and local School Boards around accountability responsibility and authority. The future of governing public education is not embedded in the loss of political power by School Boards. Rather it is in how Trustees

and School Districts can be effective modern governors in a new role of public policy influencers. An Alberta School Trustee as an elected representative, even without conventional political power, still affords the opportunity to exert influence on the provincial government about the policies that affect the purposes and practicalities of our public education system.

## **Big Changes Ahead: What They Are and What They Mean**

Let's look at the context in which public education is being governed. These are some of the big changes I spoke of in introducing this topic. The first big change is that school boards were originally set up to deal with educational needs in specific geographic communities with defined political boundaries. But more and more, public education governance pressures flow from communities of interest, not just geographic communities. In fact these communities of interest transcend geography, and usually coalesce around mutual interests, issues and concerns.

In doing so, they become the wellspring of a grassroots, bottom-up democracy that is ill served by conventional vertical, hierarchical, top-down centralized power structures and traditional governance models. Then there is the compelling force of engaged Influentials operating as networked citizens within horizontally shared power structures. This collaborative governance culture meets the obstinate reality of rigid and entrenched vertical command and control conventional governance models. There will be friction, political power plays, citizen disaffection, confusion and frustration as these different governance models interact. Horizontally networked citizens are finding the vertical conventional governance structures inadequate to meet their needs. That's where the ability of School Trustees to influence power, rather than exercise it, becomes critical to rethinking governance in the new networked, constantly connected and collaborative world that has been spawned by the Internet.

The ubiquity of the Internet has the potential for empowered citizenship and to change how representative democratic governments behave. Everyone with a computer, an Internet connection and a website can be an engaged citizen, an observer, a blogger, even a "publisher" and a "journalist," in the dynamic web-world of social media. Social media is the catalyst and the facility for the creation and sustainment of new communities of interest and activist engagement. Social media is exploding and participation has moved beyond the early adopters into the early adapter stage. It will soon become as commonplace as email.

For example, the social media application [Facebook](#) has over 200 million participants, and [Twitter](#) is estimated to have 50 million participants by summer. These statistics are mere indicators of the dawning and spawning of horizontal networks of aggregated and engaged special interest communities covering a very broad spectrum of interests, locally and globally. [You Tube](#) had more hours of video uploaded in the last six months than ABC, NBC and CBS have cumulatively broadcast in the full 60 years of their combined existence.

This heralds a shift in power to individual citizens away from the traditional governing institutions. It is no longer enough to be elected with statutory authority exercised top down with decisions made behind

closed doors by elites then proclaimed to the population with one-way media tested communication techniques. Citizens want a larger, more engaged, more authentic and effective role in the design, development and deployment of the public's business. Influentials and engaged citizens want to be public policy designers not just public policy receivers. The lack of voting participation is not a counter argument to this end. It in fact reinforces the concept that citizen concerns and impressions that the conventional governing institutions are outdated increasingly tone deaf and unresponsive to their concerns. Elections have morphed into mere marketing exercises. Most citizens seem to believe that voting does not make a difference so why bother.

Conventional governing institutions and governments are responding to this evolving and unnerving context by reverting to a conventional command and control model of centralized government. Old habits die hard and comfort zones prevail for many, especially in uncertain and volatile times.

The Alberta government and many elected MLAs don't seem to know how to respond to the turbulent and evolving significance of networked engaged citizenship, the so-called Netizens. The provincial governor's indecision is becoming evident in nearly every major political issue of the day. They seem to instinctively retreat into centralized and hierarchical power structures. That shift removes authority and latitude from former governance structures created by earlier devolutions of power beyond a single central control approach. This reversion to central control in Alberta is evidenced in the overnight disbanding of all regional health authorities and the set up of a single "Super Board." Then there was the unanticipated and surprising elimination of the very popular and effective Wildrose Foundation. These are only two examples of the shift away from community-based decentralized decision making by unilateral fiat of the provincial government.

This instinctive retrenching response of the provinces governing power structure makes things even worse by instilling a climate of uncertainty and fear in the staff, volunteer and appointed ranks that make up most of the apparatus of Alberta's governance. It is the very antithesis of an open, inclusive and creative political response that is needed to deal with the complex issues of our time. It also fails to respond to rising citizen expectations of what they see as resolutely reasonable democratic governance demands. In such a political climate, who will risk suggesting new ideas or share insights, proffer proposals or offer expertise? It is just not a risk worth taking when the governance structure and the authoritative nature of the governing philosophy makes it clear that such efforts and inputs are unwelcomed by the powers that be?

We have seen community and institutional leaders become scapegoats and even get fired for trying to do their jobs of bringing truth to power in this mistrustful political climate. The most telling example of this was the demise of Alberta's Chief Electoral Officer. His contract was not renewed ostensibly for having the audacity to suggest over 100 ways elections could be better run and democracy better served in Alberta. I know of other examples of intimidation in the bureaucracy, in agencies, boards and commissions. There have even been moves made to threaten leadership in community-based nonprofits, both at staff and volunteer board member levels.

Fear and loathing like this leads to even more systemic disengagement and citizen cynicism. The end result is democracy itself becomes imperiled. Centralized and hierarchical power absolutely insists that employees, appointees and contracted service providers merely wait for instructions and do exactly as they are told. No questions are to be asked and any response that can be perceived to be a challenge to the authority of the power structure is viewed as dissent. Dissent is said to carry dire consequences. Withdrawal from participation and withdrawal from democracy is the only logical response for most vulnerable people under such circumstances; and we all suffer as a result.

## **A Renewed and More Mature Governance Model**

It is painfully clear we need a renewed and more mature relationship between governments, agencies, boards and commissions and Alberta's ordinary citizens. We need to rethink our out-dated governing institutions and we may need to invent some new ones that are more responsive to citizen concerns. We have to increase our personal and our shared capacity for reengaged citizenship in the new networked world order. Our problems, at all levels, have never been more complex, more critical or more confounding. And that is precisely why the role of School boards as Influencers, rather than Powerbrokers, is so critical to creating a more generous and inclusive civic discourse, which in turn will lead to a more authentically democratic, inclusive and cohesive society.

We need government to govern in ways that helps individuals and communities to solve their own problems rather than provincial governors presumptively solving them for us. Never have citizens been more capable of being connected to each other and to organize to achieve their ends and aspirations. Paradoxically we now seem less together, aligned and allied in addressing our challenges and issues as individuals and communities even with this enhanced capacity to connect and connive.

Citizens have to take a larger role in planning the policy options and deciding the choices that impact themselves, their families, friends, communities and our society as a whole. The potential for personal and community empowerment with strategic use of the Internet is enormous. Yet the other reality is while some Alberta citizens are pressing for more say and freedom to make and question the choices being made, the majority still reflexively turns to government to solve many of our problems. The majority are still hoping our quintessential environmental, economic and social problems can be solved from on high and painlessly if possible.

Most of us don't vote or participate in the civic life of our province, municipality or school boards. We are ambivalent about challenging the conventional role of government as our father provider. We are sensing a need for change but uncertain as to where change may lead us, so we hesitate. Then there are the entrenched and vested interests of the Left and Right on the conventional partisan political spectrum. Both ends are intent in preserving the status quo. The Left will resist anything that smells of questioning government's role as provider. The Right will anguish over what this may mean for traditional values and institutional authority.

My sense is we have no choice but to change our model of governance but that is going to take a special kind of leadership. It will take more than just different provincial political or institutional leadership. It will require more and better community based leadership as well. Our conventional representative democracy has served us well for about 150 years but our society has changed and the pace of change is also accelerating, thanks mostly to technology.

The Internet in Alberta is a mere 15 years old but it is changing almost everything. It impacts the nature of our personal and shared relationships. It impacts our institutions, our economy, our society and even our ecology. We are entering the Era of Collaboration but our, 19<sup>th</sup> century governance structure, still in use today, was never designed nor intended to be collaborative. When we look beyond the traditional and conventional institutions of government, we see individuals and organizations learning to be more horizontal, inclusive and collaborative. The nonprofit nongovernmental environmental movement is a complex array of organizations and issues. They are at the cutting edge of using the collaborative and organizational potential of Internet to change how our society is governed. That capacity and skill has enabled them to encourage new community building, effective intelligence gathering and information sharing and use that to create enhanced awareness of various advocacy initiatives. They muster public opinion and co-create new ways to sustain the planet and grow a green economy. They also pressure conventional governments to change and adapt public policy and approaches to achieve those ends.

These new Internet tools for collaboration and communications can be used to engage ordinary folks and enable less savvy community organizations to be more directly involved and effective in the public policy governance space. As this space evolves, School Boards and School Trustees have an enormous opportunity to be facilitators and stewards of the public knowledge gained by these governance engagements all around our system of public education. Even more, they can and should become the facilitators and mediators in the inevitable clash between horizontal networks of affiliated and like-minded citizens and that challenging interface with the power based vertical structures of command-and-control conventional governing institutions.

What will be the nature of a Trustee's role as stewards, moderators and facilitators? The open question is will we see a change in citizen's expectations in exchange for their granting of power and consenting to be governed? Will the responsibility and duty to govern in service of the greater good be more widely demanded and distributed? Will this be about citizenship that requires more on people than merely voting? This emergence of a community-based collaborative governance capacity will require skillful political leadership. It will necessitate political leadership that comes from the servant-facilitator model of leadership. That is where someone has the listening, interpreting, integration and articulation skill to capture and communicate the essences of the often chaotic deliberations and debates of the citizens. They must be talented and trusted Influentials who are connected and embedded in community, not the old-school aloof pro forma powerbroker leadership model we have now.

## What Can School Boards Do About This?

The short answer is plenty. The more fecund question is will school boards rise to the challenge and play a servant-facilitator leadership role in all of this? Based on history and personal experience, I would have to say, not likely. Mostly because I see that Trustees are reluctant to step out of the conventional system of governance, and many are loathed to actually admit that they are politicians and governors at all. They take their Trustee and community representative responsibilities seriously, but they are timid and tentative about their relationship with the provincial government, both politically and administratively. This is partly because of School Act provisions where Trustees serve essentially at the pleasure of the Minister of Education. He has the statutory power under Sections 40-42 of the School Act to replace Trustees virtually in his sole discretion. This tends to inhibit Trustees from pursuing their potential for facilitating meaningful governance reform, just in case the Minister disapproves and decides to discipline delinquent Trustees or School Boards.

The more optimistic side of me says yes governance reform in Alberta could happen and emerge from the ranks of elected School Trustees. Why? Well because, as I said earlier, there is no choice but to change with the changing circumstances. With the Internet-enabled shifting of power to the engaged and Influential individual and the increased inexpensive capacity to organize, the pressures on the conventional governance model will be considerable. Change of all kinds is going to happen and it will potentially be transformational whether we like it or not. Democratic governance models are also going to have to change as well. Where is that change best to start and most likely to happen? Can new governance approaches be deliberately designed? Or are we destined to be merely change takers and victims of events caused by the pending and inescapable predicament of the tectonic shifts coming in political power distribution?

I truly believe that the community-based deliberative design approach of governance change in Alberta should best start in reimagining the governing philosophy of public education. School districts are the best positioned of any order of government to lead this change away from exclusive centralized authority, towards an informed and engaged community-based democracy. It will take some courage and boldness by individual School Trustees but this rethinking of governance is best begun where community, connectivity and collaboration is most likely to flourish; like at the local school district and the local school. Those key change elements are already present in local school systems. With elected School Trustees there is actual and ostensible authority to proceed and it would all be within their legal authority. It will still take some courage to take up the challenge to lead such change.

Trustees deal with real citizens in real communities with real issues. Who else could better help citizens learn to use their citizenship to take back governance and to collaborate for both a personal and greater good? Where can this happen more effectively than building on the strengths already existing at community based schools and in school districts? With the significant number and wide variety of school districts, Alberta could see a wide assortment of these new real democracy governance initiatives and experiments happening all over the province. They could be happening concomitantly and within the legal and authority structures of the conventional governance model. With schools having access and expertise with SuperNet connectivity this effort at governance adaptation can happen on a large

scale decentralized and be face-to-face in real time concurrently and all over the province at virtually no cost.

It will take courage for people to lead such an adaptive change. They will have to step out of their comfort zone. To me it is best put this way by Rudolf Bahro who said “When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.” “Contented oysters never made a pearl,” is the way one of my old Law School Professors put the same sentiment. My experience with School Trustees is that they are well meaning but apprehensive and insecure by nature. That anxiety is not without good reason in times like these. That insecurity however can be debilitating or it can be invigorating. It is all a matter of personal choice.

If school districts and servant-facilitator Trustees choose to be enabled and not disabled, we can start to imagine what good can come to our democracy, our sense of citizenship and our society through such leadership. Trustees would have to be directed and focused in applying their talents and attention as to what a 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen must know and be capable of doing and then decide specifically how public education can provide that knowledge, skill and capacity. They will need to figure out how people are best trained to participate as capable, engaged, informed, self-reliant and resilient citizens. We need citizens who are competent to take active participatory roles in the day to day governance decisions that affect their lives.

Next Trustees would have to take on the task of designing and managing the necessary changes they foresee by moving the decisions that need to be made as close as possible to the people and organizations who are actually affected by them. Pro forma public consultations are no longer adequate if they are merely rote and required steps in some shop worn planning process. Rather they have to become dynamic gatherings of engaged people who come together to share and explore issues, interests and impacts. They need to be inviting for people who want to share and collaborate in new ways to find some better and mutually beneficial solutions. Then those solutions have to be effectively presented and successfully recommend to senior policy decision makers. It will be messy at first but people will get the hang of it. People and groups will become better at it over time and as they learn the tools and techniques of collaboration, deliberative decision making and participatory governing. The new governance process led by Trustees has to be open and inviting to the “others” so they can also participate and influence the process to design the new democratic decision making criteria and process. Those “others” will be parents, students, community groups and neighbourhoods and even business interests. All those who want to participate will have something to contribute about the design of an effective collaborative community-based governance approach. There are going to be different perspectives, experiences and organizational cultures at play here. There will be difficulties and differences of opinion within the collaborative approach. That is where the servant facilitator leadership approach I referred to earlier has to be applied with wit and wisdom

All this is possible with school districts and Trustees working within their current statutory authority. They can also continue to meet their legal obligations to student, parent and community needs. Nothing I am saying changes the ways that school districts are fiscally and legally accountable to the provincial government either. The collaborative community-based governance challenge is to engage all

the local people who are interested and still honour the traditional governing and accountability relationships with the province and the Ministry. The senior order of government may be nervous but they need not be, if they too what to restore respect for our democracy and reinvigorate the sense of citizenship amongst Albertans. In fact this new approach to community-based governance is the essence of what it will take to for school districts to successfully conceive, create and sustain the advantages of the wrap-around school-community models currently being promoted by the Minister of Education.

It is often said that politicians in the traditional democratic governance model fear the courts, the media and a parade of concerned citizens who are organized and on a mission. Those concerned citizen parades have never been easier to form and sustain thanks to the Internet. Those citizen parades can communicate and collaborate more effectively, come to some level of common cause and sometimes settle on a working consensus. School Trustees, as servant leaders and facilitators for those citizen parades can speak authentically and forcefully on their behalf to senior orders of elected politicians with great authority and with the power to influence policy decisions. Sometimes that influence will be all about advocacy. Sometimes it will be about persuasion using influence and applied expertise for decision making support. Sometimes it will be about policy and others times it will be about pure politics, but it will always be about how to affect better governance methods and models.

### **In Conclusion:**

If School Trustees step up to the plate to take on this governance challenge, or if they are just thrust into it by extenuating circumstance , what causes it to happen will make no difference in the end. Some things are clear. Someone must give voice to the changing governance aspirations and expectations of citizens, and communities. Someone had to be thinking and acting longer term and be consciously concerned about the world and society we will be leaving for generations to come. Elected School Trustees are well positioned and culturally equipped to understand and represent the interests of those concerned citizens, today and tomorrow. School Trustees embedded in these kinds of servant-leader facilitator roles and relationships have as much clout and validity as any other democratically elected politician in any other order of government to engage and lead in governance reform.

The question is not will the opportunity be there for School Trustee to take the lead in a rethinking of how we govern ourselves. The question is will School Trustees have the courage to take up the challenge and stick with it to ensure that it happens. It's now up and over to you Mr. and Ms. Alberta School Trustee.

The Netizen are restless.

And remember, a contented oyster never made a pearl.

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