

EXECUTIVE REGIONALISM

Getting things done at the local government level often requires neighbourly collaboration. Achieving results in a regional setting demands skillful navigation by politically savvy executives who understand the regional strengths, needs, and limitations. Elected officials debate local and regional issues in open public meetings and are ultimately responsible for making decisions that shape prosperity. Appointed officials, such as chief administrative officers and senior managers, make recommendations, provide councils with advice based on the best available data, and implement the directives of their respective councils. Gathering information to define and solve regional issues requires consultation with external stakeholders and senior government departments. The term *executive regionalism* can be used to describe the collective actions of local officials and stakeholders seeking to advance some public good in a regional setting.

Intergovernmental Collaboration

Some may argue that regional deliberations are a power contest fraught with repetitive winners and losers and covert manipulation of outcomes. Other regions boast success stories of collaborative endeavours leading to collective wins. Regardless of the dynamic, externalities and competition for scarce resources bring regional executives to a common collaborative table. Regional relations are part of the Canadian local government landscape, and intergovernmental collaboration will continue to be the norm for the foreseeable future.

Executive regionalism has the flexibility to span various structures. Officials gather formally (regional board), informally (committee), or in ad hoc (task force) settings to discuss and consider issues, while the ultimate decision-making authority and responsibility rests with elected officials in the primacy of their respective council settings.

Governance colleagues are advised to learn to work well together. Egalitarian board settings demand respect for diverse perspectives and require strong political capacity to function properly.

The agility and flexibility of the local level is one of its greatest strengths as multiple stakeholders are invited to the table to consult and collaborate at the important information-sharing stage leading to quality decision making. A sincere commitment to advance mutual interests fosters a culture of trust and openness within the group. Deliberate conversations are essential in establishing a mutual understanding of concerns and opportunities for pivotal successes. External stakeholders who either add value to the decision-making process or are significantly impacted by the outcome are consulted.

Local governments are not mere underlings. They are interdependent government partners serving society. The agile, responsive nature of executive regionalism and close proximity to street-level networks on the home front are precisely why leading academics recommend a decentralized approach to risk management of critical infrastructure,¹ since it is difficult to anticipate unexpected interactions in complex systems such as power grids.²

Vertical and Outward Reach

The potential reach of executive regionalism is another strength. Besides the common horizontal intergovernmental meetings to discuss local matters, such as large development proposals or potential economies of scale in shared services, executive regionalism has vertical intergovernmental reach *upward* to provincial and federal counterparts, and *outward* reach to government agencies, non-profit groups, and the



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1 K. Quigley (2013). "Man plans, God laughs: Canada's national strategy for protecting critical infrastructure," *Canadian Public Administration*, Volume 56, Issue 1, March 2013.

2 C. Perrow (2012). *Getting to Catastrophe: Concentrations, Complexity and Coupling*. Retrieved from: <www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Normal-Accidents-Living-with-High-Risk-Technologies.php>.

private sector. Whatever the issue at hand, the powerful potential of executive regionalism enables a rapid response to bring relevant stakeholders to the table to provide input and propose solutions.

Executive regionalism is partisan-free in most of Canada,³ unlike provincial and federal government orders, where elected officials sometimes sacrifice constituent representation to vote in solidarity with their political party. Canada has a special blend of a hierarchical Westminster model in a federalist system, where provincial and federal governments are equally established under the *Constitution Act* and neither is subordinate to the other. The *Constitution Act* attempts to delineate federal and provincial responsibilities, with municipalities under provincial jurisdiction (s. 92.8) and having no constitutional power.

Despite the disconnected hierarchical power structure, federal and provincial governments are highly interdependent and inextricably involved in one another's activities over a wide range of matters⁴ such as health, education, environment, and trade. Donald Smiley, one of Canada's great political scientists defined "executive federalism" as "the ongoing interactions among [federal and provincial] governments where important public issues are debated and resolved."⁵ Similar ongoing interactions among governments occur at the municipal level and "executive regionalism" most respectfully expands on Smiley's impressive work by applying the interactive government concept to the local government context.

Whether a matter falls within municipal, provincial, or federal jurisdiction, it is evident that governments need to interact regularly to determine public value and accomplish meaningful results. Local consultation in the recent transition

of Alberta ground ambulance and dispatch services to the province is an example of intergovernmental interaction. Collaboration across organizational boundaries does not happen naturally; it must be made to happen.⁶ Interdependencies lead to important discourse as officials at various government levels work through public issues and do not sit idle when another government's action, proposed action, or inaction has the potential to impact their constituents. Canada's pluralist federal system indirectly establishes intergovernmental oversight and reduces the tendency of centrally concentrated power.⁷

Opportunities to Act – and Interact – within Complex Network

Municipal governments exist in a complex network of horizontal and vertical intergovernmental relationships. Executive regionalism hosts ongoing interactions to consult, collaborate, and advance public good in the open setting of various governance structures. Opportunities for dialogue create awareness of stakeholder positions and this does not necessarily imply unanimous agreement on proposed solutions. Regular discussions are an important part of progress, even if it leads to "one step forward and two steps back" at times. Choosing inaction is a policy decision in itself, but failing to have a discussion or take action on current or pending public issues is a serious, weak-kneed political omission.

Skillfully getting things done in a regional context, while maintaining professional relationships and political capacity, is extremely commendable and worth striving for. There is obvious political esteem awarded to individuals and regions that deliver repeated successes in executive regionalism. Vibrant communities and regions attract talent and industry that contribute to strong local, provincial, and federal economies. Further, one could presume that respectful, collaborative regions would be taken more seriously than aggressive, politically-fragmented regions when requesting from other orders of government.

Opportunities to interact and exercise executive regionalism skills should be held in a positive light as a regular part of government operations, rather than resisted or manipulated through covert dominance tactics. Governance processes rarely occur in isolation, and meaningful collaboration holds great potential to accomplish public good with widespread benefits and far-reaching impact. **MW**

3 Some Canadian municipalities operate with a party system, such as Montreal and Toronto, but most provinces require diverse, individualistic local representation where informal block voting is scorned and party formation is not permitted.

4 D. V. Smiley (1987). *The Federal Condition in Canada*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. p. 85.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

6 M. Barzelay and C. Campbell (2003). *Preparing for the Future: Strategic Planning in the U.S. Air Force*. Washington: Brookings. p. 23.

7 D. V. Smiley, note 4, *supra*, pp. 96-97.

as published in

Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

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