

NEW BRUNSWICK VOTERS HAVE SPOKEN: IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Tony Tremblay

When making the 2011 documentary film *The Challenges We Face in Governing New Brunswick*, I asked the formidable Donald Savoie if our province was indeed governable. The question, as I suspected, led him to explanations of the uneven policy landscapes that exist between central Canada and the hinterlands, New Brunswick being one. Readers of Prof. Savoie's work will know his arguments and know the compelling evidence he marshals to make the case for New Brunswick's challenges, many of which continue to seem insurmountable.

His arguments on that occasion made (and continue to make) clear the enormity of the structural impediments that stand in the way of New Brunswick achieving the kind of governance and financial solvency that it seeks. The playing field is simply not level, and policy-makers in voter-rich central Canada are unlikely to agree to concessions that make it so. Expecting that they should is as ludicrous as Canada expecting that the much more powerful and self-interested Washington would accede to our trade demands. In both instances, the best course of action is to appear agreeable while secretly hoping to avoid further damage. Maintenance of the status quo is considered a win. And so, once again, we are checkmated.

As much as this argument is compelling—so compelling that it has become truth in our region—it is also partial. The September 2018 New Brunswick election shows that clearly in both the results and the response to those results.

For the first time since the 1920s, the electorate in New Brunswick forced politicians into gridlock. Pundits call it minority government. Gridlock is a better term. Dissatisfied with the leaders and policies of the two main parties, and with the incessant yo-yoing of red to blue to red—a phenomenon that has resulted in lots of promises but few gains for the province—voters abandoned partisanship for democratic governance. That may not be clear riding by riding or even region by region, but it is clear when the vote is considered as a whole—and it is as a whole that the province serves its citizens and presents itself to the larger world.

What cannot be denied is that the provincial electorate chose *neither* main party, for neither has been able to rise above its promises to deliver results for New Brunswick. There has been much work, to be sure, and an abundance of good intentions, but socioeconomic data remain unchanged with respect to wait times, indebtedness, tax burden, out-migration, test scores, family income, and a range of other factors. The electorate had had enough. Through its vote it forced parties to reach across aisles, and, more profoundly, forced the two main parties to work together. And as much as the result has been interpreted as the rise of third-party politics in New Brunswick, which in part it is, the subtle genius of the vote is that it forces both main parties to find common ground for the betterment of the province. That is the real accomplishment this time: not the rise of alternatives but the writ issued to both main parties.

So, if that is the case, what has been the result? On the one hand, the incumbent government is claiming to have heard voters, while not appearing to have heard them at all. Premier Gallant's misrepresentation of his post-election discussion with the Lieutenant-Governor is evidence of that, as is his party's attempts to convince newly elected opposition members to betray their constituents by

joining him. Yes, that might be the way politics is done—and, yes, it is likely that Mr. Higgs is doing the same thing less publicly—but it is also the kind of shenanigan that a majority of voters rejected when casting ballots. The incumbent leader, then, is openly defying the will of an electorate that spoke loudly against concentrating power in the premier's office. The alternatives to this desperate hold on power are clear to see and hear in the many testimonials of New Brunswickers. Just listen.

Abetted by Mr. Gallant's actions and rhetoric is the reaction of some members of the province's Francophone community who have come out strongly against a third party that they perceive as threatening their hard-earned and constitutionally protected rights. This, too, happened just hours after the final results were released. This response is easier to understand, even if it was premature. The province's Francophones are a minority both provincially and otherwise. Their language, given the world we live in, is always under siege. Power for them is not status or ego but survival. Most of the English New Brunswickers I know understand that—to the point that we would oppose any gesture or policy that threatens the linguistic integrity of Acadians, including the provision of service equivalency in French. That heritage is our identity, too, even if we don't speak the language.

That said, to refuse so early to engage seems both counterproductive and reckless, especially given the state of urgency the province faces. How is New Brunswick going to move forward if refusals and threats become our opening salvos? Would it not be more productive to use such an election outcome as a basis for educating each other, for working together to find solutions that serve both communities? That's the condition New Brunswick voters created by imposing gridlock: they took away partisan excuses, requiring that groups work together for a common interest.

If our leaders are not willing to listen to the will of voters, conjuring all manner of tactics to hold power, and if influential members of vital provincial populations announce that they are not even willing to engage, then what is the hope for us? We can't blame this on Confederation. As I asked Prof. Savoie those years ago, is our province sustainable, let alone governable?

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