

Democracy IN The Canadian Commons

Reflections: During 2012 and 2013, CACOR explored and developed a focus for its activities under the theme of “Governance of the Commons”. Under this theme, we worked to advance our understanding of many issues pertaining to Governance of the Commons including but not limited to Energy Resources; The Rule of Law; Water Resources; Climate; Air Quality; Arctic Resources; and other challenges to sustainability that we face. We found that managing watersheds sustainably was a challenge because good governance of watersheds almost always includes several levels of official governments, including municipal; provincial or national (e.g. The Ottawa River Watershed); and, internationally; (e.g. the binational Great Lakes of North America). We said that protection and management of a watershed also should involve people with interests and perspectives from private and public sectors.

Following on from the 2013 Club Of Rome Conference in Ottawa, we continue to work to advance our understanding of how to achieve appropriate and effective Governance of the Commons. The Club of Rome holds the view that Governance of the Commons is a significant issue worldwide, for the foreseeable future.

In support of this continuing CACOR initiative on Governance of the Commons, we in Canada have also begun to question whether the state of Democracy in Canada is itself healthy and thriving to the point that we can count on our national, provincial and local levels of Government to provide the kind of coordination, direction, response and action that is needed to provide the timely and appropriate responses we need to develop, manage, protect and sustain our country and its both public and private space for present and future generations of Canadians. For example, there seems to be an increasing trend towards handing over (selling) public spaces (a park for example) to private hands, for “development”. The use of glaciers or groundwater for the bottling and sale of bottled water by private companies is another example.

Our discussions and work on Governance “OF” the Commons seemed to be calling for consideration of whether we have appropriate Governance “IN” our Canadian democracy to achieve the appropriate goals for sustainability that we are seeking for the Commons.

Questions: During a workshop held on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting of CACOR held May 29, 2014, the following kinds of questions were discussed:

- Is the state of Democracy itself, in Canada healthy and up to the task of providing effective vision, direction and coordination and management of our nation’s national resources in order to ensure effective Governance of the Commons and a sustainable future for Canada?

- Are there things Canadians should be striving to change or enhance or achieve that might provide more effective democratic Governance at, and between, all levels of our “official” Federal Provincial and Municipal systems?
- Is this theme of the condition of Democracy in Canada important to continue to explore, as we continue to seek effective Governance of the Commons, in Canada?
- Do you have any other observations or suggestions on how to advance this theme of Democracy IN the Commons?

Points made during the workshop discussion include the following:

- We have lost the tools of democracy because we did not pay attention and we “let it go” to the influence of private sector interests. This is an issue of uncontested power. How can the public interests “regain” the power they should rightly share, in our Canadian democracy?
- It was noted that the language we use to describe this issue is a problem, itself. What are the strategic issues at play? Can we trace the “vectors” of power to be able to understand how some issues emerged, and became the new “reality”. An example given was the handling of the Lansdowne Park takeover, in Ottawa by private interests. Perhaps we should study this, document it and synthesize the findings.
- At the same time can we really “do” things anymore in our Canadian democracy when our hands seem to be tied by our present democratic processes? We seem to have a democratic system of governance in Canada “on paper” but we need to “stop smiling”. The Prime Minister can appoint senior decision makers with zero openness and transparency and without justification.
- It was proposed, during the workshop that we need to have a follow-up discussion on this issue, perhaps including representatives of the three levels of government including a lawyer who has expertise in this area. Perhaps Globe would have financial resources.
- Transparency and Accountability are key aspects of the issue to tackle. There is a sense that there is presently a serious lack of both, resulting in a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness by the public.
- Public sector interests are often legally prevented from accounting for liabilities. Often, “risk” is measured as the risk to the company’s private interests and the only externalities that are considered are those that are

monetized as risk to the company only, not to public interests. Risks are in effect “dumped” on the public.

- International private companies often just go to the jurisdiction what will allow them to do what they say they need to do.
- In the U.S. there is a much more open framework within which issues like these can be heard. We need to look at other examples of democratic governance where these issues seem to be better addressed than in Canada. Issues that cross political as well as ecological boundaries include air, water, light, and sound.
- We should “get people in” to talk about governance, identify the tradeoffs, discuss effectiveness, efficiencies, results, how to actually assess externalities in the internal costing systems we have in public and private decision-making. We need to understand and assess the procedural things that are at play including openness, transparency, accountability and how the present “information age” and democratization of things by public use of the internet.
- Can we help to “democratize” this issue by first exposing it? In Canada we vote for the short term, not the long term. Perhaps our “first past the post” system is causing this.
- We need to work towards something with an appropriate type, level and scale of management that provides legitimate input and that somehow links the degree and level of influence to the consequences of the proposed action.
- We need a strategic plan with a paper for next year’s AGM, and for consideration for possible presentation at COR in Mexico City. We need to meet again to continue this discussion.
- Sheila offered her house for a future meeting and there was a suggestion that a politician and developer should, perhaps, be invited to join the meeting.
- Consideration should be given to a case study, with the focus, scope and scale to be determined later. Bob Rae was suggested for consideration as a special speaker.
- We should continue this opening discussion with a continuing series of meetings, to sort out the kind of things we should do and the outcomes we should seek. We should bear in mind our own transparency and accountability.

Draft by Rick Findlay based on discussion in a special session attended by 9 participants and held during the CACOR 2014 AGM, May 29, 2014