RIDING THE OFFICIAL MINORITY LANGUAGE ADVOCACY ROLLER-COASTER: CHALLENGES FACED AND MET – AND OPPORTUNITIES SEIZED

Sylvia Martin-Laforge has been Director General of the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) for more than a decade. Prior to her work at the QCGN she spent the majority of her career working on issues dealing with the rights of minorities, including employment equity, race relations, and native affairs. In the last 20 her focus has been on both minority language groups, those in the French-language sector in the rest of Canada and those of English-speaking Quebec, working in senior positions in French-language education in the Ontario Government, the Privy Council Office in Ottawa, and in the Department of Canadian Heritage.

This paper offers a rare, under-the-hood look at the governance and other challenges faced by a uniquely Canadian and increasingly high-profile not-for-profit organization. The Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) is an advocacy group that represents the interests of the English-speaking official language minority of Quebec, the never tranquil political entity with the largest concentration across the Americas of French-speakers. Sylvia Martin-Laforge, QCGN's Director General, opens up about the DNA and other aspects of her organization. The QCGN is governed through a board of directors that speaks for an increasingly diverse base, now 53 organizational members. From the group's launch in 1995, its advocacy vocation has been legislatively defined. The QCGN is largely bankrolled by the Department of Canadian Heritage. Its level of funding has been kept essentially flat even as the scope of its work, activities and impact has steadily broadened.

For almost a quarter-century, the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) has thrived while being both burdened and blessed with an unimaginative name. Our thoroughly boring and so very Canadian acronym has provided useful cover, as our organization has morphed with the times. We navigate the perpetually murky waters of linguistic politics. The waves we encounter, and on occasion must make, sometimes run wild. Even small, they feature potentially treacherous whitecaps.

As with any community-based organization, the QCGN faces many challenges, including governance. Three challenges I would underline:

- Lack of sufficient funding to fully address the scope of our mandate and the needs and priorities of our community;
- Inadequate organizational capacity to implement and fulfill our mission; and
- The increasingly competitive funding environment in which we work.

The federal funding framework for Official Language minority groups has, over the years, provided a successful formula for fostering both the vitality of the French-speaking community outside Quebec, and of our English-speaking community within Quebec. That helps, but it's never enough. As the needs of our Network and communities have increased exponentially, funding has flatlined. Our counterparts, the official language minority communities that mirror us outside Quebec, are endowed with additional support from their provincial governments. We have never been that fortunate – at least not

until recently. Over the past few months, the government of Quebec has established a Secretariat and named a Minister for Relations with English-speaking Quebecers. That's a big, big deal for us. We've been advocating for just this sort of undertaking by the provincial government for many years. We are optimistic. But the proof of the poutine is in the eating.

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

As QCGN's Director General for more than a decade, I've shepherded our staff through sometimes turbulent change. We have transformed from a locus of community dialogue and networking into a centre for evidence-based action and advocacy. We nail down and proffer statistics, facts and insights, all on behalf of Quebec's English-speaking official language minority. That's not always simple. Vital information that immediately jumps off a page for policy analysts often proves to be elusive when they must be grasped and acted upon by government. A lot of our work is, by its nature, rather dry.

Life at the QCGN, from time to time, can also be a roller coaster ride.

The QCGN was formed from a group of more than a dozen regional and sectoral organizations funded under the Official Languages Minority Communities program. All were brought together in 1995 by Canadian Heritage (PCH) to create a framework to better manage program and funding priorities. From that core, our Network branched out to become an umbrella organization now covering more than 50 broadly diverse member groups (see list at http://qcgn.ca/members). We accomplish together what none of us can do on our own.

We describe ourselves as a centre for evidence-based expertise and collective action. We identify, explore and express ourselves on strategic issues affecting the development and vitality of the English-speaking community of Quebec. In a single word, we do advocacy. We encourage dialogue and collaboration among our member organizations, individuals, community groups, institutions and leaders.

Yes, when you think about it, that really is a big, big mandate.

OUR GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

QCGN channels voice for more than 800,000 English-speaking Quebecers in and around Montreal, as well as approximately 200,000 across the regions of Quebec. From the coast of Labrador and the Magdalen Islands to the Outaouais and from the Eastern Townships to Rouyn-Noranda, and multiple points between, our English-speaking communities have different needs, different ways of seeing themselves, and different levels of access to services in their own language.

Our English institutions in the Montreal region have become bilingual, serving both the French-speaking majority and the English-speaking minority. But in the regions, few English institutions have survived. Even though we were brought together and are nourished largely with funding from the federal government, we work for our members as proponents for our community.

QCGN has a proven track record and a challenging future. As we deal with an evolving range of internal governance challenges, we are blessed with steady infusions of amazing DNA.

Like at all vibrant not-for-profits, our staff works over and above the call of duty. We expend inordinate energy chasing after the funding required to support current and emerging needs in our community. Seniors, youth, access to justice – all these issues are generously funded for other minority language communities outside our province. Within Quebec, not so much. So fledgling groups, once birthed, must strive on a shoestring to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of our communities. The absence of recurring funding to nourish these needs imposes a never-ending bleed on our time and focus across our Network. It distracts both leadership and staff.

Our many volunteers are essential to our success. They bring in so much talent, insight and energy. They also contribute their profound understanding that two cultures which complement each other so elegantly make for a whole that is so much greater than the sum of our parts. This complementarity, we believe, continues to foster a steady enrichment of the fabric of our Canadian life, both as a province and as a nation. The synergies are apparent in many dimensions, in ways both palpable and immeasurable.

With 13 organizational members at our start in 1995, each group was assigned two seats on our governing board. The first was reserved for the member group's elected president. The second was allocated to its executive director or senior staff person. By 2005, we had almost doubled our organizational membership to 22, and thus our governing board to 44 members. The impact of such an unwieldy structure on governance, much less on operational coherence, is obvious. Happily, by 2007 this behemoth had been stripped down and rebuilt into a representative board of 14 elected directors. This was part of an organizational sea change across the QCGN just before I came aboard.

As any savvy organization must, we provided ourselves rules of good governance including modernized bylaws; a Code of Ethics for the Board of Directors; a Statement of Principles for the membership; and twin strategic development plans,

respectively for the organization and the community. By and large, we are accomplishing what we have identified and believe is needed.

Through the federal department of Canadian Heritage, the government of Canada considers us the main interlocutor for Quebec's English-speaking communities. From the beginning, the knowledge and advice they sought and we provided has motivated other federal departments to seek us out. As we have grown and become more successful, an understanding has emerged that we should give more – lean in, so to speak – and strive more directly to foster stronger and more intermeshed connections throughout the various communities of English-speaking Quebec. We have taken to describing our base as our Community of Communities. Through our now 53 organizational members, we represent tens of thousands of English-speaking Quebecers.

The variety of groups is both mind-boggling and heartening. Some are tiny, or very small. Some are quite large. Some have staff. Some are entirely run by dedicated volunteers. The contrasts in their capacity and resources are stunning. And humbling. One hard-pressed dedicated volunteer has spent years, and much of her own money, working from her basement to help ensure her community has access to badly needed services. The needs, expectations and circumstances of our member groups vary widely. We are managing a very loose coalition of like-minded groups, trying to ensure the continued vitality of our Community of Communities. So, yes. It's complex.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

There's great wisdom embedded in the timeworn cliché that even the longest journey begins with a single step. We have been taking small, successive steps since 1995. This incremental approach has taken us far.

You can't get too far ahead of your members, mind you.

But you have to be far enough ahead for the government to listen to you. So the advocacy and voice piece of our mandate is certainly a challenge.

In retrospect, it was so much simpler when I started at QCGN. Each of our members received core funding from Canadian Heritage. Each worked exclusively in support of official language minority communities. By way of contrast, each of the three dozen groups that have since come aboard receive most, if not all, of their funding from other sources. All provide support for English-speaking Quebecers. Likewise, their mandates are of mixed and often remarkably varied nature. This multiplies the challenges embodied in our quest for common cause.

In the same way, growth and diversification have brought additional recognition to the QCGN. Our rewards include another layer of governance complexity.

Groups often have differing opinions about the focus and priorities of the QCGN. With our success, we have also learned to manage growth and diversity. There is, of course, always tension between old and new; rural and urban; regional and sectoral. This tension is both positive and negative. It forces us to stretch our imagination, to think creatively outside the box.

A variety of consultation mechanisms from email blasts to town halls help us nail down the issues and potential solutions. When there is wide consensus – unanimity is not a reasonable goal – we get things done.

We operate amid complexity, many levels and types of moving parts. Of course our parts are also evolving independently. We try to reflect and refract through lenses beyond the purely political. We take into full account our increasingly diverse array of communities, as their needs and perspectives continue simultaneously to evolve.

Notwithstanding, to resort to a loaded Constitutional term, the QCGN always has been, is and shall remain a remarkably distinct organization. That's quite appropriate and even somehow symmetric as we continue to evolve and grow within our distinct and somewhat asymmetric society.

In boxing jargon, our vocation is to punch consistently and far above our weight class on behalf of our community – the 12.5% of Quebecers who are most comfortable speaking English. This necessary pugnacity serves well, whether measured by effectiveness, efficiency, credibility or value added. With our board, our staff team and our track record, here's hoping we never lose our punch.