Interviews with Three Municipal Leaders

THE ROLE OF NGOS

ABSTRACT

The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) is the provincial umbrella organization for agencies, primarily NGOs, that serve immigrants and refugees. In helping to fulfill its mandate, executive director Debbie Douglas has engaged in public education of the membership, during and between elections. As author of this article, she questions what role NGOs can play in setting or influencing the political agenda and in building leadership.

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From the point of view of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, the federal, provincial and municipal elections that were held over the last twelve months were particularly significant in light of the findings of the 2001 Census for Canada. The Census found that 13.4% of Canada's 29.5 million people are visible minorities, or to use my preferred term, 'racialized minorities'. The Chinese population in Canada has reached 1 million. More than 19% of Ontario's 11.3 million people are from racialized communities and 18.4% of Canada's population is foreign-born. This figure is 26.8% for Ontario. The majority of immigrants and refugees that come to Canada settle in Ontario. Most of those new arrivals choose to live in Toronto.

Electoral representation

In light of these population numbers, how are we doing in terms of diversity in Canadian Parliament, the Ontario legislature and Toronto City Council? Not very well. Of the 308 members of Parliament, just a little over 5% (6.8%) are from racialized communities, approximately 21 members. While most of these are affiliated with the Liberal Party, only one, Ujjal Dosanjh, is in Cabinet. Of the 103 members of the Ontario legislature, only 8 members (7.8%) are from racialized communities. Compared to the 19% members of racialized communities in Ontario, this is a dismal showing.

The Census identified Chinese, South Asians, Blacks and Filipinos as the most numerous of Canada's racialized populations. No Filipinos were elected to the Canadian Parliament in the last federal elections. Only 3 Chinese, 12 South Asian and 3 Blacks were elected. Of these, only one is in Cabinet. Jean Augustine, Member of Parliament for Etobicoke-Lakeshore and one of two Black women on the government side of the House, was dropped from Cabinet.

The Ontario Liberals fare slightly better. Of the two Black members in the legislature, one is a Minister and the other is the Speaker. 36.8% of Toronto's 4.6 million population are from racialized communities. Only 4 individuals from these communities were elected to City Council in the 2003 Municipal election. In a city with a 6.7% Black population, there are no Black city councillors.

Political Parties

The majority of racialized individuals elected at the federal and provincial (Ontario) levels are members of the Liberal Party. It appears that the long-tarnished promise of Trudeau era multiculturalism retains sufficient glitter to draw members of racialized and immigrant communities to the Liberals. This is despite the fact that the recent liberal governments have introduced harsh legislation, policies and practices that have done more to devastate immigrant and refugee communities than any previous government of any stripe.

The Conservative/Reform/Alliance Party has a proportionately higher number of visible minorities elected, compared to the New Democratic Party. In fact, we have observed that the NDP also fields proportionately fewer visible minority candidates than the other two parties. Meanwhile, the NDP platforms at both levels tend to be more responsive to issues that impact on immigrant, refugee and visible minority communities.

The recent federal elections were conspicuous in the absence of any promises, sincere or contrived; to improve the lives of racialized communities in this country. This is particularly alarming at a time when the rights and freedoms of members of racialized communities have been severely proscribed in the name of the overarching, greater good of protecting Canada.

Political Leadership

As a society, we need to move beyond the politics of mere visual representation of members of racialized communities in elected office. To determine whether there is diversity in politics, I propose that we apply two tests. One: Are members of racialized communities represented in positions of leadership, both in elected office and in political parties? To what extent are they able to exert real influence to create and shape policy? Two: To what extent are the issues that are critical to immigrants, refugees and racialized communities integrated in the party platform and government policy? Until and unless these issues are addressed in core policy, immigrants, refugees and racialized communities will continue to be an adjunct, a disposable element that can be ignored at will, or managed through accommodation, rather than become integrated into the power structure.

Political Engagement

Social observers have tended to argue that political engagement and representation will increase among communities with a longer period of residence and a growth in numbers. In Canada, we have several clear examples of the marginalization and political exclusion of communities that are long-term residents of Canada and that have grown in numbers and built strong social networks. Foremost is the appalling history of the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, leaving these communities increasingly marginalized.

Particularly significant in Canada's history of immigration is the experience of Black communities of Nova Scotia and Southwestern Ontario, and Chinese and South Asian communities that settled first in British Columbia and later elsewhere in Canada. Despite a lengthy presence in this country, none of these communities have been able to achieve political representation in elected office or on issues, proportionate to their numbers and their length of residence. Of course, the experience of white immigrant communities who are also long-term residents is quite different.

Social observers have also suggested that strong social and economic networks and organizations in the community can facilitate greater civic engagement through practices such as voting, and increase participation in institutionalized politics. Also, that the presence of numerous NGOs in the community is an indicator of social capital, and that this development can lead to greater civic engagement. Yet we know that this is not the experience of racialized communities.

NGOs

I would like to take a moment to reflect on what we mean by NGOs. While NGOs are generally held to be non-governmental, not-for-profit organizations, this term encompasses an extremely broad range of entities with very different values, roles and functions.

OCASI members and other organizations in the immigrant and refugee-serving sector are primarily service providers to immigrants and refugees in Ontario. They include organizations that prioritize the needs of one or more specific ethno-cultural or linguistic communities, and ones that adopt a broad-based approach to prioritize the needs of all individuals in a geographic region. As such, they apply to various levels of government for funds to deliver services and are held to requirements that are imposed by the funder. These requirements then shape the very nature of the organization, creating a third-party contractor whose continued existence is contingent upon the pleasure of the funder.

The recent trend in Canada is to lump together all such NGOs under the term 'voluntary sector', as witnessed by the federal government's Voluntary Sector Initiative and the Voluntary Sector Accord. Work done in the NGO sector is by no means voluntary, and is often delivered by professionals, para-professionals and other trained individuals.

For example, while many of the organizations in this sector have a mandate of advocating on behalf of clients, the communities they serve or the sector in general, this activity has been greatly curtailed by funding policy and practice. OCASI recently had first-hand experience in losing funding, resulting directly from advocacy work. A year later, OCASI has yet to renew funds with this particular funder.

Advocacy is further curtailed by Revenue Canada through the Charities Act. In fact, obtaining or retaining one's charitable status is an exercise in ongoing frustration and allowable advocacy is carefully limited and proscribed.

Other NGOs perform the function of an association, serving to link community members in period activity that could be social, cultural, religious or political in nature. They can include organizations that are based in a specific ethnocultural community, or are focused on one or more issues such as the prevention of violence against women.

The recent trend in Canada is to lump together all such NGOs under the term 'voluntary sector', as witnessed by the federal government's Voluntary Sector Initiative and the Voluntary Sector Accord. Work done in the NGO sector is by no means voluntary, and is often delivered by professionals, para-professionals and other trained individuals. The work is devalued and underpaid.

Further, the funding environment has undergone a drastic change with the complete and deliberate erosion of core funding, the funds that are necessary to maintain the integrity of an organization. The combination of service downloading, straining to the utmost the resources of the NGOs, and the unfriendly funding regime, has resulted in the sector fighting for survival. NGOs that are advocates on behalf of racialized communities face the further challenge of countering special security measures that target individuals on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language and place of birth.

NGOs have traditionally been seen as a launching ground for members of racialized communities that wish to pursue a political career, either through service on a voluntary board or through paid work in the sector. Yet in the current circumstances, the majority of such individuals have had to devote their efforts to fundraising and related governance activities. This has allowed little scope for developing leadership skills and building strong networks and alliances that could lead to building political influence.

Again, the experience of NGOs that are constituted by racialized communities is qualitatively different, less positive and more challenging.

Conclusions

What role, therefore, can NGOs play in setting or influencing the political agenda and in building leadership? As long as NGOs in general, and especially those that advance the interests or advocate on behalf of racialized and immigrant and refugee communities continue to have a marginal political status, they can have no role in the political agenda. To illustrate, the Province of Ontario is in the process of pursuing an agreement with the federal government on immigration and settlement. Although the process is nearing completion, immigrant communities have not been consulted, and have been shut out.

At the national level, although a broad range of NGOs commented, deputed, spoke and wrote regarding the Bill that eventually became the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), this commentary was virtually ignored in the final version of the legislation. Of course, the prevailing hostility towards immigrants and refugees, particularly members of racialized communities, probably had a lot to do with the outcome.

While addressing objective conditions such as poverty and labour market exclusion of racialized communities is always important, this by itself will not lead to increased political participation, let alone play a tangible role in influencing the political agenda. Real power-sharing will remain a mirage, until we begin to dismantle structural inequalities.

Studies have shown that strong and active community organizations have often led to greater political engagement among those communities. Again, a high voter turnout in those communities would not necessarily translate to achieving political power. This would require that racialized communities are represented in the membership and leadership of political parties, and that equity is at the core of the party platform and political agenda.

In light of Canada's long history of immigration, we need make a real effort to address unequal and incomplete citizenship by re-evaluating the nature of franchise. The requirement of Canadian citizenship to vote at any level of government automatically excludes many immigrants from the voting process. Most recent immigrants are from racialized communities. Structural barriers to obtaining citizenship have prevented other long-standing permanent residents, who pay the same taxes as citizens, from obtaining citizenship. Until the early 1980s, landed immigrants who were British subjects could vote in municipal elections. Instead of extending this right to all immigrants, the government took away voting power from British subjects.

Finally, NGOs will continue to have key role in advocacy, either as partners, collaborators or arms-length commentators. The task of continuing to challenge governments to address structural inequalities and discrimination is one of the core functions of this sector in a liberal democracy. We must focus more clearly on building a political process that is truly equitable and inclusive.



Bringing Worlds Together

In March 2002, the Political Participation Research Network pulled together researchers and other experts on the political participation of newcomers and women to ascertain if lessons learned from the study of the participation of women could benefit the study of newcomer and minority experiences. Proceedings from this event include papers commissioned on the formal and informal participation of newcomers and minorities as well as women. They can be found on-line at **http://canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/pprn-pub/index.html** or paper copies can be order in either official language by contacting **canada@metropolis.net**