

Trustee Notebook *By Laura Busheikin*

Ethical Behaviour, Gender Equality and More Big Topics for Local Elected Officials

Now in my seventh year as a local trustee and my fourth as an Islands Trust Council Vice-Chair, I sometimes feel my work life rushes at me nonstop, like a video game: meetings to attend, reports to read, legal advice to digest, constituents to talk with, emails to answer, conflicts to negotiate, all hurtling towards me at breakneck speed.

So I really appreciate any opportunity to slow down, ponder, replenish, and talk with other elected officials about what we do, why we do it, and how to do it better.

I recently had a chance to do this at the annual Local Government Leadership Academy Seminar (LGLA). Approximately 150 local and regional politicians from all over BC spent two and a half days in a Richmond hotel attending workshops, listening to speakers, and having conversations about municipal governance issues.

Here's my report on a couple topics:

Responsible Conduct of Local Elected Officials

Ideally, local officials should demonstrate integrity, responsibility, honesty, civility, respect, and the ability both to lead and to collaborate. They should treat other people with dignity and understanding. They should welcome, and consider, differing perspectives, and they should make thoughtful decisions that are in the best interest of the community. This bundle of characteristics and practices is considered "responsible conduct."

The LGLA discussion reflected a concern that responsible conduct has been diminishing in recent years. Pressure is coming from the rise of social media and the advent of the "post-truth" era, in which objective facts are less powerful than appeals to emotion and group identity.

This is not just a local government issue. Lots of people are talking about the degeneration of the public sphere. For instance, the title of James Hoggan's book *I'm Right and You're an Idiot* (who by the way will be at the Denman Readers and Writers Festival this summer) sums up an attitude that is increasingly prevalent. When elected leaders start thinking and acting this way, we end up with nasty council meetings, dysfunctional relationships, and bad decisions.

The Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) has a working group on responsible conduct which has published a report and is working on recommendations. B.C. does have a variety of mechanisms in place for promoting responsible conduct, from an ombudsman to educational opportunities like the LGLA event, but it may be time to consider other approaches.

I was interested to learn about tools used in other provinces: for instance, a mandatory code of conduct for



elected officials, with a process to investigate violations and issue penalties; mandatory training in ethics and responsible conduct for all local representatives; and an integrity commissioner with the power to investigate and act on allegations of misconduct.

Our discussion also acknowledged the considerable power of good habits such as making time to get to know the people we work with, adhering to due process, publicly acknowledging the work of colleagues, inviting feedback, and talking through conflict, with the help of a mediator when needed.

Women in Politics

An introductory statistic set the stage for this session: there are fewer women than men in every elected body in Canada. And, according to a 2016 study on gender and politics, women clearly face barriers advancing in municipal politics, in particular because they still do more than their fair share of household and parenting work.

Also, because women in Canada still earn less than men, they have fewer resources available for campaigning and are less able to take on the financial risks involved in being a political candidate.

Does this imbalance influence how politics are done? Yes. Research shows that women bring distinctive perspectives and work styles. We are more likely than men to work across party lines, to be collaborative, avoid partisanship, and bring forward issues related to women's lives.

Research also shows that gender is not a liability at the box office. Women win elections at the same rate as their male counterparts. The challenge, however, is getting women to step up as candidates. On average, women will only run for office after being asked to do so five times, whereas men, generally, don't need to be asked at all! Women tend to wait till they are overqualified, whereas men will more likely simply jump into the fray regardless of experience or qualifications.

Women also face different and more intense pressures around personal issues such as combining work and family life, and appearance. One woman talked about being advised to pin her hair up so that more grey was visible, and tone down her makeup and classically feminine fashion style. She

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did so, and noticed immediately that people showed her more respect. “Yes, men also face pressure about appearance and dress codes, but no one expects them to camouflage their gender or deliberately look older than they are,” she said.

The three-person panel talked about the power of mentorship and recruitment. They encouraged female politicians to seek out younger women and offer them encouragement and help.

All the panelists acknowledged that sexual harassment—inappropriate comments, touch, gaze and language—exists and is, at the very least, a discouragement.

I was cheered to hear that younger women feel things have changed and that they don’t face as many barriers as the previous generation. I was also pleased to see quite a few men attending this session, listening intently, and providing supportive, thoughtful comments.

These were just a couple of the topics covered at LGLA 2018. Feel free to engage me in dialogue about these or other local governance topics when you see me around the island. I’ll appreciate the invitation to slow down and have an interesting conversation.

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