
A View from the Inside: The Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers

by Emery M. Fanjoy

The Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers is the six Governors of the New England States; Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont, and the five Premiers of Eastern Canada; New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Quebec. It has met annually since 1973. It exists to advance the interests of its eleven members through cooperation involving the private and public sectors in the region. The Conference achieves this purpose in four ways:

- making decisions and taking collective action
- sponsoring conferences, seminars and meetings
- undertaking research
- increasing public awareness of issues.

The work of the conference is conducted by committees and task forces, generally of government officials. It has been active in about a dozen areas of public policy. Approximately 250 events, activities and meetings have been sponsored. The conference is supported by two permanent secretariats, one on each side of the border.

It is unique across the United States-Canada border for its longevity, the diversity of its interests and the intensity of its work. The conference has been analyzed and visited by representatives of central and western provinces and states. To this point, no other combinations of jurisdictions have replicated it, although the Great Lake states and provinces have been expanding their relationships.

General Points

Three general points must be stated. First, although I will be using the words "conference" and "cooperation" a great deal, one must not forget that sovereign

governments are the members of the conference. Rather than considering the subject from a regional perspective looking in at the governing units or subsuming them, I prefer to consider the subject outward from the perspective of the jurisdictions. A government pursues its self-interest. When cooperation is in its self-interest, one set of behaviour follows. When cooperation is not in its self-interest, a different set of behaviour follows.

Two caveats to those statements are necessary. The first is on self-interest. Over time, one would expect in any ongoing relationship among governments, that each party is satisfied they get more out of the relationship than they put in it. The satisfaction can range from being short term or related to a single issue to being long term and cover the spectrum of the relationship with other governments. The satisfaction can be tangible or intangible. It would not be easy to measure the overall benefits and costs to each of the eleven governors and premiers by the existence of the conference. However, each of them intuitively makes that judgment periodically, especially when they take office. On balance, they consider it worthwhile, as measured by their continued involvement.

The other caveat is on tradition. All jurisdictions have a tradition and style of how they behave toward other jurisdictions. Some are outgoing; some are more inward oriented. Impressions of each jurisdiction are reinforced or changed based on the visions and actions of the current political leader toward other governments. Tradition creates an expectation of behaviour. That predictability is useful in managing a relationship as complex as the conference. The actual behaviour may vary from the norm but one would not expect to find major inconsistencies over time.

Of course, after 17 years, the conference has its own traditions also, beyond those of the member jurisdictions. Those traditions can mitigate the effects of self-interest, especially as new participants join the group. I am not implying that self-interest is bad; only that it is in competition with cooperation.

Each jurisdiction openly pursues its own bilateral and multilateral agendas within the framework of the

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conference, especially at the annual conference and major energy committee events. Resolutions are passed to send a message to a national government or the private sector. Events are announced that relate to a particular interest of a governor or premier, with theme, locale and timing carefully chosen. In summary, the conference opens doors, provides legitimacy and widens networks for each government. Some take full advantage of the opportunity.

The second general point relates to the particular region of North America being considered. Napoleon said "History sometimes, geography always, determines the policies of states." I think most would agree that Quebec, Atlantic Canada and New England have a number of factors that make them a region. The basic one would be the shared history going back to the 1600s and renewed periodically by waves of immigrants. Those roots are kept alive by social and institutional contacts. In addition, there is a web of economic relationships, also going way back in history. Further, ten of the eleven jurisdictions are on the Atlantic Ocean. Lastly, there is a common international boundary (including on the ocean) for three states and three provinces. Regular interaction across it keeps people in those jurisdictions particularly aware of their international neighbours.

Having said there is a region, one must also say that the assumption is not universally accepted. There is a wide spectrum of opinion on the matter. If people in power in a government believe in the concept of the northeast international region, cooperation flows easily. But if people in power, on balance, do not believe or are not interested in the region, cooperation suffers.

The eleven jurisdictions form a reasonable balance in numbers, population and wealth and right down to the fact there are only two dominant cities – Boston and Montreal. This balance accounts, in part, for the stability over the years.

The third general point is that multi-governmental cooperation had been a tradition on both sides of the border. The New England Governors Conference was formed in 1937. Quebec has had cooperative arrangements with its neighbours going back a long while. The Atlantic provinces regularized cooperation in 1956. The Maritime premiers structured their relationship in 1971 with the creation of the Council of Maritime Premiers. In each case, the cooperative arrangements have been innovative, long-standing and

led to the establishment of joint programs. Given the sense of region and the experience of operating common bodies within each country, it was easier for the eleven states and provinces to try a venture across the international border.

There are other multigovernmental activities involving all or many of the eleven governments in addition to the conference. These other bodies are in several fields and are listed in the inventory of state/province interactions done in the mid 1970s and currently being updated. They reinforce the concept of the region and the conference, and vice versa. No discussion of the conference would be complete without acknowledging that it is not the only show in town.

Dynamics/Operating Characteristics

What might be the secret to keeping such an unusual venture alive? Some reasons were given above. There are others.

Critical mass is one. Among the eleven governments, there has always been a critical mass of dedicated supporters at the political level. Basically, those who were for it were keen. Those who were neutral went with the flow. Those who were negative were never seriously disruptive. If the conference ever falls below the critical mass, there would be a serious crisis because other checks and balances are not very powerful.

Theodore Sorensen gave a speech in Canada in 1988 in which he said that, based on his observations of many politicians, there are three ingredients for political leadership: vision; power to persuade; and the ability to select good advisers.

In the case of the conference, how does the collective vision stay alive, given the turnover of the principals and their differing interest in the conference? All conference events play a part, but the private time together at the annual conference is particularly important. It is on those occasions – the private dinners, the private breakfasts – where the collective will is renewed; where a new principal sees how enthusiastic some of his or her colleagues are toward the conference; where ideas for personal advantage crystallize or are tested; and where deals are made.

There is also the factor of personal relationships. There have been several cases where a governor and a premier became friends; where mutual respect and compatible personalities led to something more than a professional relationship. That situation strengthens the conference.

As you might expect, there is a chance of the reverse situation; the case where tension exists between principals, generally within a country. The tension may be based on widely different personalities or styles, a

divisive issue between their two jurisdictions or based on different visions and beliefs as politicians. Such situations are not threats to the conference except that they may hamper progress with its agenda. Each situation is dealt with in the most appropriate way, depending on the causes of the tension.

I believe the word "vision" best describes the conference's continued existence. The conference works, not because of economic opportunity, but because of a perceived shared deeper understanding of the region and its people. The vision includes everything mentioned in my earlier comment about the region. The vision also recognizes that there are complex public policy issues that transcend the border. Lastly, it recognizes the merits of cooperation in the northeast to offset the vitality and population growth of the west and south.

The conference gives governors and premiers a unique opportunity for political leadership and statesmanship. They are able to lead, and be seen to lead, their jurisdiction into the complexities of international arrangements and opportunities. This adds an interesting, relevant and generally non-controversial dimension to their responsibilities.

Sorensen also mentioned the importance of selecting good advisers. In the conference, those people come together in the Coordinating Committee. This committee is generally comprised of a senior adviser to each governor and premier, supported by the co-secretaries. The committee is critical to the smooth operation of the conference, but only as an operating "shadow" of the conference itself. The vision of each political leader toward the conference is reflected in his or her appointee to the committee. As well as at private sessions of the principals, the conference vision is kept alive and passed on to new participants during Coordinating Committee meetings.

In any organization, one cannot discount the role of momentum. At the conference, momentum comes from the volume and variety of activities underway throughout the year. It also comes from the existence of the secretariats to gently remind all participants of obligations and other aspects of the annual cycle and to welcome new participants to the conference. Further, governors and premiers meet throughout the year at functions. The conference has considerable momentum.

A final aspect of the operation that may interest you is conflict. As you would expect, differences of opinion are common in an organization as large, diverse and political as the conference. They can appear at any level, on any issue and for reasons that include competing visions, personality conflicts and simple misunderstandings. The basic style of the conference is to decide things by consensus. Therefore, on any divisive issue, the practice

of all committees is to talk it out patiently and with tolerance. Thirteen organizations are involved in all activities, including the two secretariats, so there are many avenues of appeal to air such issues and seek a balanced view on them. Since there are several levels of integration in the conference—sub-committee, committee, Coordinating Committee and principals—strongly held views can be, and are, elevated to a higher level for possible resolution. Ultimately, if there can be no agreement, a divisive matter is removed from the agenda. Dealing with such issues expands the collective experience and strengthens the organization.

Differences in Public Administration

An interesting aspect of the conference is the necessity to accommodate and blend the general practice of public administration in the two countries, the specific practices in the eleven jurisdictions and that of the two secretariats. There are marked differences across the international border. The differences include:

1. States and provinces have different constitutional responsibilities, legal and political practices, institutions for governance and political cultures. The search for areas of joint action must accommodate those realities. Reality limits the scope of activities and the depth of what can be accomplished.

2. The role of governors is different than the role of premiers. Governors tend to lead by persuasion and legislation-crafting, a characteristic forced by the separation of the executive and legislative branches of government. Premiers, on the other hand, lead through their control of the cabinet and legislature, and are oriented to policy and program initiatives and responses.

Documents such as resolutions and memoranda of understanding are not as much part of the Canadian tradition as of the American. Premiers have more of a tradition of action in policies and programs.

Another difference would be how premiers and governors relate to their national leaders and government. The premiers have real political and legal power and use it regularly in the federal-provincial arena. They meet the prime minister almost as equals and participate in frequent first minister's meetings. There are only ten premiers in Canada, so they can meet in intimate surroundings and informally. Relations with Washington are much more difficult for governors given the remoteness of the president, the power and visibility of state senators, the complexity of congress and the fact that there are 50 governors.

3. The New England Governors Conference (NEGC) has quite a different role and much greater resources than the Eastern Canadian Premier's Secretariat (ECPS). The

main work of the former is to serve the governors on New England activities, in dealing with national matters and on sub-national matters beyond New England. NEGC staff help the governors with their personal common agenda and so work closely with political staff in the state capitols. It has policy and program delivery responsibilities.

The ECPS, in contrast, has no other role except the collective interest of the five premiers toward New England. The ECPS operates as an offshoot of the Council of Maritime Premiers Secretariat, which is about the same size as, and has roles and resources not unlike the NEGC staff. However, the CMP staff serves only three of the five provinces the ECPS serves, whereas the New England staff serves the regional, national and international interests of the six states.

In simple terms, one could say that the NEGC undertakes projects on behalf of the governors while ECPS coordinates them among the provinces. In the latter case, the work is done by career officials in the line departments of the provinces.

4. Premiers tend to have greater financial resources at their disposal than governors and more discretion in its use. For example, the Quebec government plans to spend \$35.5 billion (Canadian) in 1990-91, about three times the spending of Massachusetts. Governors are more openly accountable for their spending because of American budget processes.

In general, the provinces have been more willing than the states to look at ideas for the conference that require expenditures. The period of greatest spending by the conference was when US federal funds were available through the New England Regional Commission in the 1970s. After the Commission disappeared in 1981, initiatives that cost money were of less interest. That was because of the greater difficulty of getting funds on the American side as well as the revenue squeeze on all the governments due to the recession then.

The New England Governors Conference has a considerable budget for working with the Canadians and pays a lot of the expenses for meetings in New England. The Eastern Canadian Premiers Secretariat has no funds for such expenses. The host province pays those costs.

At major events in the United States, including the annual conference itself, it has been common for corporations to contribute financially by sponsoring a dinner, chartering a boat, etc. That is rare in Canada for an event hosted by a premier, although it is done at technical conferences. There is a different attitude in the two countries about perceived links between a governor or premier and the private sector.

5. Elections in New England happen at the same time. In three of the six states, they are held every two years. During those periods, there tends to be greater disruption of conference activities because either three or six jurisdictions are preoccupied. In part, this is because, in general, officials on the New England side are more political than on the eastern Canadian side.

Provincial elections, of course, are at the call of a premier and happen randomly. They generally do not affect line activities, which are conducted by career officials.

6. The requirement for openness in meetings in the United States contrasts with the Canadian practice of meeting behind closed doors. The annual conference is open to the media and votes are taken to make a decision, in the American tradition, but nearly all matters are worked out beforehand.

Outside stenographers are not allowed into meetings of officials to record a discussion because, in the Canadian tradition, remarks by officials are anonymous.

7. In general, the states behave toward each other and the Canadian side entrepreneurially, even in the governors conference. The provinces behave toward each other and the American side more consensually. This shows up, for example, in the setting of the program and agenda for events.

8. All formal events in Canada must have French and English capability, as required by New Brunswick and Quebec. In the United States, the matter is left to the discretion of the host jurisdiction.

9. There is a different style toward security in each country. Generally, it is more visible in the United States. There seems to be a view that the public expects governors to have those trappings of authority, aside from the need for it. That is not the case in Canada.

10. Lastly, a number of English words have different meanings or implications in the two countries. One has to learn them and take care in their usage. Examples are "lobby", "Liberal" and "subsidy".

Authority

In 1973, Jean Monnet said, "I believe that what is singularly lacking in European affairs is authority. Discussion has been organized, but not decision-making." The same problem faced the conference in its early days: How to enforce decisions for joint action among eleven sovereign governments. How to communicate the political vision to those who must implement it. It is not easy to ensure harmonious action by eleven bureaucracies on initiatives of their political masters. Although the political decisions are made by consensus, that does not guarantee the enthusiasm of all

principals for the decisions after they get home. Sometimes, officials receive conflicting messages, which may be interpreted as, "Do what you think is best."

In the early years of the conference, when the parties were learning how to work together, discipline to implement decisions was sometimes a problem. For example, in 1975, a decision was made to have a tourism project the following year related to the American Bicentennial and the Olympic Games in Montreal. It never got off the ground, in large part because it was not possible to communicate the political will effectively to those who had to implement it. In fairness to the latter, if decisions come down from above that call for new priority initiatives and with no new funds for them, one can imagine the reaction.

This tended to be a greater problem in Canada. The line departments there are relatively large and oriented to delivering programs. They report to a cabinet minister who has his own political power base, priorities and agenda for the department. A premier cannot necessarily command departmental resources for his own interests. In the tourism example cited above, that was the case. In New England, in contrast, officials implementing governor's decisions are often closer to him politically and so inherently more enthusiastic.

By the late 1970s there was a growing determination among the principals that the conference be more active. Four decisions followed:

1. On the Canadian side, in September 1978, a secretariat was formed to serve the five provinces in their relations with the six states. The Council of Maritime Premiers Secretariat had served the June 1978 conference in an unofficial capacity. Staff from there was seconded to the new responsibility. Before this decision, a lead province played any coordinating role necessary.

2. The Coordinating Committee was formed and was given authority over line committees. In effect, line committees report to the conference through the coordinators and not directly. This change was important to manage the implementation of conference decisions and for reviewing recommendations to the conference from the committees for activities in the ensuing year. Before this decision, there was ambiguity on the reporting of line committees and the role of the Coordinating Committee.

3. Records of discussions were produced for each agenda item and were sent by the co-secretaries to those responsible for implementing them in each jurisdiction. Before this decision, it was left to each province/state coordinator to communicate to those officials.

4. Communications and feedback was set up to see that Coordinating Committee members from each jurisdiction ensured their line officials came onside.

The checks and balances now in place within and among the eleven bureaucracies work quite well in identifying and dealing with problems that come up. Through such measures as newsletters and bulletins, letters of appointment with briefing material and active central staff in both regions, the integrity of conference decisions is reasonably high. But it needs to always be monitored.

Initiatives

The conference has taken initiatives of several types, formally and informally. One interesting example of informal cooperation was to do with the tricky matter of the United States-Canadian boundary in the Gulf of Maine and fishing rights there. Attempts were made to make the subject an official conference item. However, it was so sensitive because of the conflicting fishery interests and the emotionalism around the establishment of any international boundary, agreement could not be reached. The Donner Foundation funded a New England initiative for research and conferences, worked out among officials of the governors/premiers conference, that brought together the fishery interests on both sides of the border. Two conferences were held. Consensus was that they were helpful in decreasing tensions and increasing awareness and understanding of the views of the other side.

Controversial matters can be tricky to deal with. I mentioned the fishery and boundary issue. But there are others – nuclear energy, health care systems, trade subsidies and acid rain – to name only four. Such matters are considered from time to time. Some become high profile on the formal agenda, such as acid rain; some are dealt with informally, such as the fishery and boundary issue; others are discussed privately and some are set aside. It is not easy for the eleven governments to agree to embark on a controversial initiative. But the capacity to identify and discuss them is in place and the track record of dealing with them is not bad.

Such matters generally involve the national governments. The states and provinces have been somewhat reluctant to bring the senior governments too closely into conference affairs. When they have done so by having national political figures make presentations, notably on energy in 1976 and acid rain in 1984, results have not been fully satisfactory. There is a risk and a tendency for people from each country to defend their flag over sensitive issues, which can be counterproductive to the purpose of the discussion and the dynamics of the conference. On the other hand, Peter Murphy and Alan Gotlieb briefed the conference on the

bilateral trade negotiations in 1988, before it was law. That event went smoothly.

Interestingly, the conference this year invited a representative from each national forestry service to participate formally in the forest productivity working group. This is the first time federal bureaucrats have become part of a conference committee.

The private sector plays an important role in the conference, both at the level of the principals and the level of committees. One of the more dramatic examples of that was the project by academics in Quebec, New England and Atlantic Canada to identify trade relations within the region. They briefed the 1980 conference on their project and presented most of their findings at a seminar in Boston in 1983, convened by the conference. That led to the decision by the governors and premiers that year to start a new initiative, the Tri-regional Economic Cooperation Committee. A book on the research, *Trade and Investment Across the Northeast Boundary: Quebec, The Atlantic Provinces, and New England*, was published in 1986. The author's assumption of three trade regions influenced the decision to have three co-chairs of the Economic Committee, rather than two, as is more common.

Occasionally, line committee members on the American side are from the private sector. The tendency was greater some years ago. On the Canadian side, only provincial officials are members of committees.

At the annual conference, a considerable number of private sector people attend, invited by the governors and premiers. Their presence may be linked to an agenda item or may be based on the desire to develop or strengthen a bilateral relationship with another jurisdiction.

I have not said much about committees but they are very important parts of the entity and the concept has been very successful. By definition, committees are in a subject area where governors and premiers think there is potential for cooperation. When committees are approved, an opportunity is created. Depending on the vision, energy and attitude toward cooperation of those assigned to them, committees will realize the potential or not. In general terms, that explains the different experiences of committees. Most have been successful; a few less so. In some cases, there is just not enough in the mandate for an effective committee to gel. In other cases, lack of interest, competition among jurisdictions or personality conflicts have affected success.

There are committees at present in the fields of energy, the environment, economic development, forest productivity and sustainable development. In addition, there have been committees in the fields of tourism,

agriculture, technology, transportation and family and local history.

Each year, ongoing committees present ideas for new initiatives in the ensuing year. If approved, the committees have a renewed mandate in the recommended areas. It is important that committees receive clear and enthusiastic direction from the conference annually.

For the first time, last year the conference issued a communiqué on a non-continental matter. The subject was on human rights violations in China and called for the safeguarding of the welfare of Canadian and American nationals residing there. There will be obvious limits to how far cooperation could go on matters that take us beyond the continent. But I doubt if we've seen those limits yet.

Conclusion

The Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers has proven that it is able to alter its priorities to new issues and to adapt to changing styles in the relationship. It has survived the turnover of many governors and premiers since 1973. What does the future hold for it? That can never be certain but some thoughts might be of interest.

One thing is certain – that cross-border interactions will increase. The forces that brought the governors and premiers together and sustained their activities are growing: movement of people; economic interaction, especially the trade agreement; economic infrastructure; competition with other regions of the continent and the globe; the environment and social and cultural opportunities.

The future of structures to manage the relationship are less certain. I mentioned the importance of critical mass. Clearly, if there came a time when the number of governors and premiers who were keen on the conference dropped from what it has been, there would be a crisis of existence. One cannot rule that out. Consider the present, for example, when three of the six governors are not running in the November elections.

Given all the forces at work in and on the eleven jurisdictions, their track record of cooperation, the structures to keep the conference vital and the now rather large network of people who have been part of the cooperative experience, I believe the conference will continue to serve the governments and people of New England and Eastern Canada well for many years to come.