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# A New Brunswick Perspective on Youth in Politics

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by Shawn Graham, MLA

*After the New Brunswick general election of June 1999, the youngest MLA was 23-year-old Kirk MacDonald. In total there were four MLAs under the age of thirty and ten MLAs under the age of forty (including four cabinet ministers). This article looks at how the influx of youth has diversified the face of politics in New Brunswick*



When I was elected in a by-election on October 19, 1998, I was at thirty years old, the youngest MLA in the New Brunswick Legislature. Also elected at that time were 33-year-old Brad Green (now Justice Minister) and 33-year-old Bernard Lord (now Premier). Following our swearing-in the *Telegraph-Journal* ran a front page photo with the caption "New Kids on the Block". The public could hardly have imagined what was in store nine months later.

"Thirty-somethings" have been a part of the political landscape for generations but anyone under thirty was newsworthy. My own father was elected in 1967 at the age of twenty-five and for over thirty years maintained the distinction of being the youngest person elected to the provincial legislature in New Brunswick.

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In 1995, 26-year-old Carolle de Ste. Croix made news when she was elected to represent the riding of Dalhousie-Restigouche East. She made news again in 1996 when she became the first MLA in New Brunswick history to give birth during her term in office – a baby in the anteroom was certainly a sign of changing times!

What undercurrents lie beneath this wave of youth in the New Brunswick Legislature? How does age affect one's role as an elected official? Is it part of a growing trend? What can we do to ensure that more young people become politically involved?

I am not a political scientist nor a sociologist. I can only speak from my own experience where politics has been a way of life – not simply an academic concept. A couple of factors have contributed significantly to the number of younger people in this session of New Brunswick's Legislature.

First, it is the natural ebb and flow of politics. The pendulum swings and a wave of new members unseat the "establishment". If they are fortunate and serve the people well, this group of "upstarts" will govern until they, too, become the "establishment". Then, the pendulum swings again and a new generation forms the government.

There is also a highly practical matter behind the changing demographics of our Legislative Assembly. A generation ago it was virtually impossible to serve as an MLA unless you were independently wealthy or had another source of income. The role of MLA was not intended to be a full-time position and the salary reflected this.

During the 1960s it was recognized that changes must be made that would open the doors to the Legislature for a more diverse cross-section of the population and would allow MLAs to focus full-time on their work. Throughout the next 20 years significant increases were made in the salary level and expense allowances of Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Following these changes, the opportunity to hold office became a reality for a number of people who would previously have been excluded. This has made for a broader representation that better reflects the reality of our society. This diversity has expressed itself not only in matters of age and gender but in the variety of backgrounds from which our MLAs come – from farmers to truck drivers to university students.

There have also been changes in the routes taken into the Legislature. In the past it was customary to “pay your dues” on a local level – municipal government, school boards, civic groups – before making the jump to provincial politics. While it is still common to have some previous experience in public service, the process seems to have been accelerated. One result of these conditions is that people barely out of university can find themselves sitting in the Legislative Assembly.

Being an elected representative has unique challenges and pressures no matter what your age. There are, however, some special considerations when you come to the Legislature at an earlier age than most.

This has to do with more than knowing the standing rules or completing a thorough study of *Beauchesne* or *Erskine May*. The challenges faced by young Members are more fundamental than educating oneself on points of privilege or refraining from unparliamentary language.

The youthful enthusiasm and wide-eyed idealism that were such assets on the campaign trail can become liabilities once you are elected. To prevent that, you must temper your youth with a sense of responsibility and thoughtfulness beyond your chronological years. You must possess a sense of self, a code of conduct, and a set of values with which you can best live, and by which you can best represent your constituents.

You must know for what you will stand and for what you will not. Your principles will be the touchstone, the constant in the onslaught of demands. Even in the midst of the daily grind – whether you are trying to help senior citizens with their pension, trying to help a family who has fallen on hard times or trying to save jobs in your community – your decisions will be made much easier if you know what you believe in and where you are headed.

When you are in your mid twenties or early thirties you simply have not had a lot of time to gain experience – you have great ideas but you do not have years of experi-

ence to draw from. This is not a personal shortcoming, merely a result of logistics. So as a young representative it becomes imperative to pay attention to those who have had time to learn.

Younger members are always treading a fine line. On one hand they must respect those MLAs who have served for more years but they must never be submissive to those members. The constituents have elected each member of the Legislature, regardless of age or gender or occupation or title, and so all have an equal right to be confident in their beliefs and courageous in their convictions.

*At a time when many of our peers are concentrating on more personal issues – like building a career, settling down or starting a family – my Legislative colleagues and I are contributing to decisions that affect the entire province.*

I have spoken about the influx of younger members in New Brunswick's legislature but four “20-somethings” do not a revolution make. There remains a broader belief that young people today are apathetic to politics in general. Is this the reality or is this a myth?

I have been giving a lot of thought to this question since the death of former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. There was an outpouring of emotion not only from the generations who recalled Trudeaumania, but also from the children of those generations. The question that constantly arose was “Why”. These teenagers, university students and young professionals were too young to remember much of Trudeau's time in power, too old to have studied him as a great distant figure in history.

As these young people spoke with journalists or posted their messages on the Internet, it became clear that their generation felt a connection with the late Prime Minister that was based less on what he did during his time in office and more on who he was. The death of a Prime Minister 16 years out of power became a lightning rod for the frustration of a generation.

I started to wonder if the reported apathy of youth might, in fact, be an illusion? There is a big difference between apathy and frustration. What if our young people want to be politically active but have no idea how to begin? What if they have great ideas but have not been given the tools to express them? How do we ensure that our young people are being given a strong political foundation? And what would that foundation be?

The best and brightest political figures seem to plant themselves in the centre of a spectrum between pure instinct and pure theory. Aristotle, who was right about a great many things, once stated that "man is a political animal" but this does not preclude the need to educate our young people on how to express their political views or the best avenues for public service. We cannot simply assume that one day, preferably around a person's 18th birthday, he or she will wake up understanding politics and the role of the individual in a participatory democracy.

***We need to arm our young people with the compassion to spot injustices and the courage to change them.***

At the same time merely teaching political theory to children and young people does not give them a complete political education. Theory works well on paper, in an ideal world, but these young people will one day be charged with governing a world that is flawed – a world where you have to try to adapt the theory to the reality and not the other way around.

Somehow we must instill in our young people values and principles as well as theory. We must prepare them not only to administer, but to govern. We, as elected officials, have a pivotal role to play. We must set the example. To use our work today to inspire the government of tomorrow may be one of the highest and most noble legacies we can leave.

Political mentors are the great constant over time, nations and party lines. I would challenge you to find a person holding public office today who cannot tell you of at least one person who inspired them to pursue this calling.

Admittedly I started my political apprenticeship a bit earlier than most. My father was elected to the Legislative Assembly the year before I was born and remained the representative for Kent for the next three decades.

Politics was so ingrained in my life that I probably did not realize that I was receiving a political education. When you are the child of a politician all you really know is that your mother or father has to travel a lot, that the phone rings at really strange hours and that sometimes people in the newspapers have not-so-nice things to say about your dad or mom. Other than that you are a pretty ordinary family.

I do not think any child realizes until they reach adulthood how much they were formed by their parents values and ideals.

As an adult I had the rare opportunity to work side by side with my father as his executive assistant. The experi-

ence of those years has been invaluable in helping me cope with the day-to-day life of an MLA. I learned my way around the civil service. I learned how to get a road chip-sealed and how to help a constituent find work. But more than anything I learned the qualities of a good elected representative.

After I had made the decision to pursue elected office, I stopped by my father's house every morning of the campaign. I wanted to be elected and serve on my own terms, with my own way of doing things, but I also realized I would be foolish to turn my back on my greatest role model and my greatest source of information.

Now, two years later, I do not profess to be a political expert but I do believe that the same values that were instilled in me by my father are values we should be instilling in all our young people.

These values will serve them well – whether they plan to pursue elected office, whether they want to serve the public in some other capacity or whether they want to make an educated choice when they exercise their democratic rights in a voting booth.

I am not referring to partisan beliefs – not left, not right, not centre. These are the values that transcend time, political lines and geographic boundaries.

First, young people must learn compassion. In our home we knew it was not enough to take care of our family and ourselves. It was understood that we were part of a larger community and that we had a duty to make a positive contribution to that community. We understood that not everyone was as fortunate as we had been and it was expected that we would reach out to those who needed it most.

It has been forty years since John F. Kennedy uttered his famous rallying cry for the youth of his nation. This call needs to be reaffirmed in every generation and in every nation.

We must instill in our young people the courage to ask questions, to test the waters, to form new ideas. Some people may say that success as a politician lies in having all the right answers; I believe a great part of it lies in asking all the right questions. Our young people have to be given the freedom to look at the world around them and ask why things are the way they are and like Robert Kennedy, (and George Bernard Shaw before him) they have to be at liberty to ask "Why not?"

It is only through questioning that we can really determine and take ownership of what we believe in. And it is only through taking ownership of what we believe in that we can have the confidence to stand up for our convictions.

When it comes to standing on those convictions, young people must have access to the tools to express their ideas effectively. By "effectively" I mean through

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words, not violence (physical or verbal), through ideological discussion, not personal attacks (despite what we might see in any given question period).

We live in a time where people are bombarded by information – our schools must teach students analytical thinking in order to process the opinions of others, and strong communication skills in order to express their own. They must learn that there is a difference between co-operation and surrender. We need to teach young people the old Scottish proverb that is better to bend than break.

Integrity goes hand in hand with courage and confidence. Young people must be encouraged to act in ways that are consistent with their personal convictions. The only way to teach integrity is by example. Talking to young people about integrity does not mean a thing if they cannot see the presence of such integrity in their own elected officials.

I recognize that not every young person will answer a call to enter public service but a strong democracy relies not only on the strength of its leaders, but also on the strength of its citizens. The best way to ensure an effective and progressive government is for the voters to have an understanding of what good government looks like.

As elected officials we have the opportunity to set an example of good government – not only for our young people but for people of all ages. I challenge you to reflect on the role you can play, the actions you can take to break down the frustration that seems to be plaguing our youth. I hope as each of you return to your own corner of the nation you will think about the political newcomer you once were, who it was that inspired you and how you can pass on this inspiration to someone else.