

Serving the Communities' Agenda
Call #2 – Living in the Tension
A Conversation with Arthur Kroeger
June 9, 2006

Arthur, thank you for agreeing to be with us today and to share your insights. You're sometimes referred to as the "Dean of Deputy Ministers" – can you tell us about yourself and your career as a public servant, and what the role of a public servant means to you?

I was born in Alberta on a farm. I come from K.D. Lang's hometown of Consort. From a very early stage I was interested in public policy – more so than going into business and making money. I found it an interesting area to work in and a satisfying way to make a living.

As a Rhodes Scholar I studied philosophy, politics, and economics. It was an interesting blend of courses. It was quite a transition from Consort to Oxford, but that isn't uncommon here in Canada – a lot of people have come from farms and small towns and ended up in significant jobs.

What does it mean to you when we talk about government "serving the communities' agenda?" When we initially spoke, you said this wasn't a topic that was familiar to you. Why is this? What role did you see for communities from a federal perspective?

You often work one removed from communities. Municipal governments interact with the citizenry. Provinces deal with communities and municipalities. The federal government doesn't do that. In departments like transport and energy the "communities' agenda" was not often spoken about. It was more common in the Department of Employment and Immigration – employees in that department had the opportunity to interact with the public.

I think this is why it is hard for the federal government to even think about the communities' agenda. You're not in the habit of dealing with the citizenry. That being said, governments at all levels have to work at developing better relationships with the citizenry than they currently have. They know that. There is some experimentation going on, and I think it is important.

We have the best educated, best informed public the country has ever had. This population wants to participate in government, to dialogue, to interact. They don't want to sit back and receive government directives.

Paul – In reflecting on the role of communities in implementing the federal agenda, how would you suggest that this is best done? Can the federal government be in service of communities? How would government change if they were truly in service of communities?

It is a long and complicated process. If you look back a few decades, governments have evolved quite significantly. What I think is really important is activities such as this learning circle. That is exactly the way you do it. You don't push a government, but you can sensitize a set of officials and get them thinking and talking, broaden their horizons, and slowly you get a change. Over years and decades, government has evolved. It is interacting better. But you can't say there is one thing we are going to do that will change everything. Governments are a result of long-term factors – people, politics, dynamics.

The federal government can play a strong role as a knowledge broker. You need to provide something to pull people together, that is value-added, and that enables knowledge and information sharing to happen.

Paul - What wisdom would you give those of us concerned with this idea of a communities' agenda? How might we make this kind of thinking “popular” in the federal service?

People in Vibrant Communities have certain advantages. One is that, regardless of ideology, everyone, even the most conservative person, is in favor of self-help and local action. You go from there to people who are more socially oriented. You have to demonstrate that you are capable of achieving results (preferably that you have achieved results), and that you are well organized. That is the kind of dialogue to engage in with people regardless of political party, and I think you can get a good hearing from people across the spectrum. Government can do a lot of things but they also have limitations, and you have to turn to the public and say, we'll help, but you do have to organize yourselves – and this is what VC can do.

One thing people say about modern government is that officials have to have an interactive role with the public, including a brokerage role. You need to be able to broker compromises among different groups. You can't just say, “Headquarters says this.” You need to be out there and doing things. You can also play a convening role – although the constraint is that you are still functioning in a government environment and are subject to politics. How much officials can do is governed by the willingness of elected people to see civil servants engaging in this type of interaction.

Don't overlook the significance of your local MLAs and MPs. Sit down with them and tell them what you are doing, what you have achieved so far. You need to convey that you are well organized, that you know what you are doing, and that you can be counted on to perform competently in the future. In doing this you can create a critical mass. Don't get too worked up about them being subject to their parties. Do not forget the power of the parliamentary caucus. The debates there are vigorous and influential.

You have to recognize the limitations of government. Governments aren't good at initiating community activity. People need to become very familiar with the various government programs and to be imaginative in how you can take advantage of those programs. It is up to the initiative of people at the community level to figure out how they

can get the government to help them. An additional limitation is that there is no kind of communities program in the federal government per se just now. In the 1970s you had employment creation programs that provided money set aside for communities to apply to for job creation projects. There were quite a few programs of this type. They tended to be about job creation. What you are talking about is poverty alleviation. It would be interesting to see if the government might not be encouraged to create such a program. Conservatives like self-help and community action, and might be encouraged to create programs focused on community self-help. Governments CAN be encouraged to change. Talk to them about setting up pilots or demonstration projects.

Is there anything else that you wanted to mention during our time together today?

Politicians are in favor of community action. There is a need to build a community action program – it is very difficult to get the kind of funding needed otherwise.

Questions and Answers

Does Service Canada have the promise to work in this way with communities?

The predecessors of Service Canada collocated federal, provincial and sometimes municipal governments. That could provide opportunities for fed officials to compare notes with their colleagues from other governments. Doing it collectively this way may be the best way to go because the federal government doesn't deal as much with the public but the three orders together could come up with some ideas.

I wouldn't exclude possibility that Service Canada itself could do some innovation, and I hope people will be encouraged to think about the best way to provide services.

A word I didn't hear you hear today was "horizontal," which is a bit of a buzzword. Do you have any thoughts on how we can work better together for the benefit of communities?

There is no doubt that, increasingly, government units must work together. When I left the government in 1992, I don't think the word "horizontal" existed. I wouldn't underrate the difficulty of it. Governments are organized into functional units with their own dynamics, and you'll never get a permanent solution to people wanting to think about what's going on in their own silo. Senior management have a responsibility to provide leadership across departmental boundaries. The good news is that you are at least starting off with the consciousness that no department can operate in isolation – the climate is better than it used to be.

How do you walk the line between being a government employee and being in service of communities? How do you implement an innovative new idea?

I don't underestimate the complexity of the situation that an official can be in. You are working within a government environment. To some extent, it is probably best to wait for

communities to come to you. Encourage them to come in with ideas, to try them out. One thing officials can do that is very valuable is to provide information about what is available, what is in other departments, how to best approach a government department. So the government is supporting the innovation but not spearheading it. Senior officials should encourage their staff to do this. There are certain constraints that go with working for a government.

There is a good paper on provincial government efforts by Ian Peach that might be of interest to people. In a lot of the literature on horizontal management, there is emphasis on the need for leadership at the highest level to set the context and send the messages that support that type of effort. From your experience, are there any key things you think are factors that encourage Deputy Ministers to take that leadership role?

There's no substitute for senior people being in touch with each other. It is one thing to sit in your office and hear about what a colleague is doing. To the extent that you are in meetings with that colleague and sharing problems, it will encourage your thinking. A typical DM now spends 30% of his or her time on interdepartmental activities. Increasingly, they are being exposed to external problems and having to adopt something other than an ordinary departmental approach to issues.

Rather than creating something new, might it not be best to look at innovative uses of the programs that already exist?

As a general principle in government, it is easier to get approval for an incremental approach, provided you are able to demonstrate that you are adding to something that works. Sometimes it is as challenging to build on what exists as to create something entirely new.