



Effective First Nations governance: navigating the legacy of colonization

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Abstract:

The barrage of negative media reports coupled with reactionary federal legislation have led many Canadians to believe that most First Nation governments are corrupt. Although systematic evidence of widespread corruption has yet to materialize, governance problems in some First Nations communities do exist. With the majority of First Nations operating under the band governance system imposed by the Indian Act, political troubles are often attributed to this law. Despite the fact the Indian Act creates conditions for governance problems to occur, other First Nations have resisted its enticement and operate sound administrations. Nations like these influenced this study. To understand and explain how First Nations achieve and maintain effective governance, conversations took place with First Nations leaders, administrators, Elders and community members in Alberta and BC. The study was conducted using an Indigenous-Qualitative approach where the qualitative aspect involved a grounded theory methodology. Findings show that effective First Nations governance involves an inter-related journey consisting of four phases: motivators of change, visions of effective governance, actions to support effective governance and the maintenance of governance improvements. Every phase in the journey is profoundly shaped by the legacy of colonization. Political problems caused by the legacy motivate change, the journey is guided by visions to recover from the legacy and actions are taken to improve legacy-related governance problems. The power of colonization is particularly evident at the maintenance stage of the journey where legacy-related influences stifle political change and help keep the status quo in place. This observation led to the following hypothesis: First Nations that wish to achieve and maintain effective governance must navigate the legacy of colonization. Colonization creates obstacles that must be carefully navigated if effective First Nations governance is to be achieved. It is amazing that many First Nations leaders have been able to stickhandle their way through these obstacles and achieve some measure of effective governance. These leaders are to be commended for their skills, strength and determination. However, in the absence of decolonization, strong economies, self-government and the restoration of certain traditions, the efforts of these leaders will be lost.

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