

Conference Conclusion: 'Sustainability networking' key for leaders in all sectors

by Michelle Hancock



If there's such a thing as sustainable leaders, the [Governor General's Canadian Leadership Conference](#) certainly helps mold them. Just ask the 230 Canadians, including 29 from BC, who were honoured by being chosen to attend the conference last June. They say it was a once-in-a-lifetime learning experience — an eye-opener into regional Canada that will no doubt create lasting impacts in their own communities.

Held every four years, the Canadian Leadership Conference's mandate is to "improve decision-making abilities among young leaders likely to occupy high-level positions in the near future; facilitate a more progressive era of interaction between leaders from business, labour, government and the broader community; and broaden understanding of Canada." Launched in 1983, the conference is "designed to pack the most intense experiences of life in Canadian industry and community into a unique two-week event."

"Refreshing" recalls Stan Chung, writer and Associate Dean of Arts and Foundational Programs at Okanagan College, of the experience. "As a teacher, I'm used to reading and learning. This was far more experiential...like a field trip. Actually, the field trip is probably the most experiential learning tool there is."

Purposeful Tourism

All attendees shared a three-day introductory session in Banff, where notable speakers such as Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, discussed the "Leadership and Community" theme. Participants then assembled into smaller study groups of people with diverse backgrounds and trekked to different regions of Canada for eight days.

Chung and 15 others — "a group of high-functioning A types including politicians, lawyers, unionites, executives, and government types," he says — went to New Brunswick.

From 6 am to midnight most days, they were involved in activities as varied as lunching with the premier, the Minister of Education and CEOs of two major companies (Moosehead and Ganong,) to touring an inner-city elementary school in Saint John facing multigenerational poverty. Many evenings, they sat together and reflected on the day.

"We found ourselves intensely concerned with the fortunes of this small province, its challenges neatly mirroring the challenges of our country," Chung writes in the [conference blog](#). "New Brunswick is facing the exodus of its traditional employers such as the forest products industry. It must deal with both economic and cultural issues."



Michaëlle Jean exchanges ideas with Stan Chung from Okanagan College during the most recent Governor General's Canadian Leadership Conference. She assured attendees that they would learn a great deal about leadership, their country, and themselves, and that what they learned would reaffirm in their hearts and minds the importance of focusing on all that we have in common as Canadians.

Likewise, in BC we have many challenges. So — with our leaders called upon to make decisions affecting our social, cultural, environmental, and economic futures — how does the conference relate to us?

Broader Perspectives

For Scott Graham, director of the Community Development Education Program for the Social Planning and Research Council of BC, the conference imparted a feeling of humility that he's brought back to his job as principal investigator on a project that aims to integrate St'at'imc knowledge into Lillooet schools.

"One of the memories that comes back frequently is that of small rural Nova Scotia towns and the enduring commitment that these people have to make a difference in their communities," he says. "It makes me recognize that my work is really a small piece of a much bigger effort to strengthen Canadian communities."

Like Chung, Graham applauded the conference for providing an opportunity to learn from other leaders across the country about their approaches to challenging issues. Sustainability networking, if you will.

In Nova Scotia, Graham's group visited the Sydney Tar Ponds, where a big steel production company had once dumped toxins into a low area. "You look at it and think, 'Gee, this is stupid,'" he recalls, "but other people say, 'Well, hold on. It presents the community with the opportunity to be environmental leaders in doing a thorough job of cleaning up the mess, teaching technical experience, and involving community members in deciding how to properly deal with it.' "

National Approach for Regional Improvement

To Graham, the leadership conference also represented a chance to have input into the larger dialogue about the challenges we all face as a country, such as the lack of affordable housing, the depletion of nonrenewable resources, and the lack of support for community-based learning initiatives. He would like to see a similar but perhaps smaller-scale conference biannually in each province, where attendees get together, discuss, discover, report on their experiences, and have that report serve as an informational base to inform policy development.

"I don't think enough policy is place-based because there aren't enough place-based learning initiatives for policy leaders," he says, adding that the June conference is one of the best Canadian examples of place-based learning.

"It's definitely a learning process," agrees Maggie Leithead, president and COO of CharityVillage.com, Canada's supersite for the non-profit sector.

Leithead's study group visited the Greater Toronto Area and Eastern Ontario. In addition to many other activities they visited a Chrysler assembly plant.

"Fifteen of us took the same walking tour. What would seem like the same experience was radically different for each person," she recalls. The business people saw innovation. Labour people saw cuts. Government people saw R&D funding. Non-profit people saw the need for job-retraining services.

"It was a good opportunity to hear other perspectives," she adds.

Lasting Legacy

For Leithead—and for others no doubt as well—the conference has left a lasting impression. "I catch myself thinking in ways that I wouldn't have in the past. I may

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In her opening message at the conference, Governor General Michaëlle Jean said that, "Effective leaders understand that Canada can succeed only by building strong communities in which we all have the opportunity to flourish and help create a better country and world. Each action toward this goal is immensely important. Leaders understand we must fight against the indifference this is so common nowadays."

make the same decision, but I'll normally entertain a couple of different options along the way," she says.

"The tangible outcomes aren't like a workshop. You can't come away after a couple weeks and think, okay, now I know how to do leadership. It was a reality check. [You realize] the whole world doesn't think like you and if you want to change it, you have to appreciate all vantage points, and you may need to adapt your thinking."

At a final, three-day closing session in Ottawa, each study group presented to the Governor General and other attendees a report based on their perceptions and insights into the concerns of the communities they visited.

Chung's group presented a six-scene dramatic recreation of the struggles faced by New Brunswickans. "Our group took our lessons to heart and creatively expressed ourselves as Canadians and global citizens," he blogs. "We love this country, but we know that our collective greatness comes from how high we can raise those who are most vulnerable, most challenged, most left behind."

Chung says he has become more emotionally honest, and more of a community advocate. He recently invited the mayor of Kelowna, where he lives, for lunch, to discuss how community groups can be better engaged in the city.

He has also discovered a love of New Brunswick, its history and culture, and its people who, he points out, are ironically one of the most impoverished populations in Canada yet have been statistically proven to be the happiest. The reasons are no doubt as complex as those faced in each of the communities visited during the conference, but Chung does have one piece of the puzzle to offer.

"I think it really helps to be friendly. That really sounds basic, but why not? You can choose to be friendly. You can choose to be friendly to people who aren't."

And that's a lesson in community sustainability we all can learn.

Vancouver writer Michelle Hancock didn't attend the leadership conference but learned a lot by interviewing those who did.