

Speech to the National Association of University Board Chairs and Secretaries

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Allan Rock
President, University of Ottawa

Introduction

I begin by thanking the Association for having invited me to speak today, and for all the work you do to promote and enable better governance at Canada's universities. By establishing best practices, encouraging innovation and stimulating discussion about this important subject, you make a real contribution, for which we are all grateful.

Je veux remercier et féliciter l'Association pour sa contribution soutenue à la gouvernance universitaire au Canada. Votre voix influente est soigneusement écoutée par nous, membres de l'administration, mais également par ceux qui président et participent à titre de dirigeants. Vous établissez la norme des pratiques de gouvernance, et nous vous sommes grandement redevables.

I must say that when I was first asked to speak about "Shared Governance", I thought you wanted me to talk about managing in a minority Parliament. I was greatly relieved to find out that my subject today has nothing whatsoever to do with our current political situation.

My presentation today might, however, be sub-titled "Reflections of a Neophyte" because I am a relative newcomer to both the academy and to university governance. I am happy to share with you today my reflections after 21 months of "experiential learning".

Now, while I am new to the job, I am not by any means new to the University of Ottawa. Indeed, I have quite a history there. I enrolled for the

first time in 1960, at the age of 12, in what was then the University of Ottawa Preparatory High School. The grade nine class-room that I first entered fifty years ago this September was on the second floor of the building now known as Tabaret Hall. Today, my office as President is on that same second floor, just a few metres away from where I sat all those years ago. I seem to have taken the long way round in returning to just where I started!

Going Public

During the first five years of my studies, the University was a private institution owned and operated by the Catholic Church. In 1965, the Ontario legislature adopted a statute that established the University of Ottawa as a public institution, making it eligible for the government funding that enabled it to build and expand, to meet the rapidly growing demand for access to postsecondary education in Ontario.

Much has changed in the years since my graduation. The campus to which I returned has grown in ways that transform it beyond recognition. We now have over 38,000 students and have become one of the ten most research intensive universities in Canada.

But certain defining characteristics remain the same, and they are as noble and inspiring as I remember them.

The most obvious is our deep commitment to both official languages. Our founding legislation includes the following in specifying the University's "objects and purposes":

*To further bilingualism and biculturalism
and to preserve and develop French culture
in Ontario.*

We are now the largest bilingual University in North America, proud of the choice we offer students in all of our faculties whether to study in English or in French. Our commitment to both languages is more than a statutory responsibility: it is a great privilege and, we believe, an important comparative advantage.

Although 70% of our student body is Anglophone and almost all of them study entirely in English, the University community is enriched-- and the experience of *all of our students* more meaningful-- because teaching,

learning and scholarship take place in an environment in which both languages are used and both cultures are celebrated.

We also have the largest post-secondary French immersion program in Canada, with almost 1,000 non-Francophone students enrolled in French language programs.

I mention all of this not simply to boast, but because the special place of both official languages on campus, together with our privileged relationship with the Francophone population and the Franco-Ontarian community, influence governance of the University. Both language communities are, of course, well represented on the Board and the Senate. And both bodies take our very special legislative mandate into account in dealing with matters of governance.

As to our formal structure, the 1965 legislation answers most of the obvious questions:

- ours is a bicameral model, with both a Board of Governors and a Senate;
- the Board is comprised of 32 members, including two students elected by the student body;
- among the appointed members of the Board, half are named by other entities, including eight by our affiliate, St. Paul's University;
- others with authority to appoint members to the Board include the Lieutenant Governor in Council, the Senate and the Alumni Association;
- except for the specific responsibilities assigned by the statute to the Senate, governance of the University, its property, revenue and affairs, is vested in the Board;
- the Board's functions include strategic planning, enterprise risk management, approving the budget and concerning itself with orderly succession in senior management;
- the Senate has 72 members including 10 elected students;

- the Senate has broad responsibility for academic policy, including the creation and maintenance of faculties, departments, schools and institutes, and the determination of academic standards and practices.

Although some responsibilities are shared between the two bodies (such as in the selection of a President, and the work of the Board-Senate Joint Committee dealing with tenure and promotion), there is a definite division between the Board's institutional and business responsibilities and the Senate's concern about what is to be taught, who teaches it and how it shall be taught.

In keeping with its mandate, the Board membership reflects a broad range of stakeholders from both the campus and beyond. By contrast, members of the Senate are drawn from within, bringing their specialized knowledge of the academy and the curriculum, and their commitment to academic values and standards.

The Role of the President

As President, I am a member of the Board and I preside at the Senate. So I have a role to play in each body. I serve as a bridge between the two arms of governance.

The link between the two is important, so that each is aware of and sensitive to the concerns of the other. In very practical terms, the University could not function if the Board managed resources without consideration of the academic priorities of the Senate, or if the Senate established programs that were beyond the capacity of the University to administer.

The President's role on the Board includes inviting its attention to issues it should consider, and sharing with the Board information that is uniquely available to those of us in day-to-day management—not to burden the Board or involve it in management issues, but to "bring it into the picture" and provide context for matters it must determine. This means continuous efforts to broaden the communication channel with the Board, through reporting and analysis.

For example, I circulate a written report to the Board before each meeting (and I do the same for the Executive Committee before its meetings) in order to save time at the meeting, while still giving a reasonable level of detail

about my principal activities and the major issues that have arisen since the last meeting. The "President's Report" item at the meeting is then used as an opportunity for elaboration or for questions, based upon the information I have already shared.

While the precise set-up differs, of course, from one university to the other, it is my view that the quality of governance is determined less by our structure than by our culture: less by mechanisms than by mindset.

I believe that successful governance will be best achieved in a culture of openness and accountability. That culture enhances the quality of my dialogue with the Board while allowing me to engage it on key subjects.

In this respect, all members of both bodies (the Board and the Senate) share a common objective while bringing different perspectives to bear. From the Provost to the Deans, from the chairs of departments to the Chair of the Board, from current students to our cherished alumni, each of us focuses on the University's mission, vision and values while meeting separate responsibilities as prescribed by the statute.

Shared governance is therefore a powerful tool that enables us to bring all of these perspectives to bear—to weigh options carefully as we continue to strive for excellence in teaching and research and to pursue the best interests of the University community we all serve.

While we believe that our governance model is essentially sound and has served us well, we have recently initiated a governance review, in order to better define roles, responsibilities and reporting relationships. It has been many years since our governance process has been examined closely. We feel the time has come to evaluate issues such as

- how to add greater clarity and transparency to the governance model;
- whether the critical path between proposal and decision can be simplified; and
- how to ensure an appropriate role in governance for the Deans.

Our Vice President, Governance, Diane Davidson is leading the effort and will be consulting and working closely with all participants in governance in order to identify refinements and improvements for consideration.

A Comparative View

Over the years, I have had the great privilege of taking part in various forms of governance.

- While I was practising law here in Toronto, I took instructions from and represented the interests of a wide variety of interests, including public and private boards of many kinds;
- I served for ten years as an elected “Bencher” or governor of the Law Society of Upper Canada, which governs the legal profession. I later became the “Treasurer”, or president of the Law Society, and presided at its meetings;
- I participated in national governance as a minister of the Crown and a member of cabinet; and
- I served a term as Canada’s Ambassador to the United Nations where, among other things, I co-chaired a Committee of the Whole with the awe-inspiring mandate of modernizing UN management.

Compared to those various experiences, I am of the opinion that university governance is unique.

The corporate boards for which I acted as a lawyer owed their duty to shareholders: our Board has a public character that broadens its role and responsibilities.

The Law Society, like our Board, exercises a statutory mandate to govern the profession in the public interest. But it possesses regulatory and disciplinary dimensions that set it apart.

Cabinet and its ministers can play a crucial role in national governance (so long as they have the confidence of Parliament) but they fulfill an executive function. Ultimate authority resides in the legislature, with the judiciary playing a role of oversight.

University governance, perhaps oddly, has important features in common with the United Nations. In both places, participants who value their independence and “sovereignty” nevertheless come together to advance collective interests. In neither place is the traditional “command and control”

approach to leadership appropriate. And in both places, effective action (at least in the General Assembly) first requires a solid consensus. In such an environment, leadership involves identifying directions and objectives that reflect shared values, and then encouraging consensus through persuasion and engagement.

To be sure, shared governance at a university, like shared governance at the United Nations, is not as nimble or as efficient as corporate governance in the commercial context. But that is because authority at the university, like authority in the General Assembly, is earned by consensus and collaboration. It is not conferred by contract or by operation of law.

Challenges in Shared Governance

So what are the challenges facing a university president in a model of shared governance on a contemporary campus?

Let me mention just three.

(a) Engaging the Board Strategically

The first has to do with the strategic role of the Board, and the importance of engaging its members at the strategic level.

It is very important for the President, working closely with the Board Chair and the Vice President, Governance (or Secretary) to involve the Board beyond its fiduciary role as sentinel. The Board's strategic function amounts to more than simply overseeing with an evaluating eye: it involves scanning the environment, thinking about what's coming, and imagining where the institution should be going.

Those of us in management have work to do if we are successfully to engage the Board's strategic function. This work can only succeed if it is carried out in close collaboration with the Board Chair and the VP Governance. It includes:

- helping the Board distinguish between questions of management (which should not concern them) and broader subjects of strategic

significance (for which they exist). This means taking great care in setting the agenda and guiding Board discussions;

- framing the strategic issues coherently for consideration by the Board; and
- providing the Board with the necessary context, background and options so that they can discuss matters fully and provide management with useful direction.

Depending on the issue, tapping into the Board's strategic dimension may happen quite naturally. For example, I have had recent occasion to engage our Board at this level in relation to the preparation of our next strategic plan. In recent years, the University of Ottawa has been working with Vision 2010. The time has come for us to plan toward Horizon 2020, and to think about medium-term milestone goals for 2015. We aim to have a new strategic plan approved by the Board before the end of the calendar year.

To support the Board in the planning process, my colleagues in management and I identified the key strategic questions to be addressed. We published a framework for the discussion that identifies options and provides background. We invited a number of independent speakers from outside the university to address the Board and the community, providing thought-provoking views about coming challenges in post-secondary education. We are carrying out consultations throughout the University community so we can report to the Board where consensus exists on major points—and where it does not. We expect to have a full and vigorous discussion at the Board in the coming months as it works towards decisions about our future directions, a task made all the more complex in the difficult financial circumstances that seem certain to remain a challenge for all Ontario universities.

But beyond the strategic planning process, I find it useful to prepare for each Board meeting by asking myself the question: "How can I best solicit Board members' help in dealing with the strategic elements of our agenda?"

Let me put shared governance, and the role of both the Board and the Senate, into the context of my own goals as President.

I have been working since my arrival toward achieving three principal priorities that emerge from Vision 2010 and build upon what it has achieved: those priorities are improving the quality of our students' experience,

broadening our global engagement, and introducing an ethic of service as an integral part of the University's identity.

I look to both the Board and the Senate for direction and support as I work to achieve those goals.

In the case of the Board, it may see fit to

- adopt a strategic plan that embraces these goals as priorities;
- approve a budget that allocates resources accordingly; and
- endorse a capital master plan that allows us to build the space we need to address some of the issues involving student experience.

The role of the Senate is equally crucial. It may see fit to

- approve courses and programs that meet contemporary needs and reflect current interests;
- internationalize the curriculum to prepare our students for a world-- and a career-- without borders; and
- embrace the defining theme of "service to others" and help me link it to the academic mission of the University.

So you can see that "shared governance" essentially means that management, the Board and the Senate must work closely together towards shared goals if we are to share in success.

(b) Working With Key Allies

There are three persons upon whom I rely especially in fulfilling my own role in shared governance.

First, I have come to understand the uniquely important relationship between a university president and the chair of its board.

In our case, the Board meets six times each year. Even with monthly meetings of the Board's Executive Committee, matters are bound to arise

from day to day on which it is essential to have the advice and opinion of someone with a keen sense of the Board and its perspectives, as well as an intimate knowledge of the culture and shared values of the campus. That person is the Chair of our Board. The continuous contact and consultation between us, though it may often be very informal, is an enormously important source of guidance for me in my work.

As noted above, our close collaboration is also essential to successful Board meetings, from planning the agenda, to ensuring that appropriate background material is available, to guiding and facilitating the Board's discussions and deliberations.

I have therefore come to see first hand that the relationship between the President and Board Chair must be one of utmost mutual confidence. In that respect, I am especially fortunate to work with a Chair of vast experience and sound judgment in Marc Jolicoeur. He never fails to make himself available when needed, and I am enormously grateful for his advice.

I might add that the Vice President Governance also plays a role of unique importance in all of this. By helping set the agenda, monitoring the integrity of the process and advising on procedural issues, our VP Governance Diane Davidson is at the heart of both the Board's and the Senate's work and very skilfully assists both. (I should explain that we changed the title "Secretary" to "VP Governance" last year, in order to signal that the person occupying that position has responsibilities that are broader than the clerical and supportive features of the traditional office, and extend to overseeing the effectiveness and integrity of university governance generally.)

Finally, I must make reference to our Chancellor. Although Huguette Labelle's role is thought of as mainly ceremonial, few people can match either her perspective or her insight. She adds an invaluable dimension to our shared governance by bringing a practised eye and constructive commentary to our work.

(c) Communication

The third matter I want to touch upon is communication on campus.

While the subject of communication may not be directly linked with governance as such, I don't believe that governance can truly be effective

without a continuous and effective sharing of relevant information with members of the University community.

Given the size and complexity of that community, it is difficult to find effective ways of staying in touch by sharing news, explaining current issues and options, and soliciting feedback. In an ideal world, students, post-doctoral fellows, members of faculty, administrative personnel—all of the groups that make up the University community—would have all the information they need to evaluate the issues and assess the administration's choices. Indeed, I regard effective communication of that information as both a responsibility and a necessity if I am going to succeed in my job.

And I try every means I know to communicate it: a weekly electronic newsletter is sent to all faculty and personnel; special President's emails go to everyone frequently; regular entries appear on my personal blog, which is directed especially towards students; and I have just concluded a series of fifteen Town Hall meetings that covered all ten faculties, involving professors and administrative personnel, as well as those who furnish our central administration's services.

Still, I am sure that more needs to be done to achieve the level of awareness that is consistent with effective governance, and I will continue looking for new and better ways to get information to the community.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that I find the campus to be a uniquely stimulating environment, suffused with the palpable energy of tens of thousands of young, dynamic people and enriched by the scholarship of some of the nation's brightest and supplest minds. I consider it a privilege to work in such a community. I am also grateful for the unfailing warmth and kindness with which I have been received by the academy and for the patience of its members during my transition into this new setting.

Many people have asked me whether life on campus reminds me of my days in political office. I can only respond by quoting from John Kemeny, former President of Dartmouth College, who suggested that my current experience may be the opposite of politics:

"The University Presidency" he said, "is the only job I know where you are elected first and then spend your entire term behaving as if you were running for office!"

Well, I may no longer be running for office, but I consider it a privilege to occupy this one. I am excited by the challenges in post-secondary education generally and at the University of Ottawa in particular. I believe that our future as a nation, whether from an economic or social perspective, very much depends on the quality and accessibility of our post-secondary institutions. I also believe that as impressive as our past achievements have been, our very best days lie ahead.

I am keenly aware of the crucial role played in all of this by Board Chairs and Secretaries. I congratulate you and your association for all that you do, and I thank you once again for having invited me to join you at this wonderful conference.