The local paradox in grand policy schemes. Lessons from Newfoundland and Labrador ☆

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ABSTRACT

We turn to the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador and its continuous reorganization of governance, its series of shocks, ambitions of reinvention and development to analyze the risks associated with Great Reset-style ambitions. We coin the concept of the *local paradox*: grand schemes need input from and implementation at a local level and this requires local governance to be autonomous, legitimate and to have the institutional and cognitive capacities, as well as the resources, to fulfill these roles. On the other hand, these requirements can entirely derail top-down ambitions. Currently, existing local governance might not be interested in transformation into more empowered political entities capable of contributing to greater collective goals. We suggest ways out of this conundrum, arguing for a strict avoidance of ideological tropes and false oppositions.

1. Introduction

Thinking along the lines of the Great Reset can be and has been criticized along many lines. It can be considered a renovation of high modernist thinking (Scott, 2008), yet now emanating from an international level, including private actors and focusing on a narrower set of still grand ambitions (Roth, 2021a, 2021b). It can be criticized because decades of discourse on participation are swept under the carpet. It can be attacked more in the vein of Wildavsky because of its lack of attention to local governance, and what can happen there to either reinforce or undermine the ambitions from higher up (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). One can also question the presence of private actors around the table at the World Economic Forum (WEF) or the legitimacy of that forum (Graz, 2003). And one can wonder whether the influence of companies in the deliberations didn't reinforce even more the already problematic presence of private sector management concepts in the public sector (Hood & Peters, 2004). One could, in other words, speak of a blindness for academic developments and a blindness for processes of social innovation and democratic renovation argued for and taking place in many societies across the world.

Nevertheless, the Great Reset is being taken seriously at high levels of government, either on the stage or behind the scenes. The shock of the pandemic has been skillfully used to make further arguments and build new coalitions (Arvis, 2021). One of the places where the WEF ideas were warmly welcomed, it seems, is the Canadian Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. A recent report, presented by the provincial government, was called the Big Reset and presents a vision for the future which borrows the bold ambitions of the Great Reset to get the province out of a financial quagmire (Greene et al., 2021). The province is saddled with debt and a less than flourishing economy, with expensive public projects and failed resource extraction projects- a big and bold move is needed.

In this paper, we will take a step back and look at the governance evolution of Newfoundland and Labrador (N&L), a province which has experienced a dramatic history, in economic and social terms, and where attempts at economic development and public sector reform are routinely stalled (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Webb, 2014; Greenwood, 1991; Hamilton, Haedrich, & Duncan, 2004). In N&L, shocks are not new, attempts at resets are not new (Korneski, 2012, 2016; Vodden, 2010; Stoddart, Catano, & Ramos, 2018) and the experience of this Canadian Province can, in our view, add new insight to the discussions on the Great Reset, beyond the lines of argument sketched above.

One line of critique mentioned already which will feature in the following analysis, is the one drawing on Wildavsky and others, on the

need for local governance to effectuate any bigger change attempted from elsewhere (cf also Easterly, 2014; Healey, 1998). In order to make grand ambitions possible, a form of local governance needs to exist which has the cognitive and organizational capacities to implement ideas coming from above, to infuse them with local knowledge, align them with local interests and modify or contradict them when the general concepts promoted do not work in the local context (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Crosbie, 1956; Kornberger, 2012 for N&L). One can speak of institutional capacity, of necessary local knowledge and of a well-functioning local democracy (Healey, 1998; Minnes & Vodden, 2017; Van Assche et al., 2020b). This is not an argument for radical participation as a panacea, nor for localism; it is an argument for local governance which is able to organize itself for collective actions towards collective goods (Agnew, 1984; Greenwood, 1991; Van Assche & Hornidge, 2015).

The N&L story is an important one, in our view, as it can deepen the understanding of this need for local governance in Great Reset attempts. We will speak of a 'local paradox', as local governance and a local capacity to strategize are required while at the same time these local features can significantly hamper higher level steering attempts. And while local reinvention might be necessary for it to play a role in such democratic play of force and counterforce, locals do not always like to reinvent themselves, neither in terms of social identity or in terms of organization and governance. In N&L, we will pay special attention to a double history; a history of shocks and a rather shocking history of trying to deal with those shocks. Shocks, previous steering attempts and path dependencies thus render a Great Reset difficult, while simultaneously undermining its useful counterforce.

We draw out implications of such contingent complications for the discourse on the Great Reset, but first, in the following sections, introduce the theoretical notions needed, introduce Newfoundland & Labrador properly and analyze its governance evolution, its history of shocks and the responses to them. The vagaries of local governance, the absence of regional governance and the always unstable economic situation are considered as contributing factors to the difficulties to strategize. Additional factors will emerge in the analysis.

Our analysis is, first of all, based on literature review and careful re-reading of policy documents (government reports, pre-studies, plans, policies), as primary sources. Visits to the Province and conversations with actors at local and Provincial level (in 2016, 2018 and 2019) served to round out the literature review. Most interviews (42) took place in 2018 (5 weeks fieldwork), while 2016 served to explore the main issues, on site (5 days) and through more informal conversations on the phone with key actors, who also helped to identify further topics, documents and people to interview. A brief field visit (5 days) and phone interviews (8) in 2019 served to clarify issues observed and theorized in the previous steps, in discussion with key actors and local academics. (Further follow ups efforts were thwarted by the pandemic).

2. Theoretical perspective: strategy and evolving governance

We lean on ideas from critical management studies (Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008, 2010), strategy as practice thinking (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Seidl, Lê, & Jarzabkowski, 2021) and evolutionary governance theory (Beunen, Van Assche, & Duineveld, 2015; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2013), in order to understand the unfolding of strategy in governance under unstable conditions. In the following paragraphs, the main concepts derived from these literatures are presented.

2.1. Shocks and dependencies

Following evolutionary governance theory (Beunen et al., 2015; Van Assche et al., 2013), we identify path dependencies as all legacies from the past shaping current governance, and we distinguish cognitive and institutional path dependencies. Interdependencies constrain the governance path through tight links between particular actors, between institutions, between actors and institutions. Goal dependencies are those effects of visions for the future which affect governance in the present. Material dependencies are influences of the material environment on the functioning of governance (Van Assche, Beunen, Duineveld, & Gruezmacher, 2017). Dependencies are rigidities in governance evolution that keep it on a particular track. A shock, from this perspective, can be destructive and productive in the dimensions outlined, yet what happens after the shock, (other than collapse) will be shaped by the evolution of the governance path, by the dependencies developed in that path (cf Van Assche, Gruezmacher, & Deacon, 2020b).

A society and its system of governance can survive many things. Some degree of resilience is built into governance systems which always have to adapt to their environment in some way (von Bertalanffy, 1969). Nevertheless, not every change can be easily adapted to and when a response from within the system is not readily available, one can speak of a shock (Martin, 2012). Shocks can be primarily economic or political, environmental, military, and otherwise (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Independent of the initial nature of the shock it will likely have reverberations in all function systems of society (Luhmann, 1995). If a coordinated response to a shock is not immediately possible, this does not necessarily indicate that the governance system collapsed.

Each system has a certain adaptive capacity, which can survive even if a particular answer to a shock is not available (Plummer & Armitage, 2010; Van Assche, Verschraegen, Valentinov, & Gruezmacher, 2019, 2021b). It might take time to find resources, to think and learn, to build new forms of coordination based on the existing ones. It might take resources, new actors and new institutions to overcome the shock. As long as the modes of self-transformation available, including the rules to change the rules, are capable of continuation, then a response will come at some point (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2005; Van Assche & Hornidge, 2015). Adaptive governance in this perspective does not have one particular form, and adaptation and adaptive capacity have a different value and potential in different environments and different governance paths (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). Collapse of governance, a breakdown of adaptation, happens when coordination breaks down within each level of governance and between levels and when the tools to fix this are also broken or not available anymore in the current configuration and mode of reproduction (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009). Structures and paper plans might be there but they become meaningless. Thus, a shock can start in many places and does not always lead to collapse, while resilience can look very different in different societies (Anderies, Janssen, & Ostrom, 2004; Van Assche & Gruezmacher, 2022). A collapse in ecosystems might cause a collapse of governance, but the shock can also be political, economic, religious.

2.2. Strategy

As Kornberger (2022) and Van Assche et al. (2021b) recently argued, strategy is possible beyond the level of organizations and for the pursuit of collective goals. Such conception of strategy is useful to reconfigure and reinterpret policies and plans. We look at local strategy as both narrative and institution (Van Assche et al., 2020a, 2020b), moreover as an institution coordinating others. Indeed, a story without organizational resources, without the tools of policy, planning and law to coordinate action, would have little effect (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). While a set of policy tools without coordination and without an overarching and compelling narrative about the local future would not stand a chance either (Throgmorton, 1996). The narrative needs to be inspired by a deep knowledge of local identity and circumstances, both local and expert knowledge (we spoke of cognitive resources), in order to give it a chance to work under the given material, economic and cultural conditions (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; cf Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger,

2008, 2010).

Similarly, a local government can function both as actor and arena (Gruezmacher & Van Assche, 2022; Healey, 1998). Local government as arena allows different interests to be represented, different versions of the future to compete and be constructed. In other words, a shared narrative can be constructed and couplings with tools for organization and coordination can be made (invoking of policies, plans, laws) thus enhancing chances at implementation (Van Assche, Valentinov, & Verschraegen, 2021c). This brings back the old idea of administrative capacity. If skilled local administrators are not there, such coupling is less likely. A local government is also an actor in dealing with private actors, with higher level governments. A local government understood in this way, can be a good place for a strategy to crystallize and to work its way towards implementation.

2.3. Local paradox

To function local governance needs resources, it needs organizational (institutional) and cognitive (knowledge) capacities (a 'technocracy of the base') and it needs to be perceived as legitimate. If this works, then local governance, including local government, can fulfill a role in more ambitious multi-level schemes. It can help to make them happen. It can confer its own cognitive, institutional and legitimate sources and resources on higher-level schemes and strategies (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Easterly, 2014). Conversely, higher-level resources can serve as input for local strategies (Van Assche, Gruezmacher, Vodden, Gibson, & Deacon, 2021a; Van Assche et al., 2021c). This is the case if local strategies are perceived as real and legitimate locally and if there is trust between the different levels, when they exist (Edelenbos & Eshuis, 2012).

Strong and autonomous local governance can serve to improve, correct but also stop higher -level initiatives, and vice versa (cf Leamon, 1994; Pinkerton, Heaslip, Silver, & Furman, 2008). This is in part the intention of having checks and balances in a democracy. Perfect coordination and complete absence of conflict within and between levels does not exist in democracies (Healey, 1998; North et al., 2009). Local governance does not have to center around local government in order to articulate strategy and perform the narrative and coordinate work involved (Van Assche et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). In absence of local government, however, local governance is unlikely to emerge with the strength and stability to implement or correct higher-level strategy (cf Kornai, 1992).

In our analysis of the N&L situation we develop the concept of the local paradox. For that, we first need to familiarize ourselves with the province and its turbulent history.

3. In Newfoundland and Labrador: introduction

Newfoundland became a Canadian province in 1949, almost a century after confederation (1867). It had been contested between France and England since the 17th century, and permanent settlement had been delayed by this rivalry, as well as by the influence of merchants from the west of England, who did not want to see settlements competing with their business (Korneski, 2016; Webb, 2016). A legacy of informality followed (Korneski, 2018; Overton, 2000; Hoggart, 1979), and local government came late, for the economic and political capital, St John's, and more so for the several hundred small fishing towns dotting the coastline (Curran, 1992; Cullen, 2018).

Newfoundland had its fair share of economic, political and social shocks. It went bankrupt during the great depression and flirted with bankruptcy several times before and after (for example the bank crash of 1894). In 1934, Great Britain suspended democracy and installed a six-person commission, which was in charge until confederation in 1949 (Horwood, 1989; Lodge, 1939). That confederation led to rapid modernization of provincial government, thanks to investment by the federal government, the arrival of welfare programs but also to the

'development or perish' policies of flamboyant premier Joseph Smallwood. These entailed large industrial and infrastructure projects, providing 'good jobs' (Bassler, 1986; Horwood, 1989; Matthews, 1979) but also resettlement schemes in Newfoundland which led to the abandonment of over 300 communities, since 1954 (Copes & Steed, 1975; Webb, 2016). Meanwhile, unification with Canada enabled outmigration, especially to the western resource-rich provinces; which led, with low birth rates in recent years, to a rapidly aging population (Vodden & Hall, 2016; Vodden, Gibson, & Daniels, 2014).

Cod fishing had been a mainstay of economic activity, yet saw strong volatility, and depletion of stocks led to closure in 1992, leaving tens of thousands of people unemployed (Bavington, 2011). Before that, lobster fishing had come and gone, and after the cod moratorium, the alternative fisheries of snow crab and shrimp went through dramatic ups and downs (Davis & Korneski, 2012; Korneski, 2012). The industrialization focus of the Smallwood years, combined with a relative neglect of the fisheries (considered outdated by him), led to a missed opportunity for innovation and for maintaining a competitive advantage over other fisheries (Greenwood, 1991). For federal governmental actors, fisheries were less important anyway (Blake, 2015; Lowenthal, 2017), and foreign ships encroached on territorial waters for a long time, contributing to the decline of stocks.

An openly paternalistic form of politics evolved, where first Smallwood (Liberal), and later his successors from other parties (Conservative) favored communities which supported them (Greenwood, 1995; Horwood, 1989; Marland & Kerby, 2014). This made cohesive regional development strategy virtually impossible. It also came with a tendency to focus on jobs, rather than economic development, and on projects, rather than the position of projects in a broader development scheme, or even the goal of those projects (Andersen, 1986; Greenwood, 1991; Samson, 2017). This orientation towards continuation of the performance of 'development', rather than cultivation of reflexivity and development of governance capacity (Matthews, 1979; Pollett, 1997), can be considered a response to opportunities associated with confederation, but also as belated response to the shocks of bankruptcy, committee government, and confederation itself (cf Webb, 2016). Now, finally, St John's politicians could do something to keep people employed. The later Regional Development Associations (RDA's, see below) would similarly aim at keeping people busy, at organizing 'make-work' projects (Greenwood, 1991), enabling people to work long enough to qualify for federal unemployment benefits the rest of the year (Vickers, 2010).

The shock of the fisheries collapse was all the more dramatic, as fishing had rebounded significantly in the later Smallwood years, with some former fishermen returning from other provinces, and from industrial jobs within the province, to return (with the safety net of unemployment benefits and socialized healthcare) and invest in new boats and equipment, mostly for inshore fisheries (Bavington, 2011; Gmelch, 1983; Richling, 1985). Post- Smallwood governments had re-emphasized fishing as the core of Newfoundland identity, and had understood modernization as modernization of fisheries, not industrialization (Marland & Kerby, 2014; Greenwood, 1995). What was added was oil and gas extraction, after the province renegotiated its jurisdiction over offshore oilfields. In the years since 2010, this led to a true but short-lived boom, leaving the province in another financial hole, which then triggered the Greene report, the Big Reset variant mentioned above (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Stoddart & Quinn Burt, 2020).

By far the greatest financial disaster however, more than the shock of the cod moratorium and the decline of oil production, were the twin projects of Churchill Falls and Muskrat Falls, both hydro-electric projects on the Churchill River in Labrador. The first one initiated by Smallwood (Bannister, 2012), the latter one still under construction. Whereas Churchill Falls was a disaster primarily because the low prices negotiated with Quebec (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Smith, 1975), which insisted on buying Newfoundland electricity and reselling it freely (the cables had to pass through Quebec), the Muskrat Falls project got mostly

mired in fantastic cost overruns (Flyvbjerg & Budzier, 2019).

For the moment, we can say then that the responses to multiple shocks in Newfoundland were coordinated from the provincial center, St John's, its overlapping political and economic elites, in a polarized political landscape of patronage (Dunn, 2004; Neary, 1969; Overton, 1990). Local and regional responses were hard to crystallize, as local and regional governance were weak (Royal Commission on Municipal Government in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1974; Vodden, Hall, & Freshwater, 2013, 2014). Support came from Ottawa, but usually mediated through St John's. Where federal support reached directly the local or regional level (see below), it did not contribute to the capacity to respond to future shocks, to the building of governance capacity (Bavington, 2011; Korneski, 2012).

The shocks were mostly destructive, in the sense that old forms of organization, including informality and self-organization, fell in shambles, and were not systematically replaced (Cote & Pottie- Sherman, 2020; Greenwood, 1991). Many locals just left. Governance capacity at provincial level did increase (Channing, 1982) and the early shocks did lead to innovation there, including the development of Memorial University (Webb, 2016), the embrace and implementation of the federal welfare system, the lobby for infrastructure works (Blake, 2015; Greenwood, 1995). The failure of most industrialization projects, the limited life span of the mining activities did not produce alternative visions for the future which were implementable. New ideas did come up for local and regional government, and they will be discussed below. A Newfoundland identity which transcends religious and economic classes can be considered a product of the history of shocks sketched above (Fuchs & Thompson, 1983; Lowenthal, 2017; Webb, 2014). Rather than from the village, rather than being first an Irish Catholic, an identity was forged which enabled many to say 'I'm a Newfoundlander' (Labradorians have a more complex sense of identity, with strong indigenous communities and a connection to the Labrador 'big land', in addition – often – to a shared identity with the province as a whole).

4. Local (and regional) governance and dependencies

One dependence that plays a key role in understanding both the responses to shocks in N&L and the possibilities to do so in a transformative and strategic manner is the centrality of Provincial governmental actors in governance (Churchill, 1999; Hall, Vodden, & Greenwood, 2017; Vodden et al., 2013). This applies to the routine functioning of governance, and it applies to attempts at governance innovation, e.g. through rethinking local or regional governance, and in establishing centers of excellences for academic work and policy advice in St John's (Carter & Vodden, 2017; Gibson, 2014; Hall, Walsh, Greenwood, & Vodden, 2016; Minnes & Vodden, 2017). This current interdependence stems directly from a path dependence, where a neo-colonial relation between the capital and the outlying areas can be associated with the dominance of a class of merchants which functioned in a network spanning capital and many smaller towns, feeding into the businesses active at larger scales (Bradley, 1994; Overton, 2000).

Traditionally, fishermen were dependent on the village merchant, who gave them credit to buy whatever they needed for the fishing season and bought up the catch later. The merchant usually had the village store, St John's affiliations, and in some cases international connections (Korneski, 2016; Webb, 2016). They were not primarily interested in fishing, but in import/export of various goods, in retail; fish was just the input for the other forms of trade (Greenwood, 1991). This pattern of interdependencies contributed to the lack of innovation in fisheries for a long time and to the weak agency of fishermen, first as economic actors, but also, by extension, as political actors (Fuchs & Thompson, 1983; Loo, 2019). When Smallwood still considered himself a socialist and an organizer, he deplored the lack of organization of the fishermen, and had higher hopes for industrial workers, in mills and mines, to unionize and lobby for themselves (Horwood, 1989).

While it can be argued that in fisheries, N&L had a competitive advantage for a while, this was seemingly not realized during the crucial Smallwood years. This led to a situation where all other kinds of projects were favored, to correct 'underdevelopment', even if material conditions were not favorable (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Samson, 2017; Matthews, 1979). Material dependencies often played out negatively, with projects placed in less than auspicious places leading to economic issues and from there tensions in governance. Or, as Korneski (2012) showed for the case of the earlier lobster boom (ca 1900), because material conditions were not observed and catch not regulated, leading to boom/bust patterns damaging for governance capacity in the longer run. Even before Smallwood larger projects usually were attracted and located in negotiations between private and provincial actors, this made development of regional innovation networks difficult and as a result the presence of the projects did not lead to stronger local governance (Close, Rowe, & Wheaton, 2007; Iverson & Matthews, 1968; Pollett, 1997; cf. Franks, Brereton, & Moran, 2013; Pinkerton et al., 2008).

A mine, a fish plant, a dam; all landed in a locale based on decisions from higher up and on an assessment of material conditions which often ignored local knowledge (Horwood, 1989). In the older outports, before modernization, religious, ethnic and class differences structured governance, yet so did the material environment (McCay, 1978; Richling, 1985). Everything was geared towards fishing, the sea, survival under harsh conditions. Yet the outports became a problem in a land-centered industrial economy, in a new form of multi-level governance aiming at high levels of services and in most visions of a 'modern' N&L (Bannister, 2012; Channing, 1982). Thus, old material dependencies were broken and not replaced by better adaptations to the environment.

5. Previous attempts at 'Reset' and weak local governance

In order to achieve anything close to the ambitions of the Great Reset (Schwab & Malleret, 2020; cf Florida, 2010), and in order to achieve any radical transformation of governance -as argued for in the Newfoundland strategy of the Big Reset (Greene et al., 2021), strong local governance is needed. The history of Newfoundland teaches us that no reform at higher level can be successful without the complementary level of local governance, however defined (Greenwood, 1991; Minnes & Vodden, 2017; Pollett, 1997; Van Assche et al., 2021c). In Newfoundland, local is defined as anything smaller than the Province. The debacle of Churchill Falls and its repetition in Muskrat Falls and more recently the idea of a tunnel to Labrador, all repeat moves which failed in the past, and which could have been avoided if governance was actually multi-level governance, with its concomitant checks and balances (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Flyvbjerg & Budzier, 2019). In both cases, indigenous rights were mostly ignored and given their remote nature, both projects could be presented as located beyond existing communities (Samson, 2017). In the case of the giant iron mines in Labrador city, the local community was created for the benefit of the mine, hence the local perspective would not differ much (Procter, 2020).

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the idea of local government was problematic from the beginning, since, as we saw, the British were not keen on permanent settlement. Even St John's only became a fully self-governing city in 1884, four centuries after its foundation (Curran, 1992). We mentioned that the dependent relations within Newfoundland, the prominence of St John, and the overlap between economic and political elites there meant that few initiatives were taken at the provincial level to fortify local government. Provincial representation of remote towns and villages was often organized by provincial elites and a history of little impact in the center made for little interest locally to change that situation (Korneski, 2016). Patronage was the form of influence expected, as a reward for correct voting, and this was common knowledge (Dunn, 2004; Greenwood, 2013).

Nevertheless, a series of initiatives was taken to enhance local government and, more common, to improve regional collaboration towards economic development (see Hall et al., 2017 and Vodden et al., 2013, 2014 for excellent overviews). Memorial University Extension was very

active between the 1950s and 70′s and could locally go much beyond community research and continuing education. Project workers would try to empower local communities, to encourage self-organization, formation of cooperatives, and local government which would be able to articulate common goals and a common direction (Webb, 2014). They would, in other words, strategize for and with communities and encourage them to develop their own institutional capacity. This did not always sit well with local power brokers, and with the provincial government, so that role for the St John's academic became harder to play.

In 1968, a rural development association movement started, in opposition to governmental policies of industrialization and resettlement. These were later folded into the government, and since ca 1980 funded by government and formalized into regional development associations -RDA's (Andersen, 1986; Close et al., 2007; Curran, 1992). In the 1980′s and early 90′s, Regional Development Associations were formed which were active in economic development initiatives, bringing together public and private players from all levels. Money came often from the federal government and initiatives were often not taking deep roots (Leamon, 1994). Here we find the root of the 'make work' projects mentioned earlier: short term projects desired by the community to fix relatively small problems and to offer short-term work to people who could claim unemployment benefits afterwards (Greenwood, 1991; Vickers, 2010).

Meanwhile, the federal initiative named Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) had a local/regional presence, distributing federal funds to support local/regional initiatives for economic development. As with the RDA's and as with the 'grand projects' catching the imagination of Smallwood, the thinking was mostly in terms of projects bringing jobs and tax revenue not in terms of increasing institutional or cognitive capacity (Hall et al. 2017; Vodden et al., 2014). As with the RDA's, legitimacy was a problem since the authority of these constructions was not clear and decisions were easily questioned (Greenwood, 1991, 1995). Moreover, the same people would show up in different governance arenas for economic development, without necessarily representing a local constituency (Gibson, 2014). In certain areas, such as the Northern Peninsula, a rather impoverished fishing region, and Buchans, a former mining area, another form of regional development was tried; a development board (Greenwood, 1991) which was linked to a more project- oriented development corporation. Such corporations could borrow money and write bonds, as opposed to the municipalities, tightly controlled by the provinces. In the corporations, private partners could play a more important role (Gibson, 2013, 2014). Lack of clarity about the power, legitimacy and internal functioning of the boards and corporation led to their gradual loss of influence (Hall et al., 2017; Gibson, 2014; Vodden et al., 2013). Combining roles was again problematic, as different RDA's could be represented in the board, and the RDA's could perceive the larger scale initiatives as competing.

After the demise of the RDA's, a new construction was devised, the so called REDB, or regional development board (Hall et al., 2017). Twenty zones were identified, each was equipped with a board and a budget and the task to develop a more comprehensive vision for economic development. In all this, the role of municipalities was not reinforced (as economic development was beyond their purview) and the succession of economic development initiatives that were better resourced than the municipalities themselves, distracted the attention from working on local government. Only in 1998, municipalities were allowed to work towards their own economic development goals but supported by the province, often this meant by participating in a regional strategy under the REDB's (Gibson, 2014).

In 2012, REDB's were discontinued, supposedly because results were lacking. As with the previous arena's, legitimacy, autonomy, competing jurisdictions, and now also lacking resources were problematic (Hall et al., 2017; Vodden et al., 2013). Meanwhile, in recent years, municipalities have acquired more duties but not more powers and resources (Hallstrom et al., 2016; Stoddart & Quinn Burt, 2020; Stoddart, Catano, & Ramos, 2018). Which brings us back to our starting point of weak

local governance, non-existent or fragmentary regional governance, missing cognitive, institutional capacities and minimal legitimacy. These combined features keep a stranglehold on governance innovation, on the kind of development which would enable municipalities to develop their own strategies towards self-transformation, in dialog with ambitious provincial plans (such as the Big Reset).

It has to be said that local communities did not automatically advocate for stronger local governance. The idea of municipal self-governance came largely with confederation and many communities saw it as a ploy by the federal government to increase local control and to homogenize the country- to erase the Newfoundland identity (Curran, 1992; Greenwood, 1991; cf Blake, 2015). In addition, there was a great fear for increasing taxes or even minimal taxes (Greenwood, 1991). In a very local community and largely informal economy and governance, money was scarce and taxation, especially real estate taxes, was not perceived as necessary. Services were also minimal, strategies were limited to survival strategies, and strategies to maintain religious and cultural distinctions (Korneski, 2016; Overton, 1990, 2000; Webb, 2016). Self-help was common but did usually not extend beyond the village. The idea of municipal governance was thus not equated with greater powers of self-determination, for example the power to articulate a self-chosen development strategy, but rather with the demise of the 'real' community.

If a form of local government was chosen, it tended to be the local service district marked by limited services and minimal taxes (Curran, 1992). That decisions for the community were taken by others or not taken did not become a prominent part of public discourse. When in the early 1990′s the provincial government did attempt to amalgamate communities to create stronger municipalities (eg Department of Municipal and Provincial Affairs, 1989), which could afford to hire competent administrators and experts and advocate for itself with other entities (cf Pollett, 1997), this caused a wave of protest in hundreds of small municipalities which could clearly not manage the problems facing them on a daily basis (Greenwood, 1991, 1995). Local identity seemingly trumped anything else (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Cohen, 1975; Frost, 2021; Whalen, 1976). Ever since, forced amalgamation was off the table for successive provincial governments and voluntary amalgamation rarely occurred (Greenwood, 2013).

For local municipalities not able to hire a full- time clerk (let alone a skilled town administrator, planner, utilities engineer, accountant) it remained impossible to negotiate with provincial and private sector players, to discern which initiatives pose a threat, which one could benefit the community and how to develop and advocate for their own initiatives (Carter & Vodden, 2017; Horwood, 1989). If, moreover, young talent keeps leaving and new and more interesting jobs do not materialize, while the old guard sticks to an idea of self-government which cannot realistically increase quality of life in the community and which does not allow younger generations to choose a different direction (the infrastructure for such strategic choice is missing), then this feedback loop makes it even harder to argue for strong local government capable of making strategic choices. Provincially, the actors that benefit from patronage relations and from decision-power are less inclined to devolve more power to locales and find excuses to reinforce ideas such as 'they mess up anyway' and as 'they don't want to learn anyway' (Davis & Korneski, 2012; House, 1999; Matthews, 1974; Neary, 1969).

Such situation makes it harder at the local level to respond to shocks and harder for the Province as well. It multiplies the path dependencies at the local level, keeps the dependence on the province and on private actors in place, and leaves problematic path dependencies at the provincial level unchallenged. If nobody wants strong local governance and nobody wants strong regional governance (none of the experiments had real delegated power and real local representation), then the whims of a polarized and paternalistic provincial governance remain unchanged. Lack of countersignals led to an almost literal repetition of the Churchill falls mistakes in the Muskrat falls project -except the Quebec pricing

(Atlin & Stoddart, 2021). Opaque provincial decision-making, inspired by factionalism, paternalism, 'provincial nationalism', further weakens checks and balances (Dunn, 2004).

6. Conclusions

In the N&L setting, an equation of local government with minimal service provision, of municipal governance with higher taxes and more hassle and a history of failed attempts at regionalization, plus a thinking of development in 'project' terms, has made it difficult to imagine a form of local or regional governance and government which can contribute to strategy at all levels (Van Assche & Hornidge, 2015; Van Assche et al., 2021c). Local thinking, envisioning, strategizing, then coordinating, is necessary to enable larger strategies, as we mentioned several times (and cf Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016). In the current governance path, it is hard to imagine and organize such form of local government, a form which is capable of that. It is thus hard to transform current local governance through a purely bottom-up approach, in an entirely local and participatory fashion and transform it into configurations which can shape the community in a desirable direction. If the basic belief in local and regional governance is not there, all this is difficult. In other words; current local governance might not be interested in transforming itself or being transformed into more empowered political entities capable of contributing to greater collective goals at whatever scale. Building the cognitive, institutional resources for such transformation is not likely to happen if the belief is not there (an observation in line with critiques of uncritical use of 'self-organization' discourse in governance; cf Varela, 1984).

The creation of quasi-experimental forms of regional collaboration as sketched above, *competed* with local government and governance, while they did not produce a form of stable, autonomous, legitimate regional governance which could have compensated for local weakness (Gibson, 2014; Greenwood, 1991, 1995; Pollett, 1997; Vodden et al., 2014). Cognitive and institutional capacities were fleeting, fragmented and contested (cf Young & Matthews, 2007). A most likely benign neglect by federal and provincial authorities did not fix the situation and a legacy of thinking in projects made strategizing at all levels more difficult.

Indeed, provincial strategy can work best when space is created for articulation of *local* strategy. This space requires the different kinds of resources mentioned in a local government with power and authority (cf Easterly, 2014; Matthews, 1979; Whalen, 1976). If governance is reduced to economic development (plus fixing its absence through welfare) and economic development is reduced to projects, then more comprehensive and longer-term strategy is difficult, including the context-sensitive articulation of assets and collective goals. This is not just a N&L problem, and it is not just a feature of engineering and industry- led modernist development (Flyvbjerg & Budzier, 2019; Scott, 2008). The whole field of development studies is marked by rather problematic project thinking (Kothari, 2019; Radcliffe, 1999). Development works through projects, the ones that get financed, and this in turn hinges on politics at levels beyond the places targeted. Projects, we argue, can be part of the strategy but cannot be the strategy itself (Kornberger, 2012). Moreover, if mega- projects crystallize in such governance setting, then it becomes even harder to move to a different track of thinking and organizing, as all attention and all resources are diverted (Atlin & Stoddart, 2021; Bannister, 2012; Samson, 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2017; Zhou & Mi, 2017. In the case of N&L, attention can also be diverted to mitigating their disastrous effects.

Strategies must be understood as institution and narrative, with the narrative side enabling a linkage with local identities and conditions and from there, a managing of the risk of alienation of local communities. Understanding the various dependencies in the governance path, in multi-level systems, is crucial in envisioning ways for local governance to participate in higher-level initiatives and to play an enhancing and corrective role. Grasping such dependencies is also important to see how local governance could transform itself to play these roles better and make a regional or provincial strategy more realistic, less damaging, and *less a product of path dependencies at that level.*

7. Reflection: the local and the strategic

The necessary local kernel of any Great or Big Reset style strategy, any ambitious redesign response to a shock, *cannot be assumed to exist, therefore, and it cannot easily be forced into existence.* One cannot yell at a person and force them to 'be or become themselves' - in the fashion of Rousseau; 'we must force them to be free'- as there is a different self which does not have the same perspective on its own possible futures, on its potential role in multi-governance systems which could achieve more in terms of collective goals (Doganova & Kornberger, 2021; Gunder & Hillier, 2009; Pinkerton et al., 2008; Young & Matthews, 2007). The rich literature on scale and rescaling in governance (see Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008 for a succinct and insightful manifesto) moved in the same direction; we conceptualized the local as always paradoxical in grand strategy, and argued that this paradox plays a productive role in democracy, while an absence of the strategizing local cannot always be remedied.

What could be useful here, in systems terms, is the cultivation of second-order observation; of taking a step outside the current frames of thinking, adopting, even just for a moment, a different perspective on oneself, the community (Luhmann, 1995). The old Fogo island experiment, where, in the 1960's, Memorial Extension Service people, confronted people with film footage of themselves talking about their village and the island and of other people from neighboring villages, can be an example (Webb, 2014). One can add the social learning literature, in its more critical versions (e.g. Muro & Jeffrey, 2008), and the critical systems perspective on development (e.g. Ison & Straw, 2020) as approaches appreciating second order observation. Also the association of N&L municipalities tries to engender reflexivity and has been trying to encourage local and provincial players to adopt a second-order perspective, showing them consequences of and historical reasons for current forms of organization and discussing alternatives (Greenwood, 1991; Vodden, Lane, & Pollett, 2016).

What inspires hope is that nothing ever stays the same. All governance systems and all communities evolve, even if it does not look like it and even if nostalgia for the past seems to dominate (Van Assche et al., 2020b). Migrants can return, mayors are replaced, fishing memories can be cultivated but alternatives do assert themselves at some point. Cultivating reflexivity and second order observation can speed up this process of evolution and it can take place at all levels of government and governance, eying a reinvention of the local. Trying second order observation as a mode of learning and opening up to change can take the form of institutional experiment, but as discussed earlier, the status of the experiment, the connection with existing actors and institutions and with the long term needs to be clarified very well.

What needs to be avoided is the cultivation of factional identities, of polarized and patronage politics, which keeps people trapped in old stories and unworkable governance arrangements. Similarly, a cultivation of reflexivity and with that of discussion and debate, can weaken the attraction of ideological tropes and simplistic stories of redemption, of fixed identities and a naturally deserved glorious future (Gunder & Hillier, 2009; Voss & Bornemann, 2011). This will require provincial politicians to take responsibility and take the risk of changing political calculations, sometimes confronting voters with hard truths (as seems to be happening now) and with local responsibilities and opportunities (weakening the hold of the center, reducing patronage opportunities). The looming debt crisis stemming from the Muskrat Falls debacle might just provide the shock needed to trigger such responses.

The case of N&L is relevant for the understanding of community strategy and governance innovation and it is relevant for the ongoing discussions on the Great Reset. It shows, in a series of natural experiments, what can happen if Resets are tried a few times in a row without much attention to the building of governance capacity at lower levels

and to the cultivation of checks and balances. The extraordinary history of N&L is nevertheless crucial to question supposedly universal recipes for Resets. Its contingent path of shocks, path dependencies, and Resets (making the path even more blurry and future strategy even more unlikely) shows, at the very least, the importance of contingency in the evolution of governance, strategic capacity and local identity. Each locale, region, nation, is marked to some degree by previous attempts at steering and strategy, by weaknesses in local governance, by ups and downs and projects of governance innovation (Rolo, Van Assche, & Duineveld, 2021). Shocks and path dependencies entwine to make reactions to attempted Reset less predictable.

Of course, such projects are destined to function as productive fiction, pretending to optimize governance in general, while in practice, only improved adaptation to reigning internal and external conditions is possible. A non- understanding of previous governance configurations and limitations in the formulation of new Reset strategies (after shock) will tend to reshuffle hierarchies in manners outside democratic control (Roth, 2021a). The Reset will hit limits of new policy integration, at the same time policy integration will be necessary for strategy implementation. This is the case because the *topical focus* of the Reset (e.g. towards health; Roth, 2021b) differs from the one embraced in old attempts and the one present in the existing governance configuration and because policy focus defines policy integration. The Reset will find limits (or support) locally in the presence/absence of local governance tied to local identities, of local communities interested in becoming integrated in large-level systems from which Grand Strategy could emanate.

Mapping of the limits to Resets that became possible through the study of Newfoundland and Labrador, does not entail that Grand Challenges can't be faced. It does mean that we must refrain from searching frantically for the next magic formula to do so and it also means that we can't stay in the domain of one discipline. The step from organization to meta-organization as a unit of analysis (Ahrne et al., 2016) is helpful but that concept cannot replace the interdisciplinary study of organizational embeddings in society (Apelt et al., 2017). The new interdisciplinary forms of thinking emerging in management studies around Grand Challenges (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016), the new forms of reflexivity enabling management studies to reposition themselves in debates on governance reform (Alvesson et al., 2009; Dittrich, Guérard, & Seidl, 2016), are promising signs. The key, in our view, remains to see governance as always entwining thinking and organizing and to see strategy for collectives as situated in governance, as a tool affecting thinking and organizing (Czarniawska, 1989; Kornberger, 2022). Strategy can move the community in a different direction but at the same time it is subjected to the same dependencies and shocks as the community at large.

Funding

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kristof Van Assche: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Rob Greenwood:** Conceptualization, working on revision, analysis policy documents. **Monica Gruezmacher:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

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