

The Data Pandemic, Zombie Voters and First Nation Governance

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ELECTIONS IN FIRST NATIONS may not generate large voter turn-outs, lack standardized “rules”, and often take place while a competing governance system in the same community is also in place. But regardless, it is fair to say that deceased citizens should not participate. However, during their latest band council election, where on-line voting was used for the first time, members of the Six Nations of the Grand River **have discovered** that at least one did. This is, of course, deeply troubling.

How useful are these online platforms and does Six Nations governance truly reflect the opinion of the community?

More philosophical questions emerge from this, too. If voting, a basic function of electoral, representative democracy is compromised, can Six Nations people really consider themselves self-determining? Can they ever exercise their rights as First Nations living outside the jurisdiction of Canada? These are difficult questions to answer and touch on issues of citizenship, data, and governance more generally.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SIX NATIONS CITIZENSHIP

The Haudenosaunee (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora) still maintain their Nations across reserves throughout the lands now called Canada and the United States. While “Six Nations of the Grand River” is a British term, it refers to the fact that the community is the only place where all six of these Nations come together. Yet this amalgamation was actually forced, for Six Nations is a community of war refugees.

There’s a reason why the Haudenosaunee call George Washington, and all subsequent American Presidents, “Hanadagá:yas” or “**Town Destroyer**”; Haudenosaunee were pushed from their lands following the American Revolutionary War. In the face of this long history of displacement and alienation, the Haudenosaunee have maintained sovereignty. But these dynamics have made discussions around citizenship and governance difficult.

We are at a place in Haudenosaunee history where important questions remain unanswered.

Are the Nation’s members just those who live at the Six Nations reserve? Where do off-reserve members factor in? What about those who will be classified as **Bill S-3**, following the implementation of that legislation? Answers to these questions are as varied as they are complex, where the only consistent variable is the lack of consensus on who qualifies as a community member. If we can’t collectively decide on who is a member, it makes it difficult to determine who can vote, and how we vote.

INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY

This context is important to understand where we are right now and to link the discussion of our history with citizenship, and the crux of the issue, how we manage the related data. Six Nations is a large community with thousands of members. Keeping track of them all requires significant record-keeping infrastructure, with the corresponding policies. This is the core of **Indigenous Data Sovereignty**. There are shades of movement towards this at Six Nations.

As it stands right now, and as defined by the Six Nations of the Grand River Elected Council (or Six Nations of the Grand River as they've **recently rebranded themselves**), a new citizenship code has been developed. This means that Six Nations administrators have taken over maintaining the citizen registry, which was initially based on the **Indian Register**. While this enables the administration to add new members according to its own criteria, it also means that it is responsible for tracking the deaths of members as well.

In this transition, there are a number of questions to ask, and answer. What happens if there is a conflict between Indian Registry records and Six Nations of the Grand River records; who is responsible for ensuring any discrepancies don't become serious problems (such as zombie voters); is there a mechanism in place to reconcile these data; what if there are no consistent, reliable, or secure data processes to determine who is a living (or dead) Six Nations member?

Indigenous Data Sovereignty could help answer these questions by defining the best practices, technologies, and resources that ensure it's the members of the Six Nations of the Grand River who hold and determine the truth of the data that defines them.

After all, Canada isn't responsible for tracking or determining who is or isn't American. Why is this any different for the Haudenosaunee, other First Nations, Inuit, and Métis? Nothing about us without us applies to all things, including data.

DE-COLONIAL DATA?

It is tempting for some to think that if we mirrored Canadian voting systems these problems would disappear. We have decades of experience and libraries of evidence to indicate the failure of that perspective. Indeed, the "Indian bands" created for us through the Indian Act were designed as facsimiles of Canada and as a means to absorb us **"into the body politic."**

When we attempt to mimic colonial elections we are participating in a system designed to destroy us. The fact is that the Six Nations "Elected" Council exists as a colonial institution. As long as it remains so, we're going to run into serious problems and ridiculous scandals at every election cycle. Because we are also operating from historically sabotaged data.

In other words, along with our governance systems, our history and records (including around citizenship) were also attacked.

It's clear that we need to radically address these trends, and fast. As the Government of Canada continues to devolve services to First Nation's band administrators, we are increasingly taking on the responsibility of maintaining (data) systems that they created. Yet we have none of the power required to run them, at least in a manner that doesn't continue to cause harm to the most vulnerable people in our communities.

We are fortunate that there are **candidates**, both young and old, in recent election cycles across Indigenous territories that have the perspective, intelligence, and tenacity to fight for what's ours. They know that as we (re)claim our data, we also (re)claim our identities. Then we can start (re)building our Nations.

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