Forms of Federalism in the Governance of Sport in Multilingual Countries: A Comparison of Canada and Belgium

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Governance
Thursday, May 24, 2012
8:30 AM
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Visions)

Abstract 2012-007

As management of the sport sector is undergoing fundamental change, managers of voluntary sport organizations need to understand and react effectively to the internal and external operating environments affecting their respective organizations (Robinson & Palmer, 2011). That is why the national sport governing bodies (NSGBs) in different countries may be dissimilar in some respects because of the influences of local contingencies including cultures and traditions (Hums, Maclean & Zintz, 2011). One daunting issue faced by many national sport governing bodies relates to how they govern their regional or provincial affiliates. The interregional or interprovincial rivalries and self-interests are likely to impose heavy and sometimes conflicting demands on the NSGB. The effectiveness of the NSGB is largely dependent on how the preferences (and perceptions) of the regional or provincial units are managed to the satisfaction of these member units.

The problem of inter-provincial or inter-regional rivalries is further exacerbated when the differences among provinces or regions go beyond the traditional geographical boundaries as when provinces or regions are created based on the languages spoken in different parts of the country as in the case of Belgium and Canada. Accordingly, some of the NSGB organizational responses to the multilingualism, and multiculturalism thereof, are unique to these two countries compared to other NSGBs in unilingual countries. Further, there are also differences in the structure and processes of NSGBs in these two countries as they mirror the federal arrangements in the governance of their respective national governments. The purpose of the present study is to explore the differences in the managerial practices of the Belgian and Canadian NSGBs.

Located in the north of Europe, Belgium has a proud sporting history and heritage, having hosted the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, where the Olympic flag and the Athlete Oath were introduced (International Olympic Committee, 2008a). Canada, the northernmost country of North America has also a sporting history having hosted the Montreal Summer Olympics and the Winter Olympics in Calgary and Vancouver. The population of Canada is 33.213 million (2008 estimate) living in an area of 9976140 km2 with a population density of 3.3 persons per km2 while Belgium's population is 10.404 million in 30510 km2 with a population density of 341 person per km2 (Mongabay.com, nd). While the two countries are vastly different in overall demographics, they are similar in that their national governments are greatly influenced by the linguistic composition of the population.

Approximately 6.5 million (60%) of Belgians are Flemish-speaking and 4 million (40%) are French-speaking, with a small community of 75,000 German-speakers (Directorate-General Statistics and Economic Information - Belgium, 2010) while nearly 8 million (24.1%) Canadians declare that their official language is French (Svoboda & Donnelly, 2005). While the governance of both countries is democratic, they have adopted different forms of federalism.

Federalism in Belgium consists of two different types of federated units. One type is territorial and labeled Regions of Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels; and the other is linguistic labeled Communities of Flemish, French, and German speaking peoples (De Decker, Beaudoin, & Delperée, 2000). Further complexity is introduced as different (and overlapping) governing functions are assigned to Regions and Communities. Sport and its governance is the domain of Communities. As this arrangement lets the communities set their own sport policies, there is no coherent and unified national sport policy or budget priorities. This places a heavy burden on each of the Community Sports Governing Bodies (CSGBs) as well as the national sport governing bodies which have to balance the differing orientations and preferences of communities with the demands of international federations which treat Belgium as a unified whole. In contrast, Canada is a federation of ten provinces and three territories which constitute one federated level. While the provinces and territories have the jurisdiction over sport in their respective regions, the federal government through its agency Sport Canada also plays a significant role in the promotion of sports and pursuit of excellence in sports.
These patterns of federalism are also reflected in how a sport is governed in each country. In Canada, a national sport governing body is composed of provincial and territorial sport governing bodies which have complete jurisdiction over the sport in their respective provinces or territories. However, the selection, training, and management of the national teams are wholly under the purview of the national body. In Belgium, the national body only acts as a coordinator among the CSGBs and represents them in the international federation. Further, the Belgian Olympic and Interfederal Committee has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Communities to coordinate the elite sport policies, and to manage the participation of national teams in the Olympic Games and multi-sport international competitions.

While the intent of the constitutions of both countries is symmetry among the federated units, asymmetries in power and influence are found in both countries. The emergence of these asymmetries in the governance of sport and their consequences are discussed.