As a country whose population growth has been driven mainly by immigration, Canada is becoming increasingly diverse. Across the country, 19.1 per cent of the population identifies a visible minority and in large cities like Toronto and Vancouver this proportion rises to 47 per cent and 45.2 per cent, respectively.\(^1\) Recognizing the importance of multiculturalism and employment equity has been a key cornerstone of the country, and much work has been done to ensure equal rights for all. Canada’s Employment Equity Act legislates that every employer with 100 or more employees under federal jurisdiction must implement policies and longer-term goals in an effort to increase the representation of persons in designated groups.\(^2\) Canada’s diversity is an economic asset that drives innovation and creativity. To ensure our government makes the best possible decisions, it must reflect our population. This includes a representative executive leadership that is willing to challenge the status quo and provide perspectives and opinions that represent a wide range of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

Newfoundland and Labrador has a more homogeneous population than Canada as a whole, and arguably, this has weakened our ability to innovate. The province’s history is marked by a series of large-scale projects that threatened to break the province’s bank: the Newfoundland Railway,
The Democracy cookbook

The Upper Churchill contract, the Sprung Greenhouse, and the current Muskrat Falls project are examples of attempts by our government to invest in projects that would improve the province’s economy, but these initiatives lacked the forethought to innovate, to think long term, and to consider the ramifications of their decisions. While these examples go back a century, they all have one defining feature in common — these decisions were made under the leadership of homogeneous groups from the population. There is increasing evidence that homogeneous groups tend to reach a consensus easily, a phenomenon called “groupthink,” which may preclude new ideas and various perspectives from a diverse population. Diverse groups, on the other hand, tend to bring forward more provocative thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on the very same issue.

Having a more diverse executive leadership, both at the minister and deputy minister levels, would provide much needed role models for those groups traditionally less represented in the public offices but who are otherwise interested in becoming more involved in government, such as young people, newcomers, visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities. In the Public Service Commission’s Mandate Letter, Premier Ball specified the promotion of gender diversity in leadership as a goal of the Commission, though ethnic diversity was not discussed. Newfoundland and Labrador has a very low voter turnout at all elections, particularly in municipal elections, where some seats were not even filled. Changes at the top to fill positions with a range of citizens reflecting different backgrounds have the potential of creating role models for diverse groups of individuals to emulate and may encourage more people to get involved in democratic processes.

Studies have found that social diversity has a positive influence on informational diversity. That is, being around people who have different backgrounds and experiences can result in more creative and innovative ideas, which facilitate positive economic growth. Deszo and Ross documented that having more women in top management positions improved a firm’s growth if a firm’s business strategy was focused on innovation. Similarly, racial diversity in management could improve the performance of those firms with an innovation growth strategy, as Richard et al. concluded.

Diverse leadership can also be a key asset in maximizing global economic opportunities by leveraging the international connections, cultural competencies, and language skills of those from different backgrounds. This is a key area for Newfoundland and Labrador, where examples of export-oriented businesses are generally limited to the oil and gas sector and the
government has been slow to develop international trade relations with key trading partners such as China.

By having representative leadership in the public service, the government will be able to prove its commitment to gender equality and multiculturalism — policies to which all levels of government aspire but that have not been fully realized in our province. If the government is able to take concrete steps to become more representative, it has the potential to build trust and collaboration with groups that have been traditionally marginalized and have become apathetic to the democratic process.

Our province needs to shed its image as a homogeneous society and promote its diversity in order to become a real global player in the twenty-first century. To ensure our government makes the best decisions, it must reflect our population. Creating a representative government able to bring new and innovative ideas to the table would be pivotal. In order to build an inclusive democracy in Newfoundland and Labrador, we need an executive leadership willing to challenge the status quo and provide perspectives and opinions that represent a wide range of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

About the Authors

Tony Fang (Economics, Memorial University of Newfoundland) is Stephen Jarislowsky Chair in Economic and Cultural Transformation. He researches issues of immigration, diversity, and cultural changes, as well as high-performance workplace practices. Tony’s most recent publications include “Vulnerable Groups in Canada and Labour Market Exclusion (International Journal of Manpower) and “Minimum Wages and Employment in China” (IZA Journal of Labour Policy).

Kerri Neil (Sociology, Memorial University of Newfoundland) is a Master of Arts candidate in Sociology. She holds a BA in Economics and Canadian Studies. Her research has focused on labour markets and issues of immigrant attraction and retention in Newfoundland and Labrador. Kerri has several publications through the Department of Economics Collaborative Applied Research in Economics (CARE) initiative, including “The Gender Wage Gap” and “NL’s Human Capital Strategy.”

Notes
1. Statistics Canada, Visible Minority (15), Generation Status (4), Age Groups (10) and Sex (3) for the Population in Private Households of Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census
Agglomerations, 2011 National Household Survey. Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011029 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2011). In the calculations of Statistics Canada, Indigenous people are not considered to be among Canada’s “visible minorities.”


Citation Information


For more information, or to read The Democracy Cookbook as a free Open Access publication, visit: www.hss.mun.ca/iserbooks/title/114