

**Traditional governance approaches**

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Traditional Aboriginal politics, notes Taiaiake Alfred (1999), are founded on profoundly respectful ways of governing, and a worldview that balances respect for individual autonomy with recognition of universal interdependence. The power in traditional governance flows directly from the people and is based on the “primacy of conscience”. There is no central or coercive authority, and no separation of society and the state. Governance is based on the collective power of autonomous individual members. Alfred describes several principles of collective power, which he deems to be universal characteristics of Aboriginal governance across North America. It depends upon active participation of individuals. It balances divergent, dispersed sources of power, each of which is valued for its inherent worth. It is situational and flexible, and is used in non-coercive ways. Its membership respects the diversity in their midst.

Menno Boldt (1993) stresses that traditional leaders are the servants of the people. Boldt describes traditional governance as a paradigm of mutual empowerment in which an empowered people hold their leaders accountable. In the past, traditional structures were largely characterized by communalism, redistribution, consensus, and accountability. Principles were most directly expressed where the governance unit was small; usually on the scale of families and clans.

Ken Coates (1998) concludes that Aboriginal nations in North America have had thousands of years of experience with governance. Systems varied dramatically, from the structured processes of settled peoples on the coast, which tended to be hierarchical and status oriented, to the more informal structures of interior, forest and plains people, which were built around control of land and resources.

Based on these descriptions, what might traditional Aboriginal governance have looked like in British Columbia? There would, of course, have been a range of systems, all

characterized by a diverse community of empowered individuals, families and clans, interacting according to customary laws and traditions, with a strong spiritual connection to, and responsibility for, the land. Accountability between people and leaders was strong and usually direct.

In smaller, more mobile groups, much leadership would have been of the functional variety, such as war chiefs, fishing or hunting leaders, elders who advised on medicinal gathering or spiritual practices. This functional leadership would have depended upon the knowledge, experience and skills of an individual for a particular task in community life. In larger, more settled communities, society would have been more structured and status oriented. Hereditary leadership would have been more prevalent. Attention would have been given to grooming members of certain families for the responsibilities of leadership. Alex Rose (2000) provides an insightful look at how this careful grooming of leaders is still very active among the Nisga'a people.

Within the total range of traditional governance systems in British Columbia, we conclude that the principles of communalism, redistribution, consensus and accountability were consistently reflected.