

An African Nova Scotian Community Calling In: Agency, Accountability, Representation and Self-Determination

‘An African Nova Scotian Community Calling In’ was an online panel discussion held on January 19, 2022. The event was co-organized by the MacEachen Institute, the Delmore Buddy Daye Learning Institute and Inspiring Communities.

The purpose of this briefing note is to highlight the key takeaways from the discussion, help to frame and define areas for further community discussion, capacity building and mobilization such as: defining African Nova Scotians as distinct people, reparations and redistribution of wealth, community reconstruction, political education, long-term government funding, and the positioning of African Nova Scotians as experts in community strategic planning.

Moderator:

Sylvia Parris-Drummond – CEO, Delmore
Buddy Daye Learning Institute



Panelists:

Lynn Jones – Educator, community historian,
activist, grassroots organizer and African
Nova Scotian Labour Advocate



Robert Wright – Registered Social Worker
and lecturer at Mount Saint Vincent
University's Department of Child and
Youth Study



Carolann Wright – Director, Capacity
Building and Strategic Initiatives African
Nova Scotian Communities at Halifax
Partnership



Barb Hamilton-Hinch – Associate Professor,
School of Health & Human Performance, and
Assistant Vice Provost Equity & Inclusion
Dalhousie University



Opening Remarks:

Constance MacIntosh – Acting Scholarly
Director of the MacEachen Institute for
Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie
University.

[View panel recording](#)

Key Observations

Self-determination is achieved through accountability. The process of cultivating community accountability within African Nova Scotian organizing invites discussion about how African Nova Scotians are distinct, what this distinctiveness means in both a historical and contemporary context, and what African Nova Scotians are entitled to as a distinct people of Nova Scotia.

Accountability and self-determination are key. These guiding principles are the springboard to engaging government via its structures and processes, in a way that demonstrates the type of political and social capital that government cannot ignore.

The following pages present key takeaway findings and comments that arose during the panel discussion. They are organized according to six themes: African Nova Scotians as a Distinct People, Community Reconstruction, Reparations and Redistribution of Wealth, Political Education and Critical Mass in the Public Service, Long-term Government Funding for Community-Driven Change, and Positioning of African Nova Scotians as Experts in Community Strategic Planning.

African Nova Scotians as a Distinct People

- There are grounds to establish that African Nova Scotians are a distinct people within Nova Scotia. African Nova Scotians have resided here for over 400 years. Over this period, African Nova Scotians have endured many forms of colonization ranging from enslavement to segregationist laws such as segregated schools. Despite this long-standing history and presence in Nova Scotia, the African Nova Scotian people have not been part of the fabric of government in this province. Having resided here for over 400 years, they have an inherent right to be involved in the governmental decisions that impact the future and well-being of the Black community.
- The histories and lived experiences of African Nova Scotians must be centred in the making of decisions concerning health, justice and education, or African Nova Scotian communities will continue to be harmed by systems intended to exclude and oppress their stories and experiences.
- It is important that the quality of African Nova Scotian distinctiveness is defined by community and acknowledged by government. Defining provides a means to establish greater self-determination through collective understanding of the historical context and position that African Nova Scotians hold in Nova Scotia.
- The collective process of defining centres African Nova Scotians as experts in developing policies, strategies and initiatives that meet the needs of the Black community.



“Love is what brings me here. Love for African Nova Scotian People and the liberation of my people. I have a love for my people that surpasses all understanding.”

– Lynn Jones

Community Reconstruction

- Reconstruction is an American system of wealth redistribution instituted after Emancipation in 1863. Reconstruction redressed the deficits caused by slavery post-emancipation, acknowledging that newly freed slaves did not have access to community infrastructure such as schools, medical care and businesses. In Canada, where slavery was also practiced, reconstruction was completely ignored.
- The history of colonization in Nova Scotia has erased and eroded Black communities by means of environmental racism, gentrification and removal of essential infrastructure (i.e. schools, grocery stores, hospitals and clinics). A form of reconstruction must be considered to revive many historically Black communities in Nova Scotia. It is estimated that it will cost \$250 billion to rebuild African Nova Scotian communities. These costs are based on comparisons to thriving communities in Nova Scotia that have access to essential infrastructure (e.g. Bedford, Nova Scotia).

Reparations and Redistribution of Wealth

- If community reconstruction is necessary, then where will the money come from to support such a large-scale initiative?
- Reparations are one such source to fund community redevelopment. Reparations, while a long-standing discussion, are not part of widespread community and government discussion.
- In late 2016 the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent visited Halifax and published a report in 2017 recommending that the province work with African Nova Scotians to consider reparations in a Nova Scotia context. Federal, provincial and municipal governments have ignored this recommendation.
- African Nova Scotians do have mechanisms to begin to organize and engage government in discussions about reparations. This work has and continues to benefit from the active leadership of the Global African Congress-Nova Scotia Chapter, Africville Community Activists, and the work of those who seek to be influencers. It is evidenced by the work of the Black Family Meeting and The Decade for People of African Descent who continue to ensure the call for Reparations remains in the forefront of the demands sought.



“I am lifted by community, by people of African descent, so I feel I have a strong sense of responsibility: if we do better, we must reach back and bring others with us.”

– *Barbara Hamilton-Hinch*

Political Education and Critical Mass in the Public Service

- Political education and literacy are necessary to develop political agency in African Nova Scotian Communities.
- The development of Civics 101 political literacy workshops for the community will build deeper understandings of political and legislative processes fostering informed and empowered political engagement (i.e. running for office, lobbying government etc.)
- Government and political parties now understand that diversity in candidacy is key to increased voter turnout and garnering party support. However, the nomination of African Nova Scotian candidates often occurs at a late stage of an election campaign, giving Black candidates and communities little time to understand the process or develop a cohesive and holistic platform. Ongoing civic education can ensure deepened capacity and a strategic community-based approach to running for and supporting candidates for elected office.
- Recruiting Black public servants is key to changing anti-Black racism in government decision-making. These opportunities should be supported through mentorship, leadership development and the possibility to advance to executive-level positions. A critical mass of Black perspectives in government is key to dismantling systemic racism in government. However, the public service often manifests as a toxic environment for Black people and this needs to be actively addressed by government before and concurrently with recruiting Black leaders to government.



“There is a sense that African Nova Scotians must inform government in a way that does not compromise the community’s capacity to exist and thrive. That is the bottom line.”

- Robert Wright

Long-term Government Funding for Community-Driven Change

- Government funding for community-driven change is often temporary, of a small scale, limiting in its parameters and driven by government-defined outcomes. For government funding to be an effective support to community it must be long-term, of greater amount and structured by community-defined outcomes. This is the only way to support the longevity, sustainability and growth of grassroots-led community initiatives.



“We are the experts in terms of our presence and our future here in Nova Scotia because we understand our past. We have a blackprint that has shown us how to do this work as a founding people; once we understand our history of organizing in this province all we need to do is follow this [template established by our ancestors].”

– Carolann Wright

Positioning of African Nova Scotians as Experts in Community Strategic Planning

- As a community, African Nova Scotians can be reactive to government decisions rather than proactive. It is important to shift collective focus to critically ask: are we making this effort to organize because we are dissatisfied with government decisions or because we are not making these decisions with government in the first place? It is important to always centre community when organizing. Community organizing should not wait for government.
- Governments are excellent at budgeting with short annual turnarounds. What governments have little time to do is community engagement and strategic planning to support the outcomes advanced by budgets. Community has the expertise in planning and engagement. Community must come to the table asserting this expertise by developing holistic and responsive plans that require government attention and buy-in. To achieve this requires political capacity and collective organization. The job of government is to hold together our collective infrastructure so that as a people our communities can thrive. The relationship between government and community should always be to facilitate an equitable distribution of resources so that communities can evolve.

Conclusion

Accountability and self-determination were critical areas of focus for this panel discussion.

The way the panelists put forward that accountability is two-fold:

- 1) Accountability within the African Nova Scotian community in the ways in which it organizes, the purpose for organizing, how community capacity is built, and how collective consensus is reached, and
- 2) That African Nova Scotian community organizing hold government accountable to ensure that resources, and decisions about the distribution of them, are made with the collective voice of African Nova Scotians at the table.

“Examine what is said, not who is speaking.”

– *African proverb*

Background

This panel brought together thought leaders from the African Nova Scotian community who bring to bear their lived experiences to explore questions such as: what does an accountable government look like for the African Nova Scotian Community? What strategic plans can be implemented to centre African Nova Scotian organizations in provincial government policy decisions? What is needed to increase African Nova Scotian leadership within the provincial government and how can this be done in a way that does not unduly burden the African Nova Scotian leadership with the responsibility of promoting and developing anti-racist policies? What does self-determination mean for the African Nova Scotian community and what should be our collective vision for it?

The impetus for this conversation arose out of the organizing of the Black Family Meetings. These meetings are a series of community conversations catalyzed by the African Nova Scotian community's desire to take a central role in informing and leading provincial government decisions that impact the lives of African Nova Scotians.

These discussions, and months of community capacity-building to engage government, inspired the African Nova Scotian Community Calling-In event. The purpose of this forum was to generate broad and open conversation surrounding systemic injustice and anti-Black racism in provincial government decision-making and policy and discussions of how to transform government and community relations in a way that centres African Nova Scotian experience, community-building expertise and history as a distinct people of Nova Scotia.

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At the end of the discussion, we asked viewers to summarize how they feel about the possibilities of progress in engaging more meaningfully in African Nova Scotian communities. Words like hopeful, positive, inspired, and confident were identified. On the other end of the spectrum were phrases like worried, not confident, and not progressing. Empowered, want to get involved, leverage experience, need to see action were also common responses.

Based on this discussion, how are you feeling about the possibilities of progress in engaging more meaningfully with African Nova Scotian communities?

