

Government Efforts at Branding: Issues Raised by Initiatives within Canadian Provinces
Paper for the 2008 CPSA Meetings Vancouver, BC
Prepared by Hugh Mellon (King's University College, UWO)

In the autumn of 2006 Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams unveiled a new logo for his province. The new design featured “A stylized illustration of a pitcher plant” with the words Newfoundland and Labrador “presented in a Celtic-style font.” (“Williams Unveils ‘Quirky’ Logo for N.L.” CBC News October 4, 2006) Premier Williams proclaimed “It is a true symbol of who we are, as a people and as a place. ... We are creative, we are inventive, even a little quirky.” (Ibid) That same year the province of Manitoba revealed the product of a multi-year campaign to revitalize its provincial image. A new slogan “Spirited Energy” was coined and their provincial bison logo was “refreshed”. Tourism Minister Eric Robinson announced that the logo reform would “achieve two goals – refreshing the government’s visual identity and supporting the new provincewide branding initiative.” (“Manitoba Government Modernizes Bison Logo” Manitoba News Release, August 3, 2006) About the same time controversy emerged in Ontario over a reformed provincial logo sparked by apprehension arising from connections between the governing Liberals and the advertising industry. More recently such provinces as Saskatchewan and New Brunswick have also attempted to refurbish their provincial images and foster modern brands representative of their provincial aspirations.

The above description of the branding trend among Canadian provinces is selective and partial, yet the overall pattern is clear. Provinces are now in the identity promotion field and brand creation is a going concern. Surprisingly enough, this is a little studied development and many questions remain under-explored. What are the dimensions of this emerging trend? How are these provincial initiatives proceeding and what kinds of explanations or defenses are offered by the various provinces? What political issues do these branding efforts raise? How does the development of these branding campaigns and logo updates relate to the challenges of governance and/or of government - citizen communication? What kinds of questions do these brand promotions raise for debates over the regulation of government advertising? These are some of the topics to be dealt with in the following paper in hopes of both surveying the issue and advocating further study and attention by the academic and political community.

Much of the recent debate in Canada over government advertising and relations between governments and communication advisors has been connected to the scandal associated with the unity promotion campaigns of the Chrétien government and the associated links between partisan interests and advertising industry figures. This set of circumstances was marked by transgressions of accounting and ethical standards which were brought to light most notably through the work of Auditor General’s Office and Justice Gomery’s inquiry, as well as subsequent legal proceedings. Extensive national debate ensued and the topic certainly warrants ongoing attention. Yet, the following paper has a different objective and focus. The aim here is to turn attention to a little-studied aspect of governance and political communications, the creation of provincial

brand campaigns, and to argue for heightened attention to the related by slightly different set of issues raised by their implementation.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that there is a noteworthy literature emerging on questions of political branding and advertising. Works such as Jonathan Rose's *Making "Pictures in Our Heads": Government Advertising in Canada* (Praeger, 2000), Jennifer Lees-Marshment's *The Political Marketing Revolution: Transforming the Government of the U.K.* (Manchester University Press, 2004), or Nicholas O'Shaughnessy's *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester University Press, 2004) are applying new tools to the study of government communications. Each offers relevant insights worth drawing upon as this paper progresses. Rose calls upon rhetorical analysis and tools of communication theory to analyze major advertising efforts implemented to 'sell' such policy goals as national unity or the Goods and Services Tax. The nexus between marketing tactics and literature and the efforts of government institutions to advance their image and interests is the subject of the Lees-Marshment book. Meanwhile the O'Shaughnessy work examines the changing nature of governance as it becomes wrapped up in notions of spin, manipulation, and the 'symbolic state.' He asserts that the nature of governing is now wrapped up in the judicious application of symbols and persuasion strategies as seen in the work of leaders like Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Tony Blair. Thus, "we identify spin as part of a broader idea, the Symbolic State, embodied in the apparent solution of problems at the rhetorical level alone, preoccupation among politicians with generated imagery, the manufacture of symbolic events and concomitant devaluation of the roles of ideas and ideology in politics." (9)

Governmental Branding and the Power of Advertising

This kind of scholarship (Rose etc.) is raising the profile of studies of government communication strategy and tactics. Applying this approach and its insights to the provincial government realm offers many avenues for study. Perhaps the one most immediately germane to this somewhat preliminary exploration into provincial government image promotion is consideration of the notion of branding itself. What does the term imply? How are governments employing its application? What kinds of political debates does its use raise? Dealing with these questions first will allow facilitate subsequent discussion of marketing campaigns, the finances and resources utilized, the complexity of political identity in the modern world, and the changing nature of modern governance.

Peter van Ham brought attention to the phenomenon of state branding in the pages of the high profile American journal *Foreign Affairs* in 2001 (September/October) where he argued that "straightforward advertising has given way to branding – giving products and services an emotional dimension with which people can identify." Furthermore, countries like products can fashion appeals that merge functional appeal with positive connotations and charged perceptions. "In this way, Singapore and Ireland are no longer merely countries one finds in an atlas. They have become "brand states," with geographical and political settings that seem trivial compared to their emotional resonance among an increasingly global audience of consumers."

In a globalized setting, countries endeavour to distinguish themselves in hopes of gaining such advantages as investment capital, foreign tourists, and head office locations.

Associating countries with traits or images appealing to audiences, calls for advertising and polling expertise. Governments direct attention to desired demographics and people become consumers. Government emphasis on branding thus reflects recognition of the power of advertising and the use of symbols and logos by governments as instruments of legitimation. Rose, for example, makes the observation that the Canadian federal government's development and implementation of the modern Maple Leaf based logo "was the registered trademark that would assist in marketing and legitimating government action, and it was used in advertising as well as promotion." (Rose, 70)

In an attempt to gain at least a partial sense of power ascribed by the modern political class to advertising it might be enlightening to reflect upon recent steps taken by Al Gore, the former U.S. Vice-President and current Nobel Prize winning environmental campaigner. Gore and his Alliance for Climate Protection are turning to advertising as a central element of their campaign development. According to Gore, "The way nations and societies make up their minds in the modern age has much more to do with mass advertising than many of us purists would like, but that's the reality." In short, "Since we have a true planetary emergency, we have to give the planet a P.R. agent." (John Broder, "Create-an-Ad Contest Aims to Push Climate Message", *New York Times*, July 13, 2007, C5) A call was issued seeking advertising industry proposals for an environmental ad campaign. The spring of 2008 brought news that Gore and the Alliance had settled upon "the Martin Agency, a Richmond, Va., advertising firm known for its clever campaigns for Geico Insurance" for the 'promotional effort' while "Brian Collins, whose strategic branding firm in New York created the identity and overall design program for the campaign." ("Ideas and Trends; Al Gore's New Logo", *New York Times*, April 6, 2008)

Here in Canada a similar government advertising trend is visible. Various provincial examples of image making and brand creation were cited at the outset. Yet the trend does not end there. In the words of the *Toronto Star* of May 14, 2008, "Branding is a hot topic in the marketing world, and municipalities are getting into the game." (A11) Plus, the moneys being spent can be significant. Recent press coverage reports that Alberta, for example, has a \$25 million campaign prepared to shape perspectives of its energy and environmental policies; in short, the expenditure is "aimed at improving the province's "brand" and "perception." (Dawn Walton, "Trying to Derail Alberta's Mission in Washington", *Globe and Mail*, April 28, 2008, A4)

The stakes in the Alberta case and elsewhere are high. Brand images and perceptions are often labeled as being influential precursors to action and perception. And so government web pages and promotion documents are replete with references to brand maintenance, transmission, and promotion. The Canadian Tourism Commission offers on the internet "Brand Toolkits" which yield guidance on the ways to present and sell Canada. A recent Ontario government news release describing an upcoming visit to Mexico by the Minister of Economic Development and Trade is labeled "Promoting Ontario's Brand in Mexico." (News Release May 2, 2008) Unsuccessful branding is seen to carry with it serious commercial and governmental difficulty. Take, for simply one more example, the following statement from an official of the Greater Toronto Hotel Association to explain the 30% downturn in Toronto tourism from the U.S. over the first half of this decade. "Unfortunately when they think of our country they see the age-old stereotype of ... moose, mountains and Mounties." (CTV.ca News Staff, "Tourism Officials Blame Stereotypes for Declines", February 1, 2006) Perceptions and not

service standards, the quality of political leadership in the face of issues such as SARS or urban planning, or social cohesion are regarded as rivaling marketing perceptions.

Global and Provincial Initiatives

Government branding is a multi-faceted issue slowly emerging into the political consciousness. Before proceeding to discussion of the political debates and controversies arising from government branding and image development, it is worthwhile to review examples of the phenomenon at work. This section of the paper offers an illustrative collection of examples meant to suggest some of the justifications for the phenomenon; the kinds of explanations or rationalizations offered by the governments through their public statements of goals.

Governments engage in branding for various reasons. Encouraging domestic and international tourists is an easy example. A recent issue of *The Economist* offers up an interesting example of this in the article "Rebranding Australia" where there is discussion of the official search for a tourism slogan for Australia, the record of recent failed efforts, and the relative success of New Zealand. The stakes in terms of travelers and financial benefits are noted, not to mention the value of the contract to the advertising firms. (May 10-16th, 2008, 74-5) Attracting tourists goes arm in arm with hopes of encouraging investment and altering purchasing patterns. One of the most unlucky examples of this occurred in Britain where former Prime Minister Harold Wilson supported an "I'm Backing Britain." campaign to urge his fellow citizen to buy nationally produced goods. Alas, "The campaign lost some of its momentum when it was discovered that a batch of T-shirts bearing the ... slogan had been made in Portugal." (Myles Neligan, "Branded in Britain" BBC News Website, Feb. 26, 2002) Another major objective is to symbolize national unity and values in a highly visible way. Recent Olympic logo decisions in the UK and China exemplify this although the British choice seemed to raise almost immediate questioning despite having been "designed by the Wolff Olins agency and cost £400,000." (Simon Austin, "London 2012 Team Defend New Logo" BBC Sport Website, June 5, 2007) Interestingly enough the logo for the upcoming Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics features an Inuit inspired inukshuk design despite Vancouver's urban, southern Canadian character.

Similar motivations are clearly at work in recent advertising campaigns in Canadian provinces. Take, for example, these comments from Premier Williams; "We have been working hard to promote Newfoundland and Labrador as a spectacular tourism destination, a smart place to invest and do business, a preferred place to live, work and raise a family." "Brand Signature: Premier's Message" Government of Newfoundland Website) Unity and values are often heavily stressed in brand campaigns. Note here the following excerpt from material presented in support of Manitoba's Spirited Energy initiative. They downplay the advertising dimension in favour of justifying the new provincial image campaign as being about understanding the true provincial character. "Manitoba's image is much more than a logo. Our image is not an advertising strategy, a tagline, or a sales message. Everything we do defines the way people think about Manitoba. Our image defines "who we are and who we are not." It incorporates our aspirations; it expresses how we want our province to grow." "Manitoba's New Image" part of Spirited Energy material found on the Province of Manitoba Website)

Comparative advantages are a staple of most competitive positioning by provinces. Advertising developed under the former Calvert government in Saskatchewan touted such provincial benefits as improved lifestyle, ease of home ownership, reduced costs, and the transformation to a more technologically sophisticated provincial society. Television commercials, billboards, and websites were among the mediums utilized. Given the over-heated state of the neighbouring Alberta economy the case for price advantages was made easier.

The factors highlighted in this section of the paper are indicative of the major governmental strategies. There are other related objectives, of course, such as facilitating brand recognition, functional ease of replicating a standard design, uniformity of government image, and the encapsulation of values and perceptions. Taken together there are a variety of issues warranting discussion about the growing trend toward provincial government branding efforts. This paper will engage three of these; the rising financial stakes and the limited apparent emphasis on evaluating a range of measures of goal attainment; the dilemma of relating government branding to matters of political identity and citizen attachment; and finally, the need to reflect upon our considerations of governance and public will when the governments are now active in the 'business' of fashioning political identity and are framing citizens into models which define people more as consumers. These issues are looked at in turn and readers are encouraged to think about these issues within the outlook on nationalism formulated by the celebrated English intellectual Ernest Gellner in his *Nations and Nationalism* (Cornell University Press, 1983).

Rising Expenditures and Fragmentary Financial Information

In response to questions about the Manitoba branding exercise Robert Ziegler, one of the campaign co-chairs, spoke of the big stakes world of provincial government marketing and the challenge that faced his province. The CBC reported that in 2006 Ziegler asserted, "it's going to take a lot more than \$2.1 million to accomplish the goal of raising Manitoba's profile locally and elsewhere." According to Ziegler, "If you look at Saskatchewan, they've spent \$14 million for their campaign. Montreal has a budget of \$23 million for that." (CBC News, "Manitoba's New Brand: 'Spirited Energy'", CBC Website, June 15, 2006) The government of Nova Scotia presented a new provincial brand and marketing campaign in November 2007 and the government News Release reported that the campaign would run to \$5 million. ("Tourism Brand Launched for 2008", Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage, News Release, November 26, 2007) By way of simply one more comparison, the Toronto Star of November 4, 2006, discussed a \$550,000 marketing effort by the City of Toronto focused on three markets; Boston, New York and Washington. More recently we see the massive campaign launched by Alberta to promote provincial energy policy internationally.

Indications are that the volume of expenditures is significant and growing. Detailed cost figures are difficult to detect however for institutional and methodological reasons. Marketing and branding projects span multiple departments and serve diverse objectives as we have seen. Tourism and business promotion, two often-cited rationales for the expenditure are performed by completely separate departments. A second complication is the occasional tapping of other revenue sources such as the half million from "local businesses" donated to the Manitoba Spirited Energy effort. ("Manitoba's

New Brand” June 16, 2006) Similarly, there are government-private sector partnerships such as the Ontario Foodland and Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership promotions. As is if these complexities were not enough there is often such segmentation of expenditure data that a complete picture is not easy to assemble. Opinion polling, focus group testing, brand design, consultations, advertising, and attachment of new logos to government buildings and vehicles, as well as replacement of outdated flyers, videos, stationary etc., all of which have associated costs. An example of this reporting of partial cost was the case of the 2006 debate over reforming Ontario’s trillium logo. Premier McGuinty defended the awarding of a contract reported to be for \$219, 000 to a firm familiar to the provincial Liberals as ‘refreshing’ the logo to stay current with the times. (Robert Benzie and Rob Ferguson, “McGuinty Nips Criticism of New Logo in the Bud: Updated Trillium Helps Ontario ‘Embrace Future’, Critics say Revamp Just a Waste of Taxpayer Money”, Toronto Star (October 2, 2006, A8) The opposition could only point from the sidelines to the resulting costs involved in dissemination and actual use of the logo which were not readily made public.

There is no standard provincial methodology on how to report these expenditures. To compound this, expenditures can be spread over departments, campaign elements, budget years, and occasionally, private sector partners. At the same time, the available fragmentary data suggests sizable expenditures and provincial government awareness of competitive spending practices. Some critics of this kind of spending have surfaced, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation accused former Saskatchewan Premier Lorne Calvert of succumbing to “Makeover Madness”, but generally attention has been limited and sporadic. (Canadian Taxpayers Federation, “Let’s Talk Taxes: Makeover Madness” CTF Website December 7, 2004) It is intriguing that more scrutiny has not been directed at these rising expenditures given these factors. Coming at a time when memories are still fresh of the advertising scandal which engulfed the former federal government and the difficult spending trade-offs facing all of Canada’s provinces one wonders how long the lethargic interest will prevail.

Branding and Issues of Identity

Another complex issue to ruminate upon is the relationship between branding and government fashioning of identity, and conceptions of citizen attachment and nationalism. What are we made to make of government reliance upon pollsters and advertising gurus to create statements about the identity of their own people? Branding involves the creative public statement of positive and/or appealing images of national or provincial character and traits. One theory of nationalism which might be relevant here is that of Ernest Gellner and his *Nations and Nationalism* (Cornell University Press, 1983) where he argues that as society becomes industrialized and people move beyond rural life and agriculture a new social order emerges where national feeling needs be promoted in the interests of unity and continued accumulation. Bringing people together and overcoming past patterns of separation or stratification is a major social dilemma. Industrialization and technology require higher education, social advancement, and government recognition. Together these factors impose certain social pressures and, for Gellner, one of the ‘essential concomitants’ of industrial society is cultural homogeneity. He goes on to make the much debated declaration that “nationalist ideology suffers from pervasive false consciousness. Its myths invert reality: it claims to defend folk culture

while in fact it is forging a high culture; it claims to protect an old folk society while in fact helping to build up an anonymous mass society.” (124)

Branding is arguably, or at least in significant measure, a reaction to the kinds of pressure highlighted within Gellner’s theory of nationalism in a globalized world. There is a functional need to promote a jurisdiction and its people but in modern industrial society shopping centres, television, and electronic communication run apace and suggest elements of sameness about urban settings. At the same time scholars like Robert Putnam lament the decline of social capital and the fabric of community life and trust (*Bowling Alone*, Simon and Schuster, 2001). Perhaps branding is as much about offering unifying myths as it is about appealing to outsiders?

In early 2008 New Brunswick’s Graham government announced its new branding exercise marked by the slogan “Be in this Place.” Background material explained the branding concept, the decision-making process, and the meaning of the brand and its usage. Amid all this is the following statement appearing under the heading “Understanding the Brand”; “In New Brunswick you can be yourself, you can belong and you can be better.” Each of these elements is then explained and, for example, the part about ‘being better’ is described this way. “In New Brunswick, you can be better because your life is authentic and you are part of something you value. There is a spirit to this place that drives us to find better ways to live, learn and work.” (Backgrounder - New Brunswick’s Brand”) How are we as outside observers to understand the invocation to find authenticity in a branded identity? Come to New Brunswick and be part of something authentic and inspirational. Individual and collective improvement through provincial invocation is an interesting fashioning of public and private identity through marketing. Bear in mind that this branding campaign is not simply about aspirations for betterment, it is a government sponsored presentation to fellow provincial citizens along with the rest of the world. The provincial Backgrounder goes on to say “While the brand will be most visible in communications and marketing from the provincial government, it is intended to be used inside and outside of government as a consistent verbal and visual presentation of the province.”

Next door to New Brunswick the province of Nova Scotia presented what they called “a refreshed tourism brand and a new marketing campaign” in November 2007 which attempted a similar melding of character and aspirations. “The brand positions Nova Scotia as North America’s original maritime culture where visitors are captivated by a culture of old world charm with a new world pulse, shaped by the sea and the spirit of Nova Scotians.” (“Tourism Brand Launched ... NS News Release) One might be tempted to say simply that this is all some sort of inter-governmental popularity contest, but further reflection should lead to rejection of such a flip response. Tourism is about recruiting outside visitors but it is also about encouraging provincial citizens to stay and enjoy the treasures upon their doorsteps. Furthermore, as already noted the Nova Scotia effort is a multi-million dollar campaign so the stakes are high.

Perhaps the most intriguing example of provincial self-analysis and character remaking is provided by Manitoba. Spirited Energy is about turning people away from facile assumptions about a province dominated by wild life and customary Prairies scenes. Yet, it is also about offering a corrective to provincial culture of humility. This latter point is emphasized in the material made available to support and explain the new slogan “Spirited Energy” and the associated marketing campaign. “The image we have

of ourselves and our province is important. It's important, because the image we hold in our minds reflects not only the way we feel about ourselves, it can shape the way others feel about us, too. Manitoba's image is often based on our own self-deprecating attitudes. We need to change the way we see ourselves, so we can do a better job selling ourselves to the world."

Advertising campaigns and branding exercises raise issues not simply of resource allocations and the costs attached to replacement of symbols in government service delivery, schools, and other facets of provincial self-representation. They also speak to provincial culture, character, and to the longstanding debates over symbols, identity, and citizen attachment; not to mention costs and financial accountability. Gellner urges us to perceive how modern nationality arises in the pressure to build modern industrial society. This viewpoint leads to a questioning of how far government branding rhetoric is born out in attitudes and identity, and of the kinds of identities branding campaigns seek to engender.

Government Branding and Conceptions of Governance

So far this paper has depicted a sizable trend among Canadian provinces toward major branding exercises which bring together a combination of elements including but not limited to such things as 1) logo, symbol and symbol creation or re-design, 2) opinion polling, 3) marketing strategizing, 4) advertising campaign promotion, 5) governmental advocacy, 6) linkage between the branding work and private sector partnerships and linkages. Attempting to get a handle on this development should inspire reference to the growing literature on government advertising, political marketing, and the idea of government as being obsessed with symbol manipulation and marketing of activity. Is the increasing attention to the adjustment of symbols, provincial slogans, and brands, evidence of a deeper reality about the character of political leadership and government. It is to this last element that we now turn. Bearing in mind the extent of spending upon these branding exercises and the attempt of governments to refine and transmit a sense of provincial identity and character to both internal and external markets, and consumers, there are a number of worrying questions about evolving conceptions of governance.

The first and most obvious worry is the increasing reliance upon the language of commercial marketing in place of traditional notions of citizens and tacit understandings of civic pride and community support. Branding language speaks of consumers, not shared communal decision-making and democratic impulses. What are we to make of governmental references to helping authentic people be better; or to overcoming provincial reticence and modesty by use of a modern slogan? Secondly, there seems to be few explicit criteria offered to measure brand victory. Instead of definite goals there is talk of appealing to a broader range of markets, of brand maintenance or visibility, and of recruiting people to serve as provincial and community ambassadors. There is the third question of how seriously ordinary people regard this aspect of governmental activity. Is it simply high political signaling among elites that all is well and past sectarian divides are over? Or is it something the bulk of citizens truly digest and take on? It is not clear that governments have paid much attention to this set of issues. Simply asking people how many are aware of such government promotions, or how many can recall seeing a media representation of it, is not really getting at these deeper questions of branding success or failure.

Political philosophers as ancient as Plato and Aristotle considered the rhetorical and symbolic aspects of politics. Their deep concern for deeper truths and for assessing rhetorical claims may need to be re-awakened. Has the attention to upbeat labels and positive marketing through sophisticated branding moved public life in a troublesome direction. Nicholas O'Shaughnessy's concept of 'symbolic government' may well apply to the evolving reality of provincial political life. He defines it "as government where the creation of symbolic images, symbolic actions and celebratory rhetoric have become a principal concern. Appearances do not just matter. They are the main part of its business." (172-3) His analysis derives from examination of the Blair government's attentiveness to marketing and spin as well as the Bush administration's packaging of stories related to the Iraq invasion.

Now, in fairness, O'Shaughnessy is thinking about a bigger pattern of events than those discussed in this paper. He is also looking at how the entire apparatus of government can be turned to the spinning of a message through marketing devices and attention to delivery of a message positive for the sitting government. But, is the current trend of marketing and brand development on the part of governments moving us along the path toward a state pre-occupied with the dynamics highlighted by O'Shaughnessy? This possibility should concern students of government and political communication, not to mention advocates of rich public life with open debate and increasing social capital.