

Traditional Knowledge in Practice

Northern organizations, governments, and governments-in-waiting have been formally and informally attempting to incorporate “traditional knowledge” into policy deliberations for some time. A public debate about this practice began in fall 1996, when Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard published criticisms of the Government of the Northwest Territories’ (GNWT) Traditional Knowledge Policy and of the requirement that traditional knowledge be incorporated into environmental assessments. Widdowson was at the time a contract employee of the Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development (Howard and Widdowson, 1996). As the controversy developed, she was suspended for one week as punishment for her public criticism of government policy.

In the Canadian parliamentary tradition, public servants do not have the right to publicly disagree with the policies they are hired to implement. Employees who find themselves in fundamental disagreement with the decisions of elected officials have two options: they may work from within to bring about a change of policy; or, failing this, they must resign. As private citizens, they may—and should—criticize government policy freely. Widdowson should have resigned before speaking publicly, but at least her action stimulated public discussion of some very important questions (GNWT, 1993; Howard and Widdowson, 1996; Berkes and Henley, 1997; Howard and Widdowson, 1997; Laghi, 1997; Stevenson, 1997).

The GNWT has adopted what is probably the first formal traditional knowledge policy in Canada, in an attempt to improve democratic representation in the North by moving the policies and practices of territorial government closer to reflecting the values and needs of all northern residents. The Traditional Knowledge Policy is only one aspect of this endeavour, but it is a potentially far-reaching one that deserves intelligent discussion and debate.

Most public policies of wide application are expressed in general terms. This is certainly true for the GNWT Traditional Knowledge Policy. Each principle of the policy remains to be “unpacked” and interpreted by the public service staff who must turn general principles into action. They face some difficult questions. Should they aim for uniformity in interpretation of the policy guidelines? This is likely an unattainable goal: however one interprets traditional knowledge, the interpretation will certainly encounter differing challenges when applied to social services, for example, in contrast to public finance, or wildlife management. How do staff in various departments learn of the decisions their counterparts are making? How do departments coordinate to ensure sufficient overall uniformity of policy and approach? The Government of the Northwest Territories attempted to resolve such questions through an interdepartmental committee (which appears to have been ultimately ineffective). Clearly, the refinement and implementation of such a profoundly important and potentially transformative policy require concerted bureaucratic effort, astute and committed leadership, and a reasonable span of time for trial and error.

The GNWT policy defines traditional knowledge as “[k]nowledge and values which have been acquired through experience, observation, from the land or from spiritual teachings, and handed down from one generation to another.” The preamble explains that traditional knowledge arises from the experience of Aboriginal people in “living for centuries in close harmony” with the land. This experience means knowing “the natural environment and its resources, the use of natural resources, and the relationship of people to the land and to each other.” Is this definition controversial? Try substituting “Europeans” and “western Europe” for “Aboriginal people” in either of the two preceding sentences. The only phrase that stands out is “in close harmony,” and that is because sloppy thinkers associate “European” with the environmentally destructive impacts of industrialization. Though industrial capitalism was born in England and developed in western Europe, it is a relatively recent phenomenon. Europeans, too, lived in close harmony with the land for many centuries; they too, presumably, carried an intimate knowledge of the biosphere, suitable to the ways in which they made their living. (And no doubt, like the Dene and Inuit, they also paid the price when they failed to understand what was necessary for harmony to prevail.)

This observation raises a related question. Why call the knowledge accumulated in the indigenous civilizations of the North “traditional”? All human societies have traditional knowledge, or a tradition of knowledge. In the northern context, it might be clearer to refer to practical, land-based knowledge or hunters’ and fishers’ knowledge, on the one hand, and Dene or Inuit understandings of the biosphere and the cosmos, on the other—depending upon which aspects of knowledge are being drawn into the discussion. It is important, also, to see the evolutionary or adaptive quality of “traditions” of knowledge: both European and indigenous societies’ ideas about nature and humanity have evolved over time, a result of experience and learning from others.

An interesting feature of the GNWT policy is its mild tone concerning the application of traditional knowledge. Traditional knowledge is called “a valid and essential source of information” (not the only source); traditional knowledge “should be considered” in the design and delivery of government programs and services. Presumably other sources of knowledge are also relevant, and these will probably inform the design and delivery of programs. Where the policy is unequivocal is in the following sentence: “Government programs and services should be administered in a manner consistent with the beliefs, customs, knowledge, values and languages of the people being served.” The only odd thing about this strong statement is that, in a democracy, it had to be made at all!

If traditional knowledge is to have a serious role in public policy, it is necessary to know that the “knowledge” offered is accurate, or true, in its own terms and in the terms of current exigencies. Public servants who are guided by the GNWT’s Traditional Knowledge Policy must have practical means of recognizing the knowledge when they see it and resolving disagreements if there are any. Among others, the Dene Cultural Institute and its associated researchers have long worked with these issues of validation and verification and have developed effective and realistic means for dealing with them. The Institute’s practices should be examined for possible adaptation to the policy process, which admittedly resembles research only slightly. Another useful source might be the Ethical Guidelines of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which included means for validation and verification of contracted research studies.

Scientists working in the North may find the debate about traditional knowledge rather silly. They have found that many aspects of traditional knowledge are directly relevant to their work and immediately verifiable by experience, inspection, or the scientific method. Just because a fact is offered as an item of “traditional knowledge” does not disqualify it from examination by scientific method, just as the fact that certain theories or understandings are generated by scientists does not make them irrelevant or useless to hunters and fishers. In many areas of life, the gaps between different human cultures are just gaps, not chasms or impassable voids.

The GNWT Traditional Knowledge Policy mentions “spiritual teachings” only once, as a part of the definition of traditional knowledge. Some commentators have found reference to spiritual teachings offensive, arguing that its inclusion threatens the secular character of public bureaucracies or the separation of church and state. I find these criticisms misguided. Surely, if the GNWT were to pass a law stating that all residents or all public service employees would be required to attend the Anglican Church and subscribe to the Nicene Creed, the law would be unconstitutional. But would it be controversial to say that public policies should be implemented in a manner compatible with the deeply held values of the community? There is a difference, in short, between acknowledging the relevance of spiritual (and for that matter ethical) values and interfering with an individual’s personal religious beliefs. The GNWT Traditional Knowledge Policy directs public servants to consider traditional knowledge in the development of programs and policy, and identifies that knowledge as a source of information. There is no imposition here.

A deeper question, which has hardly been raised at all, is whether the historical values and practices of Dene or Inuit society, as these have survived the massive changes of the last century, are at all compatible with modern governing procedures, mass societies, and public bureaucracies. The institutions through which Northerners are now trying to make decisions that affect their lives and the lives of generations to come are artifacts of a quite different historical trajectory—of class-divided nation-states that evolved in Europe during the last three hundred years. The societies that invented liberal democracy differed a good deal from the small, kinship-organized, pre-contact societies of the Dene and the Inuit.

The institutions of liberal democracy, with all of their merits and disadvantages, were “planted” in the North gradually: undemocratic colonial administration was the first transplant, and fully electoral government evolved only in the last two decades. Far from worrying about pollution of these imperfectly developed institutions by the values of the indigenous societies of the North, all Canadians should be seeking to understand the self-governing practices of the Dene and Inuit, for what we might learn and incorporate into the improvement of current systems. I would be pleased if this study led public servants, politicians, and indeed all citizens of the country to consider the extent to which “spiritual values” could guide our collective decisions—but mine may remain a minority view.

REFERENCES

- BERKES, F., and HENLEY, T. 1997. Co-management and traditional knowledge: Threat or opportunity? *Policy Options* 18(2):29–31.
- GNWT (GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES). 1993. *Traditional knowledge policy*. Yellowknife: Government of the Northwest Territories.
- HOWARD, A., and WIDDOWSON, F. 1996. Traditional knowledge threatens environmental assessment. *Policy Options* 17(9):34–36.
- . 1997. Traditional knowledge advocates weave a tangled web. *Policy Options* 18(3):46–48.
- LAGHI, B. 1997. Tempest in a teepee: Getting into the spirit of things. *Globe and Mail*, August 9. D1–2.
- STEVENSON, M.A. 1997. Ignorance and prejudice threaten environmental assessment. *Policy Options* 18(2):25–28.

*Frances Abele
School of Public Administration
Carleton University*