

THE ABORIGINAL INDUSTRY'S NEW CLOTHES

Frances Widdowson
 and Albert Howard

The official view that aboriginal "traditional knowledge" is a useful supplement to scientific research provides a good illustration of how the development of native policy in Canada resembles the fable of the Emperor's New Clothes. As is the case with other aboriginal initiatives, any public questioning of traditional knowledge is likely to be met with accusations of racism. The main beneficiary of this extreme form of political correctness is the Aboriginal Industry that has grown up around the negotiation of land claims and self-government agreements. Its victims are aboriginal people, whose dependency and severe social problems are never seriously analyzed.

La vision officielle du « savoir traditionnel » autochtone, qui consiste à en faire un complément utile à la recherche scientifique, illustre à quel point l'histoire des politiques canadiennes relatives aux peuples autochtones s'apparente à la fable du roi nu. Comme pour toute initiative autochtone, quiconque met publiquement en cause ce savoir traditionnel s'expose à des accusations de racisme. Les premiers bénéficiaires de cette forme extrême de rectitude politique sont les entreprises autochtones créées dans la foulée des négociations sur les droits territoriaux et des accords d'autonomie gouvernementale. Ses principales victimes sont les autochtones eux-mêmes, dont on évite ainsi d'analyser en profondeur les graves problèmes sociaux.

One cold, bright day in Yellowknife we trudged across the snow to the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, where we were to witness an event that would dramatically alter our perception of Aboriginal policy in Canada. It was February 13, 1996 and the event in question was the Federal Environmental Assessment Review of Broken Hill Properties (BHP) Inc.'s proposed diamond mine in the Northwest Territories. A panel of four experts had been appointed by the Canadian government to probe the initiative's implications. The review was significant not only because it concerned the first-ever diamond mine development proposal in Canada but also because its terms of reference directed BHP to give "full and equal consideration" to Aboriginal peoples' "traditional knowledge" when assessing the impacts of the proposed mine.

At the time, traditional knowledge (or "TK") had become a buzzword in Aboriginal and environmental policy. Although it was just beginning to be recognized in international circles and within the Canadian government, TK was already popular in the North. In 1993 the Government

of the Northwest Territories had developed an unprecedented "Traditional Knowledge Policy" that directed government employees to incorporate traditional knowledge into all government programs and services. The policy defined TK as "knowledge 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 policy also declared that because Aboriginal peoples had lived in close contact with their environment for thousands of years traditional knowledge was a "valid and essential source of information."

Despite the expectations that had been raised about the incorporation of traditional knowledge into environmental assessment, and the praise heaped upon the panel for issuing a directive to consider TK on equal footing with scientific research, we were surprised when the technical session proved to be nothing more than a compilation of jejune platitudes interspersed with various intellectual dodges. Not only had the panel chosen to avoid establishing criteria and setting standards to evaluate TK research, but no one at the session seemed able to identify what TK was, let alone how

it could be applied. Instead, BHP's anthropological consultants spent a great deal of time explaining that it had been difficult for them to obtain traditional knowledge because it could not be separated from its "cultural context." TK meant different things to different Aboriginal groups and, they explained, its exact nature would take many years to document. BHP then made the extraordinary statement that it would pay for TK research despite not understanding what it was. Even more perplexing was the company's agreement to respect the demands of Aboriginal groups that they retain "proprietary rights" over any TK studies commissioned.

The presentations made by Aboriginal groups, the Government of the Northwest Territories, and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs also failed to shed light on the methodology of traditional knowledge or how it would assess the environmental impacts of a diamond mine. Nevertheless, it was taken for granted that a great deal of information could be acquired and that government and industry should further increase their allocation of funds to collect Aboriginal peoples' special knowledge. A spokesman for the department even claimed in his presentation that a "huge database" of traditional knowledge already existed that could be used for future research. And although a great deal of concern was expressed both about combining TK with scientific studies (because this might destroy TK's "cultural context") and about infringing upon the "intellectual property rights" of various Aboriginal groups, there was no attempt to elucidate how exactly the different "knowledge systems" or "world views" could be combined in order to better understand ecological processes.

As disinterested observers, we were astonished at how the panel, BHP, the government and Aboriginal groups were so confident that traditional knowledge was essential to the environmental assessment process when they seemed not to know what it was or how it could be used. After all, no one had recognized TK's necessity until the panel had directed that it be considered. In order to try to understand TK and how it differed from science, we asked a number of questions both in the panel's public sessions and afterwards. Doing so was a watershed in our understanding of Aboriginal policy. We caught our first glimpse of the subterfuge that was being orchestrated. And even though the chicanery was extensive, it was only, to use an apt regional

metaphor, the tip of the iceberg where Aboriginal policy was concerned.

An informal question posed to the representative from Indian and Northern Affairs revealed that, in fact, there was no "database" of traditional knowledge after all. Instead, there were boxes of tapes and handwritten notes documenting unstructured and unverified anecdotes from Aboriginal elders. Nor were the Aboriginal groups that gave presentations able to answer questions concerning TK methodology and how it differed from scientific research. Instead, they gave long, rambling pontifications about the still unspecified, but nevertheless important, "cultural context" of traditional knowledge, claiming that its very "complexity" made it difficult to describe. For example, Bill Erasmus, the Grand Chief of the Dene Nation, maintained that TK should be called "Dene science," but when we asked how its methodology compared with modern research he gave the following comments:

I call it Dene science because in the literature it is regarded as a science. I was a bit discouraged when I read through the evidence that was provided by BHP that it didn't go into the literature that is readily available. It is a form of science. For example, we have been trying to explain a number of aspects where you can understand how the mind of the people works. [François Paulette] gave examples: If someone wanted to be a leader in the field of medicine within our communities, there's a scientific way of doing it. If all the standards are not met, then the individual does not reach the level where people will recognize the person as a helper, or people will not recognize the individual as having the capability or the trust necessary to help. When you work in the field of medicine, a big aspect of a person being healed, cured or ridden of the disease is belief and faith in the individual. The scientific process we talk about is very complex. It takes a lot to describe... Without quoting experts in the field it's hard to describe. It is a science. There's a method to the way people work... We've managed to survive all of these years. We can give you many examples. This is how society works.

The "examples" that Erasmus and his colleague François Paulette, representative for the Treaty Eight Indians, gave at the session were buried in lengthy musings that eventually asserted that a man was incapable of "holding" tradi-

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tional knowledge if he was abusing alcohol, using drugs, gambling or “messing around on his wife,” and that manifestations of this “knowledge” included giving offerings to the land, holding potlaches and thinking in a cyclical fashion. Chief Paulette then went on supplement Chief Erasmus’ attempt to show how traditional knowledge was a science:

The way we know science, there’s physical and spiritual. Physical is if you ask an elder how big the fish was they caught, they would say it was this big. If you were to ask a white man, they would say it was this big. For him there’s nothing in here, what is that. There is nothing tangible you can see it’s irrelevant. In the spirit world, if you ask... My father taught me many spiritual things, one thing he said was that the rock moves. You have a tough time understanding and believing that. It’s another dimension we don’t learn every day. There is physical science and spiritual science. It can be as one at times or it can be separate. It takes a lifetime to understand. What I’m sharing with you is just touching the surface. I have witnessed all of the things I’ve talked about.

Although the obtuse language in both quotations makes it difficult to decipher the exact meaning of the answers provided by Messrs. Erasmus and Paulette, two underlying assertions can be discerned about the nature of traditional knowledge *vis-à-vis* science. The first is that the existence of traditional knowledge is dependent upon the undefined qualities of the person who allegedly “holds” it. All that is explained is that it is impossible for certain people—those who “mess around” on their wives, for example—to have this “knowledge.” Secondly, TK has a “world view” that is rooted in native spiritualism. Unlike “physical science,” TK assumes that all objects in the universe are governed by spiritual forces that cannot be seen by a “white man.” The elusive “cultural context” of traditional knowledge, therefore, appears to be the particular spiritual beliefs or animistic “world view” held by Aboriginal peoples and their faith that particular individuals have the power to “heal” others. This makes TK completely incompatible with scientific research, which verifies or refutes hypotheses with evidence that is open to public evaluation. Scientific understanding does not rely on the alleged “spiritual qualities” of a scientist or on processes that are visible only to people of a certain racial ancestry. Impenetrable postmodern

jargon like “cultural context” and “cyclical thinking” serves mainly to mystify TK’s true character, preventing the full implications of its use in public policy from being understood. It is apparent that, stripped of such adornment, TK is nothing more than a blend of traditional survival skills and superstition.

The acceptance of continuous obfuscation in a forum supposedly devoted to understanding TK’s importance was not our only surprise that day in Yellowknife. After the session was over, a number of people expressed support for our attempt to clarify the difference between traditional knowledge and science. Two BHP representatives admitted to us confidentially that they were glad these questions were asked since the company was prevented from raising similar concerns. One of the panel members approached us and thanked us for the questions, reiterating that there was apprehension about discussing TK openly.

What we saw at the panel’s hearing is a well-known pattern of behaviour in the North. Publicly, everyone declared unconditionally that TK was a valid and essential source of information for environmental assessment and that it could enhance the scientific research that was being undertaken. But when questions were asked about what this “information” was or just how it could be incorporated with scientific methods, no clarification was available. Although, as became apparent in our private discussions, many people had concerns about TK’s usefulness, no one gave voice to them publicly—even in a forum that had been specifically tasked with discussing how to incorporate traditional knowledge into the environmental assessment then being undertaken by BHP.

Reflecting on our experience at the panel meeting, we were reminded of Hans Christian Andersen’s 1837 tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in which an Emperor, his servants, and the public at large are all duped by two con men selling a suit of clothes that does not really exist. Recall that Andersen’s scam-artists use two tactics. First, they construct a powerful taboo that inhibits people from openly questioning the clothes’ existence; they claim that the “silk” from which the clothes are woven has the special quality of being invisible to anyone who is incompetent or stupid. Then, the taboo firmly in place, they set up a workshop in the Emperor’s palace, complete with all the implements required for weaving and tailoring. Sitting at a loom and mak-

ing the motions of passing thread back and forth, and then using scissors and needles to cut and sew non-existent cloth, they pretend to work day and night in creating the Emperor's new suit. Not until a child oblivious to the taboo cries "but the Emperor has nothing at all on!" is the silence broken and the Emperor acknowledged to be naked—which, of course, everyone had known all along.

Living in the Northwest Territories and observing initiatives like the Federal Environmental Assessment Panel Review you could almost understand how such a thing might happen. Before living in the North, we, like most Canadians, had little experience with Aboriginal politics, which for the most part takes place on isolated Indian reserves or behind closed doors between bureaucracies and Aboriginal organizations. The Northwest Territories is a special case, however. When we lived there the majority of its residents were native. The formulation of Aboriginal policy was much more public, which made it easier to see that some initiatives involved invisible silk. In the case of TK, a yarn of sophistic tactics, taboos and testimony from designated "experts" was being woven whose end result was to allow Aboriginal organizations to extract large sums of money from the government. Until seeing for ourselves the ritual absurdity of the traditional knowledge session we did not understand that.

The overwhelming view of those who are concerned about the terrible social conditions in Aboriginal communities is that Aboriginal peoples should "decide for themselves" how to run their affairs. To this end, two major initiatives are advocated: land claims and self-government. Land claims supposedly compensate Aboriginal peoples for past wrongs and give them an "economic base" from which to regain their self-sufficiency. Self-government is meant to make good the "cultural loss," low self-esteem and consequent social problems that government tutelage has caused. By obtaining self-government, the argument goes, Aboriginal peoples will regain pride in their culture, and this will enable them to end their marginalization and social dysfunction.

What is not understood, however, is that for the most part land claims and demands for self-government did not originate within the Aboriginal population and are not being formulated and implemented by Aboriginal peoples themselves. Instead, they are the result of a long historical process in which an ever-expanding

Aboriginal Industry—first clergy, then lawyers, anthropologists and consultants—has used the plight of Aboriginal peoples to justify its own self-serving agenda. The legalistic and "culturally sensitive" bureaucratic solutions to Aboriginal problems that the Industry proposes would, in fact, keep natives isolated and dependent, thus perpetuating existing social pathologies and, not incidentally, justifying demands for more funding and programs for the Aboriginal Industry.

The counterpart of imaginary threads and feigned weaving in the land claims and self-government initiatives is the huge infrastructure of policies and programs being created, run and evaluated by spinners for the Aboriginal Industry's demands for more and more government money. Sinecures and unproductive businesses make it seem as if unviable Aboriginal communities are "developing," while the application of low standards hides the fact that most native people have not developed the skills, knowledge or values to survive in the modern world. Even worse, a number of "institutes," journals, university departments and government-funded agencies—all controlled by the associates of the Aboriginal Industry—give credence to these initiatives. These entities have compiled whole libraries of "scholarship" that obscures the actual implications of current Aboriginal policies.

The result is the squandering of billions of dollars each year while the problems of spousal and sexual assault, child abuse and neglect, suicides, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and addictions fester. The solution touted for Aboriginal deprivation—the devolution of control to Aboriginal communities themselves—has often resulted in corruption in which powerful families siphon off resources while the majority remain mired in poverty and social dysfunction. Privileged leaders live in luxury and are paid huge salaries, while many Aboriginal people rely on social assistance. And yet, despite this obvious policy failure, the Aboriginal leadership, the federal government and the general public continue to accept the argument that land claims and self-government are the answer to Aboriginal problems.

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tained by the presumption that any criticism of Aboriginal policy constitutes a denigration of native people themselves. Whenever a criticism is raised about the current policy of acquiring more and more funding with less and less accountability, the Aboriginal Industry, rather than answer the charges, attacks the credibility of the critic. And because, quite understandably, most Canadians do not want to be thought of as insensitive to the aspirations of the most deprived ethnic group in Canadian society, virtually all criticism, let alone honest analysis of Aboriginal policy, is effectively silenced.

Although many professionals who administer government programs and analyze Aboriginal affairs realize that land claims and self-government initiatives are unworkable in the modern context, they remain mute in public. The racism taboo has insinuated itself into the bureaucracy and academe, directly affecting opportunities for promotion and advancement. In the case of traditional knowledge initiatives, for example, all employees working for the federal or NWT governments are required to recognize native spirituality as a legitimate way to explain natural processes, since challenging this proposition would result in their opposition to declared policy and allegedly constitute a breach of the public service’s “oath of loyalty.” Scientists obtaining contracts to undertake environmental studies are also required to develop a “traditional knowledge component” as a condition of receiving funding. Of course, once the studies are underway the coerced “use” of traditional knowledge is heralded as evidence of its necessity. So while grumbling may be heard behind closed doors in universities and government departments, various professional incentives and sanctions effectively block public criticism of TK projects or indeed any other Aboriginal policy initiative.

Because of Canada’s particular circumstances—Aboriginal tribes’ participation in the fur trade and in military alliances during the country’s early history, as well as the more recent use of the claims of “First Nations” to thwart Quebec separatism—the Aboriginal Industry is particularly prominent in this area of the world. But it is not just a Canadian phenomenon. The United States, Mexico, South and Central America, Australia, New Zealand, Russia and many other countries are also implicated. In fact, many consultants and lawyers, buoyed by the success of the Canadian Aboriginal Industry, have developed ties to

Aboriginal movements in other countries. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of traditional knowledge, where research promoting Aboriginal peoples’ special “world view” is common throughout universities in the Western world. A number of international organizations advocating the incorporation of traditional knowledge into government policies, including ones associated with the United Nations, have also sprouted up over the last 20 years, adding even more infrastructure to what has now become a global enterprise.

Quite apart from camouflaging Aboriginal policy’s acute non-performance, the Aboriginal Industry’s taboo of racism and its self-serving “research” perpetrates a greater and more harmful deception. It obscures the unprecedented circumstances facing Aboriginal peoples. Never in history has the cultural gap between two sets of peoples coming into contact with one another been wider. Aboriginal peoples were in the neolithic stage of development at the time of contact, while Europeans were making the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Such a cultural gap made it impossible for Aboriginal peoples to become integrated into the wider society without conscious effort, and because European settlers did not have the benefit of the social conscience that exists today, Aboriginal peoples were warehoused on reserves or exterminated when their subsistence culture became an impediment to economic development.

Solving Aboriginal problems today requires that the cultural gap between the neolithic period and late capitalism be acknowledged. It is this gap, not “cultural loss,” that is at the root of Aboriginal dependency and all the related social problems in Canada’s native population and throughout the industrialized world. But because the Aboriginal Industry continues to implement tactics that prevent an understanding of this circumstance, no programs can be developed to address it. This may be a great benefit to the lawyers, consultants and Aboriginal leaders who profit from most native people’s segregated dependency. But it is as little use to Aboriginal people as his new clothes were to the Emperor.

Frances Widdowson is a Ph.D. Candidate in political science at York University. Albert Howard is a communications consultant in Toronto. This article is adapted from their recently finished book, The Naked Emperor: Disrobing the Global Aboriginal Industry.

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