

## **Some Thoughts on the Aboriginal Dimension of the NWMO**

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**11 March 2009**

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David Crombie thought it might be helpful if I set down a few thoughts on this matter in the light of our discussion at the recent Board meeting. I have done so, quickly, and I hold no special brief for anything that I have said below; it is really meant to foster discussion and an exchange of ideas on the subject.

I think we are inclined in our discussions to think of the issue in the following way. Scientific and technical expertise is shaping the work of the NWMO. Aboriginal knowledge should also inform the work and choices of the Organization. How does one bring these two together?

I think 'western science' is at the heart of the work NWMO is doing, and will have to do, in managing nuclear waste. What can Aboriginal experience add to that? There are legitimate concerns that Aboriginal ways of understanding will wind up either being kept in a silo, or made a frill. A dialogue about Aboriginal knowledge could be actively carried on throughout the life of the NWMO, but de facto separated from the main business of the organization – on its own track, in its own silo, without having a significant impact on what the NWMO does and how it does it. Alternatively, it could be a kind of embellishment around the perimeters of what the NWMO is doing, offering symbolic cover, but not seriously penetrating and shaping the choices and policies the NWMO is pursuing.

Neither of these is the intended outcome of the NWMO Board, staff or Advisory Council, but they are serious standing risks, given the challenges associated with finding another, better way.

It is prudent to recognize just how deep and difficult this matter is. I am put in mind of C.P. Snow's 1959 Cambridge lecture in which he introduced the notion of the 'two cultures' of modern society – the sciences and the humanities – and the challenge the separation between the two posed for modern civilization. While Snow obviously did not have Aboriginal civilization on his mind, his analysis reveals how widespread and how deep the gulf between scientific and non-scientific patterns of thinking and doing is for modern society. It

suggests, at least for me, the magnitude of the problem the NWMO is seeking to address.

It would be timely for the NWMO to give some direct attention to how this matter might be addressed. One hunch I have is that it will be difficult to get very far by continuing to batter away directly at the problem, as I think we have been doing. Reconciling science and culture in modern society has not been easy in any circumstance, and it is not proving to be a simple matter in the Aboriginal context.

Possibly there is another approach. When one talks about 'Aboriginal knowledge', there is a tendency to focus on the 'product' or the outcome of Aboriginal reflection and experience; it is not apparent how one can go about relating that product to scientific knowledge. However, the concept clearly also includes as a fundamental component *the Aboriginal manner of doing things* – the consensual, spiralling process of community discussion and reflection, of listening to the voice and experience of the older members of the community while giving space to the aspirations of the young – that characterizes choice making in that cultural context. The opening up of time and space is a distinctive feature of that process, as I understand it. And the line of reasoning is very different from the rationalistic *problem definition; options; decision* model characteristic of western-style policy making.

If one focuses on that dimension of Aboriginal experience and practice, it perhaps opens up some alternative ways of integrating that experience into what the NWMO is doing. Indeed, as I suggested at our Advisory Council meeting, it might be possible to characterize the entire NWMO enterprise as implicitly Aboriginal in spirit, both in the nature of the challenges it is facing, and in the manner in which the NWMO has been responding. The problem of managing nuclear waste carries you instantly beyond the normal western government policy framework; you are trying to fashion a policy in relation to a matter that will endure as an active issue for thousands of years. What other policy field has to contemplate, and try to accommodate, a possible collapse of civilization? Environmental policy would be the other example of similar dimensions that comes to my mind. But these invite a long-term perspective that is normal for Aboriginal people, if not to their non-Aboriginal fellows – the seven generations which follow.

In addition, as I argued at the Council meeting, the unusual way in which the NWMO has approached the issue – taking plenty of time, consulting broadly, informing the conversation, revisiting the issue,

making its findings and thinking public and available to those who are interested at every step of the way, testing approaches from many different points of view – this, it might be argued, displays similarities to the Aboriginal manner of doing things. A clearer and more self-conscious realization of that fact might help us open up new avenues for the full integration of Aboriginal knowledge into the life and work of the NWMO.