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

THE ABORIGINAL INDUSTRY’S NEW CLOTHES

Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard

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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.

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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-
Thinking serves mainly to mystify TK’s true character, preventing the full implications of its use in public policy from being understood. 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-
The Aboriginal Industry’s new clothes

The 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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To maintain the gap between perception and reality, the Aboriginal Industry has constructed a taboo that would make even Andersen’s scoundrels envious. This taboo is the cry of “racism” that meets any honest analysis of Aboriginal problems and circumstances.
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.

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” perpetuates 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.

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"The Emperor's New Clothes" (Danish: Kejserens nye klæder) is a short tale written by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, about two weavers who promise an emperor a new suit of clothes that they say is invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, stupid, or incompetent while in reality, they make no clothes at all, making everyone believe the clothes are invisible to them. When the emperor parades before his subjects in his new "clothes", no one dares to say that they do not see any suit. The aboriginal industry maintains this state of affairs, in part, by advocating cultural traditionalism in the native population. No rational person believes that modern problems can be solved by reverting to the ways of our ancestors, as is assumed in aboriginal policy development. This does not mean that we are prevented from appreciating historical accomplishments, only that we are not obligated to accept all past beliefs and practices under the guise of "preserving our culture." We pride ourselves in crafting unique aboriginal clothing that anyone would be proud to wear. Our indigenous designs are limited and sell out quickly so be sure to get yours while they are in stock! Shop our aboriginal clothing company today and support native artists. Join Our Tribe. Release Dates. Sign up so you don't miss out. Email Address. POW! Thank you!