

**THE NATIVE INTERFACE:
AN EMERGING ROLE IN GOVERNMENT-NATIVE RELATIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

A wide variety of government programs is currently available to the Native people of Canada. Some are offered only to Indian people on reserves, and are usually administered by a chief and band council. Others are offered to Metis, non-status Indians, and Inuit, and are administered by officials representing those groups. In this government-Native system of interaction the chief and his Metis, non-status Indian, and Inuit counterparts play a critical role. They are the point at which the Native and Euro-Canadian systems come into contact, and they are consequently beset with the problems of dealing simultaneously with two sets of system demands.¹ On the one hand, they must try to meet the demands of the people who elect them. On the other hand, they must also try to meet the demands of the government agents who allocate them the money and power to carry out their programs. Unfortunately, these two sets of demands are rarely the same.

Today, however, Indian chiefs and their Metis, non-status, Indian and Inuit counterparts are not the only Native people who occupy the strategic position between government and the Native population of Canada. During the past two decades another, lesser-known group of Native intermediaries has emerged. Although they too promote Native concerns, they do so inside a government bureaucracy. As such, they must not only contend simultaneously with two sets of system demands, but are also² expected to be responsible to both systems at the same time. In this sense they play an interface role.

The purpose of this paper is to review some of the difficulties associated with this role, hopefully so that problems can be anticipated and, where possible, eliminated. The paper

focusses on a community development program in northwestern Ontario in which a Native interface was charged with the responsibility of mediating between her own Native advocacy organization and a large government social service agency. This was a task that she was unable to perform in an effective way because of a breakdown in the relationship between the two organizations she represented. After explaining the background of the program in which she was involved, the paper analyzes the reasons why she was unable to perform her assignment and the prospect for the future evolution of the Native interface role in Canadian society. First, though, it will be useful to define the concept of Native interface in more specific terms.

THE NATIVE INTERFACE DEFINED

One of the best ways to understand the Native interface is to distinguish it from two other popular Native roles vis-a-vis government. One is that of government employee, a role which has been subject to a steady increase in importance in both the United States and Canada, especially during the past two decades. In Canada, Native people who opt for employment with the government are sometimes called "apple Indians" -- red on the outside but white on the inside -- a harsh comment on the fact that they are first and foremost government officials and not spokespeople or advocates for Native causes or organizations. Although it may be true that some were originally hired because of their cultural and linguistic background, it is also true that once they are installed in a government bureaucracy they are evaluated on the basis of whether or not they can perform the tasks they are assigned in an effective way. Of course, some of these people have made successful careers for themselves and others have not, usually depending on whether they can meet the demands of senior administrators. Thus, no matter what their intentions when they originally accept a government job, it is unlikely that Native employees can promote Native concerns at the expense of the goals of the government bureaucracy where they are employed. By accepting a paid position as a government employee, they immediately become

representatives³ of the sovereign, and this is an allegiance they cannot forget.

Another role that should be distinguished from the Native interface is the Native advocate. Native advocates are the official public representatives of Native organizations. In 1971 Wuttunee compiled a partial list of forty such organizations in the country, five national and thirty-five regional.⁴ Today there are many more. Each of these organizations usually contains an elected executive and non-elected support staff. As the lobbying arm of Native organizations, the elected executive is responsible for promoting the concerns of their constituents to the public and to the government, and in that sense they are clearly advocates. Moreover, although most of their time is spent negotiating with government officials, it would be incorrect to regard them as civil servants or responsible to the sovereign. Native advocates are only responsible to the organization they represent. They usually have a predominantly Native constituency, and to the extent that they can meet the demands of their constituency, their internal power base and political position will be assured.⁵ Otherwise, they are usually replaced. But in order to maintain their power and position in the first place, Native advocates must be careful not to confuse their role with the role of government employee. If they are employed by anyone -- they may be volunteers -- it will be by a Native organization and not the government.

As for the Native interface, it combines the main elements of both of the above mentioned roles. A Native interface is a government employee and a Native advocate at the same time. Indeed, a common scenario, and one which is becoming increasingly popular, is for a leader or high-ranking official of a Native advocacy organization to be seconded by a civil service bureaucracy as a paid employee, to help design, direct or otherwise administer a program for Native clients which the advocacy organization regards as part of its constituency. The operative assumption on the part of both the bureaucracy and the Native organization in establishing an interface is likely that

familiarity -- physically and hopefully culturally -- will produce more effective results. No matter whether this assumption is true, it is still probably one of the main reasons the Native interface role has increased in both frequency and importance. Finally, although Native advocates who become Native interfaces may be drawn to the role by the prospect of increasing their organization's power over the direction of government programs, as the following example demonstrates, their ability to mediate between government and their own organization will not always be successful.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROGRAM

On 27 May 1974, the northern district office of the GSSA,⁶ a large Government of Ontario social service agency, received word that they had been allocated \$41,750 to carry out a combined homemaking/life skills program in northwestern Ontario. During the next two years the provincial government contributed an additional \$60,000 to support the program, and the federal government matched this with a \$31,000 grant of its own. The GSSA's interest in the program dated back to 1972-1973, when a number of its district office staff served on a task force to determine housing needs in remote centres in northwestern Ontario. At the time, the GSSA staff who served on the task force identified a number of problems they hoped their ministry could solve. Among others, they included child neglect, academic underachievement, alcoholism, under- and malnutrition, poor sanitation, failure to use preventative medicine, unemployment, violent anti-social and criminal acts, economic dependency, broken homes, and substandard housing.

Of course, to solve these problems in one fell swoop would be impossible, and this was something the district office of the GSSA recognized immediately. But they were determined to do what they could, and to this end they felt that two basic services should be provided: homemaking instruction, focusing on the care and use of home appliances, proper house cleaning techniques, meal planning, budgeting, and child training; and life skills instruction, including education, community development, family solidarity, and interpersonal relationships.

Nevertheless, by 1974, even with money in hand and a firm commitment to homemaking and life skills instruction, the district office of the GSSA found itself with one more problem to solve. Given the amount which had been allocated not all communities in northwestern Ontario could be served. A selection would have to be made. To this end the district office sought the advice of a second government agency, one that dealt specifically with Native people, the rationale being that Native people would be the principal clients no matter which communities were chosen. Besides, the government agency which the district office of the GSSA had contacted already had field staff in northwestern Ontario, whereas the GSSA had none.

During the summer and fall of 1974 the district office of the GSSA waited for its sister agency's advice, but when none came a meeting was finally called. The result of the meeting was an impasse. Due to existing legislation the GSSA's sister agency could offer no specific help without going beyond the limits of its mandate. It could not even suggest which communities should be selected since government regulations stipulated that it could only respond to requests originating from Native communities, not from government agencies. For a time it even appeared that the district office of the GSSA would be left on its own, but at precisely the same time that the GSSA's sister agency removed itself from the picture, another organization appeared on the scene -- a Native women's organization we will call the NWO.⁷

Today, NWO executive argue that they were involved in the program as early as 1973. In February of that year, the NWO submitted a proposal to the district office of the GSSA asking for funds to maintain a community worker program it had been operating in four isolated communities in northwestern Ontario under the auspices of a LIP (Local Initiative Project) grant. After two years LIP funding was about to be terminated, and the NWO was looking for new financial support to continue the program. NWO officials now argue that it was the community worker program that gave rise to the homemaking/life skills program.

"The GSSA stole the project from us and put a government budget on it," they say, "and then they forgot all about our proposal."

The GSSA disagree with the NWO's opinion in the strongest possible terms. From its standpoint there is absolutely no doubt that the program originated in its own office, primarily from the experience gained through the task force on housing. However, when the sister agency of the GSSA failed to respond, the NWO took on an increasingly important role, especially with regard to hiring field staff to deliver the program and selecting the communities where the program would be offered.

Still, the NWO's entry into the program did not come easy. For example, in October 1974, the NWO sent a letter to the Minister of the GSSA, objecting to the way in which field staff would be chosen, and requesting an increased role for Native people in the program. As they wrote:

We object strongly to the manner in which the interviews will be conducted -- specifically the panel discussion. As you are aware, Native people are basically shy and would be hesitant to sit on a panel. How well a person answers questions on a panel discussion does not necessarily guarantee that the person will succeed on the job. Should there be applications from Native people in outlying areas, may we suggest that interviews be held in their own communities. Usually, Native people living away from urban centres do not have funds for travelling to these centres for job interviews.

Furthermore, we wish to stress our concern that the positions will be filled by personnel who are not of Native ancestry. We sincerely believe that for your program to be successful, Native people should be hired to live in those communities, because they themselves have been in a similar environment.

In retrospect, NWO officials justify these concerns on the following grounds: first, that regardless of which communities were selected, the program would most likely be delivered to Native women; second, that given Native clients, Native input was essential to the success of the program; and third, that given the location of their locals in northwestern Ontario, they already had a relationship with the client population at hand. As one of their officials explained:

When we knew what ... [the GSSA] was doing, which was kind of an advanced step of what we were doing in our community worker program, we wrote to ... [the Minister of the GSSA] because the project was geared to women. Also, the majority of the population in northwestern Ontario is Native, and we already had our locals in the area. Last, we wanted to ensure that there would be Native input into the kind of things

the women were learning -- not just white middle-class values. That's why we made ourselves visible.

Visibility was nonetheless insufficient to make the district office of the GSSA welcome the NWO into the program with open arms. In reply to the letter the NWO sent to the Minister, the district office of the GSSA issued a polite but firm rejection of some of the NWO's demands. As its return letter to the NWO said:

We have been very concerned that questions and comments, such as those contained in your letter, be considered carefully. We realize very well that we cannot plan a program for isolated communities without the help of organizations like yours ...

First of all though, we must be clear that this program is aimed at unorganized communities, not Native peoples as such ...

In any case, the teaching/homemaker positions come under Civil Service regulations, and we must use the fairest and most efficient method for choosing among the candidates. This we have found to be the panel interview conducted by ... [GSSA] personnel ...

We certainly agree that one of the most important criteria for the job is the ability to work in and gain the trust of a particular community. Thus, for a largely Native community, a Native person who speaks the language would certainly have an advantage. Ability to do the job, of course, is another important consideration.

THE INTERFACE AND HER PROBLEMS

Despite the negative tone of this letter, the NWO's brand of confrontation politics soon won out. After a series of meetings in December 1974 and the first few months of 1975, it was agreed that the NWO's role in the program would be threefold. First, it would be responsible for selecting three of the six communities in which the program would be offered. Second, it would be allowed to have one person on the committee that hired the field staff. Third, the NWO would also be allowed to have one woman from its own executive serve as co-supervisor of the program -- the other co-supervisor already had been hired by the district office of the GSSA.

This supervisory position -- an interface role -- was extremely important to the NWO. It was even willing to give up face to face contact with the woman who was supposed to fill the role in order to have the position established. As one of their officials recalled:

It took some time for us to agree how we should participate, but when we did, we decided that the best way we could have input into the program would be to have our own Native co-ordinator. She would have the same status, the same salary and the same jurisdiction over the program as the ... [GSSA's] co-ordinator. We thought that she could come to our office two or three times a week and make sure our organization knew what was going on.

"Unfortunately," as this woman went on to explain, "this never did happen." Even though one of the NWO's vice-presidents did become co-supervisor of the program in April 1975, almost all of her time was taken up by the GSSA, and this led to a total breakdown in communication between the two organizations.

For example, although all of the field workers had been hired, trained, and installed in their communities by October 1975, no formal contact took place between the NWO and the interface after that date. Instead, the NWO lost track of the program until the fall of 1976, when it gained control over the delivery of the program in one of the six communities where it was being offered. Due to the fact that no field worker had remained in this community for any length of time, the GSSA, after hearing a barrage of complaints from the NWO about how it had been excluded from the program, finally agreed to let it hire and train its own field worker for the community. The only thing the GSSA insisted upon was that it would pay the woman's salary.

But the arrangement created a conflict almost immediately. Even though the NWO did hire a field worker for "its" community in September 1976, she quit after only eight weeks. Apparently there was some delay in her pay due to the slowness of the bureaucratic machinery through which special salary requisitions of the GSSA proceed, and she left as a result.

This made both the GSSA and the NWO furious. NWO officials claim that this woman's pay was delayed deliberately, forcing her to leave and thereby destroying its ability to deliver the program in the only community in which it had any control. By contrast, the district office of the GSSA claims that the NWO completely ignored its contractual responsibility to see that the program was maintained, creating doubts about the integrity of the program as a whole. This was made abundantly clear in a

letter the district office of the GSSA sent to the NWO on 29 December 1976. As the letter said:

On December 1, 1976, we received a telephone call from ... [the NWO's field worker] saying that she had resigned her contract position in the program, effective November 26, 1976.

We were surprised that the normal two week notice wasn't given, and feel that the receipt of notice five days after termination of employment is an unusual procedure.

We are also disappointed that officials of the ... [NWO] with whom our Ministry developed the agreement for ... [the community in question] have still not reported on the situation in that community. Since this has not been done are we to assume that the delivery of the program is no longer of concern to your organization?

We require good feedback to maintain our responsibilities in the program. Specifically, we find ourselves in the position of answering for the total program, and unanswered queries regarding one part can reflect negatively on the whole, especially where funding officials are involved. Also, we need to know whether to make an administrative request for the position to remain on staff. Within the Civil Service, positions which become vacant do not automatically remain open.

We have waited this long to write, expecting to hear any day from you. We would appreciate immediate guidance so plans can be made regarding the remainder of the project.

From the standpoint of the NWO's executive, however, the organization they represented had been insulted and made a scapegoat, and so the GSSA's request for additional information was ignored. Then, on 9 February 1977, the NWO issued the following terse reply:

In response to your letter, dated December 29, 1976, please be advised that the Board of Directors of the NWO are reviewing the matter and will respond the latter part of March.

But no additional response was made in March. In fact, the February letter marked the final collapse of the NWO-GSSA relationship. There was nothing left to talk over. Moreover, the program which brought these two organizations together has since been terminated, and the person who occupied the interface role is now regarded as a turncoat by the NWO. She is no longer on the executive of the organization and has no plans to return. Nor does the NWO want her back.

Thus, the alliance that was established between the GSSA and the NWO did not prove to be stable. From the beginning of the NWO's involvement, the relationship between the two

organizations was strained. The way in which the NWO was originally brought into the program, that is, through a form of confrontation politics, created an adversarial tone that persisted throughout the life of the program. The woman who was installed as the Native co-ordinator was supposed to minimize this adversarial tone. Originally, the NWO viewed her as its personal representative whose primary responsibility was to insure that the concerns of Native people, as articulated by the NWO, would be represented in the program. But interviews with both NWO and GSSA executives show that shortly after the interface role was established, there were charges made by the NWO that its co-ordinator had been taken over by the GSSA. Thereafter the relationship between the two organizations began to disintegrate, culminating in a complete breakdown in communication by the time the program was terminated. GSSA officials, on the other hand, contend that it was not a takeover that destroyed its relationship with the NWO, but rather a default in leadership on the part of the NWO, especially its inability to insure that contact with the interface was maintained. That is, GSSA staff now argue that the NWO failed to provide instructions to the interface, with the result that she began to turn more and more to the GSSA for direction and advice.

The NWO and the GSSA represented two alternate systems, and the Native co-ordinator occupied the interface role between them. The two systems had quite different organizational forms. The GSSA is a bureaucratic organization, hierarchically and formally structured, with a full-time paid staff. Its primary function is to administer social service programs. In contrast, the NWO is a voluntary organization, informally structured along more or less collegial lines, with a predominantly unpaid part-time staff. Its function is to advocate for the needs of Native people, particularly Native women.

The Native interface was thus representing an informally structured advocacy organization while trying to function in a formally structured bureaucratic organization. NWO officials apparently felt that the interface's previous experience in

their organization would be sufficient for her to fulfill her advocacy function in the program, which is how they viewed her role. But the GSSA provided much more specific and detailed instructions to the interface so she could fulfill her administrative function in the program, which was its perception of her duties. The interface was thus caught in the classic position of a person between Scylla and Charbydis, and fortunately or unfortunately, when a person is placed in this position, the natural inclination is to resolve the conflict by fulfilling only one set of system demands if this is at all possible.

In the present case it was fairly easy for the interface to resolve her conflict in favour of the GSSA's perception of her role for three reasons. First, the guidelines emanating from the NWO were general and presented in a relatively unstructured form, whereas the guidelines the GSSA provided were specific and always formal. Second, the GSSA was, in fact, the employer of the Native co-ordinator. It paid her salary and had the power to fire her if her performance was judged to be inferior. Finally, the actual content of the interface's job was decidedly more administrative than advocacy. The problem here, however, is that the GSSA and the NWO both represented functions that were needed for the successful implementation of the program. Administration without advocacy and advocacy without administration are both serious flaws. Unfortunately, the interface role as established was not sufficiently strong enough to bridge this gap.

CONCLUSION

If this analysis is persuasive, then a restructuring of the Native interface role as we have described it in our case study is in order. Clearly, if people who occupy the Native interface role remain responsible only to the government agencies which second them into service, then it is difficult to see how they can fulfill their advocacy functions as defined by their parent organizations. Allocating more money and delegating more power to the advocacy organization should certainly go a long way to

solve this problem, for then the advocacy organization would have the means to exert some control over the tasks the interface performs. But by the same token, the advocacy organization must also be willing to provide detailed and specific instructions to the interface. Otherwise, the interface likely will follow the detailed instructions which emanate from the government. Finally, it is also clear that an interface cannot be expected to perform effectively in circumstances in which the organizations which establish the role do not communicate. An interface is a valuable intermediary, but the person who occupies the role cannot be expected to perform successfully without the support of members of both organizations.

NOTES

¹ See W.J. Goode, "A Theory of Role Strain," American Sociological Review, 25 (1960), 483-496.

² See Menno Boldt, "Indian Leaders in Canada: Attitudes Toward Equality and Political Status", Diss. Yale University 1973.

³ A case in point, and one which received national media coverage, was the hiring and subsequent firing of Mr. Harold Cardinal, one of the best known Indian leaders in the country. After nine years of service as president of the Indian Association of Alberta, Mr. Cardinal was appointed as regional director-general of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for Alberta. He was hired in February 1977, and for ten months he was in charge of administering the affairs of 34,200 Indian people, with an annual working budget of about fifty million dollars. However, in November 1977, Mr. Cardinal was fired by Hugh Faulkner, who was then Minister of Indian Affairs. Although the circumstances surrounding Mr. Cardinal's dismissal are hazy, it has been alleged that Mr. Cardinal was unable to meet his responsibility as an agent of the sovereign because he was still operating as a Native advocate. Mr. Faulkner intimated as much in a press conference he called to explain Mr. Cardinal's dismissal. More recently, in 1985, Mr. Richard Price, an employee of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, was fired for leaking a secret report that called for mass reductions in federal spending on Indian Affairs. Although Mr. Price is not a Native Canadian, his case bears a striking resemblance to Mr. Cardinal's in terms of the responsibility of government employees to the agency for which they work.

⁴ William Wuttunee, Ruffled Feathers: Indians in Canadian Society (Calgary: Bell Books, 1971), pp. 170-174.

⁵ See Michael Lipsky, "Protest as a Political Resource," American Political Science Review, 62, No. 4 (1968), 1144-1158.

⁶ This is a pseudonym.

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