

COMMENTARY: A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO RESEARCH FUNDING FROM DIAND

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The Canadian Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) always spends a small part of its enormous budget on research. Most of this expenditure is for the staff employed by the Department itself or on contractors hired to defend or develop old and new policies. Also, there is a small irregular amount of funding which is awarded in the form of one-year grants to native organizations to undertake research projects in areas in which government activity is either non-existent or contested by native people. This funding is normally the only support which native organizations receive for their research programmes.

Since academic investigators, until recently, have shown very little interest in native affairs, knowledge of grievances, is quite limited. Government research has been policy oriented, circumscribed in both method and scope by political considerations. Thus, a typical government project is to establish some foundation--any empirical support at all--to vindicate an old policy or reinforce a present policy inclination. Of course, the research of native organizations is also vulnerable to the same charge or partiality (of investigating a whole series for only some of the truth) but even more to the point, the research of native organizations is limited by the very fact that the body they are most likely to challenge with their findings is the agency which is supposed to support it.

The Department of Indian Affairs does support potentially embarrassing investigation, up to a point, because the Department wishes to be well informed in advance of any action for which they must prepare an effective defense. Thus, DIAND is willing to support

"mutually acceptable" land claims research, for example, because this; is one way of keeping ahead of possible court action and to defeat it simply by withdrawing support for the research before litigation can begin.

In its partial support of a research project, the relations between DIAND and the client native organization are likely to unfold somewhat as follows. Aggressive leaders of a group begin to press a grievance concerning treaty violations or some other kind of broken promise and the membership of the organization mobilizes for action. Since officials at DIAND are primarily concerned with neutralizing all such unified action, the Department invites representatives to Ottawa for the purpose of "dialogue on concerns of mutual interest". At this time, leaders of the organization are told that there may be some small basis for their allegations but in the absence of any detailed evidence to support their claim, the Department pleads incapacity to act. Still, as an expression of the Government's good faith in the crisis, spokesmen for their aide announce that the Department is willing to consider a written proposal to undertake research in "mutually acceptable areas of investigation" on the understanding that DIAND is not committing itself at this time to anything more than receiving the results of this research.

To the leaders of the native organization, however, these steps seem positive, a kind of tacit recognition of their case. Consequently, they agree to co-operate. Even though they have no experience in designing research they still attempt to write a proposal which defines their grievances in terms which raise questions to be answered and indicate how they think they might investigate these matters within a budget which seems appropriate in personnel and time. Once the proposal is reviewed in Ottawa, however, a process which began originally as a grievance procedure becomes instead simply another budget review for yet another appendage of government. Questions are raised about the substance of the proposed research, the amount of the spending and the duration of the work which is proposed. It is suggested that some of the issues which the organization wants to investigate are not acceptable to DIAND. The budget is criticised either because it is too skimpy or too fat; and the Department asserts that under no circumstances will it be committed to a project of more than one year in duration. They counter with

the offer that if the original proposal could be revised along these and these lines, and if it were re-submitted by such and such a date then perhaps a contract could be drawn for a twelve-month period on the understanding that yet another proposal might be entertained mid-year to extend the project for another twelve months if Treasury Board approves.

At this point, the leaders of the organization realize how completely they have been co-opted by the agency which is their adversary. They do continue to hope, however, that the research might be an instrumental phase, a useful prelude to the settlement of grievances in the future. For this reason, they hire an expensive technician whose specialty is drafting proposals and with his or her help they win their first contract. Now they have to find a means of fulfilling their side of the bargain.

Basically the leaders of the organization have two options. They can operate on the notion that research is simply a lofty word for collecting information. In this case, they look for talented people within their own organization to operate as researchers and research directors. Such personnel will not have academic qualifications for their roles but they will be well motivated, affordable workers and also trustworthy in the sense of coming from inside the community of potential beneficiaries of the investigation. The alternate option is to perceive research as something far more complicated than gathering information and to assume that it involves mysterious other proceedings known only to people with the proper paper qualifications. In this event, the whole contract is turned over to speculative consultants who immediately complain that too much has been promised for too little, but they will do the best they can on the understanding that the revenue from the first contract is a kind of retainer fee, accepted on account in the expectation of greater, future dispersals. Thus, the second option leads the organization to lawyers and academics whose fees are at least ten times higher than the personnel required by option one.

Naturally, at first, the stronger inclination is to embrace the first option. The problem, however, is the inexperience of this staff in data analysis and report writing; and the report function demanded by DIAND is awesome. Contracts call for research reports on a quarterly basis. Such "progress reports" are supposed to outline the work of all staff, provide samples of discoveries and conclude

with argumentative papers based on such interim results. In this way, DIAND maintains an audit on expenditures. Equally important, the Department can keep up with the findings as they are developing. Such over-reporting also has an important impact on the researchers since their activity is interrupted completely every two months as each employee goes to work on his or her contribution to the report.

Once the document has been reviewed in Ottawa, the leaders of the organization (or their delegates) meet with a "working group" to discuss the report's contents. The working group is likely to consist of one or two persons representing DIAND, a representative from Treasury Board, someone looking after the interest of the Department of Justice, and the Prime Minister's Office might supply the chairperson of the committee. Normally the meetings only involve the DIAND and Justice representatives, but the purpose of all meetings is constant: to audit the expenditures of the previous quarter and to challenge the significance of the research which is reported.

Meetings with the working group resemble bargaining sessions in the sense that one side has something on the table. But the Government: people are always careful never to reveal their position except by way of denials. They deny that the organization has found anything which substantiates their claim and always refuse to produce any evidence from their side which supports their denial. After all, they protest, it is not the working group which has a contract to do research. The issues on which the Government people prefer to dwell concern the form or the style of the report, especially if it has been compiled by an inexperienced staff. In this case, the working group will complain that the report is disjointed, difficult to read, and full of tiresome emotionalism. They will also suggest that the arguments are entirely unconvincing since they are little more than sweeping generalizations based on sensational isolated examples whose typicality is completely unknown. The working group complains that the quality of the reports will have to improve or support for the project will lapse at the end of the year.

Without abandoning option one (the researchers and directors are still talented members of the organization itself), the project coordinator seeks a consultant to assist the staff with their report problem. One kind of professional provides exactly the report the working group demands: glossy in form, thin in substance. The

descriptions of the activities of staff are clear and apparently full, statements of expenditures do not provoke controversy and the argumentative paper section focuses on moral issues in a lofty but unemotional style. There is enough evidence to establish coherence but nothing, absolutely nothing, to suggest that the researchers are discovering evidence which could lead to successful action in court.

Another kind of consultant comes to the organization for the same apparent reason but convinces those in charge of the project that the research will have to be designed more rigorously as well as reported more artfully. No additional staff are needed. The existing researchers have trained themselves in basic research skills well enough to have amassed an enormous amount of data but having gone this far they have reached an impasse. Their enthusiasm for their subject and the commitment to the success of a project in which each employee has already invested hundreds of hours of his or her life convinces the late-comer report-writer that they are a receptive group for learning more sophisticated methods of data analysis and so they take this next step together. In this scenario, the consultant operates as a teacher and research-designer as well as a writer of more polished quarterly reports. But the argumentative papers, which emerge raise issues which the government sees as potentially disruptive. Although this consultant saves the programme, in one sense, he destroys it in another. The organization now learns that budgetary restraint requires cancellation of the project just as its momentum has developed. At the same time, however, some other branch of DIAND or some other Canadian Department has funds for the organization to embark in some equally costly but politically more neutral programme. If leaders of the organization have been adequately co-opted by their prior dependency on federal largesse, the grievance-research is shelved without significant protest and the organization veers off in a new direction following the new federal carrot.

On the basis of this somewhat hypothetical scenario it could be suggested that the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs does not perform well as a research granting agency but it does operate exceedingly well as a political neutralizer. The Auditor General may think that DIAND does not know what it is doing, that the Department has incoherent goals and a poorly managed budget. What lie does not realize is that much of the apparent ineffectiveness

is intentional. With respect to research (to take only a minor example), there are at least six factors which illustrate that it is not DIAND's intention that these resources be used effectively in a normal sense of the term:

1) DIAND offers support for research in the first instance because the Department wishes to neutralize a potentially embarrassing controversy; by persuading the Native Organization to participate in a "mutually acceptable" programme of investigation the limits of inquiry can be set irrationally, from a research standpoint, but effectively from the perspective of the Department's political interest.

2) Sophisticated research proposals are demanded from people with little or no prior experience in research.

3) Once funded, research programmes are vulnerable to failure by the inexperience of affordable researchers or to bankruptcy by sub-contracting to over-paid consultants.

4) The momentum of a research programme is continually interrupted by the requirement of reporting results on a quarterly basis.

5) The research programme is not aided by disinterested criticism of interim or final reports.

6) Since the agency most likely to be embarrassed by the findings of the research is the Department which controls the amount and duration of the funding, the continuation of the funding is a function of political rather than research considerations.

It is possible that most if not all of these factors which distort the success of the research programmes of native organizations would be eliminated if the Social Sciences and Humanities Research of Canada (SSHRC) were to recognize that the problems which concern native peoples in Canada today are issues of national importance which academic investigators have neglected, government agencies have glossed over and native organizations have not been able to examine as fully, and to publicize as widely as they have wished, with the resources available to them from DIAND. Such recognition would qualify researchers in the native peoples area for grants under the recently established, but still undeveloped Thematic Grants Programme.

The idea of Thematic Grants is to set aside a significant portion of the SSHRC's budget each year to support "research on themes

of national importance." At present, the level of funding for such work is still quite small, but within five years Thematic Grants could account for as much as 20 percent of SSHRCC's over all budget (which may reach 100 million dollars by 1985). Setting aside as much as perhaps 20 million dollars for targeted research is controversial, however, because many academics have expressed serious concerns about the difficulties of establishing research priorities by public policy. If priority areas are named by government, it is argued that research is no longer free, not spontaneous, therefore less creative and ultimately unproductive. Also, academics have expressed fears that the other portion of the budget which is devoted to supporting lone and independent investigators pursuing their own individual curiosities will find that such free research will be relatively less well supported. To both of these criticisms, SSHRCC has answered that the identification of themes worthy of designation will emerge from a process of broad, multi-level consultation. Also, the work to be undertaken will be "fully independent" in the same sense as the rest of the projects supported by SSHRCC. It is claimed that by promoting a particular theme area, all that is intended is the encouragement of "broader and more sustained attention" than might be expected without the incentive of designation. By guaranteeing that important subjects receive due attention, SSHRCC will "not 'solve' social problems" but the agency will be working more effectively, it is argued, to "build the groundwork of basic facts and analysis on which decision-makers and the public can draw"2

To date, no one has suggested that the problems which concern the 5 percent of the population which is Native are issues of national importance. Nor has it been argued that more research in this area is wanted or needed either by the people themselves or by government. Clearly, however, arguments could be advanced to support the claim that much more research should be undertaken and that the issues of concern of native peoples are important beyond their numbers. Assuming that both contentions were to persuade SSHRCC to designate the native peoples area as one of the four or five themes to be supported in the Thematic Grants programme, how would this alternative to funding from DIAND unfold? It is likely that the first step toward awarding grants in the area would be the creation of a National Advisory Council consisting of academics and

non-academics to function as a clearing house receiving problems with research implications from native organizations. The Advisory Council would circulate these problem-lists to specialists representing a broad spectrum of academic disciplines and to all native organizations. Such circulars would thereby serve to inform all interested persons of the research priorities of native people. At the same time, the circulars would also serve as calls for proposals for research appropriate to each issue or group of issues.

At the stage of launching a particular project, teams would form consisting of native organizations with similar research priorities and academic investigators who have volunteered suitable proposals (suitability being established by the same principles of peer evaluation which presently operate in the assessment of applications for support in "curiosity research"). The one important difference between these proposals and those which are drafted otherwise is that each would contain a teaching component in the sense that the academic designers of a project would be expected to train research personnel in the interested native organizations. Also, this research would be more co-ordinated than wholly independent work. To this end, each team would have to employ a full-time Director to assume overall responsibility for the progress of various sub-groups involved, to organize annual workshops for sharing findings and comparing difficulties; and, at the completion of the project, this same person would be responsible for reporting the diverse findings of various team members in the form of a synthesis for use by general readers, other academics or decision makers in and out of government. The research would therefore be targetted, strategic research, in the sense of providing additional data and grounded theory without which intelligent action would be otherwise impossible.

The hypothetical arrangement just described is neither utopian nor revolutionary. It does not depend on a level of co-operation between academics and native organizations which is any greater than the co-operative action which has already been exhibited by people involved in the land-claims research of the three Metis associations of the Prairie Provinces undertaken between 1976 and 1980. The major difference is the absence of distortions arising from the source of the funding. If SSHRCC were to designate the Native Peoples area eligible for Thematic Grant funding:

1) The native people of Canada would be taking an important step out of their present situation of nearly total dependence upon DIAND.

2) The people with the most at risk in Canada's north, or on the bottom step of the social hierarchy in Canada's western cities, would be able to initiate research in areas of their greatest concern exploiting the best available academic expertise in designing such research.

3) Once funded, the continuation of the research would no longer be vulnerable to discontinuation due to the inexperience of untrained investigators or expense of over-paid contractors.

4) The momentum of a research programme would not be continually interrupted by over-reporting; reports would be annual, not quarterly.

5) The development of research in the Native People's area would benefit from disinterested criticism arising from regular workshops supported in the course of the project.

6) The agency in control of the amount and duration of support for a particular project would no longer be the Department most likely to be embarrassed by the findings of the research.

For these six reasons, then, native organizations, academic investigators and the SSHRCC should all give serious consideration to the Thematic Grants programme as an appropriate, needed alternative to the sporadic, unsatisfactory role played by DIAND as a research granting agency in the area of Native affairs.

NOTES

1. Consultant to the Manitoba Metis Federation on Land Claim Research formerly funded by DIAND. This commentary is not offered as a history of that or any other project in particular, rather, it is a comment upon the problems that native organizations in general have with research funded from the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs.

2. SSHRCC, *Proposed Five Year Plan* (Ottawa, 1979), p. 17, 28-30.