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Decision-making in indigenous communities

Some reflections on the role of elders in decision-making in indigenous communities

Patrick McIntyre

I am not an indigenous Australian, nor do I live in an indigenous community. These reflections arise from my exposure to and experience within indigenous communities in northern Australia in recent years, and from material from Australia and overseas on this topic that I have read over a longer period of time.

These reflections are not intended to give the impression that I have begun to properly understand the traditional decision-making of indigenous communities. Rather, they are offered (as no more than a work in progress) to encourage further research in, reflection upon and conversations about this topic, by and between indigenous communities and others.

Non-indigenous Australians may get a glimpse of the complexity of this topic by thinking for a little while about how they would identify, describe and explain the decision-making processes that occur in their own local community.

How do people in a small country town of, say, less than 500 people go about the business of making community decisions? What sort of things do they make decisions about? How do they work out who is to be the decision-maker? Is there a decision-making body and if so, how is it constituted? What processes and procedures does such a body employ so as to reach a decision? Is the decision-making body really the place where the community makes its choices, or are there 'invisible' structures where the real influence is wielded, such as Freemasons, or football and Rotary clubs?

More importantly, what action is

undertaken to ensure that those with differing opinions remain committed participants within the community? How much of what happens would be visible and transparent to an unexpected visitor, from, say, Japan who is unable to read or write in English?

To simply say 'We make our decisions in the Town Council by democratic process' offers no answer to the real questions about freedom, responsibility and authority within the community.

It is even more challenging to examine the extent to which such small towns generally operate as 'community' at all. Do the townsfolk actually engage with one another about collective strategic planning? Is there a sense of solidarity, of cohesion; a valuing of consensus and of diversity? Or are decisions generally imposed by the mob (majority) over the interests of the 'others' (minority)? Do arrogance, vanity, prejudice, self-interest and manipulation dominate the decision-making landscape?

Does that sound familiar? Perhaps it's a bit more widespread than small country towns — perhaps the further we get away from our small communities, the worse our *operative* decision-making values become.

Well, perhaps there is something different happening in some of Australia's indigenous communities that might have much to offer the rest of Australia.

In traditional indigenous communities, be they Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or native North American communities, the most striking contrast with the dominant white culture is that decision-making takes

place in an oral rather than a written tradition.

The decision-making structures, like the legal, educational, health and economic structures, are generally invisible to Western eyes and ears (and, dare I say it, hearts).

Tragically, for the dominant Western culture the most profound contrast can be illustrated by reference to the spiritual (I do not mean 'religious') consciousness that traditional indigenous communities bring to their community decision-making. Tragic, that an otherwise rich and vibrant Western culture could yet be so naïve as to be constantly confused and perplexed by deep spiritual truths that actually find voice within all of the world's major religions; tragic, because these values seem left to be articulated by the very cultures least valued by the West.

Take this, for example, from North America in the 19th century:

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people ... All are holy in the memory and experience of my people ... All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself ... No man, be he Red Man or White, can be apart. We are brothers after all ... ¹

In case after case, in testimony after testimony and in the Supreme, Federal and High Courts of Australia, there is a constant plea from indigenous Australians for the dominant culture to respect the sacred relationship between indigenous people and their land.

But it is not just their land. The *operative* model of decision-making in traditional indigenous culture gives expression to the concept of connectedness and unity.

This model is both ancient and re-emergent in the West. It is, in that sense, both new and old. It is the central theme of the 14th century sermons of Meister Eckhart, and of the writings of Joseph Campbell. It is a model which embraces the ultimate unity of things; which demands a 'dialectical' rather than a 'dualistic' consciousness. It is a model that seeks creative solutions from a reconciliation of ➤



➤ differences; where 'to know is to know relationships'.²

Contrast the patient, silent, listening, last speaking role of the senior elder in traditional Aboriginal community meetings with the loud, abusive, immodest, centre-stage posturing of the party leader in our Parliaments.

There is time given over to fostering (and to the centrality of) relationships among those present at an Aboriginal community meeting. There is a willingness to postpone important decisions (and whole meetings) if it is felt that the community is not ready, and there is a holistic approach to issues. Just as all things are connected, all present are connected. There is a concerted attempt to reach consensual (even unanimous) decisions. People of differing opinions are encouraged to 'speak up' and all to 'listen up'! In an oral tradition, once a word is said, it can't be unsaid.

There is a deep respect for the wisdom of elders, who are at the same time (and I mean that literally) both teachers and guides while they are participating in the collective choosing. They are extraordinarily skilled at listening to the 'spirit', not merely the 'will', of a large group of people; at being in touch with how the people about them are feeling and participating.

As much as it is the responsibility and privilege of the elders to teach the younger people their skill, is it the responsibility of the younger to acquire the skills that the community may need in them one day. This is done in the fireplace of real decision-making.

Contrast also the notion that a nation might abdicate its collective decision-making responsibility to 'the marketplace', with an approach that accepts a responsibility in its decision-making for the welfare not only of its own people, but also for their neighbours and the earth.

In contemporary negotiations, particularly in native title negotiations, non-indigenous groups often mistake as incompetence what is often very shrewd and strategic indigenous wisdom.

Of course, it is not always so. The breakdown of traditional indigenous culture and the imposition of Western decision-making values leave Aboriginal communities in Australia in a difficult place. Western

schools have taught the young to devalue the traditional ways. Ill health, confusion, frustration and powerlessness have marginalised many of the elders. Their ability to teach younger generations by example is greatly diminished.

But here, among Australia's most marginalised and powerless, there are many committed younger indigenous Australians who will be the pathfinders for the rest of us. It is they who are struggling to find ways for communities to embrace community management in the modern world, *whilst at the same time* to maintain the values and skills they so rightly admire in their elders.

If the reader is interested in developing advanced skills in leadership or politics, do yourself a favour and spend some time in remote indigenous communities in northern Australia. They have more to teach you than you can imagine — there is work to be done in developing ways of national decision-making, which may emerge from a creative reconciliation of difference.

Perhaps you might learn the bare bones of how to be a hero by reading Joseph Campbell; but to put some flesh on those bones, go north and meet some heroes and heroines who may have some time to guide you. ●

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Endnotes

1. Chief Seattle, 1855.
2. Matthew Fox *Breakthrough, Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* Image Books Garden City, NY, 1980.

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