KWEBEH: BUILDING INSTITUTIONS TO MANAGE MINERAL DEVELOPMENT

John B. Zoe

Early man’s survival depended on understanding the environment, the plants and animals that inhabit within. They also need tools for hunting and for protection. The natural resources and the rocks were used. They needed special stones from known quarries to patiently hone into points for spears, arrowheads, and knives. It suited them well for the time without interference. Many may have been known for their skills in producing the masterpieces for the hunts.

There were many other tools of the household, for the processing of the meats, such as the pounding rocks, scrapers, etc. Stones were also used for sinkers for the nets. It is not uncommon to find stone rings outlining where a caribou hide tipi once stood. Stones were also used to let people know who was in the area. In other words, these people were surface mining to produce tools. It was very much a way of life.

Before contact, especially after contact, life started to change at a rapid pace, driven by new tools and an outside consumerism need that drove the early fur trade. In a very short time, the usage of stone tools for hunting went the way of a disappearing memory.

After the acceptance of Treaty 11, in the summer of 1921, access to subsurface resources was now officially open for anyone to claim. The early prospectors mostly followed the old canoe trails and people tried their best to avoid contact. If there was a chance meeting, there was bartering, but resources were limited. The early advanced exploration recruited the knowledge of the people to get where they needed to go safely, especially to build winter roads safely.

The people of the region supplied wood, wild fish, meats, and traditional gear to the exploration camps, in barter or trade. In today’s terms, it would be similar to under the table dealings, not written anywhere. There was no reason for the advanced exploration to do any further recruitment than necessary, to take it to a new level.

Most of the early development decisions were made by government agents and administration for the better good. The original inhabitants just had to move on and avoid what would become future contaminated sites. There are many of these sites now.

In the seventies, the Berger inquiry was probably the first time Aboriginal people were asked about what they thought about a proposed gas pipeline. The response was overwhelming to the system. The seed was planted, that it was okay to question development especially in cases where the way of life would be affected.

During the early developments prior to the 1980s, the approvals and processes were done somewhere else. Some word was passed on to the local leaders and some minor work created, most likely out of good will such as in hydro development.

During the 1990s, the Tłı̨chǫ were in negotiations with Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories for a comprehensive settlement. The negotiators from the Tłı̨chǫ achieved an agreement in 2003, and now have the Land Claim and Self Government Agreement. The Tłı̨chǫ had built a team and organization system for negotiations, so it was natural to have a dialogue that resulted in an Impact Agreement. Development was important to the leaders, so they could be abreast of the issues and ensure they benefited from employment of their citizens.

After the effective date, the Tłı̨chǫ leaders continued to monitor the developments and processes. A system of management was beginning to take shape, but mining was not a system to build around as it was always on the outside of the Tłı̨chǫ activity.
Mining activity has really picked up in the last few years, so that there are applications for licenses, reviews, environmental assessments, and this requires much more coordination of human and financial resources.

The idea of setting up a working group reporting directly to the Chiefs was the next natural step for the newly emerged Tłı̨chǫ Government. All the activity of mining in every phase will be vetted by this group, with reports to the leadership and some cases that required political decisions. The name Kwebeh was chosen to be the front line for information and initiatives.

The Kwebeh now brings together ten people every two months to listen to all the plans of the mining and exploration companies, to build new Impact Agreements, and to implement the existing ones. The roots of the Kwebeh lie in the communities, in the staff from different areas of the government, and in the positions of leadership. Kwebeh gives a predictable point of entry to the mining companies, so they know where to come with their plans and wishes for surface and underground mining.

Kwebeh is a place name of a natural feature that looks like a gigantic stone knife.

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