

Indigenous ways of knowing? You wouldn't understand

Through UNDRIP, Canada endorses “Indigenous Knowledge” as inherited and rooted in ancestral relationships to the land

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Canada is rapidly abandoning a principle that has shaped western democracies since the Enlightenment: the idea that no person or group has privileged access to sacred or divine knowledge unavailable to everyone else.

Now, this principle is being threatened by Canada’s increasing embrace of “Indigenous Knowledge”—whereby knowledge is treated as collectively owned and restricted by ancestry rather than something open to examination and shared across society.

The governments of British Columbia and Canada — both of which have formally adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) — endorse “[Indigenous Knowledge](#)” as inherited, rooted in ancestral relationships to the land, and encompassing spiritual, cultural and metaphysical dimensions passed down through generations.

Remarkably, the defining quality to possess this knowledge is not study, training, time spent on the land, or lived experience by any individual alive today. Instead, it’s lineage itself.

That’s a paradigm shift. When knowledge is said to be possessed by birth rather than learned, its universality is replaced with mysticism and its value diminished.

This comes with real-world consequences: ancestry-based considerations are reshaping how public land and resources are managed on Canadians’ behalf.

In British Columbia, newly proposed changes to hunting and wildlife regulations are described as being informed by “[the best available science and Indigenous Knowledge](#).” In practice, this means “Indigenous Knowledge” is being used to design a regulatory regime that falls almost entirely on non-Indigenous users. That’s because Indigenous harvesting rights are recognized under Section 35 of the Constitution, not bound by the same hunting seasons, bag limits, gear restrictions, or limited-entry systems that apply to the broader public.

The growing influence of this genetically transmitted, ancestry-qualified knowledge extends to matters of public safety and economic security, like [nuclear regulation](#): “Indigenous ways of knowing and the Indigenous cultural context enhance the Canadian

Nuclear Safety Commission’s understanding of the potential impacts of nuclear projects and strengthen the rigour of project reviews and regulatory oversight,” says the government of Canada website.

Governments championing the principles of UNDRIP insist that “Indigenous Knowledge” can be combined with “Western” science to produce better public policy. But this is a contradiction. Knowledge cannot at once be exclusive and universal.

A system that relies on identity as a qualification for authority risks replacing equal citizenship with differentiated standing, making the consideration of “Indigenous Knowledge” fundamentally incompatible with democratic decision-making.

Crown land exists because Canada rejected the idea that land belonged to elites or hereditary classes. It is held for the public as a whole. Removing Crown authority moves the country toward a modern form of feudalism, where both rights and access to land flow from inherited status rather than equal citizenship.

Canada is undoubtedly stronger for the inclusion of Indigenous history and culture in its social fabric, and for the perspectives this brings to understanding our shared country. Respect for that contribution, however, does not require embedding ancestry-based authority into public policy that governs all people. Authority exercised without shared accountability is incompatible with a free society.

Canadians are unlikely to tolerate new regulatory burdens developed in secret and applied unequally. If the pandemic taught governments anything, it should be that gatekeeping information breeds mistrust and resentment, not legitimacy.

Yet some academic and government institutions openly state that “Indigenous Knowledge” is not intended to be fully accessible to the public. The University of British Columbia, for example, explains that such knowledge is governed by cultural protocols, and that some forms of Indigenous data “[cannot be shared with all people or in all contexts.](#)”

This structure is now being reflected in law. Through commitments under UNDRIP, both Canada and B.C. have committed to “[Indigenous data sovereignty](#),” including through measures which support Indigenous control over data and information systems used in governance of the public.

Worse still, each government has made much of this “Indigenous Knowledge” protected from public disclosure through formal legislation. In B.C., the government [cannot disclose](#) information to the public when its release could affect Indigenous control over cultural heritage or traditional knowledge, including “manifestations of sciences, technologies or cultures.”

This creates a system in which public decisions may rely on information that the broader public has no legal right to examine. That kind of delegation of authority to a confidential, non-governmental decision-maker is without precedent in Canadian governance.

Canada must reject privileged frameworks that echo the hierarchical assumptions of early colonial ideology and deny common human reason while assigning authority by ancestry or identity group. Reconciliation should deepen our shared citizenship, not divide it into competing truths. A confident country does not fear openness. It governs through transparency, equal rules, and knowledge we are all allowed to share.

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