
Reflections

Northern Affairs and Relations: An Interview with Gunther Abrahamson, conducted by Jasmin Habib with commentary by Harvey Feit

Gunther Abrahamson died in Ottawa April 2015 after dedicating more than five decades of his life to Indigenous concerns and, in particular, co-governance. He was born in Berlin in the mid-1920s but was sent out of Germany on the *kindertransport* to the United Kingdom in 1938 by his mother, who would perish in a concentration camp soon thereafter. Gunther remained in Scotland through the war and until the 1950s, when he would begin his journey to Canada. He reflects on some of his initial experiences in the North as well as how these affected him in later years in the interview I conducted with him in Ottawa in January 2009. A distant relative (his sister had married my grandfather's brother), I had known very little about him but I thought it might be interesting to speak with Gunther since I was preparing to conduct some of my first interviews as they related to a research project on co-governance that Harvey Feit (McMaster University), Philip Awashish (Mistissini First Nation), Sam Gull (Waswanipi First Nation), and I had been awarded, under funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Growing up, I had known only that he had worked in the government and "up north somewhere." Even after the initial interview and many subsequent meetings, where he shared personal stories about the many Inuit artists and writers to whom he had become very attached, he never once referred to his commitment to, and ongoing support of, so many Indigenous and co-governance initiatives. It was only after his passing that I was to learn about many of these relationships along with the recognition and awards he had received. In the obituary published in *Arctic*, Peter Usher and John MacDonald (2016) note: "Essential to his success was the respect he earned from Inuit individuals and organizations for his responsiveness to their proposals, and his refreshingly unbureaucratic, down-to-earth approach to collaboration." In the obituary published in the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board's (BQCMB) newsletter, we learn that "the

BQCMB was the first wildlife co-management board to bring Indigenous people together with scientists and officials from two provinces and the territories ..." (*Caribou News in Brief* 2016). It was Abrahamson who pioneered the concept, says another close friend, environmental consultant and professor Peter Usher, who knew Abrahamson since 1961: "I think Gunther was really instrumental in getting that board established" (*Caribou News in Brief* 2016).

What remains most interesting – if also troubling to me – is not so much the distance that Gunther seems to have placed between himself and his bureaucratic past, as Harvey Feit describes it below, but also that there remains a striking naiveté about the relationship of the government, co-governing practices, and Indigenous communities' experiences of institutions and those who entered their communities as representatives of those institutions. As Harvey notes, this seems to capture both a moment as well as a common positioning among those who have worked in and alongside Indigenous communities on a range of projects.

The interview took place in Ottawa in 2009. Gunther reviewed, revised, and approved the transcript for publication in 2014. In keeping with *Anthropologica's* practice of having all articles evaluated before publication, several reviewers were selected. Among them was Harvey Feit, due in no small part to his expertise, and because he had heard about my interview, but had never had the chance to read or evaluate it. He agreed to share his thoughts on the interview, as follows:

I have reread the interview with Gunther Abrahamson several times now and I stay enthusiastic about publishing it. My reactions have changed over time and my recommendation that it be published has gotten even stronger. On first reading I was struck by how much his stories were typical of stories non-Indigenous northerners tell each other, sensitive temporary northerners, how much they were probably like field ethnographers' stories elsewhere. That is

still true. Even his counter-reading of knowledge, getting things done in communities, and dealing with the bureaucracy “fit” typical northern stories. But on subsequent readings, I came to appreciate how he took these experiences, knowledge and sensibilities “home,” when he moved south, even more how he took them into his life as an administrator and a bureaucrat, both in Ottawa and back in the north for various projects, and how the stories became more elaborate. So I really think that learning about how he lived out his sensibilities in the bureaucracy at the administrative center in Ottawa can be jarring or even unsettling for readers, and even for experienced ethnographers. The only disappointment for me in the narrative is how he locates his stories in the bureaucratic past so completely. This may reflect his own sense of distance from that bureaucracy – he had retired nearly 25 years earlier – or that he could not identify with the direction of the Conservative government being led by the then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Habib’s questions, even when he doesn’t take up the analyses she offers, locate Abrahamson partly in a de Certeauian-informed world, so that alongside his invitations to understand how these experiences shaped his work, she invites us to reflect as scholars on those experiences, and those of others working alongside Indigenous peoples in the North in this period.

Jasmin Habib: How did you come to learn about Indigenous peoples in Canada? How did your relationship to the community or leadership and grow? How would you define or describe your relationship – expert, consultant, collaborator, advisor, friend, and so on?

Gunther Abrahamson: That’s a single question?!

JH: Just to give you an overall sense of the questions but you can go anywhere with that. We can begin with: How did you come to learn about Indigenous peoples and their communities?

GA: Well, that’s fairly easy. I was working my way around the world, but you know about that already.

JH: Yes. Well, please tell the rest of us.

GA: Somebody told me that before I left Canada, I should really visit the North. I got a job in Yellowknife with one of the gold mines and rented a little cabin on the edge of Great Slave Lake for \$10 a month. I enjoyed a marvelous life. I had a fish net in the water and my private dock where I had a canoe and camping equipment. I stayed for five years working in the mill, eventually becoming the shift boss. When things ran well I would read a book a shift. Then one day I saw an advertisement for “an assistant superintendent, Reindeer

Station.” So, with my background in agronomy, and out of curiosity, I casually enquired what this was about. I did not hear anything for months and then somebody called me for an interview. By this time I was no longer interested. But, I ended up taking the job at the Reindeer Station, 20 miles north of Inuvik. Large landholdings in Australia used for livestock production are called “stations.” In Canada “station” refers to a small group of dwellings. The Reindeer Station was a small community of about 100 people on the edge of the reindeer reserve: 18,000 square miles or 12 million acres. I knew nothing about the job, but the man who had been superintendent for seven years was desperate to leave and I was to replace him. His wife was in total depression, and they wanted more than a one-room school for their two young daughters. That’s the first time I had real exposure to Aboriginal people. All “Eskimos,” as they were then called.

JH: Right. What year was this?

GA: This was in 1959. Most of the men were employed as reindeer herders. There was a schoolteacher, an elderly spinster lady; a young Hudson Bay Post manager; and Freddie, the mechanic who was Metis. Freddie eventually became a prominent northern leader. In recent years, he was head of the group that negotiated the pipeline deal that is currently being considered. He had saved enough money on the DEW Line to go to flying school and to buy a plane, which was just what we needed to get around the reserve. But he couldn’t get a commercial flying license. Local aircraft companies in Inuvik did not want the competition. But when I needed them, I might wait three days because they had other priorities. If Freddie could get a license, we would use his aircraft to fly herders and supplies to their camps on the reserve. One day, some officials dropped in from Ottawa. I entertained them and as they left, they asked if there was anything they could do for me. I complained that Freddie had been refused a license by the Air Transport Board (ATB) in Ottawa. They promised to look into the problem. A few weeks later, a letter arrived from the ATB: “Now that the situation has been explained to us, we are glad to provide Freddie with the license he needs.” That’s not part of the story, is it?

JH: Haha. That’s fine.

GA: There was one other non-Aboriginal family. They were Laplanders who had been recruited in Lapland in the mid-1930s to help drive the 3,000 reindeer, which the federal government had bought in Alaska, along the Arctic coast to Canada and across the Mackenzie River onto the reserve [that] had been established to receive

them. This drive took three years. When wolves spooked the animals, or there was a blizzard, the reindeer would turn around and stampede back towards Alaska.

JH: And what were the reindeer for; why were they there?

GA: In the 1890s, commercial whalers, who over-wintered in the region, had hunted caribou to near extinction. Reindeer were meant to replace caribou as a source of food and eventually to provide employment for local people. The plan was to train reindeer herders and set them up with their own herds. It did not work out. The first herder to have his own reindeer was caught in a storm at sea and drowned. There were four Aboriginal entrepreneurs and none of them met with success. They were hunters and trappers rather than herders. With reindeer, they had to stand guard almost all the time to watch that bears or wolves did not take any. In the fall, reindeer would have an instinct to move south where they vanished. The herders, who had sheepdogs, were expected to stop them.

So, that is where I started to work with Aboriginal people. In those days, none of them had much formal schooling. I was probably the only person who was semi-literate. But they were tolerant and patient. I would listen to their problems and help when I could. I soon learned that communication was seldom direct. For example, Reindeer Station employees got annual government rations that came on barges from up river during the short shipping season. These rations were to last for a year. But relatives would come in from the bush to stay for a while. Sooner or later, the men would come to my little office, which was just a cabin, and they would say:

“Women sure eat a lot.”

I was expected to ask, “What women?”

And they would say, “Well, it’s all these visitors.”

But they would not tell the visitors to buy their own food or to leave. In the end, I would suggest that they tell the visitors to go home. They would do so but cast me as being a hard man. After all, it was my suggestion!

So, we got to know each other pretty well.

There were no health professionals in the community. With the aid of *Merk’s Manual* (a medical textbook), and the occasional radioed advice from a doctor 30 miles away, I had to deal with various health issues. Looking back, I am appalled at the responsibilities we were given with no training. An elderly man in a remote camp died of botulism poisoning after eating whale muktuk. I had

mistaken his symptoms for another condition. Sometimes I was upset because a doctor would come on a rare visit. When his plane took off, people would complain to me about some ailment. I would say:

“Well, the doctor was just here, why did not you say something?”

“Oh, we don’t know that man!”

I also went out on the land with them. They had an archaic work system inherited from the 1930s. Two herders would go out to stay with the herd to watch over it. They had reindeer trained to pull sleds. But if these animals were let loose to forage, the herders might spend hours to lasso them before they got them back into harness. The herders would stay for a week on the tundra away from their families. They were not allowed sleeping bags because it was thought that if they had sleeping bags, they would just crawl into them and forget about the reindeer. They had a little coal stove, which they would have to stoke to keep warm inside an un-insulated tent. Really grim at 40 below, often with a wind blowing. The first time I went with them, I took a sleeping bag. We sat around the coal stove until somebody said it was bedtime. I took off my fur boots and my double fur parka and crawled into my sleeping bag. In the middle of the night, a storm came up and the tent blew away. With it went my parka and my boots!! The herders were laughing because they were fully clothed and I wasn’t. Nobody had said something like this might happen. I still see our lit Coleman lantern flying away in the wind. That night, we huddled under some canvas until dawn. It was very cold. When the storm died down, I found my parka and my boots. The sled dogs were comfortably buried in snow. Only their black noses were visible.

Is this what you want to hear?

JH: Yes!

GA: Well that was that one episode. I don’t know where I’m going with this story ...

JH: Well, I think you were going to talk about your relationships and how they developed. You’ve shared some stories about the relationships that you developed ... with people. That’s my sense of where you were going.

GA: Before my arrival, most of the men were drinking and gambling. They would lose their clothing, their sled dogs, and their rifles. But then a fundamentalist group arrived – Born Again Christians – and converted the

entire community. Henceforth, no drinking, no gambling, and no movies.

JH: And what year would that have been?

GA: 1959.

JH: Still 1959. So it was in the period that you were stationed there.

GA: I was there from early 1959 to the end of 1960. I learned a lot more from the people there than they learned from me. They knew the land and knew all about wildlife. As the snow melted in the spring, masses of driftwood would come down on the high water of the Mackenzie River. These logs were traditionally used to build cabins along the river and along the shores of the Beaufort Sea. At the Reindeer Station, we collected those logs mostly for firewood. The men went out with a tractor and big sled to pick up logs on the riverbank. One day, somebody came rushing into my office and said the tractor had gone through the ice. I did not react because they often played practical jokes like that.

JH: Oh, is that right?

GA: I said “oh yeah?” Whoever brought me this news was unflustered and did not convey a sense of urgency. Then Freddie came in and said, “you know the tractor went through the ice.” I told him that I had just heard that. But Freddie insisted that this was serious.

JH: Better get moving?!

GA: So, we got into the Bombardier – skis in front and tracks on the rear – and drove to the scene of the accident. Right enough, the tractor was under water and the men were sitting inside a tent on the sled. This is what happened: as they were moving along, one man was playing an accordion. All of a sudden there was silence – the tractor was not to be heard. They looked out and the tractor had gone through the ice. They must have hit a weak spot in the ice where the river current had eroded it. The tractor driver was rescued because his mates saw the fur of his parka hood beneath the surface of the water and pulled him out.

We went off to Inuvik, the recently built new town and administrative centre for the region, for equipment to hoist the tractor out of the water. The regional administrator was my boss. I was quite nervous; I couldn't tell him that the tractor had just fallen through the ice. I told him I needed a hoist from Public Works, who also reported to him. He gave his approval but, as I was leaving, asked what I wanted it for. Oh, I said, the tractor fell through the ice! He immediately reported this to

Ottawa, through the long chain of command. I thought, “what a way to start my government career!” We went back and pulled the tractor out. We towed it home and got it running again. Then a radio message came in from Ottawa – they wanted a full report. In those days, we did not have mail during the freeze up and break up of the river ice where planes had to land. All communities relied on single-sideband radio communication. You'd say what you had to say and then you'd say “over” and let the other party speak. We had regular morning radio schedules. The Department of Transport radio operator in Aklavik would call each community in turn to take or relay messages. While waiting our turn, we would all be listening to what the others had to say unless they were using code.

JH: What was the code for? Was it like a military code, or ...?

GA: The government used Slater's code for top-secret stuff like “the Russians are coming!” The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) had their own code, and most of their traffic was about what to pay for various types of fur. One HBC store manager insisted on using Morse, which irritated most of us because he took longer than anybody else making us wait for our turn.

Atmospheric conditions could make radio reception unreliable. Messages would be garbled, broken up, or mere static noise. At times, this could be convenient. When Ottawa asked for a full report on the tractor before I was ready to give it, I merely told the radio operator that I could not “read” him and to try another day, followed by an “over and out” (we each had our own code).

While on the topic of private codes, I must tell you about a code used by the government's administrator at Tuktoyaktuk. He had an arrangement with one of the airline pilots for his liquor order. A request for one size of wrench might mean a bottle of whisky and another would be for a bottle of rum. One day, there was a new pilot who, knowing nothing about the code, delivered a bundle of tools.

JH: That's hilarious!

Could you tell us the story of moving from the North to Ottawa?

GA: Well, my first move was from Reindeer Station to Aklavik. [But I married Inge first. She was the dentist at Inuvik, and I was one of her first patients!]

JH: OK, tell us about that.

GA: While at this job at the Reindeer Station, the federal government was negotiating with an anthropologist in Vermont who had ambitious plans for the reindeer industry and persuaded somebody in the Ottawa establishment that privatisation was a good idea. This man asked me to continue at about twice what the government was paying me. I think he offered me \$10,000 a year, an enormous sum then. He looked at a map, and he said we'll do this and had generally big plans based on theory and charm. I decided to stay with the government and was eventually offered a job in Aklavik with the Game Management Branch.

JH: Because you were an agronomist?

GA: No, the job in Aklavik had to do with wildlife. The Mackenzie Delta was rich in resources, especially fur bearers and fish. The Delta was divided into trapping areas. Each area was registered to a particular trapper who had exclusive trapping rights there. But when the DEW Line construction started and offered opportunities for well-paid jobs, many were quick to abandon their trap lines. At this point, the government decided it would be best to do away with individual trapping areas and have a group trapping area open to every resident with a trapping license. I was asked to get involved in this transformation but did not realise what a sensitive issue this was going to be. I started by going around to the community, and individual trappers, to explain what was involved and to get them to sign away their rights to their own trapping areas. Today, it looks like expropriation. I did not think of that then. I thought it made sense. If there were trappers who were not harvesting resources, there were others who would benefit. My official title was Game Management Officer, a fancy name for game warden. I would issue hunting and trapping licenses, as well as fur export permits, and keep records of game taken. I was also expected to enforce the game regulations, but I never considered that a priority. You do not gain people's trust and cooperation by taking them to court or confiscating their rifles. If they shot geese, or whatever, out of season, I was convinced that they had done so in self-defence or for their subsistence.

JH: And what were you doing? How were you travelling through these communities?

GA: By dog team in winter and by boat in summer. It was quite interesting. People were suspicious of another government official coming around. My first visits were introductory. The official term was "being on patrol." The Dene patrolman (guide) and I would travel from camp to camp, drink tea, and overnight with different

families who could be "Indian," "Eskimo," or "Metis" as they were then called.

JH: And did this person speak the language, or ...?

GA: Most people in the Delta understood English. There had been a school in Aklavik since about 1926, and many had been to school. I eventually got around to the deregistration of trapping areas. By this time, the idea was generally accepted, but there were some holdouts, mostly white men. The guide warned me that one man was dangerous. He had threatened to shoot my predecessor. My guide waited at a safe distance while I went up to the man's cabin. I introduced myself, asked him how he was but thought it best not to say anything about the deregistration of trap lines. He did look a bit "bushed" [rough]. After a cup of tea, he showed me a translucent stone, which, when held at a proper angle, would reveal a nude woman. I enjoyed that too, and I thought we had developed a bond ... We parted on that note. A few weeks later I went back to explain what we were trying to do. He told me, without animosity, that he was not surrendering his trapping area for anybody. I told him that there was no compulsion and that I understood his position. On another trip, we overnights at an Inuit camp. That was unpleasant. They were high on homebrew, did not like "Indians," and insisted that I was a Russian spy. I thought it best not to explain the purpose of our visit. To learn more about life on the land, I stayed for a week with an Aboriginal family, went muskrat trapping, and learned to eat muskrat stew and other country foods. I got lessons in beaver trapping. I proudly took a beaver home and put it in the oven, but we could not eat it.

JH: Why couldn't you eat it?

GA: It had a horrible smell, which put us off.

JH: Can we go back to your earlier story? Were there non-Aboriginal people who had been registered as trappers as well?

GA: Yes, in the 1920s and 1930s, there was an influx of Brits, Scandinavians, some Germans, and a few Americans.

JH: As families or as single men?

GA: Single men who came down the Mackenzie River. Most had families with Aboriginal women. Many of their children became prominent northern leaders.

JH: So you ended up there ...

GA: I'm still in Aklavik, right?

JH: Yes, exactly.

GA: Towards the end of summer in 1962, Don Snowdon, whom I had met the year before at Reindeer Station, came in from Ottawa. He asked if I would be interested in working for him carrying out Area Economic Surveys in the Northwest Territories. The purpose of these surveys was to identify local economic development opportunities such as fisheries, tourism, cooperatives, and arts and crafts. I said that I would be interested but heard nothing more. Then this telegram from Snowdon arrived to say that he had not heard from me regarding his job offer! Once again, communication had got stuck in Fort Smith, the district headquarters. We got that sorted out, and in the spring of 1962, Inge and I were on the ice of the Mackenzie River where a plane waited to take us and others to Inuvik. There were some tearful goodbyes, and we made promises to return.

We arrived in Ottawa on a balmy day in May. I reported to Don Snowdon, then chief of the Industrial Division of the Northern Administration Branch. Inge was with me and was shocked when I asked for a week off to take her on a holiday to New York and Washington!

JH: So Ottawa was 1962 ...

And you were hired by Northern Affairs not Indian Affairs.

GA: That's right. At that time, Indian Affairs and Northern Affairs were in totally separate government departments, and we had little to do with one another. The Northern Administration Branch was a new organisation, and we made our own rules as we went along. We rather looked down on Indian Affairs who were constrained by the many provisions of the Indian Act. Following government reorganisation a few years later, Indian and Northern Affairs were brought together in the same department. After I arrived in Ottawa, I was assigned to plan and carry out an area economic survey from Tuktoyuktuk to Cape Parry. Our report was published under that title. In 1963, we did another survey of the area that covered Coppermine, Cambridge Bay, Holman Island, and some satellite communities. That report, "An Area Economic Survey: The Copper Eskimos," was also published. I did these two surveys and, a year later, was put in charge of all area economic surveys.

JH: And so how did you do these when you say you did these? What did you do – travel north?

GA: We went to every community and interviewed every family about their income and spending habits; where they trapped, hunted, and fished; and asked questions

about their gear such as boats, canoes, rifles, fishnets, and traps. When I see our reports today, I'm a bit embarrassed.

JH: Why?

GA: Well, the surveys were intrusive by today's standards, and none of us had any training in the social sciences or even how to conduct interviews. On the other hand, the mission was to identify resources and opportunities to be exploited. I have since been told that our surveys established baselines where none existed. I was flattered to find one of our reports for sale in a second-hand bookstore in New York City for \$10.

JH: Really? In a New York bookstore?

GA: I don't know how it got there.

JH: No, that's fantastic! Maybe some anthropologist from New York University or Columbia brought it in?

GA: A couple of years later, I was promoted to industrial superintendent for the Arctic District, which included northern Quebec, the Keewatin, and Baffin Island. During that period, the government had a lot of money for local economic development in the Arctic. I remember my first budget request. I had just returned from a tour of the communities. Our field staff asked for items such as a handicraft centre, or a cannery, or freezers for storing fish and seal meat. I came back to Ottawa and submitted my estimates. In the review process, the assistant deputy minister astounded me when he said that he expected me to be more creative. The following year, I cast all modesty aside and doubled the amount I had previously asked for and had it approved. I repeated my success the following year.

JH: And you were at this point the superintendent for economic development of the Arctic – all three regions.

GA: Arctic District ... it wasn't the entire Arctic because it did not include the West, which was the Mackenzie District. Anyway, I got a reputation as someone who could get things done. We had some failures too but if you don't try ...

When Jim Houston was in Cape Dorset, he bought every carving just to encourage the carvers. Some of the carvings were junk, which he would put through a hole in the ice at night. Then we developed the Igloo Tag, which, when attached to a carving, certified that it was handmade by a Canadian Inuit. With this tag, carvings could be exported to the United States, our main market, duty free, and without any further documentation. That was a major coup.

JH: And did you work with the artists themselves, or was there someone else who ...?

GA: We recruited individuals with a background in printmaking, carving, weaving, canoe building, tanning, and various handicrafts. They were hired for a specific task and community and had the title of arts and crafts development officer. One of the functions I inherited was chairman of the Eskimo Loan Fund. In those days, there were no banks in the North, and the Inuit had no access to credit other than that extended by the Hudson's Bay Company for purchases made in their stores. The government established a loan fund where people could borrow at 5 percent simple interest and without security to support some economic activity or to build a house. I remember an Inuit lady in Inuvik who made my fur parkas. Her husband, a government employee, had suddenly died. His daughter wrote to tell me that her mother could barely make ends meet. She had a loan for a house but had trouble meeting her payments. Because her husband had been a term employee, he did not have a pension. I recommended that the loan be written off. This involved a submission to the Treasury Board with a full explanation of the circumstances. I had done this, when a cheque arrived from the widow with a letter apologizing for being in arrears. At this point, an official said the loan was still active and could not be written off. I had to wait another six months before I had a new contact at the Treasury Board. I told him the widow's story, and the loan was written off.

Well, that was the Eskimo Loan Fund. We had also established an Eskimo Small Boats Assistance Fund to help people buy their own boats for fishing, whaling, hauling supplies, and to support the emergence of northern tourism. These were exciting times when every challenge was met with enthusiasm and, in hindsight, frequent success.

On the other hand, I was thinking these days, there is much attention paid to residential schools and the inhumanity of them. I picture myself at Holman Island, the plane arrived to pick up the kids to take them to the residential school in Yellowknife. They were all lined up, and, you know, mothers are mothers, they don't like to see their kids being taken away. At the time, I thought we were just doing our job, but then I always think of those concentration camp guards just doing their jobs, right? Somebody tells you this is what has to be done and you don't really weigh it ...

GA: We had students from all over the Arctic in both Churchill and Ottawa completing high school or enrolled in a variety of vocational training programs.

JH: Could you explain that, because some might not know what you are referring to?

GA: Schools in the Northwest Territories and in Arctic Quebec did not teach beyond elementary grades. Students who were thought to qualify were brought to Churchill or Ottawa for vocational training or to complete high school. In Churchill, they were in residences, but in Ottawa, they were placed with families.

JH: So billeted, not fostered?

GA: No, billeted.

JH: Billeted with families. And so, was this a federal government program?

GA: Yes, a federal program that supported about 100 students in the South. It operated under the supervision of a superintendent and a staff that included student counsellors, adult educators, and other specialists.

JH: What years?

GA: I got involved in the mid 1970s when the federal government began the process of transferring responsibility for what were essentially territorial programs from Ottawa to the territorial government in Yellowknife. This was done in stages. Transfers of staff and programs were completed first in the Mackenzie District whose headquarters were in Yellowknife and were followed a year or two later by the transfer of staff and programs in the Arctic District whose headquarters were in Ottawa.

JH: And Indian Affairs became part of Northern Indian Affairs at what point? Or does that have any impact on how you dealt with ...?

GA: To answer your first question, an earlier government reorganisation brought Indian and Northern Affairs into the same department. But the Indian Branch was totally separate from the Northern Affairs Branch. The latter was a new organisation, and we made our own rules as we went along. We rather looked down on Indian Affairs who were constrained by the many provisions of the Indian Act ...

To return to a previous point in this account, I should have mentioned that until 1978 or so, as I recall, the commissioner of the Northwest Territories and the nominal head of its government was located in Ottawa. I say nominal because Northern Affairs staff provided the support for his office. Anyway, when the commissioner and the territorial government moved to Yellowknife, some of us were given the option of going to Yellowknife or staying in Ottawa to administer a number of

residual responsibilities. I stayed behind. I was given new responsibilities and made chief of a newly minted Social and Cultural Development Division, which brought together fragments of northern-related programs from various parts of the department. These included the development and marketing of Inuit arts and crafts; the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council; an Inuit language magazine; funding of comprehensive land claims research, the Eskimo Loan Fund; the Cooperative Business Development Fund and cooperatives; and a few other programs that were Canada-wide, such as Inuit linguistics. In the process of devolution, we did not just say, "Here are the files and it is your program now," but we had constant discussions with our territorial counterparts. At the request of the Inuit Tapariit Kanatami, we funded and staffed an Inuit Language Commission to make recommendations on a uniform writing system. For generations, the Inuit communities have used two systems of spelling. Inuit in Labrador and the western Arctic used the Latin alphabet, while Inuit in Quebec and the Keewatin used syllabic characters brought to Canada by missionaries. Some believed that this [practice] divided communities, and others thought that the retention of a syllabic system did not make sense because, except for the Bible, little was printed in syllabics. But *that* was the clincher, because people using syllabics saw this as the script in which the Bible was written; it could not be abandoned. So, while the language commissioner recommended against the continued use of syllabics, this idea was rejected.

JH: So, it's rooted in the fact that there had been missionaries.

GA: Yes. The first efforts to write Inuktitut came from Moravian missionaries in Greenland and Labrador in the mid-18th century. In the 1870s, Edmund Peck, an Anglican missionary, adapted the Cree script to Inuktitut. Other missionaries and linguists adapted the Latin alphabet to the dialects of the Mackenzie River Delta, the western Arctic, and Alaska. We went on to fund the development of a syllabic character element for an IBM typewriter. It was ironic that this project was good for only a couple of years after which computers took over, and the "ball" that was dubbed "the seal eye" in Inuktitut was consigned to history!

The first computers we got were called "Super Brains" to which the Inuit took to like fish to water, forcing their supervisor reluctantly into the computer age. We uplinked to a language conference in Iqaluit. When I asked the women working in the offices how it was going, they complained that the process lacked speed! Later, they

showed me how to use it and that formed my introduction to computers.

I want to return to the topic of Inuit students in Ottawa. There was no place for them to hang out or to meet their parents when they came to visit. We got approval to rent a house on Somerset Street close to the canal and called it Inuit House. It was an instant success. We had an Inuit couple look after the place. Students cooked traditional foods, met friends, played games, and welcomed new students. The superintendent in charge of student programs had sent me a requisition for new furniture. I questioned his judgment, suggesting that second-hand furniture was adequate as I believed that new stuff would not survive for long. I was wrong. Months later, I sat down with one of the Inuit girls who told me how proud they were to have been entrusted with new furniture. I learned a good lesson!

Some parents complained that their children did not write home, and they wished that they had more information about what was going on in Ottawa. With this in mind, we produced a little newsletter called *Igalaaq*.

JH: Which means what?

GA: It means "window."

The students would collect stories, interview teachers and others, and take photographs. With some help, they would produce the newsletter, which we sent to their home communities. I had a tough time getting it published by the department because I was told that it had to be bilingual, meaning English and French. I insisted that it was bilingual [Inuktitut and English] and that nobody there read French. To cut a long story short, I knew how to work the rules. I contacted a private company and said, produce this for us, and here is a purchase order for the number of copies we need.

JH: Very smart.

GA: Yes, I had mastered the skill of bending the rules to get things done. But, I must tell you another story about outwitting the system. In Arctic Quebec, we spotted this little sealskin owl, Ookpik, in a basket of handicrafts. We took Ookpik to a craft show in Chicago and came back with an order for thirty thousand more for immediate delivery. So we had to get sealskins in a rush and bought \$10,000 worth locally. The auditor general's representative came around a month later, following the paper trail. He wanted to see the requisition for this purchase. There wasn't a requisition; it was "just do it." I worked with one clerk, she'd talk the hind leg off a donkey, if you asked her for an explanation you'd be there till

doomsday. She wouldn't leave anything out. I said, oh, Grace will explain it to you. I have another appointment! I did not come back that afternoon. The next day, they told me that the poor man left clutching his head. We never saw him again!

JH: Guess she provided too many details, he did not want to know anymore! That's very funny!

GA: Even I learned not to ask too many questions ... But I was very fond of her.

JH: So, you've learned a lot from all kinds of people through these experiences. How would they describe your relationship to them: as advisor, friend, consultant, government agent, which is it? I ask because it sounds like you weren't any one thing, even though you had a number of titles, ... but what were these titles – how meaningful were they?

GA: I was just doing my job. First, let me talk about my own staff. I saw my job as helping them to do theirs. So, I would protect them from auditor generals, or directors, or ministers. I gave them maximum latitude. At that period, only division chiefs could sign letters to the public. I said, look, I want you to sign your own correspondence. If you make a mistake, you are going to hear about it, but sign it, and then the person who gets your letter can call you if necessary. I saw my role as facilitator and, sometimes, as arbitrator. I had a loyal team, and they would do anything for me. There were individuals who did not fit, and those I let go. I had a reputation for being tough but fair.

When it came to Aboriginal people, when I worked in the field, I learned more from them than they ever learned from me. They knew that they could tell me anything and that I would not be offended. I told you my story about the old man who came for his food voucher. As you know the saying goes, "give a man a fish, and he will always come back, give him a fishnet ...". Anyway, I asked this man whether he had tried fishing and gave him a fishnet. I told the superintendent of welfare what I had done, and he said, "well you know, he is an old man. Just give him his food vouchers!" So, I am saying I learned a lot by just doing things. Some places I had a reputation that it could only be my way. I had this quoted back to me. I don't know if it was true, but it might have been.

I recall that at Baker Lake there was a soapstone quarry, which fell under some mining regulations, and if you registered a claim to a stone deposit, only you had the right to mine that soapstone. We had an arts

and crafts officer who was good but could not follow instructions. We fired him, but he did not leave the community as we had expected. He persuaded three of his Inuit supporters to register their rights to the soapstone quarry, making us (the department) buy the stone for the carvers in the community. We flew in soapstone from another community. That was another lesson. We eventually had the regulations changed so that soapstone quarries would remain protected for community use. I really did get involved in all manner of things.

JH: So you made friends as well along the way with people.

GA: Yes! I don't know if I made enemies ...

JH: But what are things you did that weren't part of your job? That is, were you able to do things that weren't defined by your job or you felt you should do out of some ethical or humanitarian gesture? Did more and more of those things happen over time? Like the story of the welfare cheque?

GA: I was lucky that I had the confidence of senior management in the department and was able to define my job as I went along and do what I thought was right. Nobody set boundaries for me. I don't know if that's an explanation.

JH: No ... when you say "I was just doing my job," it doesn't sound like you were *just* doing your job, even though, of course, you *were* doing your job, you seemed to be doing more than strictly going by the book. In some ways, you seem to have redefined the job as you went along.

GA: Yes, and we were lucky to have had that liberty in those days.

JH: So you don't think that could happen now?

GA: No way. Everything is tightly controlled and requires several levels of approval. Individuals are afraid to take risks.

JH: Did you want to talk about the Caribou Management Board, since its founding and ongoing success has been so meaningful to you?

GA: In 1981, there was a big slaughter of caribou in northern Saskatchewan. There were so many caribou that individuals from First Nations and Metis communities would drive out in trucks, shoot them, cut out their tongues, take the hindquarters and abandon the rest.

JH: Why were they doing that? Why would they cut out their tongues?

GA: Tongues are considered a delicacy.

JH: Oh, okay, so they were eating some portions of them. I thought it was some sort of ritual or something.

GA: A French film crew captured the scene, and it played in Europe and got the attention of the press. The minister and prime minister were upset. John Munroe was the minister. He said that we had to do something about it. A jurisdictional division of responsibilities complicated the issue. Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Northwest Territories had exclusive responsibility over game. Relationships with "Status Indians" [First Nations] were the responsibility of the federal government. The first thing, then, was to get the ministers to agree that there was a problem, and that they would have to work together to resolve it. To cut a long story short, I was given the task of arranging a ministerial meeting. They met in Winnipeg, signed an agreement to work together to address issues of caribou management. I still had to go to Treasury Board and the Privy Council to get approval for an inter-governmental agreement. I sent the documentation to the gnomes who were processing this stuff in the department and had a control function. One of them came to tell me that he could not approve the material I had sent them. With malice aforethought, I asked what he did not like and listened to his explanation. I ended the interview by asking him to explain his reservations to the minister who had signed the agreement the previous week! So, we had an agreement to establish an intergovernmental Caribou Management Board. It took me another 12 months to visit various Aboriginal communities to explain the agreement and to persuade them to sign on. But that is a separate story.

JH: What is it about Indigenous practices that you believe Canadians need to understand or know or appreciate?

GA: Well, there are quite a few ... We go to meetings with a firm agenda and expect to leave with a decision. Aboriginal peoples will not be rushed into a decision and consensus is important to them.

And they have difficulty saying "no."

JH: Why is that?

GA: They want to avoid conflict. We prefer open and direct communication. It works better for us than it does for them. We tend to use sarcasm as a weapon – they don't.

JH: Let me just preface this with ... the way in which people see Aboriginal society is as an impoverished economy, an impoverished people, a victimised people, whether it's their experiences in residential schools or with poverty or alcoholism. But there's a richness of experience that you've talked about ... I just wonder if there's something that you experienced that you would want others ... or that you think could potentially open up people's sense of what's happened. Not just what's happened *to* them but who they might be as agents in history. As you said, you learned more from them than they learned from you. But what did you learn from them? What does that really mean?

GA: That is one big question. I think I will just focus on the last part of what I learned. I learned to listen for the real meaning of what was being said. I learned that there was no need for an immediate response to what was being said – Indigenous people are quite comfortable to sit in silence. We are not. I learned to respect traditional knowledge and beliefs.

I learned that while our society judges people by their occupation, their possessions, the size of their house, and the make of their car, they do not. They value the skill of the hunter and sewing skills ... I noticed that when women sewed for their families, where their work would be seen and judged in the community, their work was of much better quality than that produced for sale in the South. They knew the barren lands and how to survive there, how to manage a team of dogs, and how to fish under the ice, among other things. They were masters of their environment. I wasn't.

JH: Okay, there's been a great deal said and written about the role of consultants, advisors and anthropologists working in and for Indigenous communities. Some of these criticisms have been levelled by Indigenous scholars, others by scholars and journalists – most recently by Widdowson and Howard's *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*. How would you respond to these mostly negative commentaries? It could be any of them.

GA: I have worked with consultants who were invaluable and consultants who were totally biased and less than objective.

JH: Were these Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal consultants?

GA: All non-Aboriginals.

JH: Okay. So tell me why you thought the Widdowson and Howard book was interesting, because I remember when we first met, you said to me: "Oh, you'll probably hate it." And I hadn't yet read it. So I was expecting

to hate it. But I wondered why it spoke either to your experience, or what it was about the book that you thought ... besides it being a “good read.” What does that mean, a “good read”?

GA: I thought there was a lot of truth in it. I could identify with situations they described.

JH: So, could you describe one of these situations, if you can recall any of them?

GA: A consultant with considerable experience working with Aboriginal people came to a Caribou Management Board meeting. He went overboard with the importance of traditional knowledge and totally discounted the knowledge of caribou biologists, who were immediately antagonised. At this point in time, Aboriginal people and biologists had finally learned to listen to one another and to concede that everybody had something to bring to the table. Anyway, this consultant played to the gallery, stating that the government did not know anything and that the government should put millions into doing this and that. The whole thing was totally unrealistic. The government did not have millions and to denigrate biologists was counter-productive. He did have some useful things to say but it was cancelled out by the anti-government rant.

JH: Were there many like that, though? Was this the way that Aboriginal knowledge was mobilised over the years or was this just an extreme example?

GA: This consultant and a couple of others leapt on the traditional knowledge bandwagon and exploited it for all it was worth. I don't know if that's a fair comment. I know there is recognition now that Aboriginal knowledge is valuable. I believe that it, and Western science, run along different streams, and I don't think you can really combine them. We say we can, but I don't think we can. But we can learn to listen to each other and to respect each other's views. And if you believe something, that is your right. Does that answer the question?

JH: I think in many respects you're right. There are parallel streams of thought. But how, if you're developing policy – and you're a policy developer – how does one bring the knowledge of these two streams to speak to one another ...?

GA: They meet if there is acceptance that there can be other points of view.

JH: There is a way to meet?

GA: Yes. Everything is negotiable. On the Caribou Management Board, the biologists insisted that we

would know more about caribou migrations if we could attach satellite collars to the caribou. But both First Nations and Inuit cultures attach a spiritual significance to caribou, which you don't violate by hanging collars around their necks. In my experience, Inuit members were always more open than First Nations to trying something new. After some discussion, they were persuaded to go along with collaring six caribou on a pilot basis. The First Nations on the board told us that they would have to consult with their communities before any collars were attached. The Inuit said, we are open to this, but if you don't want to go along with caribou collaring we understand ... I was talking about caribou satellite collaring. There was a regulation in the [Northwest] Territories prohibiting hunting with the use of a plane. First Nations representatives from northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan could not arrive by plane, take caribou, and take off again. The regulation required the plane to depart before any hunting took place. The First Nations representatives asked the board to recommend a change to the regulations which, at that point, added to the expense of subsistence hunting. The board made its recommendation, and the government accepted it. The next time satellite collaring came up, one of the First Nations representatives said: “You helped us with the change in the hunting regulations. We'll support you if you wish to collar caribou.”

JH: ... so as forms of reciprocity?

GA: Yes. Now, in Inuit territory, collaring was a great success because the hunters would know where the caribou were to be found. I got an email from a hunter asking to let him know in real time where the caribou were.

JH: With respect to the Caribou Management Board, when was it founded?

GA: In 1982.

Yes. I should just mention my brief involvement with the Aboriginal people of Newfoundland and Labrador. When Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada in 1949, the terms of the union did not mention Aboriginal people. As a consequence, they could not access the services that the federal government made available to other Aboriginal groups in Canada. Eventually, the federal government agreed to help pay for various services provided by the province to its Indian and Inuit population. In 1974, I was appointed by the provincial government to its Federal-Provincial Committee on Financial Assistance to Indians and Eskimos. This committee, comprising federal and provincial officials and a

couple of Aboriginal representatives, administered the federal monies. I got the impression that the Newfoundland bureaucrats and the Indian Affairs bureaucrats were uncomfortably close. I shook things up, and, as my popularity increased with the Aboriginal people, it waned with the bureaucrats. I was shocked by conditions in the Aboriginal communities. They put in mind of conditions in the Territories 20 years earlier. On the island of Newfoundland, there was a land use conflict between the Mikmaq of Conne River and one of the big forestry companies. My minister got a telegram from the Mikmaqs that unless I came down at once to settle the issue, they would burn down the forests. I don't know how I got out of that one. I should have kept a diary. Now, almost four decades later and years of negotiations, Conne River is

recognised as a status Indian Reserve; and the Inuit of Labrador have settled their land claim and won the right to self-government.

JH: Thank you for your time, Gunther. I will look forward to continuing our conversations, especially on the matter of co-governance and northern relations.

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