

PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES, 1967–2000

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Abstract: The Government of the Northwest Territories has followed many of the same trends as seen in southern Canada with regard to program evaluation. As evidenced through interviews, file reviews, and the retrieval of archived cabinet documentation, it appears that program evaluation in the Northwest Territories has experienced periods of high and low activity, and is now sharing the playing field with performance measurement. However, from this point forward the N.W.T. government diverges from the rest of Canada, as aboriginal self-government agreements are negotiated and the structure of the government changes. In anticipation of community delivery of programs and services, the government is developing northern evaluation resources and working with community program managers, non-profit organizations, and charities.

Résumé: Le gouvernement des Territoires du Nord-Ouest (GTNO) a plus ou moins suivi les mêmes tendances que celles qu'on a observées dans le sud du Canada en ce qui a trait à l'évaluation de programme. D'après les entrevues, l'étude des dossiers, et la documentation extraite des archives du Cabinet, il semble que l'évaluation de programme, qui a connu des hauts et des bas, prenne aujourd'hui autant d'importance que la mesure de rendement. Le GTNO diverge du reste du Canada à partir de ce point, à mesure que des accords sur l'autonomie des peuples autochtones sont négociés et que la structure gouvernementale change. En vue de la prestation de programmes et services par les collectivités, le GTNO développe des ressources d'évaluation pour le Nord et collabore avec des gestionnaires de programmes des collectivités, des organismes sans but lucratif, et des organismes de bienfaisance.

■ On September 18, 1967, Northwest Territories commissioner Stuart Hodgson chartered an aircraft in Ottawa and headed north to Yellowknife. Travelling with him were 25 federal civil serv-

ants, all of whom had made the decision to relocate to the N.W.T. Their task was to set up the first territorial government. "The clear desire was to bring government closer to the people being governed" (Laing, 1966, p. 188).

Relatively speaking, the Government of the Northwest Territories is a young government. In the 1950s and 1960s there were a few administrative structures in place, but no formal entity called "the Government of the Northwest Territories." Programs and policies were under federal jurisdiction with some N.W.T. administrative support. This first decade of governmental activity focused on maintaining service levels, negotiating for more control and funding, and preparing local individuals for involvement in administration. Gradually, over the next few decades, programs and services were transferred from the federal government to the territories and local service mechanisms.

THE 1960S AND 1970S

In the early life of the government, there was sometimes a lack of formal administrative structures, which meant that bureaucratic procedures could be ignored or were missing altogether. Although this may seem alarming, it also left the door open to getting the task completed by whatever means necessary, usually with a great deal of initiative and imagination. Moving the government's administration north also meant moving programs away from their supporting documentation, even though a second chartered aircraft from Ottawa in September 1967 carried over 46,700 pounds of books, records, and reports (Northwest Territories, 1967–68). There was missing paperwork, few clearly defined objectives, and no known rationale for some of the programming. In order to "attain the stability of administration which will be necessary to give the residents confidence in the government" (Laing, 1966, p. 171), bureaucrats carried on with programs as they had before the transfer. The civil service was small, the infrastructure was under development, and the territory they had to cover was huge.

In 1975 the Executive Committee (a transitional body that was the forerunner to the elected cabinet) decided that it would be wise to start evaluating the programs that had been inherited from the federal government. Assessing the functioning of these programs became a key priority (Northwest Territories, 1975). In April 1975 the

Department of the Executive was reorganized and its name was changed to the Department of Planning and Program Evaluation.

The mandate of this department was to assess the programs and services offered by the government. Evaluations were at the pleasure of the Executive Committee, and usually evaluation teams were sent to investigate incidents and sort out program roles and responsibilities. In most cases, the evaluations had to take place on-site because of the nature of doing work in the North (transportation, mail service, reading levels, translation, phone service, and hunting season all had to be factored). These pioneer evaluators were very fortunate in that they evaluated challenging programs in unusual circumstances. One such evaluation examined the relocation of people to seasonal outpost camps around the N.W.T. As these camps were isolated, the evaluators had no option but to fly into the camps to do assessments and interviews. If we remember that there were gaps in paperwork and documentation was spotty, it was not surprising that evaluators found that basic program elements (design) needed to be established.

A member of the evaluation team during this period indicated that evaluation activity was not particularly well received by departmental staff. It is likely that evaluation was perceived to be a first cousin to audit, and something that was “done” to you rather than something that you undertook for yourself. The evaluators were even nicknamed “the commissioner’s Brownshirts” (T. Foster, personal communication, March 1999). Nevertheless, these evaluators enjoyed their work and were able to dispel a number of fears and misunderstandings about evaluation. This was evidenced through a review of some of their reports and interview scripts, in which community people spoke freely about what they saw and felt.

In 1977 Assistant Commissioner Mullins decided that the evaluation function did not belong in a central agency (Northwest Territories, 1977). His rationale was a familiar one: that people outside of a profession (or department) could not effectively evaluate a program that operates within another agency. He felt that only those who managed a program and had the accompanying professional body of knowledge were able to carry out credible program evaluations. To this end, the Department of Planning and Program Evaluation once again became the Department of the Executive, and the evaluation function was lost from the central agency.

The line departments picked up evaluation, but there is little evidence to suggest that departments engaged in high levels of evaluation activity during the late 1970s. Although program reviews, socioeconomic studies, and the reports of various commissions are still on the library shelf, personnel lists, job titles, and job descriptions for this period (1975–81) — needed to verify departmental resource allocation to support the program evaluation function — have not been located.

THE 1980S AND 1990S

By 1981 the NWT had experienced a growth phase. In 1961 the population was 23,000; twenty years later it had doubled to 46,000. Support services, infrastructure, training, and program delivery were trying to catch up. There was increased devolution from the federal government, which meant expanding roles and responsibilities for the territorial government. Three years earlier, the Commissioner's Task Force on Administration (1979) recommended evaluation of existing programs in relation to government objectives. In support of this recommendation, in 1983 the Department of the Executive proposed the re-establishment of a centralized evaluation function within government. They subsequently produced booklets on program review and program evaluation. During this time, evaluation activity seemed to be quite active within the line departments.

In March 1983 the Executive Council tasked a Performance Measurement and Evaluation Project Steering Committee to design and test a performance measurement system for the government. The committee wrote the guidelines and set up a pilot project similar to Ontario's management for results system. Although the steering committee included the word *evaluation* in the title of their guidelines, evaluation activity was not pursued. By 1985 the committee recommended a full implementation of management for results throughout government. It seems that the energy used to promote evaluation was now being directed towards the performance measurement initiative. During this time, if departments had evaluation officers on staff, they usually became the department's resource people for the performance measurement initiative.

By 1988 the Financial Management Board Secretariat had an established Centre for Performance Measurement. Departments had support for the evaluation function, but there was little central agency intervention. The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) was instituted in the N.W.T. at this time, and membership numbers were

at an all-time high. During the next five years, training in both evaluation and performance measurement took place. The government arranged for training in performance measurement, and the CES presented evaluation workshops.

The territorial government followed the same patterns seen in governments across Canada and the U.S.A. As performance measurement was centrally directed, it had more political support and therefore more clout than evaluation; however, evaluation was being incorporated into program design and project negotiations and had more support from line managers.

In 1991 the Financial Management Board (FMB) established a project to review the operations and structure of northern government. Their aim was to determine if it was possible to increase effectiveness while containing costs and maintaining service levels. The document *Strength at Two Levels* was the result (Northwest Territories, 1991). The recommendations for evaluation were quite specific: that a formal mechanism for program approval be implemented, information for program management and evaluation be identified through the program design phase, and systematic program evaluation be mandatory and on a schedule.

In an effort to consolidate and support these functions, the FMB Secretariat opened a Program Design and Evaluation Unit in 1994. Their mandate covered organizational design, program design, evaluation, and performance measurement. Priorities included the development and testing of evaluation and performance measurement products and materials, hands-on support to departments, and policy direction for the government. In 1996 the unit was combined with the budgeting function as the first step towards moving to performance-based budgeting.

THE YEAR 2000 AND BEYOND

Government wide, there seems to be a shift away from policy and evaluation units, to policy and strategic planning units. It is likely that the name change to strategic planning reflects the addition of a planning element rather than the loss of evaluation. Responsibility for performance measurement is usually included in these same units, as it is recognized that the departments have few dedicated evaluation resources. There are a few positions within the territorial government that have "evaluation" in the title, and most of these

positions are geared towards a program specialization. Most government managers in Yellowknife, the seat of territorial government, have had at least some training in the social sciences or program evaluation, in the health and education sectors in particular.

The evaluation function seems to have a slight advantage over performance measurement because it has been around longer and has been used as a management tool on the front lines. Performance measurement has been widely instituted and has the support of senior managers and the Legislative Assembly, but does not seem to be as widely understood or accepted as evaluation. This may be changing. The local non-profit organizations have expressed enthusiasm for the United Way Performance Measurement Package. This may generate increased interest among government staff.

It seems that in the territorial government performance measurement and evaluation have a bit of a seesaw relationship. The push for one initiative seems to leave little energy or resources for the second initiative. The implementation of either initiative probably depends on the program needs at the time. If accountability data are needed, efforts will be focused on collections. If the task is to determine a program's effectiveness, an evaluation may be employed. Very often the situation is seen as "either one or the other." Performance measurement, monitoring, evaluation, planning, and policy are all pieces to one puzzle. They will all be applied at different points in a program's lifetime. It has been a challenge to have these pieces seen as a part of a cycle, and not as stand-alone entities.

Although there is currently no approved policy framework to guide the actions of government departments in the area of program evaluation, the government has committed itself to the publication of annual reports on the results of departmental activities. There has been discussion about moving towards an accountability policy that will address evaluation, performance measurement, program design, and third-party accountability. The policy would be intended to provide guidance rather than central agency control. The Northwest Territories has recently been through an election. Nearly all of the candidates spoke about accountability in their literature, and their interest in effective government has been reflected in the name change of one of the standing committees, from the Standing Committee on Government Operations to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight. During recent reviews of tabled documents, standing committees have been asking for updated

measures and consistent results reporting from governmental departments.

In the last 100 years, the N.W.T. has been governed from Regina, Ottawa, and Yellowknife. With self-government initiatives, the territorial government has moved beyond the idea of "bringing the government closer to the people being governed" and adopted the view that aboriginal people have the right to govern themselves. Program delivery continues to move beyond the government into towns and communities, and the future of the government is unknown. Under self-government, the form that the government may take, its responsibilities, constitution, and scope, continue to evolve. Aboriginal people, through their governments, will have law-making authority and program delivery responsibility in areas such as language, social services, education, culture, and some aspects of health. The government will continue to prepare as many people as possible with training in good management and evaluation techniques, while continuing to support evaluation activities. For the past two years, the government has been doing community outreach in the area of evaluation, assisting people who work in small communities by training, providing resource materials, and giving technical support on evaluation activities. This includes community governments as well as non-profit organizations and charities that have third-party service delivery agreements with their funding agencies.

CONCLUSION

Until now, evaluation in the territorial government has generally followed the same path that has been seen in southern Canada. Throughout its history in government, program evaluation has had its highs and lows. At its high point, it was used successfully in correcting serious program flaws. Opportunities for training were eagerly accepted. At its low point, the word *evaluation* was avoided in favour of terms such as *operational reviews*, *comprehensive reviews*, *program assessments*, or *management studies*.

At this point, the territorial government will diverge from the rest of Canada, as this government is facing new challenges with the implementation of aboriginal self-government agreements. The structure of central government will change, which will lead to negotiated accountability requirements. The government has been actively promoting evaluation to regional staff, Band Council staff, and non-profit organizations and charities who hold any kind of third-

party relationships with the government. Changes in administrative and accountability structures will no doubt change the way that the government carries out its business, and the development of evaluation resources will reflect this.

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