

## **Consensus-Based Decision-Making in a Global Society**

### **Asiatic Society of Japan**

**December 10, 2001 (Monday, 6:30 p.m.)**

**Speaker: Dr. Jacqueline H. Wasilewski**

The last meeting of the year was chaired by Vice-President Hugh Wilkinson, as our President wished to propose the vote of thanks. Prof. Wilkinson began by offering the Society's congratulations to T.I.H. The Crown Prince and Princess on the birth of their first child, and he noted that it would be ten years ago next month that His Highness had addressed us at the opening of our 120th anniversary year.

Our speaker on this occasion was Dr. Jacqueline Howell Wasilewski of International Christian University, and her subject was "Consensus-based decision-making in a global society". Dr. Wasilewski began by explaining that her interest in the process of reaching a consensus had sprung from her own family background. Her mother was of Irish and French Canadian stock, and her father's family (the Howells) had been early settlers in Virginia from Wales. They had then migrated, through Cherokee country, to New Mexico, where her parents had met up. Her studies had been sparked by the practical need in her family to create an atmosphere, as around the Christmas dinner table, where Catholics and Protestants could feel comfortable together, and contrasting values could function together harmoniously.

The chief characteristics delineating the types of society in the world were individualism vs. collectivism, but in fact in every society each person had something of both, to differing degrees. In Ecuador, where she had worked twenty years ago, the problem was how to deliver education to people of many types of society, and she had found a way to harmonize the two societal elements. In the Amazon basin, people were socially responsible but also individually autonomous; five-year-olds would look after infants, and a primary-school child could use a machete. She had once experienced having to cross a deep ravine on a perilously narrow log on the way to an important courtesy call; she had caused considerable mirth by straddling the log and inching herself across, but had discovered on enquiry that three-year-olds had already mastered the art of walking across. The problem, then, for such a society was how to combine personal autonomy with social responsibility.

Her first direct encounter with decision-making based on consensus had been in Papua New Guinea in the mid-1980s. She discovered that there was an order of speaking in any group meeting, though this order differed according to the community. The discussion went on until everybody had spoken, and each contribution was received respectfully. On her return to the United States she had started to work for Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO), a native American NGO whose focus was on the participation of tribal governments in the U.S. federal system. The problem she had come up against was, why were some of these governments so dysfunctional, and she had concluded that it was because the Western decision-making processes were not organic to the tribal communities, and the convention of accepting the majority decision did not work. The

problem was how to create a decision-making process that left no-one out. In the United States there were still 500 hundred tribal groups with their own languages (and in her own old high school there were speakers of 93 languages). The old conception that the different elements making up American society would become merged in the melting pot had simply not worked out. Each cultural group had its own historical wisdom, and the question was how to enable this to be expressed. There were many conflicting elements which had to be balanced in resolving social problems, and the priorities had to be sorted out.

Through her work with AIO she had discovered that all tribes use a consensus-based process, based on five "core values". The first was "being a good relative", helping each other and fulfilling reciprocal obligations (like the Japanese *giri*). The second was "inclusive sharing", a spirit of generosity that ensured an equitable distribution of wealth. The third was "contributing", catering to an individual's natural need to feel that he or she was contributing to society. The fourth was "non-coercive leadership", in which leadership meant assuming responsibility rather than wielding power and forcing control. The fifth was "respect" for everything, everyone and every point of view. Among North American Indians there were various traditional styles of organizing a meeting, running from structured, with a leader and an agenda, to flexible. In other cases new meeting styles had been invented. One, the so-called Samoan Circle, was used successfully in the case of a housing project in Chicago involving Hispanics and African Americans, where the tendency had been for one group to try to impose its will on the other. There was no leader, but there were firm rules of speaking: five chairs were placed around a small round table, and only those seated could speak. After speaking, that person had to give up the seat to the person standing waiting behind it. This system ensured the fullest exchange of information, but although it had worked in this case, it was not necessarily suitable for other situations.

A group of people at George Mason University had developed a computer-assisted consensus-building technique for enabling people of diverse backgrounds to deal collectively with complex issues, without each talking past the other. It was found that the brain could only hold seven factors in mind at one time, so the computer would organize the ideas and sort out the best ones. It turned out that the traditional and high-tech methods of consensus-building agreed on certain essential features: there should be, for example, an order of speaking, each person should be listened to respectfully without being interrupted, and the discussion should continue until no-one had anything else to say. The same ground rules had also featured in a structured consensus-building forum held in Mozambique immediately after the civil war, to try to make a social mapping of all those who had a stake in society. Each traditional village leader who attended -- these were usually older illiterate people -- was paired off with a young literate person to make sure that his voice was listened to respectfully.

Dr. Wasilewski had experienced a cultural shock in coming to Japan, where the rules for consensus-building were very different. For instance, whereas the emphasis in America was on new visions for effectively designing the future together, in Japan an eye was always cast back on how to preserve the original ideas. She spoke in particular about the

KJ method devised by a Japanese ethnologist, Jiro Kawakita. Instead of using computers to manage information, you would have a roomful of people writing their ideas on pieces of paper; one person would put down one piece of information and others would add to it or start a new pile on a different subject. They would then work on each pile of information and pattern it. This method was crucial to our ability to solve problems, and led on to "dialogic problem-solving in culturally complex groups", as enunciated by another school of thought. According to their analysis, community begins to emerge as each person seeks to know the truth about his or her own inner nature, and this community will grow when we realize that our created nature calls us into an obedient relationship with others. The possibilities of dialogue increase when all are given an amenable environment in which to speak and be heard respectfully.

One experimental project related to creating peaceful relations in a region of conflict had been carried out in a school attended by both Serb and Croat children. Each of them was encouraged to tell his or her own experiences of the conflict, and it was important that everything should come out; it often transpired that the problems over which they had been fighting were quite different. An honest account of what had happened would in itself have a healing effect.

In conclusion, Dr. Wasilewski said that "our task is to create social spaces where compassionate conversations can take place". Such conversations occur "in places where we can all be ourselves together, where, in the words of Madame Necker, mistress of one of France's great 17th-century salons, 'feelings are able to pass into the souls of others'."

A short time was left for questions, during which Dr. Wasilewski observed that Japan was a consensus-building society but one which was based on a stratified power system. She also made some observations on the Navaho, whose respect of personal autonomy was not unlike that of the Indians of the Amazon basin mentioned earlier. No Navaho, she said, has the right to tell another Navaho what to do, and adults will take no action when a small child is struggling to open a heavy door, or appears to be feeling ill, unless the child asks for help; otherwise they would be infringing on his autonomy. The meeting was closed with a vote of thanks proposed by Dr. Berendt, who spoke of their common interest in the field of social studies.

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Adapted from "The Asiatic Society of Japan Bulletin No. 1", January 2002, compiled by Prof. Hugh E. Wilkinson and Mrs. Doreen Simmons.

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The public is invited to the monthly ASJ lectures. A 1,000 yen donation from non-[members](#) would be appreciated, but is not required.

Place: At this time, the Society does not have a fixed lecture site.

Information: [ASJ Office](#)

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