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CHALLENGING PREVAILING WISDOM

Towards the end of his career Harold Macmillan, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, said: “I have come to the conclusion that when all the establishment is united, it is always wrong.” After nearly four decades of work, I have come to the conclusion that it is time for the water profession to reflect upon the truth of this view.

Just because a paradigm is conceptually or intellectually attractive and most international institutions are promoting it does not mean that it can be operational in the entire world, under all circumstances and over decades. Equally, if after decades it is difficult to find even a few good cases where the concept has been fully applied, it is time to wonder why we have failed to apply the concept.

We should ask ourselves whether we are in fact pursuing a “solution in search of a problem” approach. In other words, the profession gets behind a solution, and it becomes heretical to question that solution. The costs incurred in challenging the prevailing wisdom at the personal level are so high that very few people are willing to bear them and the ostracism that invariably follows.

Take the concept of integrated water resources management (IWRM), which is now chanted as a “mantra” in all international gatherings, as if it was the solution to any water problem in the world. The concept is not new; it has been

around for at least 65 years under one name or another. In 1977 the United Nations Water Conference passed a resolution very specifically promoting this concept. In fact, I was one of the principal drafters of this resolution.

But by 1982, interest in IWRM had declined significantly.

In 1992, IWRM was rediscovered by the International Conference on Water in Dublin and became one of the four “Dublin principles,” enjoying continued heavy promotion by many institutions. Now, however, the time has come to raise some fundamental questions about the application and use of IWRM, the most important of which is, does it work in the real world?

On the basis of data available, we know that it is workable for small units, but we have been unable to apply it fully to medium and large units. Using a scale of 0 (not applied at all) to 100 (fully applied), I am not aware of a single medium- to large-scale river basin anywhere in the world to which one can give a score of 60 or more. One can legitimately ask, then, why, in spite of 65 years of widespread rhetoric on integrated water resources management, it has not been possible to define a development process that could be planned and implemented in such a way that it could be really integrated, however integration may be defined. And why it has not been possible to identify the parameters that should be monitored to indicate the beginning of a transition

process from integration to non-integration and vice versa. Basically, we still do not know how integration can be measured, analysed, judged, implemented or institutionalised.

In addition, the world is heterogeneous, with different cultures, social norms, physical attributes, environmental conditions, skewed availability of renewable and non-renewable resources, investment funds, management capacities and institutional arrangements and strengths. Countries are at different stages of development, with different and changing needs and requirements. Accordingly, is it possible that a single paradigm of integrated water resources management can encompass all countries, or even continents?

It was Benjamin Disraeli who said: “Predominant opinions are generally the opinions of the generation that is vanishing.” Perhaps we should challenge some of our paradigms to see if they are applicable universally under extremely variable real-world conditions. ☞

