

“Our Environment, Our Health and Our Future: The Next Big Public Policy Challenge”

Notes for a Lecture at the University of Ottawa on February 10, 2005
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“.....At the other end of the spectrum, a minority, some 20 per cent of humanity enjoys a standard of living based on a staggering level of wasteful consumption, extravagant energy use, throw-away consumer products and lavish use of seemingly abundant resources. The massive increase in the world’s production and consumption concentrated in the more industrialized countries, has clearly stimulated global economic growth in the short term. But there is now a broad, though certainly not universal, consensus that the current levels and rates of growth of consumption, production and population are simply not sustainable.

If future generations are to live healthy, productive and satisfying lives these patterns must be rapidly brought into balance with the limits of the earth’s resources and our ability to develop and use them efficiently. It makes the case that the world in which poverty is endemic will always be susceptible to ecological and human crises. A transition to sustainable development is the only pathway to a future in which all the world’s people can have equitable access to good health, decent livelihoods and opportunity.

Ours is the wealthiest civilization ever with an unprecedented capacity to produce more wealth at least as measured in economic terms. It is surely wrong to continue to use GNP as the indicator of wealth creation when so much of what it includes actually arises from the impairment and destruction of natural capital. It is surely an affront to the moral basis of our civilization as well as a threat to its future security and sustainability that while we now have the means to eradicate poverty we still have not shown the will to do so. A recent decision of G-7 finance ministers to forgive loans for developing countries and the efforts now being made to effect major increases in the assistance to them are hopeful signs.

But the developing world has had to live on unfulfilled hopes for all too long. In the meantime, while the levels of absolute poverty have been reduced to some extent, the gap between rich and poor has widened. In a world in which knowledge is the principal source of competitive advantage and value added in economic terms science, technology and education are its primary sources. These are areas in which developing countries are severely disadvantaged. We must reduce this gap if the developing world is to make real progress in closing its rich/poor divide. This means making the fruits of our research and development more freely available and helping them to enhance their own scientific, technological and educational capabilities. We can take pride in the leadership of Canada through its initiative in establishing and supporting the International Development and Research Center in meeting this challenge.

“.....I am convinced that the fate of the Earth as a hospitable home for humans will be largely set in the next two or three decades. If we do not move decisively to a transition to a sustainable way of life within this period, prospects will continuously diminish as costs escalate. It is an awesome responsibility for which we are as yet ill-prepared. What a paradox it is that as the wealthiest society in history with unprecedented levels of knowledge and power we clearly have the capacity to make the changes that will ensure a promising and sustainable future for all those who follow us, we have not yet demonstrated the will to do so. Admittedly, fundamental change is not easy. But it is not only possible – it is imperative. We know what we must do. Rio’s Agenda 21 and the Millenium Development goals adopted by world leaders at the beginning of this millennium provide the guidelines and the goals for the transition to a secure and sustainable future. But their implementation depends on our motivation. Motivation has many dimensions, ranging from the 11 immediate economic impacts of change to ensuring a better future for our families and our societies. This is primarily a moral and ethical challenge. Realizing this, I proposed to world leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the Earth Summit in 1992 that they agree on an Earth Charter as a statement of basic moral and ethical principles to guide the conduct of people and nations towards the Earth and each other. They were not ready for this. So after Rio a number of us joined in preparing a People’s Earth Charter that has now been embraced by millions of people around the world and many leading organizations. It has not been accorded the status of an official document, but with the authority of millions of people behind it has received the blessing of many individual governments and political leaders. It is now frequently invoked to spur them to act in accord with it and efforts continue to make it a primary source of inspiration and guidance to people everywhere, particularly those who are making the decisions that will so largely determine the course of the human future. I am deeply convinced that our environment, our health and our future depend on our embracing and being guided by the principles enshrined in the Earth’s Charter. I commend it to all of you.”