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Why Aren't We There Yet?

Twenty years of sustainable development

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I remember a conversation with a journalist a few months ago in which he breathlessly told me that environment was the top-of-mind issue in Canadian polls for the first time ever, supplanting national security, unemployment, health care and the like. And he wanted to know what I thought of that.

And that got me thinking that I had heard all this before. It was in 1988–89. And the issue continued to score in the polls until 1992.

At that time, Canada was the most advanced country on earth in terms of sustainable development. The Brundtland Commission had held hearings across the country which drew huge crowds. The pioneering National Task Force on Environment and Economy had been established in the wake of Brundtland. It produced a report signed by Ministers, CEOs and civil society leaders with recommendations on how to integrate the environment and economics in decision-making, the most important insight of the Brundtland Commission, more formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED).

This had been foreshadowed by Canada's official submission to the Commission during one of its many public hearings in Canada. "Unless the environmental sciences are routinely harnessed by economic scientists and decision-makers, the future of Canada—both economically and environmentally—is seriously threatened. Conventional economic analysis is the underpinning of all of the world's development decision-making. The inability of economics to take into full account the 'real' value of social and environmental assets has created enormous gaps in the ways societies define and reflect in decisions their well-being and the value of their future."

It then went on to admit that in Canada, "there is, however, almost no integration of economics and the environment at any level of government."

The Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere had brought together more than 300 experts and policy-makers under the auspices of Mrs. Brundtland and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. The rather alarming Conference Statement noted that "humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war." This was in 1988. This was not authored by Greenpeace or the Sierra Club. It was a group of climate scientists and policy people. So much for the theory that there is a great debate amongst the climate science community about whether the sources of increased CO_2 are largely anthropogenic.

The preparations for the Earth Summit in 1992, which cleverly called for by the Commission to make sure that its report did not die on the vine, were well underway and negotiations had begun for what became the global conventions on climate change and biodiversity.

Canada's environmental non-governmental organization (ENGO) leaders had jointly agreed (a very rare phenomenon) on a statement, the Greenprint, and the country's industrial leaders had also come together. In a statement by the Business Council on National Issues, Tom d'Aquino said, "Reversing the deterioration of the environment on a global basis is the most pressing challenge facing Canadians and the world."

The momentum continued with the establishment of multi-stakeholder Round Tables in each province and territory, along with the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. The high water mark of the Round Table came with a meeting in Winnipeg of all the Round Tables convened by Manitoba Premier Gary Filmon. CEOs, Ministers and ENGO leaders spent two days comparing notes and urging action.

The creation of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) was announced by the federal Environment Minister Lucien Bouchard at the first meeting of Globe, in Vancouver. We and Globe both celebrated our 15th anniversaries in 2005.

Finally, we had the Green Plan, produced over a number of years and after a seemingly endless series of consultations. Although watered down considerably because of interdepartmental suspicions that Environment Canada was seeking to transform itself into a rival to some of the central agencies, and because of the political shenanigans of its original proponent, Lucien Bouchard, the plan was still a world-leading document. Its chapter on decision-making, relegated to the end of the report by a PR expert who felt that the public did not want to hear about a reorganizing of government thinking as the lead chapter, remains a benchmark on the subject.

So we had everything in place to move forward with sustainable development, which is the hallmark of the Brundtland Report. Needless to say we have been going backward, or perhaps more generously, sideways, ever since.

I guess my story begins in 1972 with the Stockholm Conference (the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment) and the publication of *Only One Earth*. The UN had planned the world's first global conference on the environment. By 1970, it was clear that the developing countries had little interest in the idea. In fact, many of them viewed environmental protection as a threat to their own plans for development. In an effort to rescue the conference, the Secretary General of the UN sought a Secretary General for the Conference who commanded the confidence of developing countries. He chose Canada's Maurice Strong, then the President of the newly formed Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Maurice undertook a number of confidence-building initiatives with the Third World. Chief among them was his decision to ask my boss, the British writer and economist, Barbara Ward, to write the theme book for the conference. I was the uninformed research assistant who organized much of the research for the book. *Only One Earth*, which Barbara co-authored with the Franco-American biologist René Dubos, was an instant hit. I reread it in 2002 on the 30th anniversary of Stockholm and it still reads pretty well.

Stockholm was a landmark event—more journalists attended than were present at the Munich Olympics later that year. Maurice got developing countries to come and to participate in a major way. Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister, delivered the speech of the Conference. She made the link between a deteriorating environment and the growth of poverty in the starkest terms.

Stockholm led to the establishment of many environment ministries in OECD countries, greater public expenditures on the environment and a good deal of legislation.

Despite this progress, it became clear that the environment was still not a major priority for most countries. And the Global 2000 report to the President, produced in the Carter White House and strangled in its cradle by the Reaganites, made it clear that the earth's natural systems were in very serious trouble indeed.

Accordingly, Canada pressed hard in the Governing Council of the UN Environment Programme for the creation of a global commission to examine the relationship between environment and development. Born out of a Canadian initiative, the World Commission on Environment and Development had two Canadian members: Maurice Strong, who appears with great regularity in any international environmental narrative, and Jim MacNeill, the Secretary General and the hand that held the pen, as well as the guiding force behind the report.

I need to put the report in its international political context. The Commission came along at a time when both East-West and North-South relations were poor and previous World Commissions, such as that on development headed by the former West German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, had conspicuously failed to reach unanimous agreements among their members. And the WCED was geographically representative, as they like to say in the UN. It contained a Soviet scientist, an unreconstructed Chinese and a Reagan Republican, among others. So the omens were not good.

But they did produce a remarkable report. When I agreed to give this talk, I got *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report's official name) off the shelf and reread it. While I was not embarrassed when I reread the book I had helped Barbara Ward to write in 1972, I was bowled over by the Brundtland Report. Change a few dates and a few references and it is as timely today as it was in 1987.

Last fall, Jim MacNeill gave a talk at the University of Ottawa in which he spoke of the Brundtland Report. And since he wrote it, I will let him summarize it:

> Twenty years ago, in Chapter 1, we described a world threatened by interlocking crises. We spoke of rising levels of population and a spiraling growth of megacities in the Third World along with massive projected increases in consumption in the First; of increasing levels of poverty and inequity within and between nations; of continuing huge transfers of wealth from the poor to the rich built into grossly inequitable trading relations; of unsustainable increases in the consumption of our natural capital, our soils, waters, and forests; of the destruction of species; and of the growing menace of climate change. We pointed out that these environmental syndromes presented a ***"threat to national security and even survival"*** greater than any military threats then on the horizon.
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> If that doesn't sound familiar, look at yesterday's headlines—or even today's—or at today's best seller lists?
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> We pointed out that ***"most efforts to maintain human progress [to] meet human needs and [to] realize human ambitions are simply unsustainable in both rich and poor nations"*** and if we continued on these paths we would ***"threaten ecological collapse."***

> One final quote that I find equally germane 20 years later. **"We act as we do,"** we said, **"because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote; they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions.… We are…rapidly closing the options for future generations."**
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> And so, after much debate and analysis, we concluded that we must change course. **"Humanity,"** we said, **"has the ability to make development sustainable,"** but we don't have much time—some decades at the most. And so we called for an urgent and rapid change worldwide to more sustainable forms of development.

Now this was pretty powerful stuff and it attracted an enormous amount of media attention, not least because the report was not only tough, but all of the Commissioners, including the Soviet member and the unreconstructed Chinese Communist, as well as President Reagan's former EPA Director, signed it.

Maurice Strong used the oxygen created by the report to energize the preparations for the 1992 Conference in Rio. Since the Stockholm Conference in 1972, the UN had staged two-week conferences on all kinds of subjects. Many of these were inconclusive or indecisive and the format was tired. Maurice decided to up the ante. He egged on those negotiating the climate change and biodiversity conventions to speed up their timetables so that the conventions would be ready for signature by the time of the Conference. And then he upped it again by turning it into a summit, rather than a meeting of Environment Ministers. This reflected one of the principal learnings of the Brundtland Commission—sustainable development had to be a top-down process in governments and corporations. Jim's idea that the national budget would become the government's most important annual statement of sustainable development meant that the Head of Government had to take this concept seriously or it would not go to the heart of the decision-making process. Just as Ed Woolard of Dupont once described the term CEO as Chief *Environmental* Officer, now the Ministers of Finance would become Ministers of Finance and Sustainable Development. And this would be legitimized in Rio by a massive Round Table lunch of some 120 Heads of Government who would be asked to sign a ringing declaration, as well as the two conventions.

And Canada played an important role at the Conference. Maurice was the star of the show. Brian Mulroney saved the Biodiversity Convention from destruction at the hands of the semi-articulate U.S. Vice President, Dan Quayle (remember the potato man?), by agreeing to sign it. This encouraged the Europeans to stand up to American pressure. After all, if the great Irish tenor who joined Ronald Reagan in singing When Irish Eyes are Smiling could stand up to Bush 41, why so could they.

And the delegation was led by the then Environment Minister Jean Charest, who had the time of his life. And then the Conference came to an end. And they all came home. And very little happened.

In 2001, I was asked to Chair a multi-stakeholder panel to prepare the Canadian National Report for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (the Johannesburg Summit of 2002). I won't go into the gory story of how the report was suppressed by the PMO after it had been written. Our report found that there had been some progress. The office of the Commissioner for Environment and Sustainable Development had been created and was functioning well. The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy and my own institute, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, had been created. An ill-prepared delegation had gone to Kyoto and negotiated the protocol. Canada had taken the lead on the POPs convention. And many companies in Canada had begun to shift their attention to the development of corporate environmental policies which went beyond mere compliance with environmental rules and regulations, and were undertaking proactive environmental reporting initiatives to their stakeholders. But compared with the scale of the challenges identified by Brundtland, not nearly enough had happened and Canada ranked near the bottom on OECD surveys of the effectiveness of national environmental policies.

Sustainable development, once one of Canada's strong points, had taken root in Europe and several countries had made substantial progress on the integration of environment and economy and the creation of high-level bodies to begin the incorporation of sustainable development into mainstream decision-making. Perhaps most notably, sustainable development had been embedded into the Treaty of Amsterdam, the EU's basic constitution at the time, as one of the guiding principles of the Union. It had even become one of the central principles of the Marrakech Declaration, the final document of the Uruguay Round which created the World Trade Organization.

What happened to us?

I guess we all have theories about this one. Mine goes something like this:

1) **Constitutional crises**. Remember the ill-fated Charlottetown accord? The politicians who were part of the Canadian delegation at the Earth Summit in Rio returned to Ottawa in June and were immediately caught up in the negotiations for the accord and the debate over the referendum which failed in the fall of that year.

2) **Eco-fatigue**. In some ways Rio was a victim of its own success. It had attracted a massive press corps, there had been whole issues of *The Economist, Time* and *Newsweek* devoted to the event. Because the Heads of Government were there for the second week, all the superstar political reporters tagged along, and their coverage augmented that of the environmental journalists who had already been filing for a week.

   Environmental historians have written a good deal about the waves of public support for environment and have traced these waves from the creation of the U.S. and Canadian national parks systems. And Rio was likely the end of such a wave, at least in North America.

   And it soon became apparent that Rio had not really delivered as much as all the hype seemed to indicate. Much was written, by Jim MacNeill and me, as well as others, about the Rio bargain. Because of the parlous state of North-South relations, Rio never really

faced up to the challenge of sustainable development. Instead of a sustainable development agenda, the conference really faced two agendas: (1) the Canadian and other OECD countries' agenda of climate change, loss of biodiversity, forest loss and marine and fisheries issues; and (2) the developing country agenda of trade liberalization, increased aid, access to advanced technology and the famous principle of common but differentiated responsibility. The cracks were papered over by an implicit deal that the developing countries would pay attention to our agenda if we increased official development assistance considerably. Instead, most developed countries actually decreased their aid flows, including Canada after CIDA was a serious victim of Program Review. The failure of that bargain still plays a role in the reluctance of many developing countries to assume targets under the Kyoto process. They simply do not trust us.

So Rio did not have any obvious deliverables for the public, except for Kyoto, which flew below the public radar screen in Canada until the Johannesburg Summit in 2002.

3) **Recession and the war against the deficit.** And this should not be underestimated. The Mexican peso crisis brought the state of Canada's shaky public finances into stark relief. The Chretien government was determined to get the deficit under control. Despite all of the good things said in their initial "Red Book" about sustainable development, the Environment Canada and CIDA budgets were cut dramatically and these cuts escalated when the Green Plan funding expired as well. Since the Green Plan funding was time bound, Finance did not have to count it as a cut. So, while the Environment Department's cut was proportional to those of some other departments, it was actually as high as 30 per cent or more, according to some estimates.

4) **Financial stringency also affected the corporate sector.** And the first wave of corporate believers who had been instrumental in the success of the Round Tables had moved on. They were replaced by more traditional bottom-line-oriented CEOs, many of whom were unaware of the sustainability debate and viewed environment as a cost which could be ignored until times were better. This was one of the factors in the death of the Round Tables, one of Canada's genuinely innovative responses to the challenges of environment/economy integration and unique fora for bringing ENGOs, politicians and business leaders together. Corporate retrenchment left little time for luxuries such as the environment.

5) **Major cuts occurred at the provincial level as well.** In many cases, these were much more serious than at the federal level. For example, the Ontario Ministry of the Environment has still not recovered from the cuts of the Harris era.

6) **And then we have that all-time favourite, political will.** Or rather, lack of it. With some notable exceptions such as David Anderson and Charles Caccia, few were prepared to speak up for the environment.

Our world has changed dramatically over the past two or three years. According to Globescan, another Canadian invention, Canadians are more concerned about climate change than the citizens of any other developed country. And it is not inconceivable that we could still have a defeat of the government over climate policy.

This is part of a worldwide trend, which is perhaps most obvious in Europe and which culminated in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last year.

Political opinion is even changing in the U.S., where all three remaining major Presidential candidates have strong positions on climate change.

What do we have to do in order to restore Canadian respectability, if not leadership, on sustainable development?

1) **We need to remember the #1 issue of Brundtland.** And that is that the world's environment and its economy are so closely linked that policies that ignore the other are bound for failure. We need to integrate environment into economic decision making at all levels of government and in the private sector. This integration can only be done with strong leadership from the top. We need Ministers and bureaucrats to follow the existing Cabinet directive requiring strategic environmental assessments of all major policy decisions before they are taken.

2) **We need at least a federal sustainable development strategy.** I would like to suggest a national strategy, developed through public consultation, both through electronic and other means. But if not possible, at least a government-wide strategy. The lack of such a strategy has hamstrung the work of the Commissioner for Environment and Sustainable Development from the beginning. A collection of departmental reports does not an overall strategy make.

3) **We need to develop an economic policy that promotes sustainable development.** Cities, provinces and Ottawa itself need to keep environment top-of-mind as they develop budgets. Stand-alone environmental policies and projects can be useful, but until the environment is truly integrated throughout all economic policy-making, real change will be stunted.

4) **We need a national conversation about energy policy.** As the Prime Minister has said repeatedly, we are an energy superpower. We need to act like one.

5) **We need a climate policy which is acceptable to Canadians as a whole.** It looks as if we are moving toward a crazy quilt of federal and provincial policies at a time when I suspect that the United States will be moving in the opposite direction.

6) **We need to do something about adaptation to climate change.** As any Northerner can tell you, climate change has already begun in a major way north of 60. Adaptation is a complex subject, ranging from the need for new patrol vessels to reinforce Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, to flood defences for Surrey and Richmond, B.C.

7) **We need a more sustainable approach to natural resource management.** Canada's "natural capital" is one of its greatest assets. Although our management of

fisheries, soils, water and forests seems to be slowly improving, we have a long way to go.

8) **Developing countries need to be part of the solution.** Climate change is a truly global problem. A tonne of CO_2 emitted in Vancouver has the same impact as a tonne emitted in Beijing or Brasilia. Canada needs to take a leading role in helping developing countries to develop their own sustainable energy paths.

9) **Reform of international environmental governance.** We need to have fora where real agreements can be reached. Although the 190 some odd countries present in the December 2007 climate talks in Bali all have a right to be part of the solution, 15 countries are responsible for the vast majority of the world's emissions. We need to find a way to get those 15 to agree on policies to curb emissions, to price carbon and to create new technologies, before the other 175 are brought into the debate.

10) **Finally, it goes without saying that we have to engage and energize young people.** Climate change is the biggest challenge to sustainable development. And if we do not take strong actions within the next 10–15 years, the world will become an awful place to live. I may not see it within my lifetime, but my children will—and they cannot sit idly by and passively watch it happen.