

## Our "global community" on verge of momentous shift

By ADRIAN IWACHIW

Some 20 years ago, a manifesto called *The Triple Revolution* spelled out an emerging social vision that helped to catalyze the social movements of the '60s. Concurrent with and paralleled by the Students for a Democratic Society "Port Huron Statement," *The Triple Revolution* argued that the "revolutions" in cybernetics and communications technology, nuclear weaponry and human rights were precipitating an "historic break" with the past. The once-controversial observations of *The Triple Revolution* seem self-evident today.

A year ago, a new 30-page document entitled *At the Crossroads* was published by the Communications Era Task Force to update the observations of *The Triple Revolution* and to articulate what was felt to be an emerging "set of commonly held hopes, values and visions."

Circulation of *At the Crossroads* has already reached over 100,000 copies worldwide, and it continues to sell at a rate of about 1,000 per week, enough to make the book a non-fiction "best-seller," according to their publicity. One of the prime movers behind the documents, Robert Theobald, who was also involved in *The Triple Revolution*, is currently completing a PBS series called "The New American Revolution."

The central thrust of *At the Crossroads* is that the various crises of the world—such as mass unemployment, environmental degradation and the scramble for limited natural resources, the gap between rich and poor, the nuclear arms race—can each be seen as challenges and opportunities. With the "communications revolution" that now binds our planet into a global village, we are on the verge of a shift as momentous as the agricultural revolution, the move to the cities and urban civilization, and the industrial revolution. Also, the rise of nuclear weapons—with which we have, for the first time in history, the possibility of total self-destruction—requires us to develop new cooperative, synergistic principles of inter-group relations.

At the same time, *Crossroads* points out, high unemployment allows us to develop social systems that free people from repetitive physical and mental toil. Environmental stresses urge us to co-operate with natural systems in a sustainable manner instead of exploiting them for short-term profits.

In the transition from an industrial society to a "communications era," the authors claim it is necessary to phase out certain common assumptions about the world in favor of new ones. In place of a world-view that sees individuals and nations as isolated and competing for scarce resources, which the authors claim is supported by the mechanistic outlook of 19th century science, they suggest an ecological vision of interconnectedness and co-operation between social communities and with nature, and an emphasis on sustainable, renewable forms of energy, agriculture and industry. This latter view is, accordingly, more compatible

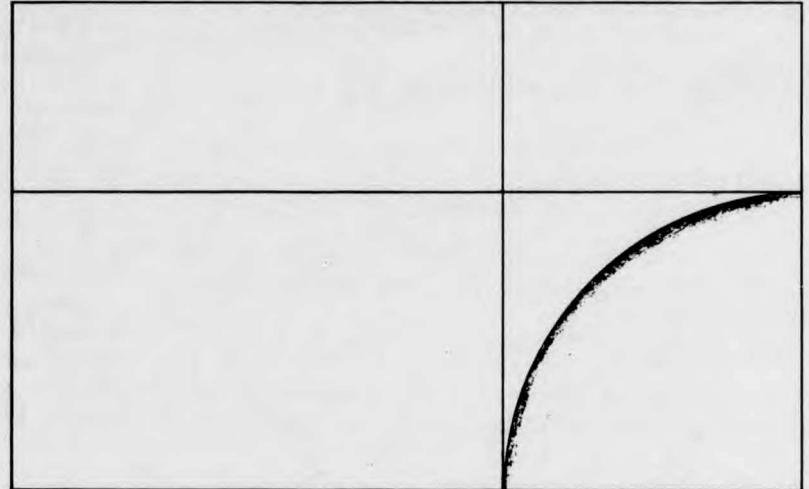
with the findings of modern physics and systems theory. In international affairs, "it does not make sense to make ourselves, our families, our communities or our nation secure by acting in ways that make others less secure."

The authors also foresee a shift from an overspecialized division of labor, with its consequent passivity and dependence on specialists of all kinds, to greater information sharing. "Specialists will no longer be the decision-makers, but will be the creators and communicators of tools, techniques, and knowledge. They will teach others to be more self-reliant." Other "shifts" they perceive include those from high-cost, pharmaceutical-oriented medicine to healthier lifestyles, from over-reliance on courts to mediation, from more police patrols to block watch programs, from commercial banking to "lender-directed" socially-responsible banking, and from hierarchy to participatory management.

In the area of work, automation should not lead to growing unemployment, but rather to a restructuring of work towards more job-sharing, part-time work and "in and out" life cycles (where an individual might work for six months, then spend six months involved in a community cultural or education group). At the same time, "there are urgent world problems which can absorb huge amounts of human energy." According to the authors, there needs to be a recognition of the "committed economy" of socially valuable, productive activity such as parenting, teaching, community activities, creative and innovative endeavors in the arts and in societal entrepreneurship. These activities have traditionally been undervalued since they do not fit into our current market economy or the public sector—"We usually consider 'productive' only those activities done for money." The authors assert that a guaranteed minimum economic security should be available to all members of society as a "legitimate recognition of the debt that the market economy owes to the committed economy." They further maintain that the industrial era view of life as divided between education, job and retirement, with the central part of one's life being the job, must be replaced by one in which life is seen as a process of personal development, learning and growth.

In education, *Crossroads* suggests a shift from the "employability"-oriented general public schooling of the industrial era to an approach built around "learning centers" that would be open to all. These would be a combination of community centre, library and telecommunications centre; education would emphasize learning and communication skills, creative thinking, problem-solving and information-usage skills, and expressions in "languages" ranging "from science to dance, from English to Hopi, from computers to painting." The role of educators would move away from inculcating information to facilitating the learning processes of students.

## At the Crossroads



A Publication of the Communications Era Task Force

None of the ideas presented in *At the Crossroads* are new: books such as Alvin Toffler's bestselling *The Third Wave*, Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Change in the 1980s*, Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* and Mark Satin's *New Age Politics*, have attempted to provide similar analyses of the world, each with its own emphases and its own drawbacks. *At the Crossroads* differs by being a short, succinct summary that skillfully avoids the platitudes of the "personal growth" movement while avoiding the clichés of traditional Left/Right political rhetoric. What can be criticized in most of these writings is the lack of definite program of action—how do we get there from here? *Crossroads* relies on an underlying assumption that requires some faith in human nature: namely, that the necessary changes would not be brought about by a democratic change of government alone, nor by a socialist "revolution," but that the "emerging" social vision of an ecological, co-operative, global "communications era" will itself be enough to bring about the gradual withering away of military-industrial complexes, exploitative multinationals, overgrown bureaucracies, and the like. *Crossroads* represents the hope and belief that this new worldview is emerging, and that it will eventually reach the minds of those who hold the power to declare wars, terrorize political opponents, or decide the fate of countless starving and oppressed masses.

*At the Crossroads* partially redeems itself of these weaknesses in the sections on "New Decision-Making Styles" and "What We Can Do." It calls for a move away from the national level of decision-making. "The nation-state still has the power to declare war but the existence of nuclear weapons means that it cannot afford to do so." Instead, power should shift in two directions: "down" to the regional, local and community levels, where decisions in areas such as education, crime reduction and socio-economic patterns can be made by those directly affected by them, and "up" to the global level, for decisions on peace and environmental protection. Global decision-making, however, would not take the form of a "world government" bureaucratic superstate, but rather a system of networks, coalitions, professional societies and international agencies—"nongovernmental channels through which information, understanding and trust can

flow." In fact, organizations and networks such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and many others, are already creating this kind of international "web" of global monitoring.

*Crossroads*, unfortunately, barely skims the surface of "What We Can Do." "We can realize that we can act," it suggests as a starting point. "We can begin talking with those people around us," "we can take a fresh look at the patterns of the our own lives," our various

social roles, our communities (or lack of communities). "We can begin a block watch program . . . conflict resolution practices in our workplace . . . get together with others who share our concern." For the politically-minded, this list may appear rather weak. One might wonder how we would "create economic security for all members of society" while providing more "leisure time and educational opportunities," as the document earlier suggested, or how we are to stop the millions dying in the Third World.

The function of the document is not as a blueprint, however, but as a thought-provoking general introduction to this political perspective. According to Robert Theobald, *Crossroads* is intended to be used as a "tool" towards creating a "critical mass" of "social change agents." For this reason, the document avoids listing too many names and organizations involved in the kind of social change that is described.

In spite of these minor quibbles, though, *At the Crossroads* succeeds in weaving together the various seemingly disconnected strands of change in our modern world into a unified perspective, one that can help provide a positive and coherent vision of the future. The document even manages a refreshingly humorous twist—an "Interlude" consisting of a Japanese Haiku, a subway graffiti and a quote from Sir Fred Hoyle—though its attempt at poetic flair comes off as slightly awkward (*Crossroads* is predicated on the metaphor of a "journey" from the industrial age to the "communications era"). Most importantly, it manages to speak clearly and coherently in a way that works around ideological barriers and that appeals to the grass roots, where any "fundamental change" (to use a favorite term of theirs) must begin.

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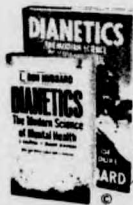
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