

HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Sponsored by the Faculty of Law and The International Centre of the University of Calgary, the Roundtable on Human Rights and International Business was held on March 20, 1997. Participants from the academic, NGO and business communities were very well represented by individuals such as Bill Keys from Transcanada Pipelines, Grand Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, Professor Joy Calkin, Vice-President, Academic, of the University of Calgary and Ann McGrath of OXFAM.

A general consensus was found to exist on the importance of human rights to international business. The concept of human rights was felt to be an extremely broad one with many inter-related sub-issues such as harassment, occupational health and safety, environmental practices and corruption.

The small group discussions raised a number of interesting issues and generated several key suggestions for the involvement of international business in the protection of human rights. While there was not always consensus on each of the issues raised, the discussions represented the beginning of a potentially profitable dialogue among the various sectors involved in the Roundtable.

One of the critical issues raised within all of the small discussion groups was the need for a deeper understanding among all sectors on human rights in general and within a Canadian perspective in particular. The issue of cultural relativism versus universal human rights was discussed. It was also recognized that each of the sectors involved in the Roundtable had different perspectives on human rights and that this may derive from ideological differences between those primarily committed to the profit motive and those primarily committed to the promotion of human rights. The issue of political stability was discussed, and the need to better understand the role of human rights protection in generating such stability.

With respect to creating a deeper understanding of human rights from a Canadian perspective, it was suggested that there needs to be greater education for all Canadians, including business, on the human rights Conventions to which Canada is a signatory. There currently seems to be a low level of knowledge of these Conventions and their contents. It was also emphasized that the development of a distinctly Canadian perspective on human rights needs to concentrate on differentiating the Canadian perspective from that of the United States. It was felt that for too long, it has been perceived that Canada's foreign policy mirrors that of the United States and that this is damaging to Canada's international reputation.

Beyond the need for a deeper understanding of human rights, a further issue that was raised was the difficulty in moving from an understanding of human rights to effectively implementing methods for protecting human rights. Developing effective