

## The Brundtland Commission

panels, invite distinguished people to meet with us. And I also proposed two things that had not been done before: first, that we hold open public hearings on every continent; and second, that after completing the report, we extend the life of the Commission by nine months to ensure that the recommendations were presented to governments, industry, NGOs and the media in a series of meetings around the world.

The proposal for public hearings arose out of my experience with OECD, where I introduced them in the 1979 review of New Zealand's environment policy, and where they are now a standard feature of such reviews. In fact, it went back to my experience with water resources development in Saskatchewan in the '50s and '60s.

Some were quick to point out that, under the UN resolution, we had no authority to conduct public hearings, and that they could be seen as an infringement on national sovereignty. I suggested that we make our acceptance of any invitation to hold our meetings in any country conditional on agreement by the host government to allow us to organize such hearings. The Commission agreed. The hearings went on to become our hallmark and, in my view, the primary source of the eventual consensus.

The proposal for an "advocacy phase" arose from what I had learned about the fate of the recommendations of earlier Commissions, such as Brandt and Palme, which had simply published their reports. Although the proposal remained in the work program, it was subject to constant questioning on the grounds that we had no authority to extend our life, that the Commission's obligations ended with the publication of the report, and that government and other supporters could not be expected to provide funds for it. In the event, it was fully embraced by all concerned and during the past year it proved its worth.

When the Commission finally decided not only to adopt the alternative agenda, but also to include public hearings in its strategy of inquiry, I knew we had a chance to take a fresh look at the issues and to come up with some meaningful recommendations for change. With a budget of around eight million dollars, which it also adopted, we had a licence to find the resources needed. My London draft was published, with few modifications, under the title *Mandate for Change*. We were on our way.

### Getting to "Yes"

Some 900 days later, at the end of February 1987, the Commission concluded its deliberations on *Our Common Future* at its final meeting in Tokyo. A full consensus had been reached on a diagnosis of the issues confronting the world community and on an agenda for change to manage the growing risks and immense potential challenging the world community. A political document, *Our Common Future* was to be hailed by major economic journals and by leaders in the government, corporate, scientific and non-governmental world as the most hopeful and useful report on environment and development to appear in two decades.

But we had gone down to the wire on a number of issues. Energy, with its many unresolved dilemmas and with the emotions surrounding nuclear reinforced by the Chernobyl effect, had resisted several attempts at consensus. In Tokyo it kept some of us going several nights and provided the stuff of drama. Population, security, Antarctica, international economic relations and, of course, institutional reform had proved almost equally difficult.

Between its second meeting in Jakarta and the final moments in Tokyo, the Commission had got to "yes" from almost total

confusion and fundamental disagreement on most issues. Composed of political leaders — present and former ministers of foreign affairs, finance, energy, population, environment and many other portfolios — industrialists, scientists and senior administrators, the Commissioners represented almost every shade of ideology, academic background and personal experience. They served in a personal capacity, but national, cultural and group loyalties were strong and manifested themselves in many ways. Tackling some of the most complex issues facing humankind, issues loaded with questions of power, equity and justice, the group had a built-in potential to blow itself apart. But it did not. Why?

### Good will and cooperation

Almost one year later, the question remains. But a few things stand out. The agreement reached at its first meeting on an alternative agenda and a strategy for the inquiry was fundamental. The capacity of Commissioners to rise above their differences and to search for and ultimately find common ground was evident from the beginning. It was aided by a compelling sense of the urgency of the issues of global change, a growing conviction that the approaches to management now in place were deeply flawed and that change was essential. The brilliant reports of our expert panels and the work of a dedicated secretariat and excellent consultants and advisers provided basic support. All of these were essential to the consensus, but they were not sufficient.

We skirmished with each other for months before we finally broke through the diverse cultural and ideological skins that we all brought to the table. And, in my view, we broke through finally only because of the public hearings and site visits that we organized in every part of the globe, including a breakthrough 10-day visit to Canada.

The hearings enabled us to hear the testimony of nearly a thousand experts and concerned citizens on five continents. They gave us direct exposure to the issues on the ground and direct contact with the people living the issues. They provided us, almost complete strangers at the beginning, with a common base of information and a common set of experiences.

Two, sometimes three, days sitting, listening to testimony delivered with conviction and often with great emotion, dialoguing with ministers, experts and ordinary people on the front line of the interface between environment and development, helped to tear down the normal barriers of communication in the formal meetings of the Commission.

### Going to the people

I recall many incidents in Brazil, Indonesia, Norway, USSR, Zimbabwe and Canada. We not only invited groups and individuals to come to our hearings, where necessary we took our hearings to them. When the BC government found it inconvenient to invite the Haida Council to meet with the Commission in Vancouver, we found Miles Richardson, and with him as our guide, some of us flew to Port Moresby to meet the Council in a day filled with drama. We went to East Kalimantan to see 1000-year-old tropical forests being mined for timber and to talk to local groups struggling with problems that Canadians cannot even imagine. We flew to the highlands of Zimbabwe where the land has been sheared of trees, compromising prospects for development. In São Paulo, the leaders of several Indian nations were present, their homelands threatened by massive deforestation. Electricity seemed to jump from the eyes of the first when he declaimed: "I am the son of a small nation . . . . dying . . . ."