

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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CRITICAL MINERAL SHORTAGES

An address delivered at a plenary session of the United Nations Scientific Conference on the Conservation and Utilization of Resources, on August 18, 1949, by Dr. H.L. Keenleyside, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, and Commissioner of the Northwest Territories.

I am deeply sensible of both the honour and the responsibility which I accepted in agreeing to prepare a statement on critical mineral shortages for a plenary session of this Conference.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the subject. The significance of minerals in providing the material basis for the economic life and social organization of humanity has long been recognized. Indeed, historians and archaeologists commonly designate the major divisions of human history by reference to the mineral products which were most characteristic of the successive eras. Thus we have the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods and the Copper, Bronze and Iron Ages.

Contemporary civilization, beyond all preceding experience, depends for its continuance on the minerals which permit and sustain its existence. The growth and concentrations of population, the frequency and speed of movement and transport, the extent and quality of human control over the forces of nature are all directly dependent upon the discovery and utilization of mineral resources. It is, therefore, of prime importance that we should have as accurate information as can be obtained about the extent of the available reserves in this field.

It will be obvious to all those who have given thought to the subject that a single paper can do no more than outline in general terms the facts of so vast and complicated a subject. However, even generalizations are difficult because our information is so inadequate. Both scientists and economists have boldly adventured in this field and many volumes have been written on particular aspects of its problems - especially within the last ten years. But in most cases the result has been simply to underline the conclusion that our knowledge of the facts is so meagre as to make any precise estimate or detailed and dogmatic forecast either impossible or else of most dubious validity.

Estimates of the general position have varied all the way from a strong conviction that new sources of supply and new techniques of exploitation will always keep ahead of human demand to the contrary view that the standard of life now enjoyed by the more industrialized nations is in danger of early collapse through the exhaustion of essential resources.