

REVIEWS



On A Hinge of History

Ivan L. Head

Toronto: University of Toronto Press,
1991, 229 pp., \$35.00, cloth

Ivan Head has been a force in the way Ottawa thinks about international matters since he became Pierre Trudeau's special advisor on foreign affairs in 1970. In 1978, he was appointed president of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) – a crown corporation with the mandate of “assisting developing countries in utilizing science and technology.”

Pierre Trudeau's first foreign policy speech as prime minister was written by Head and presaged many of the themes of this volume. “Never before in history has the disparity between the rich and the poor, the comfortable and the starving, been so extreme,” Trudeau said. “The name of peace is development.”

On A Hinge of History is an examination of the “global disequilibria and the resulting mutual-ity of vulnerability of societies in both the industrialized and developing regions of the world.”

While Head recently left IDRC, the book is also the result of an institutional effort by IDRC. The author credits about a dozen senior scholars from across the country for their contribution to the research project that gave rise to the book, but does not indicate who contributed how much to which part, or provide many details about the nature and goals of the research. This ambiguity about the book's origins and purposes is no doubt at least partly responsible for its uneven quality.

What Head does convincingly is redecorate the mental stage on which international politics has

been played out for two generations. Rich industrialized peoples have been obsessed with East-West relations to the point where they have been blinded to what has really been going on around them. With the East-West struggle now off the agenda, they now have the opportunity to see clearly. One way Head forces the reader into this mental adjustment is by eschewing words like “Third World” and “developing country” – with all their judgemental, even racist baggage – in favour of “north” and “south.”

Head presents striking descriptions, metaphors, and statistics as he works his way through the international debt, agriculture, trade, environmental, demographic, and institutional crises:

the circle of denuded landscape around many African villages ... has a radius of 7 kilometres ... the distance that a person can reasonably walk in quest of firewood and return in a single day.

The [World] Bank's definition of the phrase [“absolute poverty”] is so shocking as to remove it from the personal experience of virtually every single person in Canada. To exist in absolute poverty is to be so calorie-deficient that one lacks the energy needed to work.

[In the period 1955 to 1987] the global increase in world trade was 600 percent in real dollar terms. The [forty-five small low-income countries most of which are in sub-Saharan Africa] increased their exports by only 12.7 percent.

Given the credentials of the author, and the acknowledged institutional backup, *On A Hinge of History* ought to be a singular contribution to the knowledge and understanding of global economics and north-south politics. The compelling and very difficult question, after forty-five years of tragically bungled efforts with foreign aid and various experiments in development is: what are the overarching principles and models which emerge from this long experience that can help everyone move for-

ward? Here, at the pragmatic, public policy end of the problem, Head's book offers very little.

The language of the two final chapters which deal largely with the politics of the issue is vague, soft and overblown: “A new outlook is needed, one more subtle and all-embracing than in the past. A new form of social contract is required, one based on scientific reality and tempered by humanitarian constants.” Avoided entirely is serious grappling with some of the dilemmas which paralyze international and domestic systems.

One such puzzle is the conflict between individual and collective social needs. How do you get large numbers of people to do what they know they should do, but cannot or do not because for each individual making the decision the apparent costs are too high? We know that our future as comfortable northerners is inextricably tied to the welfare of southerners and that our personal patterns of consumption are destroying the planet. Yet, this knowledge is not, in itself, a guide to action.

The Leninists grabbed on to this puzzle from the wrong end by discarding liberal notions of individual good and imposing onerous collective rules on personal conduct. The Marxist experiment is now finally discredited, but then what to do? The poignancy of this key dilemma facing the management of human economic activity has been articulated by economist Fred Hirsch:

Individuals can perceive a need for themselves and their fellows and yet have no rational basis to act on it in isolation ... collective means may be necessary to implement individual ends ... [and] ... thought control remains the most horrifying threat in the collectivist intrusion. Yet if individual orientation is outside our area of influence, we are left with an impasse. We know what needs to be done and cannot or dare not do it.

Any writer taking on a subject like this starts with a serious handicap: most people likely to read this book, know the role the affluent and indifferent north has played in creating our current difficulties. What they don't know, and therefore, what is much more useful to explore, is what to do about it – a vastly more difficult exercise. Head tells us that his book is about “ethics” as a survival tool and “the obligation of one generation to the next.” It is not a “doomsday message,” he writes. However, the most effective and affecting parts of *On A Hinge of History* are the descriptions of our impossible mess. As for ethics, they are an essential but insufficient condition for understanding where to go next.

– Michael Bryans

Mr. Bryans is editor of *Peace & Security*

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Changing Soviet Union: Implications for Canada and the World

Peter Dobell, editor

Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991, 166 pp.,
\$19.95 paper

This volume is the distillation of a three-day conference held in Ottawa in November 1990 which brought many of the best Soviet political scientists and economists together with an equally high-powered group of Western experts on the USSR. Major topics include: the development of civil society; the making of a market economy; cooperation in the Arctic; the utility of Western economic assistance; and implications for the world of the collapse of the Soviet empire. Among the conference participants were: Georgy Arbatov, Vladimir Popov, Andrei Kokoshin, Franklyn Griffiths, Martin Walker, Jacques Lévesque, and Irwin Cotler. (The Institute for Peace and Security was a co-sponsor of the conference on which this volume is based.) □

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