

almost everywhere have begun to realize that long-term changes to the basic elements on which all life depends may prove to be as threatening to human security as the nuclear war and military aggression against which we have been so assiduously defending ourselves.

THE SPEED WITH WHICH THE NEW PERCEPTION HAS GATHERED MOMENTUM is a remarkable commentary on the power of our new systems of mass communications. The publication in 1987 of the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development to the United Nations General Assembly (known as the Brundtland report) dramatized fears and concerns that had been growing for several decades. Within two years tens of thousands of copies of this report had been sold in dozens of countries – more in Canada than anywhere else – and it quickly became necessary for political leaders to pay attention.

Since the environment became a matter of widespread concern in the late 1960s, most political leaders have acted as if environmental matters – clean water and air, fertile soil, vigorous forests – are peripheral to the real business of running their countries. And in fact, it was because of this lack of political urgency that the enterprise of writing this book was launched, late in 1987. We felt that Canadian governments were reacting too sluggishly to the challenges thrown out by these dramatic new developments. The federal government seemed reluctant to seize opportunities offered by these changes.

The contrast between the Brundtland vision of the future, and that of the Canadian government, as revealed in its 1987 Defence White Paper, was simply too great to be ignored. Brundtland suggested the need for a changed vision of the future, and a rapid reallocation of resources to meet entirely new challenges to our long-term security, both as Canadians and as citizens of the globe. But the Defence White Paper ignored this dimension entirely, confronting Canadians with a vast programme of proposed rearmament, based on what appeared (more and more with each passing day) to be the outmoded clichés of Cold War thinking.

We felt it important to try to stimulate public dialogue on these vital issues. But an interesting thing then happened: coincidentally, between the conception of this book and its publication eighteen months later, some sort of sea-change occurred in public perceptions. Perhaps the exceptionally hot summer of 1988 had something to do with it. As the world's climatologists gathered in Toronto to discuss the prospect of long-term, man-induced climate change that could potentially swamp dozens of major cities, decimate forests, diminish cropping lands – in short, revolutionize human life – the city sweltered under its highest temperatures for many years, and many people had difficulty breathing the smog-laden air.

One day it was revealed that all five of the hottest years experienced in this country since records began a century ago had occurred in the 1980s. It began to seem that climate change was no longer a prospect for the distant future, but was actually upon us.

In the six or nine months that followed that hot summer we were inundated by mass media accounts of dramatic and horrendous possibilities for the future: of dreadful environment-destroying incidents through Eastern Europe, South America and Africa. For a time it almost seemed there was a competition to discover the most irresponsible country: Ethiopia with its massive soil erosion; the Soviet Union with its

disastrous water diversions; Czechoslovakia, China, or Poland with their dreadful air pollution; Brazil, with its insensate destruction of the rainforest; the United States or Canada, spreading deadly poisons throughout the countryside and oceans in the name of industrial progress – these became the stuff of everyday stories in our mass media, which, having discovered the subject, appeared to delight in scaring us all to death.

NO SOONER HAD THIS OUTBURST OF SCARY INFORMATION BEGUN TO subside with the onset of winter than the biggest oil spill ever known in North America decimated the pristine ocean and beautiful shorelines of southern Alaska. This incident exposed in the most brutal way how worthless are the soothing assurances of environmental concern propagated by the world's biggest companies through television and magazine advertising. These companies are major decision-makers; but the spectacle of the oil-strewn Prince William Sound demonstrated that we cannot depend on these decision-makers unless they are subject to constant prodding and vigilance from an informed and concerned public. There is no doubt that millions of people got this message.

Within two years of the publication of the Brundtland report, a number of other things happened that testify to the remarkable influence of the report on public discourse around the world:

- President George Bush recognized the existence of acid rain, and moved to do something, however inadequate, about it.
- Margaret Thatcher actually sponsored an international conference on climate change.
- The European Economic Community adopted an environmentally-conscious agricultural policy, to encourage organic methods and discourage industrial agriculture.
- The Dutch government became the first in the world ever to be defeated on an environmental issue, when a governing coalition broke up over a far-reaching new plan to solve Holland's environmental crisis in one generation by doubling environmental spending in the next four years.
- The Green Parties improved their position in the elections to the European Parliament, in England winning as much as fifteen percent of the vote.
- In Canada the government dropped its re-armament programme, thus clearing the way

for more attention to be paid to longer-term problems. Brian Mulroney was even given an environmental award by an American business group for his rousing speeches to international conferences.

That so many of our leaders should have jumped on the bandwagon after decades of indifference indicates the head of steam that is now driving the engine of environmental concern. To keep pace these leaders have had to pay at least lip-service to the idea that humans can have a secure future only if we manage to build an environmentally sustainable global economy. Lip-service, of course, is not enough: a group of Canadian activists followed Prime Minister Mulroney to a conference in Europe and denounced him before the world's press. They said that in spite of his vigorous speeches favouring sustainability, his government cut spending on alternative energy projects while investing enormously in climate-changing energy megaprojects. His actions, they said, spoke louder than his words.

From all of this we discovered that there is a considerable gap between getting political leaders to endorse sustainability and getting them to implement the measures needed. No doubt many years of ferocious political debate and struggle lie ahead in this effort to create a new international order. ▶

*Leaders began to change their attitudes because a consensus developed among scientists, forecasters, and the general public about the urgency of the growing environmental threat.*

