



Statements and Speeches

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NORTH-SOUTH FUTURES AND CANADA'S ROLE

A Speech by the Honourable Mark MacGuigan, Secretary of State for External Affairs, to the Canadian Association of Futures Studies, Montreal, October 3, 1981

...The future of North-South relations is an issue to which the government has devoted a great deal of attention; and as you know, the Prime Minister is deeply concerned about North-South issues and the future of relations between the developed and the developing world. In my remarks I'd like to approach the subject by moving from some general comments on futures studies and on North-South trends to some specific points on North-South issues and how I see Canada's emerging role.

The focus of this conference is on North-South futures. As members of an association devoted to futures studies, your interest in global questions relates naturally to medium and longer term perspectives. However, you are acutely aware, as demonstrated in your program, that action or inaction today can have a vast influence on the shape of the world tomorrow. Perhaps at the outset you will allow me to make one or two brief comments about the relationship between futures studies and policy making.

Policy makers in governments and institutions today face pressures which tend to narrow planning horizons. Planning for the future becomes more difficult when change is rapid and its impact is increasingly immediate. There is an understandable tendency to give short-term interests more attention and protection under these circumstances. At the same time, policy makers clearly need a better understanding of the environment which we will be facing 5, 10 and 15 years away and a better understanding of the major forces which will shape that environment. Implementing projects with long lead times requires knowledge of the shape of the world into which these projects will emerge. Whether one is speaking of long-term social programs or defence procurement issues, we need a better idea of the shapes in the mist. In a time of rapid change this is not a luxury, it becomes a necessity of the first order, and yet governments and institutions quite frankly often remain ill-equipped in this regard.

I think therefore that there is a complementarity between those associated with futures studies and those who formulate policy. There could be a much more effective harnessing of efforts — thoughtful long-term analysis can be of immense help to policy makers, particularly in a world of rapid change. It has never been more necessary to gain a clearer idea of the long-term consequences of our actions — or of our inactions.

But much of the writing associated with futures studies today strikes me as being clustered around the twin poles of excessive optimism and excessive pessimism. Both extremes have tended to overshadow the centre. The pessimists tend to produce research which leads us to believe that the time may have already come when the forces of man and nature have created situations which are beyond control. The pessimist-futurologist philosophy might be summed up in the following lines:

Need for
long-term
analysis