

Difficult Decisions Imposed

With new appreciation of the rigid limits imposed by the laws of the balance of nature to which I have referred, every government, including the federal and provincial governments of my own country, has difficult decisions to make. What level of environmental purity shall be required? Producers in the past under all economic systems have been permitted freedom to seek in production the greatest output for the least input or cost, irrespective of the pollution in the process. Economic decisions have not taken pollution into account and, as we reach and strain the limits of nature's tolerance, costs appear which the community bears in terms of waste and deterioration of environment. In this context, the question of standards, which is the crucial beginning, is really the same as asking what level of environmental purity can each economy afford, because, as I shall indicate in a moment, huge costs are involved, far greater for developed than for developing areas, and a responsible decision will undoubtedly affect the gross national product. Having decided upon the goal, each government must then decide how, within its society, it will induce the reforms required to maintain the target level. One thing is clear: within each region, there must be a concentrated effort at reform in which responsibility is broadly shared, because all of us contribute to the production of pollution. We benefit as consumers from the lower costs of goods and services created under conditions where pollution is not controlled, and we all suffer the consequences in the broader context of wasted resources and a deteriorating environment. The choices are whether to require producers to bear the costs directly, or to make direct government expenditures, or to make use of subsidies, tax credits or exemptions; what method is chosen will depend on the society and the economic system involved.

It is against this background that the Canadian delegation views the question now before us. A first step was taken by the Economic and Social Council which, in its Resolution 1346 (XLV), set forth the reasons for concern about our human environment and recommended that this Assembly consider the possibility of an international conference being held on this question. The ECOSOC resolution came none too soon and it is the Canadian view that time is now ripe to take the next step. Accordingly, my delegation has been glad to join with Sweden and many other countries in co-sponsoring Draft Resolution A/L553, which would have the General Assembly decide to convene a UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972.

As the resolution indicates, the Secretary-General would be asked to prepare a report, through the forty-seventh session of ECOSOC, for the twenty-fourth session of the General Assembly. On the basis of this report, it should be possible for the General Assembly to define clearly and precisely the purposes of the proposed conference, and how these purposes should be achieved. For our part, we should hope that the agenda and terms of reference would be shaped in such a way that the conference would produce constructive guide-lines for future action, particularly through international co-operation.