

NEIGHBOURHOOD VALUES FOR A COMMON FUTURE

Even as East and West join hands, North and South, rich and poor, remain in the depths of their own Cold War.

BY SHRIDATH S. RAMPHAL

IT IS INTRIGUING THAT ONE OF THE MOST APT DESCRIPTIONS OF OUR world, as we prepare for the third millennium, is that of the medieval poet Langland who described his world as he knew it as "a field full of folk." We know it now to be a much larger field and there are many billion more folk in it than Langland ever dreamt of. Yet, the description holds; indeed, it is closer to our present perceptions than it has been for many an era.

That field of folk is our human neighbourhood: our global village. We continue, it is true, to act more in response to the lure of materialism than the claims of humanity. We live most of our lives with yesterday's images of far away places with strange sounding names only to be reminded with increasing frequency that our genius has made our planet small and that our own survival requires that we care and share it better than we have done. Today both ethical and practical considerations compel us to put otherness behind us and acknowledge that our humanity is inseparable. And all this presses upon us as we hurtle towards the 21st century with mixed emotions of confusion and excitement, of great hope and some panic.

But the auguries are auspicious; certainly compared to say five years ago. 1985 was a dire time. The Soviet Union was entrenched in Afghanistan. The Gulf War ground on. Namibia was occupied, and its border lands were still killing fields. There was relentless repression, not talk of reform, in *apartheid* South Africa. A dead hand lay across Eastern Europe; Vaclav Havel was a dissident, not a president. And there were grave doubts over the whole future for international cooperation. There was no valid basis for assuming the existence of an ethic of multilateralism; the spirit guiding superpower decision-making was certainly not an ethos of internationalism.

But, fortunately, that ethos lingered among people, and especially among young people who understood instinctively the global community they shared. Everywhere, people were making manifest, wherever the right of dissent existed – but also, whenever they could, in places where that right was denied – their sense that they were being led to disaster. We were moved out of complacency by both mass demonstrations and the heroism of lone voices, like those of Andrei Sakharov and Nelson Mandela. The question asked by the tapestry hanging in St. James's Church in London – woven by one of the Sisters of Soweto – "How Long?" has been answered with respect to Mandela's captivity; and with regard to an end to *apartheid* itself, the answer is surely: "Not long now."

THE CLIMATE FOR MULTILATERALISM AND FOR INTERNATIONALISM HAS improved with the improvement of relations between the superpowers; this could be the true end of the post-war era – the beginning of a new age of enlightenment. But human values are about people and how they live day-to-day. Our global neighbourhood – like any other neighbourhood – is about life at the street level, not the penthouse. We would be guilty of Panglossian optimism if we ignored these large realities.

When we set out to consider the state of the world, we must be clear of what world we speak. Is it, for example, the one-quarter world that is developed and materially prosperous, or is it the other three-quarters that exists on the margins of prosperity and progress? But even if we answer in rejection of a world of separate worlds, a question remains: the world as seen through whose eyes? The eyes of strategic planners of West or East? The eyes of stockbrokers in New York or Tokyo; the eyes of farmers in the paddy fields of Bangladesh; the eyes of many who will not see or others who look as through a glass darkly? The viewpoint profoundly colours judgements on values, particularly neighbourhood values, and to a substantial extent determines whether living by them will remain an illusion or is capable of fulfilment.

MY ASSERTION IS THAT THIS IS INDEED ONE WORLD, UNEVEN AND DISPARATE but integral nonetheless. Our closely knit, interlinked human society is a contemporary reality, however much the instincts of yesterday recall us to old nationalisms and summon up the adversary habits of crude sovereignty. What interdependence means in the global context is that we all need each other. Neither rich nor poor, West nor East, has the option to go it alone. Our shrinking world really holds no human sanctuaries. There are no shelters that insulate anyone, anywhere, from disease, from poverty, from nuclear holocaust, from environmental collapse. The concept of jurisdiction, increasingly, has meaning mainly for lawyers.

In Commonwealth countries like Canada whose precious inheritance is the common law – it is recognized in law that we all owe a duty of care to our neighbour, a duty to act in a reasonable way to avoid injury to him or her. Today, that duty of care is imposing new imperatives – the duty of care we owe is to all the world's people who are our neighbours now. The nature of that duty, the notion of what is reasonable conduct in relation to others, is known intuitively by ordinary people the world over. We must, in a new, more enlightened internationalism, provide conceptual space for these realities; we need to develop new precepts of rights and duties as relevant to our time as any formulated in an earlier era. We need the rule of enforceable law between nations if human society is to live by global neighbourhood values.

But to assert what we need is to acknowledge what we lack. For all of humankind's rich catalogue of achievements, this world remains a dangerous enigma: advanced in some ways, yet primitive in others; a combination of genius and perversity that may yet cause it to self-destruct – less now with a bang than a whimper. Contrasting elements of variety and oneness have been age-old features of human society. But today they contend with a special fierceness; and this contention seems destined to constitute a great struggle of ideas which will replace the clash of ideologies that has dominated so much of the 20th century. Let me try to illustrate these preoccupations of the years ahead by looking awhile at "democracy" and "freedom."

Many will assert that the most dramatic and exciting aspect of our changing times is the compulsion towards democracy, the demand for freedom; and so it is. In China, in 1989, through the miracle of the communications revolution which has helped to make the world an intimate