



Statements and Speeches

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COMMUNICATIONS: CORNERSTONE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

An Address by the Honourable Francis Fox, Minister of Communications, at the Opening Session of the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the International Relations Club, University of Montreal, March 6, 1981

...As the Minister of Communications, I am pleased that the general theme of this year's fourteenth annual conference is "Communications and International Relations". Communications is currently one of the most dynamic areas of international relations, and one in which I would venture to say, although I may not be regarded as the most objective observer, Canada is particularly influential.

To set the scene for this annual conference, I have been asked to share with you my views on the international environment affecting communications and of some of the new themes which are emerging. I must confide in you that it was the organizers of the conference, and not I, who chose the title for my presentation — "Communications: Cornerstone of International Relations" — although I admit that it has a nice solemn ring to it. Let me start by defining briefly how I interpret the terms "communications" and "cornerstone".

Definition of terms

When I use the term "communications", I am not referring to interpersonal conversations, or diplomatic communications, as important as these are in international relations. I am, rather, talking about the technical means of transmission, that is the "hardware", and also the "message" or content that is being transmitted, that is the "software". This "software" is, in fact, information which can be packaged in a great variety of formats, such as television programs, films, records, or specialized data flows. We can thank the late Marshall McLuhan for making everyone aware of the powerful impact of the "medium" on the "message". It is clear that effective communications policies must reflect the realities of this inter-relationship. This is why the federal government took the step last summer of placing under one roof federal responsibilities for both communications and arts and culture.

What is a "cornerstone"? Having consulted a number of dictionaries, including an architectural one, I would say that in popular usage "cornerstone" is usually understood to mean "keystone", that is the stone which, if removed, causes the structure to collapse. I find this a particularly apt analogy since, in the communications field, we are always referring to the communications infrastructure of Canada, and the information which is flowing through it, as the essential mortar which binds our country together. And it is similarly impossible to conceive of meaningful international relations without a communications system to fuel the process.

But the more precise meaning of "cornerstone" is as the "point of reference" in a structure in relationship to which the rest of the structure is aligned. This is also a valid analogy to communications since it is obvious that the effectiveness of international communications, at any point in time, is a gauge of the state of international
