

Statement

Secretary of
State for
External Affairs



Déclaration

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**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE BARBARA McDOUGALL,
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
TO THE CANADIAN PREPARATORY COMMITTEE
ON THE UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

**OTTAWA, Ontario
February 21, 1992**

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to speak to you today. I know how much time and effort the organizations represented here have invested in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) process.

I want to begin by discussing the prospects for Prepcom IV and for the conference itself in Rio de Janeiro. But I am not going to dwell on these meetings at length because I suspect that most of this audience has already spent many miles on the road to Rio. And as you know, there are many more miles ahead for all of us.

I do want to discuss, on a larger scale, the meaning of the UNCED process, both domestically and internationally. I want to look at the impact of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) on UNCED and also what I perceive to be the impact of UNCED on the great diversity of NGOs that are participating.

First, in looking at the prospects for UNCED, I must be candid. I believe that the expectations for UNCED have been inflated beyond the realistic ability of the world's institutions to deliver. The tragedy of high expectations is that they could slow, rather than accelerate future action and they tend to obscure genuine progress that is made. We must be vigilant to ensure that this does not become an exercise in brinkmanship.

UNCED will not be an end in itself. It is not the Earth's last chance. In real terms, it will be neither a spectacular failure nor an overwhelming success. The issues are far too complicated for a once-and-for-all solution to the problems facing the planet to come out of Rio. In fact, UNCED should be seen as one large step that will carry us forward to many others. It is one of the most important and ambitious steps that the world has taken.

The real objective of UNCED should be the meaningful and long-term engagement of the nations of the world in the task of healing the planet.

It is no secret that the nations of the world are still some distance from the broad international consensus that is necessary for formal agreements to be established on the key issues. The goal at Prepcom IV will be to identify and act on those elements that can be resolved, while narrowing the gaps that exist, where resolution is perhaps not achievable.

Let us understand that what we are undertaking through UNCED is nothing less than an international effort to build consensus among states with widely varied levels of development, wholly different political systems and entirely different environmental policies.

That is not a simple task. Those of you who have had the opportunity to participate in the work of the Canadian delegation to any of the previous Prepcoms know that ideas and beliefs that we may take for granted in Canada are not shared by all other

delegates. That requires us to listen, to understand and to work patiently together.

In fact, I suspect that one of the benefits of the UNCED process for NGOs has been the exposure to the different and deeply held opinions of representatives of other countries and other sectors of our own society.

The issues are complex. That is not an excuse for inaction. It is a reality. If these problems were easy, they would have been solved long ago. Finding points of disagreement, at UNCED or anywhere else, is always easy. Working for a consensus that will produce action is harder but ultimately far more satisfying and indeed a greater accomplishment.

For all that, I believe that we are making progress. Our recent contacts with developing states suggest that they do not expect a massive transfer of funds from North to South to be made at Rio in exchange for environmental action. They are only too well aware of the current financial pressures on governments of developed states. However, they seek the understanding of the public in countries like Canada of the links between poverty and the environment. They seek clear commitments of new funds to meet these needs. And that is a commitment we are prepared to make.

I firmly believe that, at the end of the day, we will have achievements in Rio to which we can point with pride. And I also believe that we will have developed a momentum that will keep us moving forward. But those achievements will not be the sole product of diplomats or of Cabinet Ministers or of environmentalists, no matter how well-intentioned. They will be the product of people around the world who see changes in their air, their water or the lives of those around them -- and who do not like what they see. They will be the product of women and men taking action in their communities and their world.

Many of those people are in Canada. During the government's recent review of Canada's foreign policy priorities, Canadians told us that they wanted to see greater emphasis placed on efforts to improve the world's environment. In fact, two thirds of those surveyed indicated that protecting the world environment should be either the first or second priority of our foreign policy. That was a higher level than for any other issue -- arms control, trade or the promotion of human rights.

So, our recent Foreign Policy Themes and Priorities document reflects the fact that Canadians understand that a world based on sustainable development will be a safer, more secure one. It recognizes that Canada benefits from global agreements that reduce barriers between nations.

It commits us to UNCED as a priority for action.

It does so because we recognize that we are in a world of interdependence. Our environmental fate is tied to that of the world.

Perhaps this understanding comes from the strong sense of environment which underlies Canadians' sense of nationhood.

Think about it for a moment. When Canada came into being 125 years ago, less than a quarter of Canadians lived in cities, while the rest lived in rural and frontier areas as our Aboriginal people had for many centuries. Now, the reverse is true and with a much larger population. But, while Canadians may have moved to the cities and new immigrants have tended to settle there, our sense of place is not really urban.

Our mental image of Canada may include the CN Tower, but in our hearts it is one of mountains, oceans and the Arctic. It is the North and the prairies. It is fundamentally shaped by the environment that welcomed us and that nurtures us still.

Our artistic heritage, whether back to painters like Paul Peel or later among the Group of Seven, A. J. Casson and Emily Carr, is linked to the vastness and grandeur of the Canadian environment.

Our economic life began with furs, fish and forests. To this day, many jobs are still tied to them.

All these factors suggest why, maybe more than most people, Canadians see themselves through the prism of their environment. And threats to that environment or how we co-exist with it have been a part of Canadian thinking for a long time. In the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, there is a display of how a lumber camp in the Ottawa Valley would have looked in the 19th century.

That's interesting enough, but what is more interesting in some ways can be found on a wall nearby. There you will find a long quote from Sir John A. Macdonald. As Prime Minister for many years, his office overlooked the Ottawa River. From his window he could see hundreds of thousands of logs floating on their way to the mills in Ottawa, Hull and elsewhere.

The quote describes his concern about the long-term viability of that kind of forest use. He wondered just how long such cutting could last before there were no more trees. He wondered where it would lead. Although Sir John A. did not know the term, he was wondering about sustainable development. And now we are coming to grips with the questions he posed over a hundred years ago.

It was precisely those kinds of concerns that led successive federal governments to create national parks, to negotiate treaties with the United States on joint management of the great lakes and migratory waterfowl.

More recently, those concerns led to an agreement which this government signed with the U.S., to control transboundary air pollution, and thus reduce acid rain.

In short, environmental issues have always had an importance for Canadians. And Canadians and their governments have understood that actions in one country can have devastating consequences in another. Now we recognize just how widespread those consequences can become. That is why we are committed to the UNCED process.

Communicating is not solely a job for government. NGOs have the capacity to move community opinion and raise awareness of issues and options. And that is why I can see your role as a critical part of UNCED.

Since the original decision to hold the conference, the government's approach to UNCED preparations has been to work with a broad range of Canadians, including NGOs.

From the beginning, we have worked in a co-operative fashion with the Canadian Participatory Committee (CPCU) on UNCED because it represented a good way of involving groups that wanted to make a constructive contribution to the UNCED process. We also determined early on that Canada was not the only country that could benefit from that kind of involvement.

We took a strong stand during the early UNCED discussions that governments were not enough. We believed that NGOs had a contribution to offer that had to be accepted including the right to be involved in discussions. Many other countries, perhaps reflecting their own beliefs about democratic decision-making, objected. However, in the end, the NGO role in UNCED was accepted.

To support this agreement, we have committed funds to assist NGOs from less developed states to participate in UNCED activities. We have supported the work of indigenous people from other states to ensure that their legitimate role in these discussions is played.

Through involvement in the development of Canadian negotiating positions and priorities, CPCU members have had a significant role in helping shape the direction of our efforts at Prepcoms and for that, all Canadians thank you.

I think that this process has also been useful for NGOs. I suspect that it has been challenging for NGOs to hear each

other's opinions as we work toward a set of positions that are broadly representative of the needs of Canadians and those of the world as a whole.

But I believe that there is another element to the importance of NGO involvement in UNCED. When the 30,000 people expected in Rio for UNCED have gone home again, when the last story has been filed by the last journalist and the last debriefing note has been written by the last official, there will still be a world needing help. There will still be so much to do.

Much, hopefully, will be done by governments. However, much will have to come from people -- the now-famous "ordinary Canadians" and the ordinary Americans, Brazilians and Tanzanians. They will have to continue to understand the environmental impacts of their decisions. They will have to understand the changes that may come in lifestyles and their demands on the environment.

NGOs will play an important role in both encouraging public debate on these kinds of issues and in informing citizens generally. With Agenda 21 and the Earth Charter, we will have committed governments to certain standards of action and goals. But NGOs will play an important part in their achievement.

Because ultimately, the success of our efforts will be measured by what people do, not by what they say.

I hope that the co-operation that you have shown in preparation for UNCED will continue.

I say that because I am proud of the way in which Canadians from many backgrounds have come together to participate in Canada's preparations for UNCED. People have set aside differences of opinion and policy to focus attention on the task at hand, a task which will need long-term co-operation and commitment from many parties.

I think, more than anything, it is the process, the involvement of individuals, communities and governments, that will really take us forward from Rio. If there is one lesson that governments have learned over the past decade, it is that there are many things they cannot do alone. They require partners in Canada and they require partners abroad. UNCED has given us the best opportunity we've ever had to forge the partnerships we will require to resolve these issues.

I thank you for your commitment to that partnership so far, and I look forward to your continued commitment.

Thank you very much.