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SPEECH BY THE  
RIGHT HONOURABLE JOE CLARK,  
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TO THE AIR POLLUTION CONTROL ASSOCIATION

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Canada

Your introduction, in fact, touched upon some of the basic themes that I want to touch upon. One, particularly, is that we not lose the opportunity that is building. It is, in fact, a very important development that the environmental issue has risen to the top of international agendas.

I have had some experience in what happens in international agendas. Perhaps it is unfortunate that leaders are driven by the communiqués they issue and by the agendas that are set out when they gather, but it also ensures that because those questions are now on an agenda rather than off an agenda that they acquire much more prominence in the discussion, not simply of meetings such as the Toronto Economic Summit last June, but also in the preparation for that meeting, and in the consequences that flow from it. I think it is a very signal development, an important one, that environmental concerns which previously could not make their way into an Economic Summit are now very much a part of that Summit. I won't say at the heart of it, not yet, but very much a part of it. I think that is a development that is important, and it is important that we not lose the opportunity, to quote Dr. McNeil. I think that is something on which we all have to work.

Obviously, the world everyday is becoming more aware of the damage inflicted upon our planet's environment and, by definition, our own collective well-being.

Occasionally, as with Hurricane Gilbert last month or the ravages of flooding in the Sudan, the hand of man plays no apparent part.

In other cases natural disasters are made worse because of human activity. For thousands of years, the water basin that so dominates Bangladesh had coped with cyclical flooding. Now its capacity to do so has been critically jeopardized by deforestation in Nepal and India which in turn has clogged Bengali waterways.

In most cases, it is tragically and increasingly evident, that the most profound threats to our biosphere are man-made; that we have become our own worst enemies. The examples are seemingly endless: Bhopal; Chernobyl; lakes in this country killed by acid rain.

Actions we began innocently have had implications no one thought to anticipate. A wide use of chlorofluorocarbons threatens to destroy the ozone layer. One molecule of chlorine set free can destroy thousands of molecules of ozone. The ozone layer affords protection from the sun's ultraviolet rays. As it gradually disappears, the dangers to aquatic life, the risk of skin cancers and the prospects of reduced crop yields all increase. The warming of the globe's climate, accelerated by the enormous volume of pollutants discharged into the air, increase the risk that fertile agricultural areas may be turned into arid zones. With receding polar icecaps and alarmingly higher sea levels, shorelines may disappear.

In the name of economic development, the rate of extinction of plant and animal life is increasing. Tropical extinction of plant and animal life is also increasing. Tropical rainforests contain, at a minimum, half of all the earth's species. Yet, present trends of forest destruction are estimated to spell extinction for 750,000 species in the next twelve years. The 2000 tropical forest plants identified as having cancer-fighting potential are among the species the world might irreversibly lose.

These are genuine world problems. But they are national problems too.

In terms of land mass, Canada is the second largest country in the world. Perhaps because we are thinly populated, we are perceived by others as having an environment that is pristine. Yet, pollution is now found in our Arctic. 300,000 Canadian lakes are vulnerable to our most important environmental problem, acid rain, and 14,000 lakes have already been acidified. Acid rain from the United States is threatening our apple and maple trees, each producers of important agricultural earnings.

The breeding grounds of northern caribou are threatened by resource development. Beluga whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence are endangered by the flow of pollutants, including toxic chemicals, from the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes river system. The food supply of the loon, one of the symbols of the Canadian wilderness, is affected by acid rain.

That list is both incomplete and sobering. It is the context in which the Government of Canada has been working on a broad range of programs and policies, designed to heal past wounds inflicted on the environment and to prevent further deterioration in the quality of the air, water and soil on which human life depends.

Canada was, as Dr. McNeil indicated, a strong and early supporter of the World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by Prime Minister Gro Brundtland, of Norway. In addition to helping fund the Commission's work, we made a detailed submission on the issue of environmentally sustainable economic development. In the opinion of this government, as in the view of the United Nations when it accepted Dr. Brundtland's report, sustainable development is the key to the world's future economic well-being and environmental security.

In order to further the work begun by the Brundtland Commission, the Government of Canada is establishing a centre for environmentally sustainable development, in Winnipeg. Discussions about its exact focus and nature have begun within Government Departments, with the Province of Manitoba, and the United Nations Environment Program.

As part of our support of the Brundtland Commission, Canada organized the Global Climate Change Conference, in Toronto, in June. It set a new standard of international cooperation and information exchange and Canada has made it clear that we are willing to organize other conferences to accelerate international research and cooperation.

We have made significant improvements to the Canada-U.S. agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality. We are working closely with the Province of Quebec to clean up the St. Lawrence River under a program that will identify and remove toxics from its waters, rehabilitate polluted sites and wetlands, and create a unique marine park to ensure protection of beluga whales and other endangered species and environments.

We tried hard to get an agreement with the United States on the control of acid rain, and we are disappointed that the Reagan Administration could not agree to a specific schedule of targets and timetables. The acid rain issue is of paramount importance to Canada, and will be at the top of our agenda with a new President and Congress.

Nationally, this country submitted itself to cleaning up acid rain in our own house. We now have the toughest auto emission standards in the world. Until recently, the largest individual sources of acid rain in North America were right here in Canada. That is no longer the case. In fact, thanks to successful cooperation with our provinces, Canada is well ahead of scheduled 1994 emission-reduction targets. The reality remains that, with acid rain as with other environmental issues, it is not enough to have the commitment of one country alone.

At some times in the past, that would have been seen as an obstacle to progress. Today I think it is an opportunity because the international system is working better, and because the international system is beginning to work now on a much broader agenda.

Let me quote a speech that was delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations last month.

"Faced with the threat of environmental catastrophe, the dividing lines of the bipolar ideological world are receding. The biosphere recognizes no division into blocs, alliances or systems. All share the same climate system and no one is in a position to build his own isolated and independent line of environmental defense."

The speaker was Edouard Shevardnadze, Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union.

His words demonstrate that protecting the environment has become a priority everywhere, across traditional divisions between east and west, and perhaps even more important, to an increasing degree across traditional divisions between north and south. It is a genuine international issue, and like peace, it requires hard work at the details, as well as inspirational talk about goals. Indeed, what is most encouraging about the challenge of environmental issues is that we are moving beyond words to actual agreements and initiatives. Certainly that was the case at the meeting in Montreal last year, which yielded agreement on the Protocol on Protection of the Ozone Layer. That same spirit was evident at a joint meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Berlin, where the Canadian Minister of Finance, Michael Wilson, proposed that the World Bank should make more information available about the environmental impact of its activities; develop criteria for its lending that affects such vital resources as rainforests; and examine innovative ways to finance conservation in the developing world.

What is significant about that is, that, if there can be a change in World Bank standards, that change will inevitably affect the standards that are put in place by national governments whether those are national governments that are involved in encouraging development elsewhere or whether those are the site governments of development. It is not an easy issue. None of these issues is easy.

Whether one likes it or not there are competitions among various countries whether they are in the business of encouraging development or being the site of development. Standards have to be set that each one can feel comfortable they can follow without suffering some national prejudice. Working on the World Bank is an important place to start, not alone, but an important place to start. I think it is an indication of the kinds of changes we are seeing in the world that the proposals that Mike Wilson put forward at the Berlin meeting were well received, that there is a disposition to begin to move on that kind of issue as there had not been in the past.

We are the beneficiaries if we are wise enough to take advantage of it, of changes that are occurring generally in the world, not simply in the new prominence of the issue of the environment, but changes that are making it more possible for the international system to work more effectively and to work together.

There are times when international relations are marked by suspicion and fear, and in those times it is hard to get things done. Hard even with the best will in the world. Hard even with the most skill in the world. We have a different atmosphere today internationally, not just in the direct relation between the superpowers, but also concerning some of the regional conflicts that were so threatening just months ago. Conflicts in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and southern Africa are subsiding. Glimmers of hope can be seen elsewhere as well - in South East Asia, in the Sahara. Those developments, important in themselves, have also injected new optimism into international affairs. We see some successes, and seek more. That optimism, that renewed confidence that international cooperation can work, coincides with a rising sense of urgency about the environment. This Government believes that we should take full advantage of this new atmosphere in international relations to move the world forward on environmental questions. That is why Prime Minister Mulroney gave such high priority to the environmental question when he addressed the United Nations last month.

Let me confess an evident Canadian bias. We believe in multilateral organizations. It may be that we believe in them so strongly because we are not a superpower, and countries that are not superpowers understand particularly how important it is to have rules that work for the whole world. But we think the world needs rules that work, and we think the world needs a strong international system that can let common goals be pursued together. That is why Canada attaches such priority to the effective operation of the United Nations. We always have. We were invited to leave UNESCO. We had good reason to leave UNESCO. We didn't. We stayed in UNESCO to try to reform it from within. That is the spirit we adopt towards international organizations. That is why we were so instrumental, going back decades to Mr. Pearson's service as Foreign Minister, in establishing the idea of UN peacekeeping forces and why we are trying to make that idea work now. That is why we have taken such an active role in international trade negotiations because rules that work are important for the world. That is why we were the first country to announce a formal national response to the Brundtland concept of sustainable development. That has been our tradition in Canada, historically. It is today.

Obviously, we are going to pursue bilateral agreements on environmental issues, particularly with the United States regarding acid rain. Often agreements between two nations can set the stage for broader agreement among many nations, particularly at a time when the world is discovering ways to work together. In these circumstances, two Canadian traditions combine - a profound concern about the world's environment, and our experience in making the international system work.

To that end, I want to talk about some of the things that are on the immediate agenda now.

We are working hard with Sweden, a country that has credentials and a standing internationally similar to our own, to try to achieve a consensus resolution in the UN General Assembly to convene, in 1992, a United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

We have announced the establishment in Canada of a National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. A round table that brings together in one place, at one table, people who come from different sectors, to discuss the common problem of the interlinkage of environmental and economic questions. We think that will be important in Canada, but we are also aware that things that work in Canada can sometimes be adopted elsewhere. We think that this concept of the Round Table can become a model that will be helpful elsewhere in taking advantage of precisely the kind of developments that have been noted earlier, and precisely the fact that the question of action on the environment, of identifying the details where we can make some solid progress, is becoming a higher priority on a variety of levels.

We are hosting in Canada, in Ottawa in February, a workshop of legal and other experts to develop a framework umbrella convention for the protection of the atmosphere. Our hope is that we can agree on such a convention by 1992.

There are a range of other questions now actively, not simply on the agenda of Departments of the Environment, off on the edge of government, or off on the agenda of organizations that only meet three times since 1907 in national convocation, but at the heart of national governments and are increasingly becoming the heart of international deliberation whether they are the Economic Summit or the General Assembly discussions of the United Nations.

We have an opportunity to put to work the skills that Canada has developed internationally and the commitments that Canadians feel about the environment to make some solid and real progress in this field, as we have been able to do in other fields at other times in the history of this country and this world. That is very much a commitment of mine. I know it is of yours and that is the real reason why I wanted to take the opportunity to be with you today.

Your organization and our Government have a great deal of work to do together. If we are skillful and marry our experience and our commitment, it is work to which the world will pay increasing attention to the benefit of us all in the future.

Thank you.