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ACID RAIN: A SERIOUS BILATERAL ISSUE

An Address by the Honourable John Roberts, Minister of the Environment, to the Air Pollution Control Association, New Orleans, June 21, 1982

My 1980 speech was devoted to a single topic, acid rain. It was a call to action, it stressed the urgency of dealing with a problem that you as experts are all too familiar with, and it was a plea for both our countries to jointly meet the environmental challenges that confront us in the Eighties. I sincerely wish that I could come to New Orleans and offer congratulations all around on the wonderful job that is being done to combat the menace of acid rain. Unfortunately, this is impossible.

In Canada we are deeply disappointed with the state of negotiations between my country and the United States government on acid rain. The foot dragging and interference in the development of scientific information has reached frustrating proportions. The Administration's rejection of our proposal to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions in eastern North America by 50 per cent by 1990 and a clear indication that it may be some considerable period of time before it will be able even to begin to discuss control actions, is a bitter pill for us to swallow.

The latest obstacles, which occurred less than one week ago at a negotiating session in Ottawa, are forcing us to an agonizing reappraisal of the usefulness of continuing discussions.

Our emission-reduction proposal was drawn from the same science that U.S. negotiators have drawn diametrically opposed conclusions. On a *per capita* basis, our proposal is more costly to Canadians than to Americans. We are willing to put our money where our mouth is. I can only conclude that the values and factors influencing Canadian decision-making are considerably different from those in the U.S.

Some of you must think that I am beginning to sound like a broken record. Shall I reiterate the grim facts for you? That in our province of Ontario a recent survey showed 48 per cent of 2 000 lakes surveyed to be very sensitive to acid rain. That, conservatively, in Norway and Sweden, fish life has been destroyed in more than 6 500 lakes. That, according to a Congressional study, one out of every four streams and lakes in the northeastern United States has already been damaged by acid rain. That evidence continues to mount as to the multi billion dollar threat that acid rain poses to our soils and forests, even to our buildings and monuments.

My arguments in Montreal in 1980 were encapsulated in an October 16, 1981, editorial in the *Washington Post*:

"Enough is known about acid rain to put an end to debate over whether the phenomenon is real, man-made and damaging. It is all three. The important area for action now is how best to go about reducing sulphur and nitrogen oxide emissions, and how fast".

More public awareness in Canada

Precisely. This is the problem that still faces us now, as it faced us two years ago. One of the items on the bright side, however, is that at least we have made some progress in terms of public awareness. In Canada, only 5 per cent of our population is unaware of the threat of acid rain, and a staggering 77 per cent of Canadians view acid rain as our most serious and pressing environmental problem.

Yet, incredible as it must seem to you scientists and experts in the field, there are those who still insist that acid rain poses no immediate threat, and that it should be a subject merely for further research, not quick action.

The so-called scientific case against action was recently put in an article appearing in the *Wall Street Journal.* The basic argument was that the acid rain question calls for more research, that as yet too many unproven variables enter the equation, and that controls might prove to be uneffective. The report's author, by the way, was the president of the National Coal Association.

There is no lack of scientific proof as to the causes of acid rain, or that it might not really be due to the long range transport of pollutants, or that emission controls are not the best way of dealing with the problem.

But let us even concede, for the sake of argument, that all the facts are not yet in on acid rain. In science, it is always possible to gather more information, and to constantly refine our judgments. Are we in that case still justified in taking immediate action?

The answer can only be yes. Consider the case against smoking. "Scientific" debate still goes on, yet any reasonably prudent person knows what is best for his or her own health. Or take the matter of phosphorous pollution of the Great Lakes, an excellent precedent of bilateral co-operation between Canada and the United States. We didn't wait until every iota of humanly obtainable evidence was in before taking firm and effective steps against phosphorous emissions; if we had waited, Lake Erie would be dead today. An unarguable preponderance of evidence dictated the need for prompt action, and we acted.

I put it to you that the same situation exists today with regard to acid rain. To procrastinate on the basis of a so-called lack of knowledge would be like hesitating to drain a malarial swamp, because we didn't know precisely which mosquitoes were carrying the disease.

Over ten years ago both Canada and the United States strengthened their laws to clean the air in our cities. We have both made tremendous progress. The air in our cities is purer. However, some of our industries stopped local air pollution by building taller stacks as well as controlling their emissions. These taller stacks are spreading current emissions far and wide. Thus part of the answer to one problem has become part or cause of another problem – acid rain. It is time for both countries to look at laws and regulations. It is time to revise our legislation in a manner conducive not only to maintaining and improving local air quality but to reducing long range transport of air pollutants. Continuing only to focus our attention on local air quality will do little or nothing for acid rain.

Solutions differ

The things we will each have to do to solve the acid rain problem will be quite different. The relative importance of emissions from various source sectors in our two countries dictates this. In eastern Canada almost 50 per cent of our SO_2 emissions come from non-ferrous smelters and less than 20 per cent from utilities. In the eastern U.S. about two thirds of your SO_2 emissions come from utilities.

Canada is already doing a lot to curtail acid rain. Of course, we must do a lot more, and we are prepared to do so. In February of this year my provincial colleagues and I committed ourselves to reduce sulphate deposition to 20 kilograms a hectare a year by 1990. We agreed that this could be accomplished by a 50 per cent reduction in SO_2 emissions in Canada east of the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border and in the United States east of the Mississippi. The Canadian delegation to the February 24 Canada/U.S. negotiating session offered to undertake this 50 per cent reduction by 1990 contingent on parallel action in the United States. The contingency factor was introduced to encourage the U.S. to initiate control programs.

I know that Mark Twain said that "nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits", and I don't wish to be sanctimonious.

I will be the first to admit that Canada does not have clean hands when it comes to acid rain. Yet in Canada as a whole, 50 per cent of our acid rain originates in the United States, and in the regions of particular concern, such as the tourist and recreation areas of Ontario, as much as 75 per cent of the acid rain comes from the United States. We receive far more acid rain than we export. We are far more vulnerable to it because of the circumstances of both our economy and our geography.

Extensive damage caused

On the Canadian Shield, the area most sensitive to acid rain, tourism is a $700 million a year business. Tourists don't like to fish in dead lakes. In Eastern Canada, damage to buildings and other structures caused by corrosion from acid rain is conservatively estimated at $500 million annually. Our fresh water fisheries resource potentially at risk from acid rain has an approximate value of, say, $1 billion. And our eastern forest products industry – which is genuinely and seriously threatened by acid rain, make no mistake – is a $12 billion industry. Remember to increase the

weight of these figures ten times because of the proportionately smaller size of our economy.

The costs to Canadians of reducing acid rain to an acceptable level are high; about $1 billion a year by 1990. But given the stakes I have just described, you can see why it will be a good investment. The economic and social cost of not acting would be much higher.

The cost to the United States of a 50 per cent reduction in emissions from thermal plants east of the Mississippi would be $2.5 to $3 billion by 1990, an average increase in utility rates of about 2 per cent. This may be reduced by advances in technology. In Canada, given our population differential – we have about one tenth the population you do – the burden on individual Canadians would be three to four times as great as on Americans, and we are prepared to pay it. Canadians are willing to do our share.

This, very briefly, is the Canadian case against acid rain. The gravity of the problem has been recognized by both our countries, and the need for swift and decisive action has been embodied in the U.S./Canada Memorandum of Intent. This document, if lived up to, will set us well on our way towards eliminating co-operatively the threat in the only way that matters: reducing, at source, the pollution that causes it. President Reagan put it this way when he addressed our House of Commons on March 11, 1981:

"We want to continue to work co-operatively to understand and control the air and water pollution that respects no borders."

Canadians are disappointed with developments in the United States, and apprehensive about their significance both for dealing with acid rain, and managing this increasingly serious bilateral issue. Always, the constant refrain rings out from the Administration that nothing is proven, and that an indefinite amount of further study is needed, not prompt action. Well, we can't wait. Our lakes and forests are literally dying.

We find that regulations in the United States are being relaxed – with two excuses. First, that ambient air quality standards are being met or improved. But ambient air quality is by definition, local; it is not the standard relevant to long-range pollution transportation. Second, we are told that the existing regulations permit exemptions. Thus, in relaxing standards, the existing regulations are really being vigorously applied. It is hard for us to convince Canadians that the solemn commitments given to us, and which I quoted to you, are being fulfilled.

This is not what we expected when we signed the Memorandum of Intent.

One of the important specific undertakings the United States made is to "Promote

vigorous enforcement of existing laws as they require limitations of emissions from new, substantially modified, and existing facilities in a way which is responsive to the problems of transboundary air pollution".

Problem with broad implications

As experts, you all know how strong the case against acid rain really is. Vitally important as this issue is on its own terms, however, the acid rain problem has even wider implications. These interface with many of the major environmental questions of our time. Acid rain is related to the toxics dilemma generally; the airborne-transportation of contaminants and particulates and the resulting deleterious fallout pose a real threat to the continued safety of our water supplies. Soil depletion and future agricultural production; forestry and resource management; conservation and the need to find the best means of power generation: all these factors and more can be considered at least a part of the acid rain equation.

How we solve this equation will have tremendous implications for us socially, politically, and especially, economically, because our contemporary management of the environment will largely determine what resources will be available to us in the future. Above all, our management of the acid rain question is a test of how we see ourselves in the world.

I am encouraged by the fact that our two nations have faced equally serious environmental challenges in the past, and have triumphed. At the turn of the century, there was a very real fear that we would exhaust the wilderness, that our resources were being used up at too fast a rate, and that certain species of animal, such as the buffalo, faced extinction. It was about this time that the policy of setting aside large national parks for the benefit of future generations was begun by farsighted men in both countries.

In your nation, the first comprehensive policy of conservation was adopted by Theodore Roosevelt, after he had made the American people acutely conscious of a very pressing environmental problem. His words still hold today:

"To waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed".

Roosevelt then pushed through a national parks and land use program which is both his monument and the heritage of all humanity.

Today, we are confronted by an environmental crisis no less serious than the one faced at the turn of the century. In some ways, it is even graver, because the threats we face, like acid rain, are often nebulous or even invisible, and do not yield themselves to simple solutions.

Public must be informed

Our present situation demands action as bold as that taken by Teddy Roosevelt 75 years ago. You as air pollution experts, and we, as politicians, all have a clear role to play. You are the experts who, in addition to the scientific and pollution duties of your jobs, must get the information about acid rain and its menace out to the general public. Then, and only then, can an aroused populace help create the political will which is a precondition for meaningful action by elected representatives.

I applaud the courage and foresight shown by newspapers such as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* located as that paper is in a state heavily dependent on coal; a state that is a major contributor to the acid rain problem and is faced with tough economic times. In a series of recent editorials the *Plain Dealer* argued that, even though some Ohio politicians refuse to admit that an acid rain problem exists, and even though the cost of solutions might pinch, the long term and most important interests of the American and Canadian people require that strong and immediate steps be taken to stop acid rain. The *Plain Dealer* exemplifies both the spirit of neighbourly co-operation and the plain old-fashioned guts that are so necessary today.

This is the spirit that I call upon the Air Pollution Control Association to foster. I hope that if in the future I again have the privilege of addressing your organization, I will be able to bring you good news, and speak of the progress that we are making in defeating acid rain.

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