



Statements and Speeches

No. 74/14

REKINDLING "THE SPIRIT OF OTTAWA"

Remarks by the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau, to the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Meeting, Ottawa, September 25, 1974

I'm happy to be able to greet you all at the commencement of your Ottawa meeting. Commonwealth gatherings are particularly welcome in this country, as many of you know who have been in Canada on previous occasions. This is so because Canada regards the Commonwealth with much affection, and attaches to it considerable importance. In our view, there is simply no other association that permits men and women from virtually all parts of the world to gather so informally and so successfully to seek solutions to problems of common concern. In the Commonwealth, we employ our energies in attacking problems, not in attacking one another.

This is especially important in the work that brings you here this week. It is hard to believe that only 14 months have passed since heads of government met here in the summer of 1973. In that short period, the nations of the world have been faced with a series of economic shocks unparalleled, perhaps, in history. These have tested to the breaking-point the resilience of the international trading and monetary systems, and have tested beyond the breaking-point the resilience of some national economies. The issues now before us are so broad, and the remedies required of us are so complex, that no single conference -- not even one of the breadth and goodwill of this one -- can hope to be more than the beginning of a long process.

But how important is that beginning! How important it is that the peoples of all our countries can be assured that their governments have identified at least some of the problems and have agreed on the path that must be travelled in order to deal with them. Of those problems, one of the most fundamental is a failure of confidence: in ourselves and in our ability to act effectively. This meeting, I hope, will be marked by a great demonstration of confidence, for it is an essential element in the world economic structure. And it is perhaps the only element in the world monetary structure that is of any consequence at all.

In that meeting of heads of government in 1973, something that has come to be called "The Spirit of Ottawa" was either discovered or created (I'm not certain which), but certainly experienced.

That spirit will not, I think, escape from any who shared it. For it lit within each of us the realization that, while our problems are very real and very complex, our ability to deal with them depends entirely upon our willingness to extend to them the same measure of honesty and concern that we employ within our own families. And we realized then, as well, that answers that do not confer benefits upon ordinary human beings are not answers at all.

That concern for people was what "The Spirit of Ottawa" was all about. I urge you to rekindle it here this week. I urge you to do so by adhering to the high standards of human concern that were voiced again and again around that particular table by leaders from all parts of the world, but by no one with the compassion and the eloquence and the sincerity of the late Norman Kirk. None who listened to Prime Minister Kirk last August, and certainly none who had the good fortune to know him, doubt the depth of the loss experienced by the people of New Zealand, and by men and women everywhere. Mr. Kirk possessed the genius to remind us that none of our activities, be they political or economic, are defensible unless they bring with them human benefit.

One of the underpinnings, surely, of the human condition is economic in nature. In years past, I fear, we have not always approached this underpinning with sufficient care. We have allowed too much darkness to spill into the spaces between the occasional beacons of a Bretton Woods or a Colombo Plan or a Kennedy Round. And we in the developed countries have injected ourselves with the unforgiving opiate of unthinking belief in our systems, our values, our generosity and our indestructibility. By clinging to those economic beliefs too long, we have remained in the dark while the world has changed about us. In the result, the international record has been subject to fits and spasms of progress, frequented by long spells of inactivity or even decline.

I dare to believe, however, that we are emerging now from one of those long periods without light. And, as always when one first faces the brilliance of sunshine, certain images are engraved on the retina. One of those images, to me, is the absolute interconnection of events in all countries of the world, developed and developing alike. Another image is of the similarly absolute requirement for co-operation in our attempts to deal with those events in order to turn them to our benefit.

We should be shortsighted indeed if we believed that the development process can be dealt with separately from that of commodity

prices or resource management. We should be foolish if we assumed that the evils of inflation could be diminished without efforts both international and domestic. We should be stupid beyond belief if any of us assumed that any one country could become so self-sufficient in this or that product that it could afford to pursue economic or trading or monetary policies independent of the interests of others.

What I am saying is that international meetings, and international institutions, too, must henceforth play a more dominant role in the management of all our economies. That role will be unsuccessful, however, unless both our discussions and our actions reflect an ethical awareness of our responsibilities -- to one another and on this physical planet on which we all dwell and on which we all depend absolutely for survival. Resource transfers, exchange deficits, liquidity difficulties, inflation, trade barriers, unemployment, environmental deterioration, growth -- none are severable either one from the other or as between one country and another. Nor can we sever any of these from the concern that must underline and permeate all our discussions and all our activities. That concern is for social justice and individual human dignity. To it we must marry self-discipline and industriousness.

I am confident that that concern will be evident throughout your discussions. I wish you well in your meeting, and I bid you a pleasant stay in Ottawa.

S/C