

An address at

“Realizing the Global Agenda: From Ideas to Action”  
A symposium in Honour of Ivan Head

Liu Institute for Global Issues  
Vancouver, B.C.  
September 20, 2004

Maureen O’Neil, President  
IDRC

Ivan would approve of the extraordinarily broad remit we have been given: Have the South-North and global governance agendas stalled?

First, I want to share with you some of Ivan’s thoughts on the need for attention to the South-North agenda and then argue that national agendas of our countries and developing countries are the place to start. After all, acting together, they determine whether there will be any changes to international norms, laws and structures. As far as the US is concerned, we must understand much better how the Bush agenda will influence that myriad of national agendas.

Ivan’s own summing up of the state of South-North issues more than a decade ago reflected his frustration that citizens of Canada and developed countries do not appear to understand the mutual vulnerability of South and North. I will not repeat all his arguments here, but I will quote generously from “[On a] Hinge of History”.

He said: “We seem unable to recognize that we cannot will ourselves to be immune to the unavoidable pressures of natural and physical laws, of economic certainties, and of political volatility — much of which now originates in the South. Inevitably they will come to occupy a major segment of Canada’s attention, of its economic and scientific activity, of its foreign policy. As they will come to dominate the policies and activities of all the industrialized nations.”

Ivan was convinced that the world and its rules of survival had changed — that we were, are, in the early stages of a major shift in human relations and that new technologies “inform billions that their wretched impoverishment is becoming worse even as the consumption patterns of the wealthy, most of who reside in the countries of the North, are becoming obscenely excessive.”

He bewailed four decades of cold-war obsessions and the absorption of intellectual attention, industrial production, and public spending that “were directed to defence-related purposes ... crowding out everything else.” He documented the billions in arms sales that had helped fuel the

127 wars which were fought between 1945 and 1989 and noted: “At least five of those importing countries have either attained or are close to attaining nuclear explosive capability. Several possess chemical weapons. The consequences of that pattern took an ugly but predictable turn in the Persian Gulf in the summer of 1990.” (Ivan was writing in the shadow of the last Iraq war.)

The destruction of Air India Flight 182 had occurred five years before. As he said, “the most heinous crime ever committed in Canadian history ... the product of political turbulence in a developing country.”

“Inexorably,” he reminded us, “Canada’s present and future is being shaped and influenced by events in the developing countries of the South. These influences are not incidental and they are not spasmodic; they are major and they are persistent. Nevertheless, Canada as a nation has acknowledged neither the importance of the relationships nor the vulnerability of this country to events in the South.” Ivan believed that South-North relations would “come to occupy a major segment of Canada’s conscious attention, of its economic and scientific activity, of its foreign policy. As they will come to dominate the policies and activities of all the industrialized nations.”

He was worried whether this recognition and realignment of priorities would come quickly enough to avoid environmental catastrophes, economic turbulence, and political upheaval. He warned that it is nonsense for arrogant developed countries to believe that “drawbridge politics” can be effective in this single biosphere, in this planetary economy, in this age of satellite communications and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Ivan felt, hoped, that with the end of the cold war this attitude would change, that “as the haze dissipated from 40 years of smoke and mirrors,” the extent to which Canada and the countries of the North are now vulnerable to events in the South, the enormity of the disequilibria would be recognized and, most importantly, the range of options (based on sound research) which could take us forward “to ensure for ourselves and the billions of human beings who live in the South a future of hope.”

He looked forward to a future in which the world’s scientific knowledge would be mobilized to end poverty, inequity, and injustice.

Canada didn’t take up Ivan’s challenge.

That isn’t what happened in the 90s in Canada. Quite the opposite. To balance our budget, we took the money from the easiest spots—those departments and agencies whose job it was to address Ivan’s agenda ... we dramatically reduced our capacity to act internationally and are only gradually rebuilding. For a time, we reduced our capacity to generate scientific knowledge — for ourselves and with others, although the turn-around here has been dramatically positive for domestic knowledge creation. Enhanced initiatives to share knowledge with poor countries were hinted at in the last Speech from the Throne.

In the 90s, aside from what was going on or not going on at the UN and its host of agencies, or because of what was perceived to be the agendas of the WTO, World Bank, IMF, on the streets, the anti-globalizers were omnipresent. Agree with their take on the subject or not, North-South issues were unavoidable on the television and in the papers. And Canada's own Naomi Klein emerged, as The Economist's Robert Guest said, as "the siren of the anti-globalization movement."

Even more important than this energetic, sometimes festive, sometimes violent, engagement of civil society on the fairness of global governance agendas, were the changes happening at the national level in many developing countries. Events that were underway before 9/11.

As I said a moment ago, it is important to recognize that it is unlikely that significant changes in global governance will take place without a growing capacity for accountable, democratic government at national levels.

One of the major sins of the Cold War was the well-known and disastrous backing of a number of autocratic regimes that showed little regard for human rights. Pakistan, the Congo, Chile usually come to mind. However, many states didn't need that encouragement. Often, developing countries threw off colonialism and created what were, ultimately, nationalistic non-democracies with centrally controlled economies; approaches to development which did not produce positive results. Indeed, they were not obviously trying to produce benefits for the majority of their citizens.

Since the Cold War's end, in spite of the horrors of civil wars and genocides in Africa, not to mention the terrible scourge of AIDS, there have been remarkable and positive changes. Politically, 43 of the 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have held at least one election in the last decade compared to three in 1990. In Kenya, Moi was finally toppled from power and, though the coalition is unstable, good things are happening for children's education, attacks on corruption, reform of the justice system. South Africa has had three democratic elections.

All is not rosy — Freedom House notes the considerable differences in intensity of democracies in Africa and, indeed, in Latin America. Nonetheless, in Latin America, 18 countries can be described as democracies now, whereas 25 years ago, only three could be.

In Asia, transformed approaches to economic policy and investment are changing the lives of millions even if democratic institutions are not around the corner everywhere. Success countries like South Korea are now becoming donors: a significant change from the 1960s when their level of development was about the same as Ghana's. At UBC, in this centre of expertise on Asia, you are much better placed than I to document the ups and downs of accountability and transparency. And to contribute advice on how to achieve change in the dangerous enigma of North Korea..

It is the Middle East, where there has not been such a move towards democracy, which now rivets our attention. As the Arab Human Development Report pointed out so clearly, the Arab states have been almost without exception anti-democratic and abusive of human rights,

particularly women's. Israel, the strongest democracy in the region, has been under fire since its creation and the inability to find a peaceful solution with the Palestinians, who until recently did not accept Israel's right to exist, fuels excuses across the region to avoid reforms.

It is at the national level where governments that care to can provide personal and economic security for their people, where governments willing to become knowledgeable in the policies they need to transform opportunities can do so. Governments can choose to focus on the security of their people, their human security.

While it is the global trade agenda that gets the most press, the International Fund for Agriculture and Development, in an excellent paper produced last year for their governing council on trade and rural development, noted that the removal of regional barriers would be even more important to increasing well-being of rural citizens than changes to the international trade regime. And all those issues like phyto-sanitary controls depend on capacity in national governments. Governments which recognize that the generation of new knowledge should call on their national resources, too. After all, to meet the UN Millennium Goals, it will be the budgetary allocations of national governments that make the difference — even if those governments are now aid-dependent. That is why the national poverty reduction strategies trigger debt forgiveness and donor contributions. It is national governments which will or not make the NEPAD in Africa work.

It is national governments which create global governance structures. It is national governments which must respect those institutions. Even before Bush, the US was not that keen on the UN — for good and bad reasons. What we have seen over the last while is an exaggeration of that. To turn to post-9/11 US policy, the issue is to understand what the US is asking of other countries in order to assist them to contain terrorist threats. Will these actions enable democratic governments to strengthen the security they are able to provide for their own people? Public policing in most developing countries is inefficient, ineffective, and often corrupt. Their security sectors do need reform to improve poor peoples' lives.

The Cold War showed us what a blunt instrument the pursuit of a particular security strategy could be and how it sometimes exacerbated the anti-democratic forces which existed at the national level in the countries most affected. As I have said, many new democracies are very weak and perch precariously on shifting sands of illegality — trans-border arms, drugs, diamonds, people, etc. There is the usual long list of manifestations of power and greed. How will the US define its route to a more secure future for itself? What will it expect of other countries and how, in concrete ways, will they ensure that it happens? Will this be positive or negative for citizens' ability to strengthen their democracies or end their particular tyranny?

While we need to understand well the Bush agenda, in particular how it affects Canada's ability to act, we should not be mesmerized by it. It is worthwhile to put effort into thinking through new ways of expanding the capacity for North and South to interact effectively at the global level. Mr. Martin's G-20 at the leaders' level is one suggestion being explored — Gordon Smith and his team are actively engaged. The concepts embraced by the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy's

commission, Responsibility to Protect, need to be pushed to discuss the operational implications. The next G-8, to be chaired by the UK, will, under their chairmanship, continue the discussions of support to Africa, to debt relief commitments, to support for NEPAD. The UK continues to massively increase their aid. And, as we see in the papers today, Tony Blair is launching a major initiative on climate change.

However huge the challenge, understanding how to support the building and deepening of democracy in Afghanistan and, if it ever gets to that, Iraq and elsewhere is key to building a safer future for us all. Remarkably little analysis has been carried out on the changes catalysed by the billions already invested in support for democratization. Some that has been done is quite depressing — Larry Diamond's recent article on Iraq comes to mind.

Scholars and students like you, centres like the Liu Centre can make a difference in Canadian foreign policy. The results will not be immediate. The analyses which emerge from research will require enormous promotion.

We are honouring Ivan Head who made an outstanding contribution to that debate. He placed South-North issues at its heart. It is wonderful that the Chair will be named after him. IDRC will be pleased to contribute to that endeavour.