

The individual and the environment:
Canada and the international community.
J. Alan Beesley at the University of Waterloo
Forty-eighth Convocation, May 25, 1984

Mr. Chancellor, members of Senate, members of Faculty,
Graduating Students, Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I should like to express my deep appreciation to members of Senate and, if I may say so, to the University of Waterloo as a whole for the great honour which has just been conferred on me. It would have been a pleasure to be here on this campus, in such a physically beautiful and intellectually stimulating environment, under any circumstances, but particularly on this occasion. I have been privileged to work with many people, in and out of government - scientists, lawyers, engineers, businessmen, academics, parliamentarians, provincial and federal, media representatives and private persons - in seeking to develop the law of the environment, and I acknowledge this honour on their behalf as much as my own. I do so with a feeling more akin to humility than pride.

I propose to address the interrelationship between the individual and the environment and between Canada and the international community. In so doing I shall ask why should we care? What can we do? What is the role of the individual?

Before I begin I must make clear that I have never agreed with those who say our time in university is the easiest time of our life and afterwards we must face the real world. I was rather frightened most of my time in university.

It didn't prevent me from enjoying life, but for years afterwards I would get sick to my stomach - and feel vaguely guilty - every Spring, until I finally realized I no longer had to write exams each May. Moreover I cannot set myself up as a role model. I should not presume to advise you. I am in trouble most of the time. It is often no fun; but then often it is; and it is always interesting. So be forewarned that you are listening to someone accused of being an activist; however, that word might also be used to describe the spirit of this university and perhaps that is how I came to be here today.

It is significant and directly relevant that there are present here today new graduates and learned faculty members in the fields of geography, urban and regional planning, man and environmental studies, architecture, physics, chemistry, biology and earth sciences, optometry, and integrated studies. I wonder if there is another university in Canada which has adopted such a broad but integrated system of studies. If there is a first principle in the field of environmental action it is that an inter-disciplinary approach is essential. Indeed it is increasingly evident that what is required is a holistic approach. Nothing could better illustrate this concept than the representation of so many disciplines here in this hall. I am told that physicists, chemists and biologists are discovering a symbiotic relationship amongst what were formally thought to be discrete fields of study. At a more personal level, medicine is learning more and more about the need to

take an integrated approach - physical, emotional and spiritual.

So what does this have to do with us as individuals? Well, I wonder what might be accomplished if even a fraction of those present today were to keep in touch after graduation - a new type of network, an environmental network - in which you would assist each other by working together to help preserve the environment. Perhaps there are some present who would ask "Why should we?" What has it to do with us, with me?

Speaking to this audience, I need hardly stress that environmental degradation eventually affects everyone in the community whether at the local, national or global level. Some suggest that the environment belongs to all of us. I prefer to think that we belong to the environment, as our own native Eskimos and Indians believe. It flows from either approach that we each have a duty to preserve the environment, and to so utilize it as not to damage our neighbours. Canada pioneered in developing this concept as a principle of international environmental law. Again, I hardly need to belabor the obvious to this audience. Our species is part of the environment - that part, unfortunately, which seems at times to be bent on destroying it. At times we seem to be afflicted with the lemming instinct; yet we continue to find that with a little help, nature is resilient - so long as we act before we reach the point of no return. There is a much-told story, and I know its an old chestnut, about the lily pad which doubled its size each day until it reached the point at which it covered half the pond. The question was asked, how long remained before action could be taken. The answer of course was "one day".

This audience is aware that such problems as the deforestation of jungles in South America and the mountain sides of the Himalayas, the desertification in Africa and Australia, the pollution of coastal marine areas, the degradation of the ozone layer, the population explosion, linked in many areas with abject poverty, the problems of acid rain - all of these are everyone's concern. As many of you know, Canada has done studies establishing that migratory birds damaged by pesticides in their southern habitat carry their toxic effects back to Canada; remedial action taken in other countries - with assistance from Canada - benefits us directly. No one here needs a lecture on the interaction between Canada and the USA on acid rain. Nothing better illustrates the inutility of compartmentalized approaches to environmental issues. Acid rain is no respecter of boundaries. Ask a Swiss or a German about acid rain and whether those who cause it are also those who suffer the consequences. These two countries recently joined other European countries and Canada in accepting in Ottawa a common commitment to reduce sulphur emissions by specific percentages before a fixed date.

Yet Canada was regarded by most Western countries almost as a renegade only a little over a decade ago, when we embarked upon a campaign to develop principles of international environmental law at the Stockholm Environmental Conference in 1972, the London Dumping Conference in 1973, and the Law of the Sea Conference, from 1973 to 1983. Now some of those countries

who most strongly opposed our initiatives are in the vanguard of those seeking to develop a common international environmental ethic. How has this come to pass? Canada has worked to heighten this awareness. The Amoco Cadiz also helped. The good news is that the peoples of the world and their governments are becoming more concerned about the environment. The bad news is that so much damage had to occur before, finally, there was widespread - still not universal - recognition of the disastrous effects of environmental laissez-faire - what I refer to as malign neglect.

Does environmental degradation matter in the face of the overriding danger of a global nuclear holocaust? Yes, and the two problems are not unrelated. We all know that the greatest threat to the environment is the danger of nuclear war. Whether we would end up with the nuclear night or the greenhouse effect there is no doubt that the environment would be seriously and perhaps irreparably damaged - even by a so-called limited nuclear war - if there can be such a thing - and even for the winners - if there can be a winner. There is ample evidence that the survivors of a nuclear exchange would have cause to wonder if they were the lucky ones.

Are we then facing the apocolypse? I don't think so. But we ignore the warning signs at our peril.

What then can you or I or any other individual do about the environment - and disarmament? A lot, I suggest, if you undertake the commitment, as many here most clearly have. To put it differently, what will be done if you and I opt out?

What will be done unless individuals like those here today, skilled persons, experts in many fields, join with one another in pressing at the local, provincial, national and international level for positive, sustained and concrete action on both the environment and on disarmament?

Some of you may feel that governments - and even more of you may feel that bureaucrats - don't take public opinion seriously. That is not my experience, as someone who has been at both ends of the communications chain. Even in countries where to express such views is to take serious risks we find shining examples of what can be wrought by the human spirit. Does anyone think that the Russian dissidents have no influence in the USSR? Why then is Sakahrov not merely ignored? Why have the efforts to silence him failed? Does anyone argue that Lech Walensa makes no impact on public opinion in Poland? If we who are fortunate enough to live in democracies denigrate the impact of the individual upon the society in which we live then let us learn from the Sakahrovs and the Walensas. Maurice Strong, a Canadian who was the first head of the U.N. Environmental Programme influenced public opinion the world over. So, in quite a different fashion, did Martin Luther King. And so, I suggest, did Gloria Steinam. None of these individuals except Maurice Strong was elected or appointed to a high office as a platform from which to launch their creative ideas. To come closer to home, consider the impact Terry Fox had on all of us. Perhaps we can't all be Martin Luther Kings or Terry Foxes, but we can all learn from them.

Who can say what might be accomplished by even a fraction of those assembled today if there were a conscious commitment to work individually and collectively for the preservation of the environment - and the prevention of war? Your studies have qualified you not only to form your own opinions but to help shape those of others. What applies at the personal level can have equal application at the international level. I have seen ample evidence of what one country can do - in this case our own country - Canada - when we are concerned enough to be courageous, when we are passionate enough to persevere.

In the fields of the law of the environment the law of the sea and the law of outer space and even the limited and inadequate law of disarmament Canada has been able to make very significant contributions. In my own experience we were able to do so only if we acted as if we had some ability to influence events. If we assume we are unimportant and without influence then that is precisely the kind of impact we have. As at the personal level, so too on the international plane. Surprisingly, perhaps, even at the international level it is individuals who ignite bursts of creativity, who make breakthroughs on difficult political issues, and who create the conditions and climate in which progress can be made.

What does all this have to do with each of us? Is it presumptuous to tell you to try to attain standards of excellence in whatever you do, whether in your chosen field or not? Would you find it surprising if I tell you - as a

government bureaucrat - that the qualities I look for, especially in young people are courage, integrity, and honesty? That commitment and creativity are as important as adherence to the work ethic and the capacity for good inter-personal relations? In diplomacy, and in many other fields, the ability to empathize is particularly important but so is the willingness to make judgments and take decisions, even when it entails personal risks. These are characteristics which we don't always think of when we use the term professionalism. For my part, if I have one piece of advice to give to you it would be simply to think for yourself - to question the conventional wisdom; and having done so, retain an open mind. I prefer an open mind even if based on ignorance, to a closed mind based on pre-conceived notions.

The classic dictum from my generation to someone in yours is to quote Shakespeare's Petronius - "to thine own self be true". The problem for many of us, of course, especially when we are young, is how to answer the question "who am I"? "What do I really want to do"? "How can I be true to myself until I discover who I am"? The only one of my friends who knew all through high school exactly what he wanted to do, got his degree, practised his profession for a year and became a truck driver. In my case I took law, practised for 5 years, and then entered the foreign service. Had I been more ambitious I might have kept my set of drums and become a jazz musician - and wealthy. Who knows? The lesson, if there is one, is not to be too troubled if you are not all that certain

of exactly where you fit into in this increasingly complex world. So long as you don't give up and quit trying. I feel very strongly that there is no field of human endeavor which is without dignity, and there is none so exalted that merely to do it is to be worthwhile. When all is said and done, it remains true that whatever we do, it is how we do it that counts.

To return to where I began, it is my conviction that each of you has something to contribute. Whatever your profession, whatever your goals, you can do better and do more - not just for yourselves but for your community, for your country and for other peoples in other lands - if you maintain an awareness of your interdependence, not only with your fellow human beings but with other forms of life, both plant and animal. You have the training and the education. Don't wait to be asked for your views. Insist on making them known, particularly on vital issues such as the environment, disarmament and peace and security. If even a few of us are willing and able to work together toward such objectives, Canada will be a little better and the world a little safer.

Graduating students, today is your day. It is my belief that tomorrow is also yours. Good luck to all of you.