Barbara Ward speech to UN Habitat main plenary

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My dear friends, I would like to give this speech both in French and in English …
(French) Je vous addresse en anglais…

I know that one of the great problems confronting this whole conference is that in a very real sense it's a conference about everything. **One of the most encouraging things of the 70s is the way in which the whole human family has started to talk about the basic elements of its daily life, the needs of its citizens—food, population, the status of women, all beginning with the Stockholm realization that we belong to a single planet and however much we may still think of ourselves as politically separate, in the most profound sense of sharing in all the great life support systems, we are one, inescapably one.**

And now here you are, coming together to discuss how we live together in our settlements, the single species in a fragile planet which has got to find the way of its daily life. And quite clearly it's much too big a subject for a conference. That obviously is clear, and I think one would have to say that all of you who are here have our support, our sympathy, our loving admiration for the way in which you are taking on an absolutely impossible task. But having said that, it does seem to me that the sheer scale of what you are thinking about is also a guarantee that what you do may be among the most important step forward taken by the human species to recognize its own condition. Because how can we recognize where we are unless we see the interconnections? The things that were thought of at Stockholm, at Rome, at Bucharest and Mexico City, this is where they come together, and this is where the planetary future of this single precious species may well be decided.

2:50
Now where are we? A very nice question. And one of the problems of course is that many people will feel our position is so unprecedented that we really haven't any guide to tell us where we are. I think it was Henry Ford, wasn't it, who said history was bunk. Well I wouldn't go as far as that but I would say that it is perfectly possible that the kind of quantum jump, the kind of scale of change in which we're living now, makes the past in some sense irrelevant. And yet I think when Santayana said those who will not learn from history are destined to repeat it, that is possibly a wiser approach.
3:23
And if we look back I think it is quite clear that in a sense we are in the middle of one of the vast historical changes in the human condition, which if we can grasp, we can hope to guide. Being that in the past after all we invented a settled agriculture about 20,000 years ago, we invented that extraordinary mixture of of vanity and destruction, the city, about 5,000 years ago, and now, the entire planetary community is being drawn in to the technological urban order. About one quarter of us are through, another three

quarters are in the process, and one has to admit that looking at what the quarter have already done, that this very early stage of mankind's understanding of industrialism and urbanism isn't precisely encouraging because heaven knows the messes made by the developed nations, perhaps the most useful thing is to take a look at them and make absolutely certain that this isn't the pattern of the future. [applause]

In other words you have here possibly one of the great opportunities at this conference, that is to look at the mistakes that are made and to remember, what could be a most hopeful and glorious fact, is that thank heaven something like half the world's settlements are not yet built and so they can, at a pinch, be better. So in some sense it should be a conference of hope because we are before it's too late reconsidering a human condition. And perhaps we're going to be able to draw conclusions from the first very faltering, very faulty, very disturbed and aggressive and angry phase of our technological order, and do better. Because if you look back—and forgive me if I take a lot of my examples from my own country, from Britain. We did happen to invent it, you know, for good and ill, and I think you could perhaps argue that the entire human species now is about where Britain was got to in the 1840s. We're about the stage in this massive transfer to the urban technological order which Britain had reached in the 1840s. Now is there possibly here an historical analogy which will help us to look from the particular instance to the larger global system. I would like to suggest to you that yes, it has a lot to teach us, because man of the features that we see in the world today were is it already embedded in our early experience, for evil and then perhaps a little for good. So may I begin with this particular instance of a society heaving itself into the urban and technological order and what did it look like in the 1830s and 40s because that is about where there whole planet is today.

Well, first of all one would have to say that cities were being scrambled into without intention as the by-product of something else. The industrial order was going forward and the cities were growing as they could. There was absolutely no control over the use of land and by god if you were a Duke with a farm in Belgravia, hmmm could you tuck it away. The degree to which in the early cities land speculation and the vast fortunes made, very often as I say by these dukely families who weren't exactly on the side of poverty in the first place, is one of the most remarkable circumstances of early city building. The entire values of land created by the mere need of the expansion of the economy and of the new urban system ended up overwhelmingly in the pockets of the few. And that was one of the reasons why the early mark of our industrial technological system was a simply fantastic skew in income. Economists reckon that in the whole first fifty to sixty years of the industrial order in Britain, no part of the value added by the industrial system ended up with the working classes. It went entirely to the managerial and the profited groups. And by the 1830s the skew in income—let us take a typical city, Manchester, archetypal city of the early industrial revolution—the skew in income in which probably ninety percent of all the gain was going to ten percent of the people, was beginning to show up in conditions which heaven knows are familiar to us today.

Hunger: William Cobbett said that the average Lancashire millhand lived on oatmeal and water. Children of five and six went to work in the factories and if they were pauper children, my friends, they went manacled so they couldn't get loose. The first legislation of any kind, the first factory act—you won't believe this, now wait for it—limited the work to children under 10 to 12 hours a day in a seven day week. Well I'll tell you something, there weren't many ten year old who could survive that kind of week in that kind of condition. And that is what is was like in Manchester in those days.

In addition, housing in the most incredible squalor, and I think, I wish I could remember it, I have to read it, this I think will give you a little vignette of the splendid environmental conditions of Manchester in the 1830s. It's describing the central river which took the full brunt of the entire effluent of this growing industrial city. Here we go: "A narrow, coal black foul-smelling stream full of debris and refuse which it deposits on the shallow right bank. In dry weather, a long stream of the most disgusting blackish-green slime pools are left standing on the bank, from the depths of which bubbles up miasmatic gas and gives forth a stench unendurable even on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the surface of the stream." Now we think about environment, now how's that! I challenge Cleveland itself to do better than that, and it's got a river that catches fire. Anyway.

But the fascinating thing about that quotation is that it was in a letter from Friedrich Engels to his friend Karl Marx. Now t hose were the conditions in the early cities. Growing up as the by-products of an industrial process with a total skew of income, with hunger and with disease so that the average length of life on a labourer was eighteen years, infantile death and hanging over all this appalling environmental stench and corruption. That was the beginning of the industrial system. And so much so did it impress itself upon the imagination of contemporaries. You can look at it for example in the novels of Dickens, but it was a conservative politician, Benjamin Disraeli, who I think best summed it up by saying Britain is two nations, a nation of the rich and a nation of the poor. And that was the product of the first uncontrolled development of our technical industrial urban order.

To then follow it on from 1840 to 1940, if you add in the number of depressions, the number of colonial wars, the number of growing conflicts in Europe crowned by two world conflicts and the invention of atomic energy for destructive purposes, you would say that it was a pretty lethal order, and that the first 150 years of the techno-urban system does not perhaps give us the best hopes of survival on a fragile planet.

But having said that, one would also have to say that in the developed world today, from San Francisco to Vladivostock, where the processes of technological change have gone forward, we do in fact find that for the mass of the people, not for all, there are tragic, disgusting and disgraceful pockets of poverty in the wealthiest countries, but in general you would have to say that the condition of the people compared with those of Manchester in 1840 have enormously improved.

So in spite of the travail, in spite of the horrors, in spite of the difficulties, we cannot look back and say that this was a period of utter and total disaster. Something else was happening at the same time. And therefore when we begin to look forward, history is not totally irrelevant because we can ask ourselves: okay, which were the things that went better, what happened, what changed, what transformed the Manchester of 1840 to the really reasonably respectable Manchester of 1970? What happened in between? Because does this give us some clues to what we as a planet have to do? Are we here confronting as it were a moment of truth which is not all doom but which is also giving us clues to the future?

Now I'd like to suggest that there are one or two things here that explain to us how it was that in spite of the appalling start and of the continued troubles and difficulties of the last century, there are clues for better action. Some of them are good fortune, and we better recognize that, some of them are policy. But together they offer us some kind of guidance, the kind of guidance that a general conference of this kind can as it were sort out and turn into priority action.

First of all, there was the lack of food. This was the period when all the temperate land of this planet was brought under the plow. And so that well known ascetic memorable and extremely respectable figure, Thomas Malthus was proved to be not entirely right. He if you recall said that population always would rise to meet the resources available. Now that sounds a little like Professor Parkinson doesn't it but never mind, Malthus was roughly on the same lines. And he believed therefore that there would always be a collision course between population and resources. Malthus was the arch doomster if you like because he really said there was no way out. Now with the coming of cheap food—and it became massively cheap after the American civil war, in fact so cheap that Britain stopped producing food almost altogether, we just got it from over the way, a little habit we've got to change—but at that period, with all the temperate lands coming under the plow, the industrial revolution went forward with a massive input of adequate and cheap food. And what was the result? Did population go on rising? No. No. When the children were better nourished, when they began to have the realization that their children weren't going to die, parents said well, there's little Johnny and there's little Mary and little Richard—hmmm, perhaps they're going to live, perhaps we don't need fifteen more. And now came, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, wherever you got the movement towards a more abundant economy you began to get a change in the population balance. That's part of it.

Now the second element of extreme importance was that a political process began, and wherever this political process was successful, the worst tragedies, the worst convulsions were avoided. There were two sides to it. One was the emergence of the conscience of the rich, and the other was the growth of unremitting and absolutely irresistible pressure from the people who had been unfortunate, the labouring masses who began by their own strength and efforts, of self-help and self reliance, mechanics institutes, friendly societies, the beginning of the trade unions, to create the kind of

pressures that could be expressed politically and in Britain we expressed through universal suffrage (only I hasten to say that universal suffrage in 1870 only stood for men but you know we've a little forward since then) anyway universal suffrage pressuring this pressure of the mass of the people as it were up against if you like, let's call it, let's have a cliché, a good old cliche into the bastions of privilege, and quite frankly the bastions of privilege began to give way. And it was Disraeli again who in 1840 had coined the phrase the two nations, the nation of the rich and the nation of the poor, after universal suffrage he began to think about drains, public housing, popular education and in fact the beginning of the whole effort to have cities not as residuals but as cities by design in which some measure of human decency could be extended to the whole of the people. Heaven knows it wasn't completed and it isn't complete now. You've only got to go to Clydeside or the Bronx and heaven knows it's not complete. But I do maintain that where that dialogue of the rich with conscience and the poor with punch worked out, you began to move away from the total and desperate fatalities of revolution, collapse and indeed war. So in the first thing you were lucky with food, the political process is more than luck, that was an attitude of mind and as it were, creative confrontation. In addition of course we did then have as a result an enormous increase in public health, and a further as it were underlining of ability of families or desire of families to stabilize their size, and by the time the industrial structures of the developed world were moving more and more towards capital intensive industry and away from the simple unskilled jobs of the early industrial revolution, universally where the development changes had taken place you began to get a greater balance between numbers, work, opportunity and so forth.

So the result was not cities exploding in misery and despair. It was the beginning of cities that were manageable and cities in fact in which you could live. So it's a mixture as I say, it's a mixture on the one hand of an appalling start, of continuing problems of a terrible kind, but one or two clues to how we can do better. Now does that tell us anything about where we are now?

Well, let's begin by saying quite clearly that we're in Manchester in 1830. That's where we are as a planet. And if Disraeli were alive today he'd talk of the planet of the rich and the planet of the poor. And the proportions would be about the same. Because about 75 per cent of the world's resources are controlled by about twenty to twenty five percent of the world's peoples. 20:45 We have transferred if you like to the whole planetary system as it struggles to enter into the technological order, we have transferred the early skew of the early industrial societies. That's number one.

The next resemblance is that a large part of this world is hungry. Hungry as the millhands in Manchester, some of them starving as Europe's weavers starved in the 1840s. Again, the pressure of demand that cannot be satisfied for food because it cannot get into the pocket range of the workers. You had it in the 1840s, you have it now.

Sanitation: something like 40-50% of the human race is not certain of clean water. Something like twenty-five to thirty percent of the human race have these desperate diseases: cholera, typhus, dysentery, the killers of the nineteenth century. Above all the most tragic, infantile gastritis, which in the Manchester of the 1840s meant that most of the children under five just died of intestinal complaints. And there are cities in the developing world today where sixty percent of the children who are born die of infantile gastritis before they are five. So again there is some resemblance between a planet in the 1970s and a Manchester in the 1840s. We have contrived in a sense to have the same kind of bumbling, appalling, dreadful approach to the technological order which began it and which we have to some extent cleared but which is still the lot of two thirds of the human race.

In addition, I would have to say that the conditions are in some ways worse. There is no more vast fertile prairie land to bring under the plough. You can't do that twice. The entire world food surplus which is now about ninety million tons comes entirely from North America at this moment. If you were to have a period of drought, we would have a period of mass starvation. That cushion is not there.

The next is that by curing a number of epidemics ahead of any change of the entire modernization structure, in some areas population growth going ahead between 2.8 and 3 percent a year is double the nineteenth century growth and it also means that the workforce is growing twice as fast. This means that there is an underlying unemployment problem which was not present in the same degree in the nineteenth century, and what is more, because in so many areas the technologies that have been evolved in the developed world which have been based up on considerable availability of capital and a fairly high increasing cost of labour, are precisely the technologies that do not match the experience of countries that are chiefly rich in their human resources and poor in their capital resources. So you get the phenomenon we know, that of the emptying out of the countryside into the cities to a twenty five percent rate of unemployment as normal. Now those were conditions that did not prevailing the nineteenth century and which make our task in fact more difficult today.

The cities in a sense have come before the jobs. In Europe in the nineteenth century, in every case the jobs were pulling in the people into the cities and this is a critical change. So we do resemble the 1840s but in certain very critical ways the situation is worse. And that means that the crisis is potentially greater, and what is more, in between the confrontations and difficulties of the nineteenth century and what could lie ahead of us in the next twenty-five years when onto this skewed planet we may be adding another planet of the same size, one of the great differences is that we have invented nuclear destruction and we therefore have the possibility, quoting again from Engels and Marx, that we could achieve a common ruin of the contending parties. Because nuclear war is a respecter of nobody: victor, vanquished, it's the same.

So are we to say that after all Henry Ford is right, it's bunk, the whole exercise of looking back is irrelevant. Back to the beginnings of this industrial and urban order, well it's a waste of time, the conditions have changed so much that it teaches us nothing. Well I maintain no. And one of the things that this conference could do is to pick up some of the points where the lessons are clear and get them into the world's dialogue in time so that as we build for another planet as we build as many settlements in the next thirty years as have been built in the whole of human history, some of these lessons are learnt and that you here at Vancouver start mankind on a wiser course. Because it is two planets, the planet of the rich and the planet of the poor. What shall we learn from the nineteenth century success stories, how shall we apply them?

Well, let's take first of all the critical one of food, because though I know man lives not by bread alone, I don't know whether any of you have tried getting on without it, because it doesn't last very long, all of three weeks. So let's begin with food. We cannot have the cushioned free food of the great prairies again. But what we can have and what you can carry up here at this conference are the resolutions of the Rome world Food Conference which were perfectly specific about an emergency food stock for immediate emergencies, a grain reserve system which can carry over with regularity from harvest to harvest so that the larger emergencies are avoided and above all—and I was delighted to see last week that a start has been made and the World Food Council meets immediately after Vancouver, so please direct a running kick at that conference with some splendid resolutions about food—that conference can begin the systematic investment in developing world food supplies which will mean that over the next twenty-five years, the equivalent of the prairies can come into being by the full-scale development of the agricultural potential of the developing countries. We know what it means; it's a five percent growth rate a year, it's something like a twenty five to thirty billion dollar investment, with perhaps five to six billions coming from the already rich as stimulus and as prod, as it were, to the process. It means and this is where it's closely linked with settlements—it means putting an end to the position in which agriculture is the Cinderella of the economy. It means seeing that intermediate settlements, for marketing, for the sale of goods, for the building up of cooperatives, it means that you've got to have a national settlements system in which agriculture is given its full weight, and so that this can be the basis of the national life because we cannot rely on cheap food from somewhere else. It's got to be at the core of the plan.

So okay we don't have good luck, but we can correct it by good policy.

Now the second thing. The political process itself. Those of you who represent the developed countries, the wealthy countries, whether new rich or old rich, remember there has never been a single case in history of an elite entrenched in power and wealth, and unready to share. They have always collapsed. I have no doubt that if any of us could go and eavesdrop on the vomitoria of Rome or the hot baths of the gentlemen, we'd find them muttering about the Visigoths. Well they were right. So let us remember that there is no record in history of an entrenched minority controlling eighty

to ninety percent of the wealth, whether it's internally inside the country or in the planet as a whole. It doesn't last. And what is needed is therefore conscience, yes, if we can have it, but I say that fair too is the beginning of wisdom and I'd like to see us running a little bit more scared.

And that will depend on the other side of the dialogue, the developing peoples have got to keep the pressure up. And there are two aspects to the pressure. One is the realization that if the mass of the people are mobilized to do their own thing in their cites, to build up, drive away the feudal restraints on agriculture, get them into their cooperatives, get them organized—these are the biggest resources the world has. So often we sound like Victorian duchesses going down to the dockers in London to lecture the poor into thrift and continence. It makes me sick, I must confess.

Why not see that here coming up in the developing world are the human resources for an immense ??30:38 *target?* if they could be made part of a job itself.

Could not one of the messages from this conference be for agriculture, for the building of cities, take the biggest resource which is the people's courage, the people's ability to work, the people's readiness to do so, don't treat them as problems, treat them as partners. And you'll be astonished at what they'll do. That I think… [applause[

God knows in the building of settlements, the kind of settlements that people build for themselves are infinitely more human than those which in fact are built for them. Our beloved friend Margaret Mead coined a marvellous aphorism over this weekend and I hope she'll forgive me if I pass it on. And that is, "no one has ever built a really good home for someone of a lower class." And this is true. In other words, people build better for themselves. [applause] And in the settlements policies that are advocated here, give this drive, give this openness to what people can do, the highest priority in your thinking.

Now, if you're going to do that, two things must be remembered. And we say this, we the developed market economies, we have to say this, beating our breasts at our failures: you will not be able to do this if you rely on a speculative land market to do your city building for you. If it could give us good cities we'd have them now. And we haven't. And one of the reasons is that the function of a market and it's a very legitimate and even a magnificent function of the market, is when price signals go up, to produce more goods. Well you know what Mark Twain's father is said to have said. He said to him "Mark [oh I can't remember what his real name was, we'll say it was Mark] Mark my son, buy land. They're not making any more of it." Well. **Therefore the justification of the market which is a rising price increases greater supply, doesn't work with land. It's fixed. Now, this doesn't mean that ownership of land may not be a tremendous safeguard of the citizens' individuality, of their sense of dignity—in fact the number of people in the developing world for whom owning their own house is a sort of acme of what they want—but there is absolutely no right to the public sale of land so that the**

development rights end up with the modern equivalence of the dukes of Belgravia. What we need is if you like private ownership, public sales. And let the control of city land which is an absolutely scarce resource, let it be with the community, and those gains which come from the value added by the community's needs must go back to the community, because otherwise where will the funds come from to build us decent cities. Let that, I plead with you, be at the centre of your thinking here at Settlements.

In addition, with this certainty of the community recouping the gains which it has itself created, you can then go on to one of the most creative changes of the nineteenth century, the beginning of those support systems which enable citizens to have the strength, the ability, the health, the self-confidence to help themselves. And this means all the systems of sanitation that we need, all those services that the citizen however well intentioned, however energetic, cannot supply himself.

And will you forgive me if now I make one special plea. And that is for the forty percent of the people this world who haven't got clean water. If one thing could sweeten the world and the world's imagination, would be if from Habitat came out a resolution that by a specific date, the most undignified aspect of human living—and I can tell you what it is, it's running at both ends, that's what it is—if you could get rid of that, what you would have done for human happiness and dignity would be absolutely incommensurate with anything else we've talked about. We're thinking of one thing—I want to speak of a lot of things I hasten to add—but for the one thing, let it be clean water for every child of man, say by 1990. Why not? Why not. The reason why not…
[Applause]
I'll tell you the reason why not—it is not a prime objective of governmental will.

Well the dialogue between the lucky and the unfortunate, between the rich who we hope will have conscience and the poor who must exercise every means of pressure, this is where we have to be absolutely and brutally frank. I read for instance in a report from Nairobi that one very very well-provided Western government that shall be nameless, remarked that they couldn't possibly provide six billions—well I mean the whole Western world couldn't provide six billions for the Buffer Stock ??? programme because that would set in motion again the inflation in the western world. Six billion!

Now let's be clear about this. There are two great sources which could provide now a decent life for everyone on earth in terms of the basic human minimum dignity that they require. One of those sources is the appalling wastefulness of the technological order of the developed world. If you see figures where of the energy that is produced up to forty percent is wasted. Has it ever struck you what an utter idiocy a cooling tower is? You get a generator, you pump it up, you put in the fuel, you get out all that heat.. And then you have a cooling tower to get rid of it. Just isn't that sense? Now, if you have what you're beginning to have all over Scandinavia which is district heat systems, all that heat is then used in fact for heating the homes and the commercial premises, instead of

having what we have now which is a thirty-five percent use from our generating systems, you can get it up to seventy-five percent. Don't talk to me about inflation when the most inflationary thing we're doing is chucking away fifty percent of the precious energy which we need for our technological order. It carries on into other things. Look at our chuck-away society. Every one of those bottles, every one of those cans recycled, uses eighty to ninety percent less energy than the production from raw materials? Does anyone know, does anyone care? No, they don't. And if we in the developed world want to produce the resources for the next twenty-five years, then let's look at our waste, and I would beg you at this conference, look at the all the recycling and conserving possibilities that are coming up, which are getting more and more interesting, which mean incidentally that you don't have to be hustled dear friends into the nuclear option on the grounds that we're going to run out of everything by 1990. Don't you believe it. We're wasting fifty percent now, and we have three hundred years of coal.

Let's take our nuclear option very quietly, please, because when you consider that old Canis is out of the Pacific and the Atlantic, and now beginning to leak plutonium after twenty-five years, when we've heard so much about how absolutely certain it is that all these wastes can be safeguarded: watch it, I say. Don't be hurried into this option. And remember that partly as a result of our energy crisis, whole new range of technologies including a technology which would use the resource of which the developing world has the most abundance supply, and that is, thank god, sunshine, solar energy. Wait: don't be stampeded. It may be alright. But don't get into it on the grounds that everything's going to run out in the next twenty-five years. Don't you believe it. It's only going to run out because we're wasting it. [applause]

Now, the second great source: you know it as well as I do. It's the biggest most inflationary boondoggle in the whole history of humanity, and that's the arms programme. Three hundred billion dollars a year. Now you can blow up the planet twenty times over with that, and I'd have thought once was enough but there you are, you never know. I'm not a military expert so maybe twenty times over is better. But anyway. Three hundred billion dollars a year. Now, this is the most inflationary form of spending there is for the reason that they told us over and over and over again in World War II and that is that if you create arms, and pay wages for the creation of arms, there is nothing to mop up the wages, because people can't go out and buy their friendly neighbourhood howitzers or at least not yet. You know, what's the latest line in tanks this week? Well we can't do it, therefore the wages slop about in the economy and we have three hundred billion dollars of slopover because we are so frantically institutionalizing our fears and our hates that we haven't enough left to give the world the real security which is the security of being neighbours and friends. Now, if we could, and if you could at this conference revive a resolution which was made in the United Nations General Assembly under the sponsorship of the Soviet Union in 1973 and then sank without trace as far as I can see. And if you're interested it's Resolution 3093 and then in brackets, roman 17, from the 2,194th plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly of the 7th of December 1973, the proposal was to cut arms spending by ten

percent (which would now give us thirty billions). Well it gets a bit weaselly after that because it's then suggested that ten percent of that should be dedicated to development and that brings us down to three billion which of course is not on the generous side. But notice that three billion dollars a year would be enough according to World Bank figures to provide clean water in ten years' time. [applause]

Can you not go back to that resolution? Can you not set in process here at least the first step towards realizing the lunacy of three hundred billions for the weapons of death and not even three billions for the means of life. If that was one of your themes, heavens how the world would respond. Because then we'd know that the creative dialogue between the conscience and the fear of the rich, and the pressure and the determination of the poor, was beginning as in the most hopeful aspects of the nineteenth century to turn into the possibility of better cities, more basic health, better chances for the children, the beginnings of education, the beginnings of the cities in which it's worthwhile living, in which the promise of urbanity, of civilization is not a dirty word but something that's real and true.

Can you not begin here to end this terrible, terrible resemblance to Necropolis, to the city of death, and begin instead to begin the City of Man. Oh, it will be a long journey, but as the Chinese say a journey of a thousand days must begin with the first step. I beg you, take that step here, and let the spirit of Vancouver, and the memory of Vancouver, be one of hope. Thank you. (Ovation, very long applause)