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NOTES FOR THE PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH
AT THE OPENING OF HABITAT: UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS
IN VANCOUVER, MAY 31, 1976

On behalf of the Government and people of Canada, I extend to you a most cordial welcome. It is with great pride that I greet you here today. The pride is not mine alone; it is shared by all of my fellow Canadians, and especially by the citizens of British Columbia and Vancouver, for they know that this city will long be remembered as the site of one of the most important meetings ever held by the United Nations: Habitat, the Conference on Human Settlements.

I should like to extend a special welcome to the Secretary General of Habitat, Mr. Enrique Peñalosa. His has been the difficult - and sometimes delicate - task of directing the long, laborious preparations, both intellectual and physical, which have led up to this conference. To this man we are triply indebted: for his devotion to his fellows, for his warm personality and for his professional competence. On behalf of all here, I extend to Mr. Peñalosa an expression of our thanks and our admiration.

Canadians will not soon forget the honour that has been given them in hosting Habitat. It has been our endeavour to demonstrate the appropriateness of that selection. From the inception of the United Nations in a neighboring city to the south, successive Canadian governments have lent with vigour support to the UN, its activities, and its international ideals. During the course of this conference, you will learn

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that in its size and the diversity of its geography, in the contrasts and harshness of its climate, and in its ethnic and cultural mosaic, Canada reflects to an appreciable degree the realities of today's world.

We do not pretend to possess answers to everyone's settlement problems; we do know, however, that the early settlers in Canada faced difficulties which were at least the equal of those anywhere else. The vastness of the country, and the extremity of the conditions demanded of our pioneers patience, endurance and ingenuity. These qualities we have tried to preserve. We have tried to preserve as well something of what we have learned from the process of settling this country from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Great Lakes to the Arctic Circle. The process is yet far from complete (but then what country can claim to have finished?), yet equally it is far from a failure. We have accomplished much, and are dedicated to doing more.

Canadians are far from complacent about their urban record. In the course of our development we have committed both the ordinary and the serious mistakes that have been made elsewhere. Nor have we avoided the errors of omission: we have at times been stricken with paralysis; we have at others been mere mimics. Why is it that societies are so prone to observe enormous blunders elsewhere - as in the area of urban planning or land use - to note with dismay the deplorable consequences, and then - once the feeling of dismay has passed - to do nothing to avoid similar errors themselves? This conference will be a success if such repetition can be avoided in the future.

Canada can claim some originality in the techniques it has employed in housing its people, some value in its experience. It recognizes, nevertheless its deficiencies, and understands its need to learn more. We are ready to share these techniques and this value, and to learn in exchange

from others. This country has been endowed with space and with natural resources. These form a wealth to enjoy and to administer for the benefit of future generations.

There is a new world in the making, and a spreading awareness of that fact. No longer can there be a measure of fortune without an equal measure of responsibility. No nation can afford to isolate itself in self-contemplation, clasping to its breast its possessions in denial to others. Human demands require us to be more open with one another; modern technics, demands it. No longer is it possible - either morally or technically - not to be accountable. We have entered, willingly or otherwise, the era of a community of interest, vital to the survival of the species, that has brought us together here. To me, this is the meaning of this historic gathering.

Of all the factors that bear on this conference, I regard urgency to be as important as any. For too long, the relationship of Man to his environment, of Man as inhabitant of the planet, has been the subject of intellectual - and somewhat abstract - debate; considered to be the domain only of scientists, bureaucrats, and - on Sundays - theologians. It must pass to the people, to become a vehicle of human benefit, to become a symbol of hope for a richer and more wholesome life. To do so, urgency is required. I am delighted that this process is underway, and particularly so among young people. They have made an impassioned commitment to human development and to a wholesome natural environment. It is a commitment which ignores formalities, which demands from authorities immediate corrective action or innovation.

These youth, of whatever age (who could be younger in spirit and more enthusiastic in commitment than Barbara Ward?), are here in Vancouver. They are meeting alongside us in a parallel conference: Habitat Forum. To them, too,

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I extend a warm welcome. The long years of experience, the specialization, the advanced knowledge and the wisdom of the delegates to Habitat, mixed with the imagination, the originality, the spontaneity, the boldness and the irreverence to be found at Habitat Forum will produce, I am sure, an effervescence of quality. The proximity of the two gatherings promises to be instructive and mutually profitable. Both groups are asking the same questions and working toward the same goal. We are all asking ourselves what to do now, how to proceed immediately, in order to make our human settlements truly human, and at the same time to prevent further deterioration of the natural environment. We possess powerful political, economic, social and technical tools; we plan to make an inventory of them and examine in each case their possible application. I do not suggest that the brainstorming of Habitat Forum can by itself completely shatter the taboos of culture and the darkness of tradition which pose such shocking obstacles to action in a world where change has become a matter of life and death. But I shall be watching with anticipation as our indispensable trumpeters lay siege to Jericho, to see what cracks they succeed in making in the walls of ancient fears and rigid conservatism.

The large international conferences which are so common in our time seem to me to denote two things: first that nations recognize the growth of interdependence and the need for cooperative action; second, that nations are sensitive to the urgency of current problems.

The concept of international cooperation is not new; it has been present in our minds for many years. My plea to you at the outset of this conference is to encourage that concept to descend to your guts, where thought can be leavened with passion, and accomplishment can become a reality. Altruism is not the most highly developed of international phenomena. But it does exist, it is real,

and it is making progress and growing. The international organizations which we have created, of which the United Nations is the most ambitious and the most valuable, are signs of this altruism. Stockholm, Bucharest and Rome are, similarly, manifestations of this quality, and are to my mind decisive in spite of the modest scope of their practical results. Vancouver will, I am convinced, mark a yet more important stage, for it gathers together and extends a number of major concerns arising from previous conferences, and because its theme is of an absolutely fundamental nature.

The theme of human settlements is one of immense scope; in a manner of speaking it focuses the spotlight on very nearly the entire culture of each participating country. Any human settlement, understood in the full complexity of its components and considered on a national basis, is nothing less than a given culture demonstrating its actual existence. That nations have consented to open themselves up to one another in this way appears to me to be unprecedented in international relations.

The feeling of widespread and growing urgency which has been so acute at recent international conferences seems to me to be even more intense and noticeable here. I am not surprised that this should be so. Human settlements are linked so closely to existence itself, represent such a concrete and widespread reality, are so complex and demanding, so laden with questions of rights and desires, with needs and aspirations, so racked with injustices and deficiencies, that the subject cannot be approached with the leisurely detachment of the solitary theoretician. Man's habitat, with its infrastructure and its network of public utilities, is an area of continuing intervention and perpetual rearrangement; in the still uncertain and groping realm of our intentions in this matter, there will be constant improvisation and expediency. It is necessary and inevitable that this should be so. For it is a question of

existence. And existence is not a matter of waiting for something in the future; it is a question of the here-and-now. It is difficult to remain indifferent in the face of all this. One feels overwhelmed, in the midst of this assembly and its message of urgency, by a spirit of feverish haste.

It is human nature to seek time to dwell on one's difficulties, to expose their roots to the light of reason, to minutely examine the fruits of every possible solution. Unfortunately, we do not have the time. All we can do is to cut back the foliage, to prune and trim, to try to combat the persistent resurgence of custom and tradition. No longer are we allowed the leisure of lingering. On one hand, the irrational roots in our gardens are too deep and too firmly entrenched to remove; on the other, the seeds of reason which gave birth to human settlement and the fruits of knowledge and intelligence borne by them are so precious that to destroy them would be madness. Furthermore, we have nothing at the moment to put in their place.

Over the centuries, man has created wonderful structures and numerous architectural monuments in which to house himself, yet in all too many instances the appearance of his dwellings and the conditions within them are deplorable, and inhuman when measured against our universally-held ideals. This is the contradiction of the human condition itself: we are conscious, but not fully conscious; we are free, but our freedom is incomplete; we are rational, but not rational enough. Conditions beyond our control are attached to whatever we are, have and do. Against these conditions we must persist, yet in the final analysis we have to adjust to the fact that our success will never be more than partial. To attempt to eliminate our determinism would not only be foolhardy, it would be as impossible as escaping from the universe itself. No desire for integrity will ever eliminate our basic ambiguity.

This ambiguity is the reason why almost all of the inventions associated with progress can turn against us. It sheds light on the ambivalence inherent in the notion of progress and on the reason why, despite the magnificent structures of our philosophies, arts and sciences, we have never been anything but provincials in the realm of reason. To limit ourselves to matters closely related to the concerns of this conference and to the solutions it seeks, this ambiguity accounts for the fact that whereas in themselves our techniques and machines denote a high degree of rationality, they can in fact be insufferably unreasonable from the psychological, social and ecological viewpoints. Nevertheless, it is to them that we must look for new solutions by seeking ways of restoring them to their intentional purity and to the purposes for which they were originally intended. The organizers of Habitat rightly maintain that the world's nations now have the means to solve the problems of human settlements. Mankind has a technical and mechanical heritage which is extraordinarily rich but which is misunderstood, mismanaged and poorly utilized.

Many thoughtful persons have reflected on the regrettable fact that our technically - and mechanically - oriented civilization has been unable to develop a universal technology, in the true sense of the word, and a mechanology. What an incredible shortcoming this is! It means that technics and mechanics have not yet been endowed with the conceptual and critical apparatus which would enable us to understand them immediately for what they are, or with the specific systems of thought which would have integrated them with culture as they developed, and would continuously have reoriented them. Had it been otherwise, had we been masters of technics and mechanics, we would undoubtedly be less dependent on the empirical groping to which we have

resigned ourselves. Be that as it may, time is pressing, and our intention to work steadfastly toward correcting the injustices we have perpetrated on mankind and on the recklessness we have displayed toward nature is in itself an act of contrition. We are indeed beginning to understand that, as the Bible sternly declares, "...the universe will... fight the reckless" (Wisdom, V, 20). And we are discovering the truth in the Scriptural affirmation that "...the elements fight for the virtuous" (ibid., XVI, 17).

Barbara Ward, who has outlined the objectives and the spirit of Habitat in a masterly fashion, and the authors of the papers written for study by the delegates, have stressed the demographic aspect of human settlements. They have gone to great lengths to point out the catastrophic nature of the population imbalances being everywhere created by excessive urbanization and by the uncontrolled growth of cities. The stressful effects of living in confined areas, the deterioration of the social climate, the disintegration of rural life, the disappearance of farm lands through the spread of cities and their satellites, the widespread degradation of the environment, the destruction of present and future food sources, the disorganization of transportation, the overconsumption of energy, the exorbitant costs for services, the unbridled speculation and cutthroat competition - all these disorders play a part in the breakdown of human settlements. But the main theme of the papers I am referring to is not the influx or the concentration of population in given areas; it is the very number of people presently on the earth and the inevitable consequences of this - that in thirty years the world's population will have doubled to six and one-half billion.

In order to obtain a clear picture of the present situation, we must take a fresh look at the huge crowds we are so used to seeing and which therefore no longer amaze us, and imagine what these crowds represent in terms of the satisfaction of their basic needs today, tomorrow and for

ever after, not to mention the fulfilment of their aspirations and their legitimate desires. To obtain a clear idea of what the year 2000 holds in store for us, the population mass of 1976 has to be doubled and the area and density of our conurbations and megalopolitan areas increased several times over, made even more complex by the countless needs of this enormous population.

Many things, some of them terrifying and others reassuring, are being said and written about the consequences of the world population explosion. Views oscillate between the gloomiest pessimism and the most categorical optimism. I personally avoid either extreme, adopting a position quite similar to that of Teilhard de Chardin.

The notion of population growth is central to the prophetic thought of his extraordinary scholar. He constantly seeks to show his readers its positive side, while at the same time acknowledging the danger it holds for mankind as a whole. He obviously regards the question of numbers as a factor - and a problem - of capital importance.

I believe it would be ridiculous to think and to act as if our numbers on this earth were not so great. Numbers are already creating overwhelming problems for mankind with respect to shelter, transportation, food, drinking water, education, employment, government and, in a word, all aspects of our concrete existence. Habitat will deal with numbers from its beginning to its end. The psychological problems raised by numbers are extremely serious. The simple existence of every individual is submerged in the coexistence of all; from now on we will all have to redefine ourselves in terms of a very close relationship with other groups and individuals - all of whom have become our neighbour. Our neighbour, who remained at a respectable distance from us until the last century, has been brought much closer through population

growth, and we cannot imagine how uncomfortably close he will come in the future. How are we going to tolerate this new neighbour in tomorrow's settlements? How will we put up with ourselves in the human beehive which was envisaged by Teilhard and which is already well on its way to becoming a reality?

It is no use saying that the population will level off and even decline to a level which we would be tempted to call "human". Our numbers are destined to increase for centuries to come. What, then, is to be done?

It is clear that in order to survive, we will be forced to socialize ourselves more and more. What is actually meant by "socializing"? From a human viewpoint, it means loving one another. We will thus have not only to tolerate one another, but to love one another in a way which will require of us an unprecedented desire to change ourselves. Such a change will be more drastic than a major mutation of our species.

The only type of love which would be effective in the tightly-packed world we already live in would be a passionate love. The fact that such a statement sounds slightly ridiculous is a measure of the extent of the change we must make if we are to save ourselves.

Love one another, or you will perish, writes Teilhard in L'énergie humaine, adding that we have reached a critical point in human evolution in which the only path open to us is to move toward a common passion, a "conspiracy" of love.

The conspiracy of men with men and the conspiracy of the universe with an ever more just humanity; in this lies the salvation of human settlements and the hope held forth by Habitat.