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“A Declaration of Interdependence”

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I genuinely desire to conform to the tradition of my predecessors at this podium and record that I am sincerely sensitive of the honor you do me in inviting me to give this the 18th Foundation Lecture. I am personally pleased because this for me represents a double first or, in hunters' language, a right and left barrel. For I believe that some 20-odd years ago, I was the first "foreigner" to be invited to address the Annual Conference of the PRSA and I see that I am the first from overseas to give this particular lecture. I am professionally flattered because possibly more than any national award, medal or trophy, this invitation does represent an international accolade, even though it be administered with the "Sword of Damocles." In preparation for today, I read carefully the contributions of previous speakers and I was both humbled by their quality and frightened by their erudition.

Your earlier lecturers contributed to an impressive sounding series labeled "historical" and a second grouping contributed to a mildly, rather coyly, labeled series entitled "contemporary." No one has told me whether I am taking the field today for the "historians" or the "contemps" but I feel certain that before we break, this audience will have applied its own description to my offering. Who knows? I might even initiate a new series.

All those years ago at the PRSA conference in Philadelphia I was handed my title. It was "The Fundamental Role of the Public Relations Man on the Worldwide Scene," a title which I recall describing at the time as not only a "hell of a mouthful" but also vaguely indecent. My father gave me two pieces of advice which have stood me in good stead over the years. The first is distinctly not relevant to this place and audience -- if you must know it was "NEVER HIT A CHILD EXCEPT IN ANGER" -- but the second piece was guidance on how to pass examinations. He said, if they ask you where bananas come from and you don't know, tell them where oranges come from because they are only trying to test the extent of your knowledge -- which is probably why I failed medicine and had to switch to liberal studies.

So with his advice ringing in my ears and my previous experience with the Public Relations Society over the matter of speech titles, I thought that this time I would get in first and set my own theme, because you see, I want to depart from previous tradition at these lectures to this extent.

I have come very far and I have not much time at my disposal to try and convey to you a great deal. Moreover, by nature I am not a person who can summarize his thoughts publicly in the

hope that his audience will necessarily study the extended text later privately. And too, like a preacher, I am more concerned with my direct impact on you, my listeners here today, for I believe that thoughts when shared personally do grow legs, do develop a motive of power all of their own through the interaction of individuals. I am desperately anxious to share some of my thoughts, some of my concerns with you in the hope that they will travel back with you from this city. For I understand that this is the City of Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells speak only to the Cabots and the Cabots speak only to God. Now, without wishing to unseat the Lowells and the Cabots from their privileged position on the Right or the Left Hand, there remains a need to broaden the area of dialogue and to widen the lines of communication which were alluded to in that bit of doggerel. I have 20 minutes to make my case.

Revolution Happening on All Levels

I suppose if it were put to them, most in this room would agree that everywhere what we all want is a stable society in order to live out our lives in peace and prosperity and see our children doing the same. Now a stable society is not a static one because in human affairs everything moves forward.¹ For the changes that are best for society evolve from the experience of the past, melded with the creative propositions of the present. They are not complete novelties, since the adoption of novelties usually implies a degree of revolution and in this context I submit revolution is precisely what is happening worldwide on a political and social level.

As John Hargreaves and Jan Dauman have indicated, this "revolution" is taking place upon the broadest possible front and historically this is no new situation.² At the time when the United States of America was born, a social revolution was taking place in France and an industrial revolution in England. Adam Smith wrote his "Wealth of Nations," Lavoisier published his *Advanced Chemical Treatise*. The artists Goya and Pushkin were imprisoned for revolutionary activities. Nevertheless, nonconformist thought was in the ascendancy.

So too today, social, political, technical, cultural and even moral changes are taking place over a broad front. Since nowadays hardly a conference goes by without someone listing all these changes, I will not bore you on this score. But the point I wish to drive home is that it is impossible to consider them singly. A colleague labeled the Seventies "The Questioning Years;" certainly today the total of established thought is being questioned at speeds which are leaving the academics, the philosophers and the theologians breathless.³ Based upon a mixture of misunderstanding of the fundamental issues involved and often a desire to take a short-term tactical advantage -- the questioners often serve only to drive the machine of change, lubricated with prejudice and fueled by sensationalism, that move much quicker and that much more dangerously along the track.

In direct opposition to these forces is the "Let Me Be/Small is Good" school. Over the post-war periods, the twin ideologies of equality and freedom have grown in direct proportion to the growth of our bureaucratic or organizational society. The frontiers of suffrage have been extended to women, the young and the non-property owners. As Katz⁴ pointed out to us, with the vote arrived freedom from a wide area of moral constraints, but with greater equity also came

more rules and more regulations and a reduction of the private areas of our lives. Simultaneously, more voters have also become taxpayers.

Following closely on the rising social expectations which these ideologies created came disillusionment. The individual realizes that societies operating collectively are remote, that he has little or no say or control over policies which concern him directly, that the overall output from organizations are often contradictory to his input. The people feel cheated. The more active, more militant, therefore, have translated the individual's right to do his own thing in his own castle, in his own home, into activities in larger social settings, invoking the rights of expression when demonstrating and of equity when their activities are curtailed by officialdom.

Briefly, I would like to outline the two contradictory forces which I see at work and which, unless they can be harmonized and at least brought to run in tandem, will destroy society not only as we know it today but even as we can imagine it.

Centralization vs. Laissez-faire

First the "Bigness and Closeness" Movement. Evidence abounds that demonstrates the pace at which small groupings on the political, social and business fronts at the international, national and even local levels are losing power and even being forced out of existence. Fewer, more powerful political parties are emerging even with across-the-border affiliations. Social agencies are growing and proliferating, centralized control over citizens is advancing, there are more federations and bigger associations; mergers, takeovers and the formation of international and multinational companies is the order of the day. The creation of International Marketing Groupings goes ahead -- The European Common Market, OPEC, Organization of African Unity and so on -- most of them with political muscle. On the personal front improved educational and travel facilities, when linked to the penetrating power of the international marketers and the leveling influence of the mass communication media, have created stereotypes citizens recognize instantly.

The two social forces I have outlined are on collision course. Daily, the cohesion of individual societies and their subsystems are being reduced without a new amalgam being produced to bind them. Just consider the short list of conflicts reported and reflected in the national daily newspapers of any one of us present here today. Centralized government versus personal freedom. Free enterprise versus mixed economy. Internationalism versus nationalism. Industrialized countries versus the developing countries. Central government versus the state. The minority versus the majority. The "haves" versus the "have nots."

I want to suggest, however, that there is present in small quantities the amalgam desperately needed, and its name is "Interdependence." I believe our only hope is increased awareness of its existence, of its makeup, of how it works, of what it can do.

The fact of the matter is that today one person is dependent upon another, one sector of society on the next, nation upon nation, continent upon continent. One man's quality gain in any situation is another man's quality loss. One man's right to strike, for example, poses a threat to another man's right to work. "Interdependence" affects everyone in every walk of life

everywhere. The concept of unity is not new but the present nature of our interdependence is.⁵ Technically and socially, we are living in the age of a single source of supply. For example, a power failure in New York could affect the whole Eastern Seaboard. A power failure in the Southern counties of England could affect our French neighbors across the Channel who purchase our surplus energy. Cultural interdependence manifests itself in simultaneous expression. Economically and environmentally, the recent recession has provided ample evidence of the international chain of interaction. Norway's crystal clear air is being polluted, it is claimed by industrial "smog" swept across the North Sea.

Industrially, successes or failures, government or labor relations problems in one country or area intimately affect performance, plans, even livelihoods in others.⁶

Politically, abuses of power in one country erode confidence in the institutions of another, just as commercial corruption in one corporation damages the reputation of others totally innocent.⁷

And increasingly, business is becoming concerned as to whether the corporation as it is presently manifested "will survive into the next century."⁸ At the same time there is increased recognition that the remedy lies in the corporations' understanding of "interdependence" and its acceptance of a new role for itself in society. As Rakash Sethi put it: "At the heart of the social responsibility movement is the gap between corporate performance and societal expectations...the Talking Stage is over and the future efforts of critics will be concentrated in evaluating actions and accountability to affected social groups... the issue is not how corporations should respond to social pressures but what their long-term role in the dynamic social system should be."⁹

Public Relations Has a Role

I am not suggesting that as public relations practitioners we can bring about total awareness of the nature of "interdependence" unaided. By no means. Some problems contain elements to which no single group has the answer.¹⁰ This is such a one but I do believe in all humility that although there is no "star" role for us to play, there is a key one.

Politicians and industrialists are, generally speaking, still organized along 19th Century lines -- vertically. The nation state controls decisions. Instructions flow down and, to the extent that democracy is practiced, reactions filter upwards. On the other hand, professionals, academics and artists are 20th Century beings geared to problem solving of one sort or another and working horizontally across physical, cultural and social borders. We fall into this latter category.

We too, are 20th Century beings geared to problem solving of one sort or another and working horizontally across physical, cultural and social boundaries. We work across borders, and more so perhaps than our professional colleagues in other disciplines, we know the pitfalls and the power of information properly communicated, of dialogue effectively established. But I question whether we are doing everything we might to promote between rival interests, between special interests, greater understanding of viewpoints at variance, mutual understanding. Under our professional code,¹¹ we are ethically committed to present a "balanced" view of the organizations we represent. For us, distortion by omission ranks equally with a sin of commission. Are we in this context in our daily work doing all we should? Is it sufficient for us to calm our consciences

with the thought that, irrespective of the virtues of our case, it is up to the other party to put their arguments hard and strong, but if they won't, or don't, or can't, then too bad for them and so what?

Propaganda overkill, as in real warfare, as often as not only serves to create an underground movement.

I would like to put to you the idea -- by no means a new one, for a great deal of work is being done in this whole area by the Centre for Conflict Analysis -- that our tendency, the politician's tendency for his purposes and the media for theirs, is more often than not to select in an even mildly conflicting situation the areas of difference or disagreement, and to hone in on these, to spotlight them. The outcome is that the parties become polarized and the uncommitted are spun by the centrifugal force of publicity against the outer wall of the argument.

The fact is that when the same situation is analyzed with the emphasis on likenesses, on similarities -- on the extent of the areas of agreement rather than disagreement -- then peaceful solutions are more likely to emerge more quickly.

By definition, the politician represents a special interest. The media have a duty to be critical, to investigate, to report. Perhaps it would be asking too much to ask politicians and the media to act otherwise. But someone has to strike the balance. Someone, some group, has to play the part of a flywheel between the two speeding forces which I described earlier which otherwise will just crash against each other and smash the machine which we know as society.

I believe that we could be that group and that we should act now -- individually and collectively -- by rallying fellow professionals in related disciplines to the task of explaining and preaching the gospel of the interdependence of man, the only message likely to save our society from self-destruction.

I was told last night that a few years ago as a promotion involving the student community the Boston Gas Company organized a poetry competition. The 10 young finalists were brought together and in an endeavor to weed out a winner, were set the task of composing an instant poem mentioning both Boston Gas and one of the districts it supplies. One young man came up with this verse:

“There was a young lady from Concord, Mass.
Who cooked her supper on Boston Gas
After which this crazy lass
Walked into the Bay right up to her knees.”

The nonplussed judge pointed out to the young competitor that it didn't rhyme. "Just wait until the tide comes in!" he replied.

I submit that as a group we are in a similar spot to King Canute if not to the "crazy lass from Concord, Mass." If the tide of public action flows out we will be left stranded and if it flows in we will be in trouble up to our armpits.

And for this reason what is now called the "Nuremberg Rule,"¹² that is, the individual's ultimate responsibility for his own personal actions and indeed inactions in a corporate situation, is used only to apply to generals and politicians but is increasingly being applied today by society to administrators, managers and specialists.

When the time comes for public relations practitioners to be judged under this rule by society, by our friends and our children, and I think the time is not far ahead, then what will the verdict be?

Footnotes

¹Geoffrey Morris, "The Management of Change," Long Range Planning Journal (Great Britain) June 1975.

²John Hargreaves and Jan Dauman, "Business Survival and Social Change," Associated Business Programmes, Prentice Hall International.

³Lord Lyons of Brighton, Institute of Public Relations Conference, 1971.

⁴Daniel Katz, "The Rights of the Individual in Modern Society," IPRA Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, May 1972.

⁵"Issues and Trends," Matrix Limited Special Report, London, England, May 1976.

⁶Michael Duerr, "What Troubles the World's Business Leaders," Conference Board Report No. 628.

⁷Joe Sims, "On Faith and Free Enterprise," School of Business Administration Conferences, Southern Methodist University.

⁸John Paluszek, "Business and Society 1976-2000," AMA Survey Report, 1976.

⁹Rakash Sethi, professor of Business Administration, University of California, and visiting professor, School of Management, Boston University.

¹⁰Lucien Matrat, "On the Future of Public Relations," Paris, France, March 1969.

¹¹"Code of Athens," IPRA, 1965.

¹²Eli Goldston, "The Quantification of Concern," Fairless Memorial Lectures, 1971.