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The State of the Environment: Crisis, Challenge, Opportunities

Lecture delivered by the Hungarian Ambassador, H.E. Mr. Károly Gedai at the luncheon meeting of the Canadian Association for the Club of Rome on March 29, 1995

On the verge of the third millennium the whole world is still confronted with a number of economic, social and environmental problems as well as tragic armed clashes. We cannot find a general cure for every ailment, but it is our long term obligation to work out peaceful and just solutions that will not endanger the well-being of future generations. The task is enormous and sometimes we may lose faith in our ability to resolve the problems. However we must not give up the fight.

Global Environmental Problems

Improved health, living conditions, education and protection of the ecosphere are global goals. Reaching them is impeded by prevailing conditions of particular geographical areas. We are living in an era when all things are interrelated, be it finance, migration, crime, pollution or overpopulated mega-cities. You cannot live in so called safe havens of the world because pollution and economic miseries do not recognize

borders. Therefore we cannot pacify our souls that bad things happen only somewhere else. Here in North America one cannot distance oneself from events happening on the other side of the world. Similarly, we in Central Europe may not sit idly by and see how our neighbors struggle with problems and, at the same time, think we can stay uninvolved. Therefore the guiding principles of the Club of Rome are still very timely and can provide directions that are more useful now than ever. The concerns expressed by the Club in its early days have withstood the institutional resistance and the erosion of the passing years. It is time to put brain power, logic and good intentions in its engines, to regain momentum again for solving many pressing problems

The Central and Eastern European Scene

Such highly developed industrialized countries, as the G7s, as well as the developing ones, have their own pressing environmental problems. But let us focus on this occasion on Eastern and Central Europe and particularly on Hungary.

There are two questions that should serve as the starting point:-

- Do we have a clear idea what are the greatest dangers to the environment.?
- What are the primary possibilities to control population growth and excessive consumerism before it is too late?

In Central Europe Hungary, together with her immediate neighbors and other East European countries, was trapped for almost half a century on the wrong side of the Churchillian Iron Curtain, which left them ages behind Western Europe in creating wealth and economic prosperity. To overcome this serious handicap requires enormous efforts on our part as well as assistance from external sources.

I believe the one common concern that can bring us together globally is the protection and safeguarding of the environment. That is a non-discretionary obligation which must be discharged with all the means at our disposal in order to provide future generations with the hope of living on a clean blue planet free from environmental hazards

It is quite obvious that if we are to take our proper place in Europe, both the long-overdue modernization of industry in the Eastern and Central European countries and the transformation of the economy are urgently needed. Our aim is to achieve an economy where the different sectors require less energy and fewer chemicals and where there is much less need to destroy wildlife habitats and nature – an economy in which environmental health hazards can be eliminated and at the same time marginalization in the world economy can be avoided.

In our region a far-reaching socio-economic transformation began after 1989, in which Hungary was also offered an historical opportunity to switch over from the centrally-planned economy – along with an industrial structure which had much less sensitivity toward environmental considerations – to a market economy with an eye on more profitable output with less energy and raw material input. These changes have already started to remedy some of the environmental problems. At the same time they have begun to overcome technological and economic backwardness with the hope of improving the environment, the quality of life and sanitary conditions in general. The current challenge is to harmonize efforts from the grassroots up to the top-level politicians in order to achieve a significant enhancement of the environment all over the world in the short term.

The Status of the Environment in Hungary

Hungary, along with more developed countries in Europe and other parts of the world, takes the environmental issues and requirements into consideration while hammering out strategies on sustainable development that can be applied while still encountering national problems and global environmental dangers

We are facing almost insurmountable problems in altering the inherited previous system and treating the consequences of distorted socio-economic development. We do this while carefully following the path toward our goals and without falling into the traps of uncontrolled market economy ailments. We have to evaluate the conditions of the environment and assess what should and could be done in the present political and economic conditions. In my opinion what we urgently need is a particular kind of socio-economic policy that integrates the protection and long-term rational use of environmental elements into both the decision making process and sectoral and regional policies at the expense of short-term interests!

I know that such a development will be very difficult, in view of the burdensome inheritance of the previous COMECON system, especially in the field of social and environmental protection.. The prevailing economic and political conditions in Hungary – and the whole region, until 1990 – were determined by our membership both in COMECON and the Warsaw Pact. The economic and social institutions of the past, although some of them deserve acknowledgment, and the isolating dominance of COMECON relations by Western influence, still overshadow our economic development

Environmental Hazards and Consciousness

The environmental consciousness in the West predates by almost a decade the appearance in the East of the Green Movement. Despite the increasingly deteriorating condition of the environment, the relevant policy under the previous governments was limited by an economically and environmentally ineffective structure. The non-existence of ecological consciousness coupled with the disastrous political slogan “we will conquer nature” produced an all-pervasive indifference. Examples of such reckless behavior are: Chernobyl:

the over-polluted areas of Bohemia in the Czech Republic, parts of Poland, and the former GDR. Hungary also has her own environmental disaster areas. They are the results of such polluting industries as coal fired power generating plants, cement factories: by soil pollution caused by excessive use of chemicals in agriculture; or by huge land areas, dried up because of the unilateral diversion of the Danube – an international boundary river – to Slovakia. Damming the Danube caused enormous ground water – remnants of the last ice ages – damage affecting more than 3 million people

These are the results of the blind and environmentally insensitive decisions taken by the former political systems. For a long time, the past political leadership of our countries attempted to isolate us from the emerging environmental concerns appearing all over the world from the 1960s on. Environmentally conscious works of international significance failed to reach us; or even if some of them did, such as the Club of Rome's famous report entitled "The Limits to Growth", they were not readily accessible

However, as a result of the increasingly obvious ecological damage, the seventies witnessed sporadic protests which increased during the next decade. The most significant of them was the Danube movement set up in 1984 in protest against the construction of the above-mentioned joint Gabčíkovo (Slovak)-Nagymaros (Hungarian) hydro-electric station. In the following year, the movement was granted the Right Livelihood Award, the alternative Nobel Prize. The movement not only protested against the project but challenged the socio-economic structures both in Hungary and in the former Czechoslovakia that shaped such senseless environmental policies. It, therefore, attracted dissidents and, during an important period preceding the radical political change, temporarily became a mass movement

Options

Hungary did not participate in the 1972 UN Conference on environmental issues held in Stockholm, though Hungarian environmental policy subsequently accepted both the recommendations put forward in Stockholm and the UN environmental protection program

Despite the afore-mentioned momentum, the inevitable necessity of environmental protection was gradually

realized in Hungary as well as in our region. However, our societies were ambivalent towards these ideas with the general level of ecological consciousness still remaining rather low. The majority of people do not want to make more sacrifices for the sake of the environment specially at the expense of their declining living standards. The current rather critical situation poses a vital question. **How can we achieve in Central and Eastern Europe an environment-friendly economy, in general, and in industry in particular, given declining internal and external economies and market conditions?**

Environment-conscious education

In order to make any progress and to have a well-justified successful environmental policy in the future, strong emphasis should be placed on environmental education. Respect for environmental values and ecological awareness should be strengthened from an early age on. Equally, the necessity of environmental protection should be made clear so that both professionals and ordinary citizens could make environmentally favorable decisions. To facilitate such achievements Hungarian universities offer graduate and postgraduate courses for those interested in this field. Both, Hungarian and foreign engineers, specialists are being trained at our technical and agrarian colleges

Early Hungarian legislations

As mentioned earlier, the environmental consideration and consciousness arrived to Eastern and Central Europe somewhat later than in the West. Nevertheless, Hungary can be proud for some of the earliest legislation in this field. Beginning with the Second Industrial Act of 1874, a number of laws have been enacted in the 1960s and 70s (mining in 1961, land in 1961, forests and forestry in 1961, water management in 1964, construction in 1961, medical care in 1972, nature conservation in 1961, and a law-decree on the protection of air purity in 1973). All these contained detailed provisions, including environmental standards and procedures. However, the institutionalization of environmental protection did not begin until the middle of the seventies, when the 1976 Act on Environmental Protection, a comprehensive Hungarian piece of legislation came into force

At this point a few more details should be provided to highlight the intention of this Act. It stipulated

that it is the right of citizens to live in a humane, healthy environment and that society as a whole should be interested and involved in their protection. It summarized the targets and principles of environmental policy and provided for the establishment of an independent system to manage its protection. From the issuing of this Act onward, a number of such related provisions have been passed on dangerous wastes, or protection against noise and vibration damage. Today, we have over 500 environmental standards and technological guidelines.

Geopolitical Integration

Hungary along with the whole Central and East European region tries to form close ties with the European Union, setting the ultimate goal to join it as full member. Inevitably, these endeavors force us to enhance our efforts at environmental protection both in the short and medium run. We are also obliged to do so by international agreements, where Hungary is one of the signatories to such as the 1979 Geneva Conventions on the reduction of long distance Air Pollution Crossing National Boundaries, or the Helsinki and Sofia Protocols concerning sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions. Hungary signed and fully respects the 1985 Vienna convention and the 1987 Montreal Protocol on the protection of stratospheric ozone layer, the relevant monitoring recommendations of UNEP (EEC), the UNESCO Man and Biosphere program and the Rio Earth Conference among many others. **It would be interesting to know what are the noticeable benefits of the Earth Conference on the present day life of the individuals and, on the basis of the recommendations of the Conference, could the Club of Rome do something to improve the quality of life?**

Our common environmental problems, solutions and the answers to many pressing necessities should bring the countries of our Central and East European region politically closer together despite the fact that we are still debating unresolved problems. I am convinced that Hungarian environmental policy has some positive effect on the prevailing environmental conditions both in the neighbouring countries and – although to a modest extent – all over the world. Given the fact that environmental problems do not respect national boundaries, sustainable development should be

promoted simultaneously at regional and global levels.

Responsibilities

The responsibility for the preservation and enhancement of the environment should be shared by the international community, individual states and their citizens, as well as by the various economic and social organizations and NGOs. We have realized that environmental protection cannot be really efficient without state intervention but it is also fundamental that environmental policy must not be worked out without the citizens' initiatives and participation

Within a democratic society, the only possible way of solving environmental problems and managing conflicts is based on creative and co-operative partnership between state administration, local governments and such enthusiastic individuals as Mr. Ferenc Nádasdy. He has created a foundation both here in Canada and in Hungary to link his native country with his adoptive one in the field of environment and the arts.

Unique Opportunity

Following his aristocratic family's centuries old tradition in assisting arts and education he established the Nádasdy Foundation for the Environment and the Arts in 1992 the date which almost exactly coincides interestingly enough with the granting of the Nádasdy family's coat of arms 900 years ago

Mr. Nádasdy has worked tirelessly to launch the Foundation and its activities; trying to raise funds for its far reaching goals. Surprising results can be achieved through firm determination and belief in the work; especially when the interest of the state meets the creative vision of the individual.. Mr. Nádasdy has gained the moral support of such well known persons as Dr. Otto von Habsburg, one of the leading figures of the Council of Europe, Árpád Göncz, President of the Republic of Hungary, the then Governor General The Right Honorable Ramon Hnatyshyn, as well as Sir George Solti, the famous conductor and a number of other well known artists. They all appear on his list of patrons.

The Hungarian Government, rightly realizing the usefulness of the work of the Nádasdy Foundation, also assisted it with such generous moves as offering the Nádasdy Castle to the Foundation for its artistic and environmental-cum-nature-protection purposes for 99 years, rent free, and at the same time providing a budget in the value of about \$250,000 yearly to

renovate the heritage buildings and to revive the surrounding arboretum.

The Nádasdy Foundation

The Rationale

The Nádasdy Foundation believes, along with many others, that mankind has never faced a period in its history when it had to overcome as many obstacles to our planet's and its own survival. Since it was human activity that caused the disasters, it will be their responsibility to drastically change attitudes toward the global ecology

It is disheartening to realize that so little real progress has been made in the past twenty-five to thirty years following the recommendations by such groups as the Club of Rome. It is disappointing particularly because of the very high calibre of people, of all professions, who thought and made recommendations through the Club of Rome. Analyzing some of the most obvious global problems we find that:

- the continued population explosion,
- the ever-diminishing non-renewable resources,
- the inevitable immigration and migration which will cause yet unknown problems, – the ever-increasing loss of power by nation states and the loss of their individual cultural identity,
- the very real danger which is posed to the economic stability of the world by the disarray of our monetary system, and
- the individual and corporate greed which governs our collective behaviour offers two crucial choices for action:
 - follow the general trend and be only self-serving, or
 - dig deeply to summon one's courage and try to do something effective about it

The Targets

The Nádasdy Foundation, chose the latter. It came into existence in early 1992 with the strong commitment to do something positive about some of the above problems. It recognizes its limitations but it also realizes that in order to accomplish change, one must start from a seed. Therefore it bases its philosophy on the belief that changes can only be achieved by changing the attitudes of people, particularly decision-makers

By establishing the Nádasdy Academy for artistic development and environmental responsibility they

will pursue this goal relentlessly. They acknowledge the absolute necessity of effective interaction by providing a physical habitat where the intellects and philosophies of the Club of Rome could also find a home. With the communications technology already available to us today and improving in the future, instant, but impersonal communication is at our disposal. However, nothing substitutes for direct human contact and discussions, particularly when people with opposing views wish to find consensus. This is what we hope to achieve in Hungary, at the Nádasdy Academy, within the next two or three years

Sanity Sanctuary

Our most important resource, we believe, is the individual human mind which is able and willing to make the necessary decisions. The Nádasdy Foundation's overall mission is to seek out the best and most diverse minds for viable solutions which can and must be implemented. The ultimate reality is continuum. Life sustained with quality. Art for life and life for art and in a sustainable ecosphere

We all must engage in accomplishing this task. It is the desire and purpose of the Foundation to create a habitat which will become a model for cooperation between decision-makers and creative visionaries, a place for cross-pollination of diverse and opposing views, an institution for creative growth and the dissemination of solutions. It will also strive to facilitate the exchange of concerns, visions and ideas between artists, environmentalists, and civic and business leaders. It will also offer decision-makers a place to rest, recharge mental energies and renew attitudes – A SANITY SANCTUARY

The Nádasdy Academy of the future intends to be a model that others can and should imitate. We feel, and hope that we have the time and are able to succeed in generating the ripple effect of a pebble thrown into a still lake

The Road to Realization

The Foundation, while resting on these philosophical principles, does not wish to become just another ineffective think-tank where all the ideas are applauded but the changes they promote never materialize. It is therefore important that very practical ways be found for the implementation of great concepts

The following are some of the practical plans the Foundation feels will enable some of the good ideas

and concepts reached by the brightest minds at the Academy to become practical solutions

A Habitat Creation: As mentioned earlier, in this unique space an example will be developed where nature, human habitat (a building), daily mundane human activity and high level creativity will coexist. This will be an example where the word environment will take on a new meaning. It will continue to mean the many species of animals, plants and their protection, clean water and air, and all other things we have come to associate with it. But it will take on a new meaning that includes the most important part of our environment, which is the process of human thinking and decision-making, the process of creativity and its enjoyment and human behavior that takes into account the beauty of love and the ultimate enjoyment – the quest for knowledge

The Foundation expects to promote this new all-encompassing meaning of the word environment. This was the basis in fact why both the Foundation and the Academy were designed to support the arts and the environment and bring them together to show that they should never be talked about separately since culture is the most important part of our environment. One of the slogans the foundation uses: **without clean air and water there is no life and without culture there is no purpose to life**

Another way we wish to be practical, in the decision-making process, is to follow one of the recommendations of the Rio Conference. **Consensus-building:** We believe this idea has a great deal of merit for genuine consensus and eliminates an inherent opposition. However, we must ensure that this type of consensus building in a positive sense will have a chance to develop with the shortness of time that planet earth may give us. Regrettably, it is also possible that even with the best intentions, due to the enormous pressures building in the 21st Century quite the opposite may happen. It is a frightening thought but a real one. The excessive number of people on the face of the

earth within the next 25 years may give rise to the most brutal dictatorships, localized wars amongst different believers, different colors and for that matter different tribes and families. We will exert all efforts to ensure that those of us who have chosen the second alternative will succeed in accomplishing our goals

In other practical terms, the Nádasy Foundation intends to utilize and learn from both the merits and the mistakes of industrialized society – particularly the North American. It hopes to transplant the technologies that can and should be capable of enhancing life without destroying its habitat and would like to be a catalyst between the two extreme political-economic systems which are represented by communism and runaway capitalism. The Foundation does not suggest that it already has the necessary know-how to achieve this. It only recognizes the necessity of new thinking in our political, economic order is vital if we wish to avoid a calamity and work towards this goal in alliance with all progressive forces

It may appear that the tasks the Nádasy Foundation have set for itself are enormous. Therefore, it is important to reemphasize that it intends to be the effective catalyst in most of its functions and to set an example for others to follow

Canadian Connection

Operating out of both Canada and Hungary the Foundation will have a solid axis to make its initiatives move forward. The Academy's location in central Europe, provides us with a geographic location that is ideal, perhaps for the first time in the history of Hungary, to be a central clearing-house of positive initiatives as opposed to a small country constantly run over by major powers

The human brain is our most important asset. We believe that in the 21st century, small but intensely intellectual and culturally rich institutions can have a major impact. The Nádasy Academy will be one of them.