The June 3 Debate: Some Afterthoughts

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The June 1996 issue of these Proceedings *included the texts of the papers read at this year's CACOR Symposium by Jack Milne and Andy Clarke, as well as my own introductory remarks. These afterthoughts were developed from the notes I took during the discussion that followed. The Symposium's title was, of course, Solutions to the World Problematique: The Element of Hope. It was not the first time we had looked at possible solutions, but it was the first to put 'hope' in the target area.*

One of the features of the discussion was that just about everyone round the table took part in it. My notes attempted to capture the main threads, arguments and points that were raised, but not everything went down on paper. Nor did I necessarily capture all of these things with precision. What follows, therefore, is more of a personal filtering and summary than a definitive account. It contains no attributions. It has been laid out under a series of headings that combine what several people said. It is intended to help CACOR find what someone later in the meeting called 'the road through the jungle.'

Hope

What does hope mean?

Hope involves the feeling that something can be done to correct or change a situation, and that there are individuals and resources available to do it. Otherwise, a situation is impersonal, as well as menacing, and will not get the attention from people that it deserves. In some societies it may not even be discussed. So, for there to be hope, there needs to be a positive face put on the search for, and implementation of, solutions.

Hope may be for the shorter term, or for the longer term. If we assume that today's apprehension will become tomorrow's uncertainty and upheaval, then the shorter term variety will tend to be the less likely and the longer term variety the more likely. But this will depend on the effectiveness of the curative actions taken over the shorter term. The main element of hope in the context of the World Problematique, therefore, is that appropriate curative actions can be taken during the time of uncertainty to turn things around, quickly enough.

There are, of course, other questions. To what extent will this hope be shared? Will it reach the public generally or be confined to the elite, the leaders, the few? Will it be a local thing, a national thing, or an international thing? In today's world, is hope for the future more prevalent in Canada than it is in a lot of other countries - African ones, for example? It is important to understand even now where these gaps in expectations lie, and how big they are. It is equally important that the people affected should receive good advice.

Hope is a moveable feast; it can be here now and gone a minute, a day or a month later because some factor affecting it has changed. Different people in the same society can hope for different things. We must also remember that there are a lot of perennial optimists around, as well as those who wish to deny the existence of what is causing the optimism. So, when talking about hope, it is important to distinguish between factors and problems - often the prevailing ones - with which a lot of people will be content to live, and those that are widely believed to involve real menace and require real change. But at the same time, it is seldom possible to satisfy all of the unquenchable wishes for a better life, a cleaner environment or a larger family. The objectives of hope are never assured. It is sometimes hard to come by.

Hope also needs real policies, not just promises, and it needs changes to 'conventional wisdom' since what we have of this at the moment is not adequate to deal with the problems embodied in the Problematique. Hope begins at the 'grass roots' in more ways than one.

Definitions

CACOR members are well aware of the problems of defining and interpreting with consistency the terms associated with the elements of the Problematique and the search for solutions. Terms like 'sustainable development', 'the environment' and 'carrying capacity' may often be defined to suit the user and may become, with careless use, meaningless, hackneyed, and even dangerous.

This situation is made especially difficult in the case of the Problematique since its scope is global, its approach holistic, and the elements themselves complex. We know, for example, that development is not usually sustainable and that the carrying capacity of the planet, while limited, is not evenly distributed over its surface. The existence of

a government 'Department of the Environment' does not guarantee that it will address the environment as a life-support system, or take care to preserve the physical elements of it, remove the causes of its degradation, and understand its economic and social impacts. The environment is something we live in, and with. Also, those private groups that profess to champion 'the environment' are usually quite narrow in their focus, their concerns and their solutions.

The key question is: what jargon should be used?

The Time Factor

Just how far away in time are the foreseen uncertainty and upheaval around the world? Ten years, fifteen years, twenty years? Which of the major problems – population, environmental degradation, excessive resource use, and continuing economic growth – is likely to strike first? Or will it be a relatively minor one that triggers the situation? Where will it strike first – in North America, the Third World or globally? Will the local impact be more important than the global one? Is it possible to estimate how long the uncertainty and upheaval might last, assuming that the will exists to apply counter-measures quickly and effectively? To what extent will past experience in the selection and application of solutions be relevant for whatever lies ahead? CACOR members realize that policies to overcome uncertainty and upheaval need to be developed in advance. Nor can we wait to do so until wealth is more evenly distributed throughout the world. We have to begin now. Yet the degree of hopefulness - or of helplessness – will most likely change with time and circumstances. And in terms of having the need for solutions to be more widely accepted, the technique of moving the atomic clock closer and closer to midnight may be the model to follow.

Time is also the reason why some of today's problems cannot be solved by conventional means. How, for example, can the world's population be reduced to 3 billion again over the next 10, 15 or 20 years? And what constraints will be needed to keep the numbers of people from rising again? In connection with time, hope and apprehension, it is important to remember that concerns and preoccupations, as well as enthusiasms, may change in relatively short periods. Examples include the beginning - and the end - of the Cold War. It should also be remembered that there are some societies in which political correctness or some similar influence prohibits or restricts the discussion of threats and, in consequence, prevents the development of measures for their mitigation.

The Media

The relative lack of understanding and missionary zeal among editors for the political, economic and human issues associated with the World Problematique is well known, as is the limited exposure that media people in general are willing to give to the current apprehensions associated with them. The media usually have, of course, a commercial bias in most countries, a political one in some, and in some others the Church runs the media. Also, since time, space and the attention of readers and viewers are often limited, they tend to oversimplify complex issues, to ignore the 'big picture' and to give their readers and viewers what they want to read and see. Yet, when they wish, the media can intimidate just as easily as they can put a positive spin on the need for action and for change.

Indeed, the media have roles to play in providing a clear understanding of what has been happening and what needs to be corrected in particular circumstances, and for getting the messages out to those who should be receiving them. But the influence of the media – and especially the print one – may be local, even when reporting events that have taken place in the far corners of the globe.

Electronic communications have come a long way in the past ten years, and will probably go at least equally far in the next ten. The newest media innovation - the Internet - may simply be a vehicle for conversation rather than for decision-making, a library rather than a platform for action. Even so, the Internet can be exploited to provide a wider audience with the results of analyses and suggestions for solutions – as well as grounds for hope, should there be some. The particular techniques used for communication in the entertainment business may be especially applicable for this purpose. But will the WWW replace newspapers, and how long will this take? What kind of news will be available through it? CNN-type, with no real in-depth analyses? What will the existing media do, especially the print ones, in these new circumstances? Will the audience be large and appropriate enough?

Economics

For a long time now, capitalism has gone relatively unchallenged as a system, even though nowadays it may not be what Adam Smith had in mind. In particular, the moral aspect of it seems to have been lost. The present system appears to assume that, if the world's wishes and needs are being satisfied, it is all right for capital to assist in the exploitation of the planet's resources – regardless. This premise needs to be challenged, and the practice of

capitalism may need to fit more closely to the Adam Smith model.

But we should not perhaps challenge the capitalist system by itself. The underlying economic system as a whole should also be challenged – first – and changed first. Economics is an allocative activity, and is applied to commodities. But allocations cannot be made unless the commodities have a price in monetary terms (in the broad sense, not just the currency one). This is a problem that affects `the environment' (however defined) since it, too, is a commodity. Money value may therefore be the key element in the situation, but the root problem would seem to be the economic system and not just the capitalism aspect of it.

People

People in different countries and in different strata of society may respond to the same new situation in different ways. They may also view differently the role of government in controlling and changing situations that have become threatening. However, for the individual, the basic motivation for change will be his or her well-being, followed by well-being at various `collective' levels -for example, the family, the community, the region, and the nation. Individuals also have what might be called `comfort zones' which they wish to achieve and/or to maintain but which, if not achieved or maintained, will cause problems and the feeling of being threatened.

The Problematique poses potential challenges of several kinds to people, including the assessment of threats and the devising of solutions for their removal. But if individuals, and communities, feel they have the ability to diffuse the threats and apply the solutions, and there is hope that they will be successful in doing so, then the fear of change may be diminished and new comfort zone levels achieved.

At the same time, it should be recognized that some brutal situations – such as individual and mass starvation – have always been in evidence in the world at large and, despite the best efforts of individuals, communities and governments, may always be. But there are many people who have not yet faced starvation and whose view of it as a threat – and their ability to cope with it – will differ from those who have experienced it. In relation to hope, individuals must have a feeling that there is something they can do to change things – including their own behaviour. Otherwise the business of change is too impersonal and out of control. CACOR is well aware of the need to change human behaviour. The question is how it can be done. We need a new model.

The Future for CACOR

In years past, there have been frustrations within CACOR over what it ought to be doing and how these things should be done. It is clear that, in the future, the members want to be more `activist' but want to continue their efforts to understand the global `system' and the elements of the Problematique.

At the same time, the members realize that the Association's holistic approach to these elements is the correct one. They also realize that a lot of people `out there' share their concerns but that, in some jurisdictions, the elements of the Problematique are simply not discussed, appropriate information is not available, certain questions are never asked and, consequently, solutions are never sought.

Obviously, CACOR should exploit the Internet, but it should not ignore the more `conventional' media. It should organize more discussions of the Problematique, either within its membership or in collaboration with other groups and institutions. It should have other outreach activities – some that involve techniques of communication it has not previously used. It should consider establishing an information system that will attract the attention of the media. It might even profit from having a Press Secretary.

CACOR should consider the development of a core policy position and, as a matter of priority, set up a committee to work on a draft of this for discussion among the members.

All of these efforts should be sustained. A mere 15 minutes of fame will simply not be enough!