

The Multilateral Agreement On Investment: An Alternative Approach

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There are two competing visions for the future of the world. One believes that economic growth will provide the greatest satisfaction to the people of the world and that the primary challenge is to remove the barriers to free enterprise. The other argues that the quality of life and ecological integrity must be the central goals for the twenty-first century if catastrophe is to be avoided.

This is an either-or proposition. Some still hope to fudge it and look for a compromise. But this cannot be done for the policies which seem necessary from one stance appear destructive from the other. While economic growth will continue in both scenarios, it will be a means to an end rather than an end in itself if society adopts new goals.

We are, in fact, making our personal and collective choice between futures every day although we are seldom aware of the truth of this statement. It will, however, be very visible in an emerging debate about a proposed new treaty, being negotiated in secret, between countries in the developed world entitled the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. This would enshrine in law the proposition that commercial interests have a higher priority than human rights or ecological protection. A process which has already begun with NAFTA and the World Trade Organization would become fully entrenched.

A new large-scale battle can be anticipated when the treaty is submitted for ratification in 1998. Will it be lost again? The answer depends on whether we are willing to look at strategic questions rather than simply aiming to stop a stampede by riding into the middle of a herd. The only way to change the direction of a frightened herd of cattle is to get ahead of it.

Can this be done? Are there ideas and rhetoric which would be compelling? Are there interest groups, which have not been mobilized in the past, which might come together around this issue? I believe there are. Let us look at several groups which lose if MAI passes in its present form. First, there are many current power brokers who are responsible for local, regional and national policy-making. Their ability to do what they believe to be in the best interests of their constituents is drastically reduced.

Second, it is already clear that promises to protect human rights and environmental policies made under NAFTA and GATT are being broken. Strong opposition to the

extension of these dangers because of MAI could easily be mobilized.

Third, the rapidly growing group which believes that increased community autonomy is one core issue for the future will necessarily be horrified by the proposed treaty. Labour unions and those concerned with social justice will correctly see in MAI a further development of the forces which are creating inequality and unemployment around the world. And there are a small, but significant, group of corporations who recognize that their current strategies will result in a massive backlash.

In a short column I can only come up with a short listing. Even this limited set of potential players shows that the potential for coalescing energy exists. What then might be an effective strategy for mobilization? The suggestion I shall make was triggered by Jim Turner, a lawyer in Washington.

The MAI could become a Trojan horse. It could become an opportunity for a broad coalition to come together and insist that corporations are subject to the same limitations as we have imposed on governments over past generations. It could work from the assumption that corporations are, in fact, quasi-governments and that rather than needing more freedom they need to be constrained by a global code of conduct.

Is this a feasible strategy? Each person's answer will depend on their readings of what dynamics exist in the world today. My belief is that we are ready for a "populist" revolt. Like all revolts it threatens to be messy and untidy and to contain many negative elements. A focus on revising MAI to provide a bill of rights and a commitment to ecological integrity from corporations could give the movement a fascinating focus.

I have been watching the anti-MAI movement develop. Since the first leaks just a few months ago, the sense of outrage has grown exponentially. I am suggesting that it would be possible for us to use this emerging energy for far more than another attack on corporate power. It could become the opportunity for those of us who care for a more positive future to express our dreams and visions and to coalesce as a major force in the world.

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