

Considering a Future of Possibilities

By Sheila Murray and
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In January 2005, a question was put to the Board of the Canadian Association for the Club of Rome by a member. If, aligned with the tradition of reports being written to rather than by the Club of Rome, would the Board commit simply to reading a report to CACOR if one were written?

Critical to this “Report Project” was its intent to make the Report of a length and style potentially accessible to a broad public, to engage interest, to stimulate focused discussion, to elicit hope for a civil human future and to foster convivial action toward such a future. The Report would:

- outline the facts of the world problematique insofar as they are known
- look to its possible causes, both immediate and longer-term
- offer an intellectually respectable and broadly credible diagnosis
- construct a forward-looking and engaging developmental strategy, taking due account of precautionary situations, and
- suggest practical procedures and policies to implement the strategy.

Welcoming the initiative and recognizing its autonomy, the Board agreed: it would read the report when it was ready. The key to the success of the project then became securing able participants to write the report. Fortunately, this proved possible and their report, if not initially written so as to be accessible to the broadest possible public, could certainly be summarized to be

so.

Also, as noted by the Club of Rome,

The World Problematique

As noted by Dr. Rennie J. Whitehead, in the Epilogue to his book *Radar to the Future* (1995),

“Peccei realised that there was not much time left when he injected a sense of urgency in *The Chasm Ahead*, in 1968. Now more than thirty years later, we are still faced with all the problems that Peccei described, plus a few more, and every one of them has been aggravated by the passage of time, the growth of population and the inaction of governments.”

<http://www3.sympatico.ca/drrennie/radar.html> (accessed 05/11/12)

“The complexity of the world problematique lies in the high level of mutual interdependence of all these problems on the one hand, and in the long time it often takes until the impact of action and reaction in this complex system becomes visible.”

http://www.clubofrome.org/about/world_problematique.php (accessed 05/11/12)

The Report to CACOR

The Report, authored by Charles Beaubien, Dr. Nancy Doubleday, Dr. Roberts-Pichette and Dr. Jerzy Wojciechowski and entitled *A Future of Possibility* was presented to the Board in June 2005 and distributed to the members of CACOR.

In a single voice, the authors proposed a pivotal change in approaching the world problematique:

“This document is a call for opening the borders of conventional thought and seeing beyond the geopolitical walls that circumscribe our usual ways of thinking and doing. It is a call to step aside from the dictates of our training, to drop the prejudices of the past and be, to the greatest extent possible, in communion with a future of possibility rather than prediction.

...There is a creative consciousness afoot, demanding accountability, transparency, justice, truth and reconciliation. ...We look for a new universal currency, capable of accurately representing the costs and benefits of our choices. We recognize that in the disappearance of distance, everybody is each other’s next door neighbour. ...We also have regard to the Millennium Development Goals. We then go beyond the latter to challenge ourselves and others to engage personally and professionally.... Specifically we challenge the Club of Rome, with other, to facilitate the creation of the social processes that will enable us to reflect on the current situation, ...haemorrhaging poverty, changing climate, ...in the full knowledge that any future for humankind is necessarily a shared future.

“The change of mind that will bring us to the change of heart is the pivotal possibility to achieve a change in the trajectory of the current human condition, a change in our time.

“Nor is this a futile hope. There are signals everywhere.... There is much to be done.”

Individually, the authors made such comments as:

Beaubien (quoting Peccei): “Solidarity

must be expanded from the national to the regional and the global realm.”

Doubleday: “Inclusive norms are essential.”

Roberts-Pichette (speaking to diagnosis): “failure to understand that everything affects everything else and (speaking to strategy): “Conversations” with cross-memberships...”

Wojciechowski: “In an ever more crowded world, with knowledge giving us constantly more accessible and varied means of mass destruction, the only chance for humanity for a viable future is a moral evolution.”

As noted in the editor’s introduction to the Report,

“Some readers may be surprised at the direction the Report takes in addressing the global problematique. This direction is rather different from that taken on many previous occasions by the Canadian Association for the Club of Rome and its members and by reports to the Club of Rome itself. The authors themselves might perhaps attribute this to their sense of an increasingly urgent need for a change in humanity’s present course. Fully understanding the seriousness of the present material problems faced by humankind, they have nonetheless very largely eschewed recounting these problems and then addressing them discretely. It might not be unfair to represent their consultations as having concluded that such remedial actions will not add up to a solution unless there is change in human perceptions, values, attitudes and behaviour. As one of them said in conversation, “For humans to have a future, they have to reinvent themselves.” Whether such a stance adds a new practicality, visionary and moral,

to the urgent and otherwise pragmatic discussion of the global problematique that has heretofore been predominant in CACOR and the Club of Rome, it surely draws attention to the authors' recommendations and should stimulate discussion."

Discussion of the Report

Preliminary discussion of the Report took place at the CACOR Annual General Meeting on June 21, 2005. At that meeting too a short paper by Dr. Rennie J. Whitehead., "The Global Crisis," was tabled, urging that the Report be seen against the background of critical problems grown urgent in the time since Aurelio Peccei began to call attention to the "Problematique" in the mid-60s. "There can be no question that the greatest and most urgent priority at the present time is the replacement of fossil fuels as rapidly as possible," wrote Dr. Whitehead. ("The Global Crisis" was subsequently published in the autumn issue of CACOR Proceedings.)

Members were encouraged to contribute comments in writing on both the Report and the Whitehead paper over a two month period, after which discussion would be resumed. Each paper elicited a number of comments by readers, all of which were compiled along with other Project materials into a comprehensive project document.

[The Compilation Document associated with The Report Project, containing material from January 13, 2005 to November 15, 2005, is available in electronic form through CACOR.]

A Special Session

On September 28, 2005, a Special Session convened at the request of the Board brought the authors and commentators together to share their analyses and proposals for action. Prior to the Session, the comprehensive project document was provided to each participant. It was clear at the outset of the Session that participants shared a deep concern for

the human future on the planet. However, they also held strong and often conflicting views on the status of the issues set out in the Problematique and on opportunities for redress of such. (This would not have surprised the founder. The Club of Rome itself was variously described by Aurelio Peccei as "catalyst" and "invisible college," and he was clear: "no single value system or consolidated view can be attributed to [the Club of Rome] nor can it speak with one voice." Peccei, The Human Quality, 1977)

Hope was expressed in the convenors' invitation to the Special Session that participants would be:

"... engaged by the possibilities raised by the Report and by Dr. Whitehead's paper, including a heightened awareness of our situation on the planet and constructive action toward human survival and well-being -- the very purposes of CACOR. We hope that a robust, continuing and mainstreamed discussion process will result from this collaboration among interested members as we explore our various perspectives. We are grateful to the [CACOR] Board for the invitation to convene this Special Session and look forward to reporting its results."

The Situation

There are, as yet, few serious observers of the overall human condition on the planet. Indeed it is only within the last two or three generations that it has been recognized that the world is limited in its capacities to support human life. Many among those serious observers now warn that humankind is already in unsustainable imbalance with respect to our environment and that many current practices must be changed if human civilization is to survive. By some measures, e.g. our "ecological footprint," we are said to have already overshot our continuing life support systems by more than one-third.

If this view is accepted, it seems humankind is faced with a tangle of contemporary problems and a variety of choices. Many of these choices are frightening,

some deeply unattractive. Some opinion even holds that our choices are already narrowed, even that we face substantial dieoff. Other opinion holds that time for new thinking and action is very short indeed. Some persons see possibilities of responding in such a way as to strengthen and develop civilization, actions that might usefully, or should, be taken in any case. Most persons are unaware of the global situation of humankind.

Questions for Discussion

Thus, without seeking to substantiate or choose among various views expressed in the papers and by the commentators, participants in the Special Session constructed a variety of questions, any one of which, used in a variety of places or forums, should help to focus attention and stimulate discussion on the global problematique/global possibility and encourage creative action. It was hoped too that the Club of Rome and affiliated national associations of the Club of Rome might find use for such questions. To this end Dr. Rob Hoffman included comments on *The Report Project* and the Special Session in the report from CACOR to the Club of Rome at its 2005 Annual Meeting at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA. Some of the questions follow.

- How can we build into public policy-making the idea of looking at effects to the seventh generation, both backwards and forwards...?
- If we were to step outside of a predictive future, what sort of future would we invent?
- What, as a result of our deliberations today, do we believe should be done differently in our culture? What, as a result of our deliberations today, are we going to do differently?
- Do we understand that, with overshoot and overconsumption, solutions can involve actions that most people today will regard as [unpalatable]?
- How can we make a transition from the current state in which the crises are ridiculed and ignored

to one in which they are accepted as self-evident?

- How urgent is the present crisis? How visible are the opportunities? How can we create opportunities in the midst of this crisis? How can we turn crisis into opportunity? Recognizing that a feeling of crisis tends to paralyze people's ability to respond, how can we transform "masterful (complete) paralysis" into "inspired creativity?"
- What model or models of organization give the best opportunity to respond to crisis? What model can best integrate social, cultural, economic, political, spiritual and environmental responses to the crisis?

A Pivotal Change

The members of the Club of Rome, as Aurelio Peccei said,

"believe that human society needs a profound renewal which can be imagined and enacted only by the joint efforts of all peoples and has to be founded on mutual tolerance, understanding and solidarity. ...Many of them probably also share something deeper, yet not clearly expressed anywhere. This is the feeling that the doctrines and schools of thought which they support have somehow become stale and hollow, and inadequate to guide mankind in this age."

Aurelio Peccei, *The Human Quality*, 1977

"This document," the Report's authors said, "is a call for opening the borders of conventional thought...."

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