

## ***SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT***

### ***Developing and enforcing regional and international commitments toward sustainable development: the role of parliamentarians***

***Summary of the conferences and discussions on Saturday, September 20, 1997***

#### **Chair:**

**Mr. Montgomery Maule**

Speaker of the House of Assembly of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

#### **Vice-chair:**

**Mr. Henri-François Gautrin**

Member of the National Assembly of Québec

#### **Speakers:**

**Mr. Emigdio Flores Calpiñeiro**

Member of the Chamber of Deputies of the Republic of Bolivia  
President of the Amazonian Parliament

**Mr. Bob Mills**

Member of Parliament, House of Commons, Canada

**Mr. Humberto Peláez Gutiérrez**

Executive Secretary of the Latin American Parliament

#### **Secretary:**

**Mr. Jean-Guy Pelletier**

National Assembly of Québec

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***Mr. Emigdio Flores Calpiñeiro*** is a Member of the Chamber of Deputies of the Republic of Bolivia, where he was Chairman of the Committee on the Environment and Natural Resources and Chairman of the Committee on Science and Technology. After having exercised the duties of Vice-President of the Amazonian Parliament, he has assumed its Presidency up until 1998. Having graduated in sociology from the Paul Valéry University in France, Mr. Flores Calpiñeiro held the position of coordinator of the CORDEPANDO development corporation in Bolivia, from 1979 to 1980. From 1982 to 1988, he was a professor at the Federal University of Acre in Brazil as well as technical coordinator of the Agricultural Planning

Mr. Emigdio Flores Calpiñeiro firstly presented the Amazonian Parliament, which brings together parliamentarians from the countries of the Amazon river basin, and whose goal is to strengthen the political and legislative ties between the eight member countries, namely Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Surinam and Venezuela. He also emphasized that this organization took many initiatives in the areas of the environment, sustainable development and biological diversity, particularly through the development of a legislative framework on biological diversity, national parks, endangered species and forestry resources. The Amazonian Parliament is also working on an Amazonian Fund project, the goal of which is to accumulate resources to finance regional projects that fit within the scope of sustainable development.

Parliamentarians have three main tasks within their national Congresses: to legislate, to monitor the measures adopted by the executive branch, and finally, to take measures on behalf of their constituents. According to Mr. Flores Calpiñeiro, they can contribute, through each of these tasks, to the debate and to the process of sustainable development. According to the speaker, it is possible for a policy to respect the criteria of sustainable development. To him, the creation of Departments of Sustainable Development in fact constitutes an effective means of achieving the objectives of sustainable development. However, these Departments must have the appropriate powers to take into account its political, social and economic dimensions and, in particular, to have a say with regard to public and private investments.

The integration of the measures connected with sustainable development between our respective countries is not only a need, it is a pressing necessity. In this sense, the process of integration is not a threat to sustainable development. On the contrary, constructive work must be done based on our legislative texts, in order to ensure better coordination and thus to allow our countries to integrate within larger groups. In this respect, the forming of committees to deal with integration and with major infrastructure projects, such as the construction of a gas pipeline between Bolivia and Brazil, appears as an encouraging element. The discussions that will be held will aim, in particular, to mitigate the direct and indirect effects of these projects on the protection of the environment and on the native communities.

Without a democratic system, we cannot speak of sustainable development, since political stability leads to economic stability and the latter enables us to aspire to other projects, such as sustainable development and integration on a large scale. Mr. Flores Calpiñeiro was glad that the environmental concern was now present everywhere, but he raised an alarm call about the arms race that is currently taking place in Latin America. In his opinion, parliamentarians have considerable means available to them to enhance the achievement of sustainable development and may exercise pressure on the executive branch to move forward with integration and to ensure the adoption of the necessary laws.

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**Mr. Bob Mills** has been a Member of the House of Commons of Canada since October 1993. He is the Official Opposition critic on international affairs, as well as a member of the House of Commons Committee on External Affairs and International Trade. Before beginning his political career, Mr. Mills obtained a B.A. in Science and a diploma in education from the University of Saskatchewan. He then completed a major in history and biology. From 1965 to 1979, he taught biology at the Lindsay Thunder Comprehensive Secondary School in Red Deer. In 1979, he founded the Mills Travel Limited travel agency, for which he received the Travel Hall of Fame Award in 1992 in Orlando in the United States.

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Sustainable development has become an all-purpose buzzword in this latter part of the century, and requires some explanation. Sustainable development is development that satisfies the needs of current generations without compromising the capacity of future generations to satisfy theirs. We must also recognize that what is meant by sustainable development will change in the course of time, as its definition is dynamic. Each generation is responsible for managing its development so as not to cause irreparable harm to the environment.

Poverty is one of the main enemies of sustainable development. Not only must the standard of living be raised, in order that all may benefit from minimum living conditions, but also investments must be made in education, health, research, roads, communications, energy, housing, supply of drinking water and waste management.

The rapidity of the changes together with technological progress result in a situation today in which we cannot imagine what will happen in the XXI century. For example, the changes that have taken place in the field of agriculture over the past 25 years in Canada have been extraordinary: crop rotation, improvements in equipment and new techniques have all contributed to increasing productivity.

Thirty years ago, it was thought that the world's population would continue to grow unchecked; however, we are now witnessing a decrease in the rate of demographic growth. The United Nations nevertheless estimates that in the mid-XXI century, there will be ten billion inhabitants on earth. Will our ecosystem be able to provide subsistence for twice the current population? The answer is affirmative if, through the use of new technologies, we increase the productivity of land in the developing countries.

Moreover, the 28 countries represented here must also collaborate in order to ensure the management of renewable resources. The current sources of energy could run out some day, which would push up its cost. To be more fair, however, it is necessary to add that alternative solutions will become more competitive and energy conservation practices will increase. Between now and the end of the XXI century, we will have access to energy sources whose existence we do not even suspect today.

It should be kept in mind that the biosphere is a closed system. Hence, for the XXIst century, we must concentrate on the development of new recycling technologies in order to maximize

the utilization of non-renewable resources. Landfill sites are an inefficient way of disposing of waste. Indeed, more materials should be recycled rather than being thrown out.

To Mr. Mills, it is essential that parliamentarians work to implement the concept of sustainable development in their respective countries by cooperating and by establishing partnerships. In addition, if we wish to ensure sustainable development within the Americas, a proactive attitude must be adopted so as to assist the States less advanced in this area in establishing and in enforcing environmental standards. Mr. Mills expressed above all the hope that parliamentarians will succeed in giving new hope to the youth of the Americas.

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*Mr. Humberto Peláez Gutiérrez is Secretary General of the Latin American Parliament. He was a senator of the Republic of Colombia between 1974 and 1994, during which period he presided over the Colombian Congress and chaired the Budget Committee and the Senate External Relations Committee. He held the positions of Vice-President and President of the Andean Parliament successively between 1986 and 1989. From 1982 to 1995, he was Vice-president, President, Secretary General and Director of the permanent head office of the Latin American Parliament.*

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During the past half-century, we have drawn more from the earth than throughout all previous centuries, and during this same period, we have increased our capacity to destroy it. The general indifference toward these phenomena has also become generalized. Nowadays, less than a quarter of the world's population consumes three quarters of the raw materials and produces 75% of the solid waste. For this reason, according to Mr. Peláez Gutiérrez, we must recognize an absolute imperative: that of protecting the environment and ensuring a sustainable development, which is defined, according to the United Nations, as "the balanced development of our present resources without compromising the development and resources of future generations." We do not have an absolute and permanent right of ownership over the earth's ecological capital; we are only the tenants on this planet.

During the past decade, the theme of the environment has been on the agenda of nearly all the international conferences. The subjects that turn up most frequently in the different international declarations and agreements mainly involve the protection of the atmosphere, biodiversity, the environment, forests, water, the marine habitat, as well as issues related to toxic and dangerous waste, biotechnology, aboriginal populations, science and technology, the legal and juridical framework, institutional reinforcement, financial resources, and international trade.

There exists a consensus on a certain number of fundamental principles that explain the origin of certain environmental problems, such as underdevelopment, the greenhouse effect and the sovereignty of States in the exploitation of their natural resources. The Earth Summit also placed emphasis on the fact that environmental challenges are closely connected with questions of consumption, demographic growth and increasing economic inequalities within

populations.

However, despite this observation, not only has the overall situation of the planet not improved, but it has continued to deteriorate in certain areas. It must be acknowledged that there is no true political will to implement the strict measures aiming to solve the problems that have negative impacts on the environment.

Different concrete means must be identified to rectify the errors of the past. The solution is closely connected with the adoption of a new attitude regarding international cooperation, which could translate into an increase in financial resources, better access to technologies, a multiplication of commercial exchanges and the solving of the problem of the foreign debt.

One interesting suggestion lies in what could be referred to as "conscious participation", namely a social commitment and a gaining of awareness through education. Two fundamental concepts are thus associated: sustainable development and participatory democracy. For this to occur, the concerted action of all actors in society appears as an indispensable area of support to parliamentary action. Each legislative assembly has the threefold function of legislating, controlling and debating social problems, in addition to exercising a coordinating function. This job should be accomplished both by Parliaments and by the international parliamentary organizations which constitute major forums of discussion and analysis. National parliaments must therefore ratify international conventions and see to their implementation.

The Latin American Parliament, which groups together 22 countries, is an example of a regional organization of a permanent nature. It was created with the goal of playing the role of a high-level political forum, to act as a promoter of development and integration, in a framework of absolute democracy. In addition to the activities of Parliament itself, several committees have been set up in order to establish an essential link with the various Parliaments of the member countries and with many organizations, such as the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the Latin American Interparliamentary Commission for the Environment, and in the context of interparliamentary conferences, with the European Parliament.

We must become the bearers of a message of hope based on the need to establish a world of cooperation. The implementation of Agenda 21, adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992, is not only achievable, but imperative, from both an economic and an environmental viewpoint. We must make certain that economic growth no longer leads to human destruction, and that industrial development does not cause deterioration of the environment in an irreversible way. In summary, any development strategy must place priority on the future and on sustainable development in the world.

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## ***SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS***

A Brazilian delegate mentioned that beyond the ratification of international agreements, such as Agenda 21, countries must respect their commitments, failing which these processes will

serve no useful purpose. Hence, it is a problem of redistribution of wealth that we face collectively, as there is too much wealth in the hands of too few, and too much misery in the hands of the others.

A Deputy from El Salvador regretted, for his part, that the international agreements do not always produce the results expected, since the local parliaments do not fulfill their responsibility of control and monitoring of pollution.

One participant asked whether sustainable development was being taken into account in the mining operations in Latin America. Mr. Péláez Gutiérrez pointed out that mining operations are one of the main sources of pollution, but that corrective measures were under way to regulate mining operations and to protect the environment.

Others maintain that Peru is in the process of bringing in stricter legislation in order to enable the country to develop while respecting what was agreed on in Rio in 1992. For example, a law has just been promulgated to the effect that any investment project must be accompanied by an evaluation of the environmental impacts.

According to one participant, the Latin American Parliament would need to be able to bring pressure on local parliaments to make them fulfill their responsibilities. A delegate from El Salvador pointed out that laws are being voted in to punish those who do not respect the agreements, and in his opinion, one must not be content only to apply punishment, but should also reward those who respect the agreements.

One participant pointed out that assemblies such as this make it possible to build awareness among parliamentarians on environmental issues. A delegate underlined that, in his view, women had had little presence at this assembly, and he hoped that they would play a greater role on a future occasion. All the participants agreed that it is no longer time for discussion, but rather to adopt concrete measures.