

A New Generation - A New Idealism



"A NEW GENERATION - A NEW IDEALISM" Notes for an Address by Lewis Perinbam, Senior Advisor to the President, The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada, to the AIESEC Global Theme Conference, Basel, Switzerland, May 6, 1997

Transcript

I am honoured and pleased to address AIESEC's Global Theme Conference. It is always an inspiring experience to be at an AIESEC gathering of students from all over the world.

With its membership of over 50,000 students in its 741 affiliates in 87 countries, AIESEC represents an influential movement for change. As the largest student-led and student-managed organisation in the world, it commands widespread admiration and respect. Its commitment to the advancement of its member countries and to international understanding and co-operation is a commendable and noble goal that merits unqualified support.

The theme of this session is "The Citizen of the 21st Century"; we must recognise at the outset that the 20th century citizen must be an informed person. This conference will be valuable in helping you to learn from each other; in enabling you to understand the cultural and political forces that shape nations; in cultivating respect for people from different economic and social circumstances and in overcoming outdated attitudes that are barriers to progress.

Knowing that I would be speaking to a gathering of very bright students I wanted to say something original. This is not easy and I was reminded of the Scottish lawyer whose stone front door-step had worn down. Fearing that he might become liable for damages if one of his clients slipped on it and injured himself or herself, he enquired about the cost of replacing it. He was told that a new step would cost one hundred pounds. Being a Scot this alarmed him. It then occurred to him that, if he turned the old step around, there would be a sharp edge on the hidden other side. When the stonemason told him it would cost only ten pounds to turn the step around he quickly had it done only to find that his grandfather had done the same fifty years earlier.

Like the Scottish lawyer, I may not be original; but I shall try to offer a fresh perspective.

In this century our planet has undergone one of the most dramatic transformations in its history. It marked the end of vast European empires that had dominated the world for three centuries and the emergence into

freedom of over one hundred countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It witnessed the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Communist movement for world domination. Through the compassionate and wise leadership of Nelson Mandela - one of the greatest leaders that the world has seen - it heralded the end by peaceful means of the dreadful apartheid system in South Africa.

Our world has moved from the aftermath of the industrial revolution to a new era driven by knowledge, information and new technologies. These developments hold great promise for transforming a world of conflict and economic disparities into a stable and more equitable global society - provided that new technologies are our slave and not our master and are used for the benefit of all the world's peoples.

Despite the scientific and technological revolution that has swept the world over four billion people in the developing countries are engulfed in abject poverty. The income gap between them and the developed countries leapt from 30:1 in 1960 to 60:1 in the 1990s. We live in a world where:

many countries spend more on armaments than on the education and health of their citizens;
nearly 1 billion people face starvation although there is more than enough food for all.

In the time that we spend at this session more than 20,000 children in developing countries will die from preventable diseases. It is estimated that every new born North American child will consume twenty-five times as much as its counterpart in the developing world during its lifetime.

Despite these contradictions of wealth and poverty it is not often recognised that developing countries - today referred to as "the South" - were not always economically poor. We owe much to them for their contributions over the centuries to our world and to our prosperity.

Our mathematical figures and concepts were brought to Europe from India by Arab mathematicians. Nearly 200 years before Gutenberg revolutionised printing in Europe in the 16th century, inventive Korean printers developed the world's first moveable type. For four centuries, Arab medicine was the source of scientific and technological progress in the Western world. History tells us that these countries had to attain certain economic levels before they could produce these scientific and technological breakthroughs.

This material and cultural wealth in the developing world prompts me to remind you that the industrialised countries of the North did not go out into the world and discover "under-developed" countries. They helped to create them. Before the industrial revolution Asia provided many manufactured goods for the economies of Europe, thus helping in the latter's development. But Europe's conquest of Asia reversed this process and Asian production goals became subordinated to those of their foreign rulers. It has been well-documented that the British destroyed the industrial economy of India. And Africa possessed well-developed forms of political organisation, including kingdoms, that were destroyed at the hands of its many European conquerors.

Our world is seething with discontent and discord. The peoples of the developing South are resentful of their impoverished condition and frustrated by their continuing failure to obtain a fair share in the international economic system. Their growing receptiveness to extremist voices is one manifestation of

this. The problem is aggravated by some of today's leaders, in the North and the South, who are prepared to resort to violence to gain their ends.

In the past we could ignore such tensions and remain secure. This is no longer possible. The world is like a giant drum; strike it anywhere and it will resound everywhere.

Yet these are also times of promise and of hope. The past decade has witnessed the extraordinary economic emergence of Asia's ten largest developing countries led by China, India and Indonesia. Together they account for as much global trade as Europe and North America combined. One-half of the world's economic growth over the next decade will take place in Asia. According to the Financial Times of London (January 13, 1997), "most of the world's fastest growing countries next year will be from Asia and Africa, while the slowest will be from former European communist countries and wealthy members of OECD."

The challenge you face is to create a new kind of society based on a global perspective. This will call for enlightened and courageous leadership by individuals like yourselves; the kind of leadership that Themistocles, the Athenian leader was talking about nearly 2000 years ago when he said, "I never learned how to tune a harp or play a lute, but I know how to raise a small and not inconsiderable city to glory and greatness."

Your generation, with its knowledge, skills and enterprise can turn hope into reality. You can do so by inspiring the ordinary citizen to believe that he or she can make the world a better place. If your education has not prepared you for this responsibility, it has failed. The main purpose of education is to train the intellect to respond to human realities, to give our lives shape and meaning, to cultivate in us a sense of values and to help us to adapt to a constantly changing world.

This is a time of greatness for AIESEC. As you become global citizens of the 21st century you can be the creators of a new idealism that is driven by honesty, integrity and humility. You can help the world to break out of the aid era of donors and recipients and fashion a global society that is founded, not on those who give and those who receive, but on sharing the bounty of the planet that Providence has entrusted to our care.

AIESEC is a means and not an end. You can use it to translate your idealism into practical action. You can help to release the vast creative energies and creativity of people in your respective communities and countries. You can use your spirit of enterprise to improve the conditions of life in your societies. You can use AIESEC's programmes and networks to involve your generation in re-shaping the world and in building a new global society that is worthy of your generation. This is an ambitious agenda. How can you achieve it? You can do so:

By helping to ensure that economic and technological advances benefit all and do not bypass countries engulfed in poverty and people who are disadvantaged.

By promoting innovative approaches to education; distance learning for instance is, for the first time in human history, bringing education within the reach of millions so that its availability is no longer

confined to the privileged few.

By advancing the "open society" that is hospitable to diverse and conflicting points of view (to which Mr. George Soros and his foundation have committed their energies and funds) and help to stem the tide of authoritarian and military regimes that trespass on the rights and freedoms of their citizens.

By ensuring that the enormous enterprise, technology and resources that reside in the private sector are tempered in their use by an overriding sense of social responsibility and accountability to society.

As our world enters a new millennium in its history you can be the architects and standard bearers of a new destiny. You can forge a vision of a better world - a vision that demonstrates that your way of life means more than your comforts and that your ideals of generosity, compassion and justice hold promise for the world.

You are among the most privileged citizens of our planet. You have been given the opportunity to study and to learn and to take your place among the tiny, fortunate minority of the world's educated people. You can use your talents and enormous privilege for purely personal ends. But you should remember that you will be judged, and ultimately you will judge yourself, on the extent to which you have used your gifts and your life for the benefit of others.

As you gather together in this great AIESEC assembly you should recognise that your idealism can lift our world on to a plateau of a new kind of greatness, not the greatness of power to dominate or to destroy, but the greatness of power to create and to construct an ethic of sharing and decency among the nations on this planet. You can be a beacon of hope in a troubled world.

As you prepare yourselves to become citizens of the 21st century you face daunting challenges. You may not succeed in all that you set out to achieve but let not future generations say of you that your generation lacked the courage or the vision to have made the effort. In your hands lie our best hopes for the future.