



# Call for Global Environmental Action

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It is an honor to have been invited to address you here today, and in particular the young students and graduates of Harvard in whom so much hope for the future reposes.

In the course of the less than 400 weeks left of the twentieth century, you will enter professional life with promising chances of influencing the future course of this country, a future that is of such decisive importance to the whole world.

In the final decade of the second millennium, 2,500 years since the birth of democracy in ancient Greece, humanity—and nature on which it depends—finds itself at a crossroads.

Technological and scientific advances have created a world economy of staggering dimensions, but it has left more than half of the world's people in poverty. Through overexploitation of our natural resources, we have brought life on earth even closer to the brink of disaster.

The predicament is new to present generations, the first ones to face the formidable moral challenge: not only one of responsibility to the needs and rights of others, but of those not yet born—and of the future life of nature itself.

At this point in our evolution, we cannot hope that the environmental and development crisis will go away as a passing fad. Technological trends, patterns of production and consumption, and pure

human numbers call for radical changes to reconcile human activities with the laws of nature.

The 1990s will be a decade of destiny, in which we must summon our human resources, our knowledge, and our moral conviction to face seriously the real challenge of the future.

Fifty-three years of life experience and 18 years of political work in government and the parliament of my country have brought me to the following view of the most fundamental challenge of our time: The forces of technology, of finance, and of electronic communication have increasingly taken over the powers that were vested in democracy to shape our future. What should be our global village is threatening to turn into a global jungle. We need to replace international anarchy with international governance.

The challenge of the 1990s is to deepen and widen the forces of democracy and to lift democratic decision making also to the international level.

We are brought up being taught that democracy allows us to govern on behalf of the people, and that people, through their participation in democratic processes in each country, can make decisions and choices about their own future.

We elect our leaders on their programs. Our elected representatives, in turn, pursue the objectives of society by means of legislation, rules, and taxation.

The idea of democracy, 2,500 years old, has a stronghold here near Boston. All of you, and those who are fortunate to get higher education, are familiar with the account of the Boston Tea Party. Today, the ideas summed up at Gettysburg: "government of the people, by the people, for the people," while formally in good order, are, when applied

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at the level of the nation-state, not alone able to lead us to a future that is more safe, more just, and more secure.

The nation-state, even the most powerful, is too small a scene for addressing regional and global challenges. It will become increasingly contradictory to promise remedy through national measures alone to challenges that are of an international nature and origin. I can give you an example from my own country. People expect the government to see to it that the general interest rate is such that they can repay their mortgages without too much hardship; reasonable interest rates are good for investments and for jobs. The last time the Federal Bank of Germany raised the prime lending rate, however, it took 17 seconds until the Norwegian National Bank had to raise its interest rate.

Another example: In Norway, we have cut our sulfur emission by more than 50% since the 1970s. Still, rain as sour as vinegar keeps falling down, destroying our lakes and soil, and 90% of this acid rain originates in other countries.

If we maintain the illusion that nations can act in isolation, we not only risk postponing critical decisions that can only be made effective when states act in cooperation, but we also risk an increase in the growing skepticism and lack of respect for democracy, politics, and politicians because they seemingly cannot do what is in reality beyond the reach of their present powers.

We are used to holding politicians accountable and to measure their results and how they are able to improve our lives. If their results do not meet our expectations, we are quick both to turn against them and to turn against the political system. If this alienation toward political life is allowed to continue, we risk a gradual disintegration also of traditional political institutions. The new and dangerous antidemocratic trends in some countries and calls for the strongman are dangerous symptoms that we must take seriously.

We must not forget that it is we ourselves, not somebody else, who are responsible for how our democracies work. We cannot wait for someone else to do their job or put all our faith in an illusion of omnipotence at the top political level. All segments of our societies must become more deeply involved in the real issues of our time.

Democracy cannot be achieved by top-down processes. It must have its base in our communities,

in the minds and priorities of the individual citizen and voter, in political parties, and in the network of interest groups and nongovernmental organizations that are an essential part of our pluralistic societies.

I have come here directly from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which opened yesterday in Rio de Janeiro. That conference is about survival of the human race and about its reconciliation with the biosphere.

Cynics are often quick to dismiss international conferences as futile, costly, and substantively contrary to what they see as national privileges and vested interests. Such attitudes are dangerous. "Cynics know the price of anything and the value of nothing," said Oscar Wilde.

Presently, the vast majority who are poor make only a minimal claim to our natural resources, while the more voracious North is consuming in a few decades what it has taken the planet billions of years to accumulate.

This growing difference between the fortunate few and the powerless, impoverished majority is a destabilizing trend. It is dangerous as well as morally unacceptable.

Achieving or approaching sustainability demands a profound understanding of a series of challenges facing societies between now and the year 2050. Can a doubled world population be adequately fed in an environmentally sustainable way? How can they be educated and become our partners when today only 8%, and in some very poor countries only 2%, have access to higher education? How can we find the energy needed to fuel a world economy perhaps five times larger than today's without spoiling the environment and significantly disrupting the climate?

Unless we assist developing countries in bypassing the most polluting stages of development and in developing the potential of their people, we ourselves may be the victims. We cannot say to the developing world: "Sorry, we have filled the wastebasket, there is no room left for you."

Developing countries require environmental space for their development. For them, the future is essentially about development and justice. For them, the environment is vital, as it is for us. But they will not accept the unequal burden that seems to be asked of them, to be the caretakers of our common responsibilities for future generations, while we who have been destroying nature and who have raised

our standard of living, through unsustainable patterns of growth, are not ready to do our share.

I have been stunned to see how the Rio Conference seems to fail to make workable decisions on how to curb population growth. States that do not have a population problem, in one particular case even no births at all, are doing their utmost to prevent the world from making sensible decisions regarding family planning. Family planning services must be made universally available. The status of women must be raised, and they must receive better education. Women have been patronized long enough.

We are faced with a watered-down climate convention. It fails to set firm targets. It fails to recognize that the longer we wait the greater the bill.

Many countries have already made deep cuts in their emissions and pledged further reduction. And still, their economies are among the primary forces on the planet. Germany is a case in point. The energy efficiency of Japan is well known. We cannot be surprised when these countries increase their economic edge in the future because they forced their industry to become more effective.

Carbon taxes have been introduced in some countries, including my own. They may not be popular, but they are accepted as necessary. But all such measures in small and medium-sized countries will not make a decisive difference unless they are matched by similar strong measures in major countries.

Faced with these challenges and ever-dwindling natural resources, I see the Rio Earth Summit as steps in the staircase leading to what will have to come: a better organized world community where we pool resources as well as formal sovereignty in order to obtain more real sovereignty and choices for the future, not foreclosing the choices of future generations.

We need to use the gifts of the world's crust more thoughtfully and efficiently. We should treasure them more, price them properly, and keep more of them available for future generations.

Time itself is a scarce resource, as the Club of Rome's report "Limits to Growth" illustrates by a French children's riddle:

You own a pond with a water lily. The lily plant doubles in size each day. If the plant was allowed to grow unchecked, it would completely cover the pond

in 30 days, ruining all other forms of life in the pond completely. Imagine that you decide not to worry until the water lily covers half the pond. On which day will that be? Only one day to go!

It shows how little time we have and why derisory attitudes will be self-destructive.

If we signal that the task is almost hopeless, we will foster environmental nihilism rather than stimulate a new global ethic. The World Commission on Environment and Development, which I had the honor to chair, concluded that the situation is far from hopeless. Instead, the Commission expressed the hope and the firm belief that humankind has the capacity to change the dangerous course we have been travelling. We need new policies at local, national, and international levels based on sustainable patterns of development.

We do not have global institutions strong enough to determine new directions or to implement effective global policies. We must develop an international public sector based on the United Nations and existing institutions. Countries have sovereignty over their national resources, but decisions leading to sustainable development will be illusory if we can only move forward at a snail's pace decided by the most reluctant movers. It is difficult to see how decision making in international institutions can become effective unless we introduce new elements of supranational rule. We need elements of global governance that can serve our real interests, across national barriers.

We have come to a watershed in human history. Political leaders will have to lead into uncharted land, where familiar concepts of purpose and interests fail to match reality. But democratically elected leaders cannot do the job alone. They need to be supported by increasing millions of responsible citizens, particularly when the necessary measures seem costly in a short-term perspective.

Trillions of dollars have been spent on arms in the past; now comparable gigantic efforts are needed in a new and common struggle.

Thanks to U.S. leadership and the United Nations, we said effectively no to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In a similar manner we must say effectively no and deploy the resources needed to repel the much more serious threat of global environmental and social collapse. Leadership will have to come from the North. We must set our own house in order and assist both the developing countries and the

former communist countries. The West has won the cold war. Now the West must again resume real leadership.

In my view, there are compelling political reasons for ensuring that Europe and the U.S. will be walking together, breaking new ground. Political innovation must come from those countries that derive their values and form of government from the same sources of free, democratic thinking. We must use our cultural, political, and humanitarian capital to undertake an even greater responsibility for those who are less fortunate than we are. Then we can hope to build a truly global democracy that will include also those parts of the world where today the seeds of our values are growing on the thinnest soil.

We need a collective engagement that goes beyond building a new East-West relationship. We need a new era of internationalism where peace, environment, and development are linked and placed in the epicenter of national and international affairs.

You stand here today, as I once did, as a highly privileged group. You have been gifted with talent, opportunity, knowledge, and access to the best education the world has to offer. You have hopes and may also have doubts about the future. But most of all each of you has a great opportunity to make a difference and to play a role in the establishment of the primacy of global democracy.

As generations before you have experienced, the world—and life itself—has changed during the two decades of your childhood and youth. That pace of change is likely to increase.

When I myself left Harvard, in 1965, before most of you were born, there was a war in Vietnam. A reformist wave was under way. President Johnson was announcing the Great Society, Rachel Carson gave us her warning in *Silent Spring*, and gradually the world was preparing for the first U.N. Conference on the Environment.

Your two decades from 1972 to 1992 have seen the new radical right movement evolving. But let us remember: however good the markets are at allo-

cating resources efficiently and effectively, they cannot build community purpose, instill social responsibility, or assert the larger vision only people can have of a just and sustainable future. The truth is that to make far-reaching decisions governments depend on a population that will support even the most difficult decisions. Only then can truly effective change come about.

Through satellites and cables we receive fragmented images from all over the world, 24 hours a day. Complexity is reduced to disconnected simplicity. One day of multimedia information comes close to what Umberto Eco calls a journey in hyperreality. We must not be blinded by the immediate. We must all take a longer term view. We need to expand and share knowledge, and we must get many more people engaged in the overriding issues of our time.

Luckily, at the beginning of the 1990s, democracy is gaining ground worldwide, now that we need it so urgently. These changes would have been slower had it not been for the information revolutions and the global media. We will have to rely on the gift of information technology for spreading knowledge and for developing those common perspectives and those common attitudes that our human predicament now requires.

We are compelled to manage the most important global transition since the agricultural and industrial revolutions—the transition to sustainable development—and how to reconcile human activities and human numbers with the long-term carrying capacity of this finite earth.

If we succeed, as we must, we may with greater confidence teach generations yet unborn the Gettysburg ideals and how they were made to work at a time when people and countries realized that they had to move toward more mature stages of civilization.

My own faith is in the youth of the world, custodians of the present and trustees of the future. We—and you—should see to it that the day will come when people look back on your generation and say: Faced with the challenge, they managed to upgrade human civilization. ■