

THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

Speech to Annual Meeting of Engineers Without Borders

Address by

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I speak to you today as someone who went overseas on a two-year assignment with CUSO and discovered 25 years later that I had had a career in “international development”, something I didn’t even know existed when I signed up to go to West Africa. If longevity equals expertise, I guess that qualifies me as an “expert”.

However, I am no such thing, and when it comes to international development, I don’t believe anyone else is either. I would describe myself rather as a dis-illusioned development worker who has learned one thing – that when it comes to promoting development, I don’t know very much. So what can I bring to you today?

I can see George and Parker starting to squirm: oh, oh, they’re thinking, he’s going to rain on EWB’s parade. Well, no. When I say dis-illusioned, I mean it in a positive sense. I haven’t lost hope, or become cynical or think that aid programs just throw tax money into a bottomless pit. I simply mean that I have gotten over some of the illusions I once had. And, in the spirit of enquiry that is one of the most compelling qualities of EWB, I want to talk about some of those illusions and why we all need to get past them, if indeed, we hope to have impact in this challenging field.

It has been said that an era ends when the illusions that sustain it are exhausted. I think that in that sense, we are indeed at the end of an era. And I think that is a good thing, because clinging to our illusions just prevents us from engaging with the world as it is. Charles Dickens started his famous book about the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the wonderful sentence: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...* The old order was collapsing and something new was being born. Maybe not such a great time to be an aristocrat, one of the privileged, but – as we acknowledge today – it was a great step forward for the serfs and “sans-culottes” - the underprivileged masses.

I want to talk about three illusions that I took with me and clung to like life rafts, until I began to realize they weren’t holding me up, they were holding me back.

The first is the illusion of the inevitability of progress. This is a source of great comfort and reassurance, that history unfolds linearly and always toward greater opportunity and well-being. It is an illusion that North Americans are particularly prone to, with our practical, problem-solving approach to life. Ironically, it reached its fullest and most hubristic expression in a book titled *The End of History* published in 1992, which was written by an American academic and policy wonk named Francis Fukuyama. In it he argued that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the spread of economic globalization world history had reached its final stop, which was the universal adoption of capitalism and liberal democracy. No more ideology – or rather only one ideology – and therefore no more conflict. Well, that was before 9/11 and Al Qaeda and the spread of conflict in the Middle East, and a number of other events that suggest we are not done with History yet!

Thirty years ago, when I set off for Africa, I was fortified by the conviction that things were inexorably improving. I wanted to be part of the process, contributing to and benefiting from the fast-forward march of history, you might say. Of course, there might be setbacks, but overall things were fated to get better, for most people. Now that the age of colonialism was over, development would vanquish poverty and democracy would free people from oppression. Of course, many positive things have happened - but no one can argue seriously that Africa as a whole is better off today than it was then. It turns out there is nothing inevitable about progress. We just didn't foresee the HIV/AIDS pandemic, failed states, rule by genocidal governments or well-intentioned but misguided "aid".

Ah, you may say, but overall the proportion of people living in absolute poverty in the world is going down. In the aggregate, due to economic growth in parts of Asia that is true, but if you look more closely at the breakdowns within countries, you see a yawning gap opening up between the prosperity of those who are benefiting from economic growth and the poverty of those dislocated by it. And economic disparity is growing within rich countries too. Still today 2.7 billion people – over half the population of the developing world - live on less than \$2/day; and there are 793 billionaires, according to Forbes, who collectively have assets equal to one-fifth of US GDP (and in the last three years, the number has increased by 66%, and their total net worth by 86%). Yes, India and China are getting richer – fast. But according to World Bank economist Branko Milanovic, the widening inequalities inside India and China counterbalance any reduction in global inequality derived from those countries overall growth. In Shanghai alone, six million impoverished migrants from the hinterland have poured into the city, desperate for some share of the new wealth that is being created. That number is growing every day and is causing considerable concern for the Chinese government.

Does it matter, so long as global disparity between the so-called “developed” or rich world and the poor or “developing” world shifts? According to most research, what creates resentment and hence instability is not the absolute level of poverty in a society,

but the relative level – the visible gap between what a few people have and what their more numerous neighbours lack. That is when people question why they are poor and struggling to survive, and whether the system that creates and feeds those disparities is just or legitimate. And if people feel that there is opportunity for some, but they are excluded from it, the foundations are laid for resentment, anger and violence. That is true in China, India, Mexico – or the suburbs of Paris or Rome.

Economic growth is part of the answer of course. But by itself it is not enough. Capitalism may be the best system yet devised for allocating resources efficiently and for generating wealth but even its staunchest defenders don't suggest that it can distribute wealth fairly. That is the role of government, to create a level playing field, to set the stage through rules and laws for markets to function, to ensure that at some minimum level all citizens' basic needs are met. When the political system doesn't do this, or serves only the desires of the powerful – as is the case in many parts of the world today – the result is instability and violence.

But if the idea that progress is inevitable, that social and economic change create only benefits for people, is an illusion, what does that mean for us? Certainly not that we should give up on the goal of improving people's lives, just the notion that this can happen all by itself, without our active engagement. It means that we have to commit ourselves to creating that better world, and that it will require perseverance; it is not a two-year assignment, it is a lifetime's commitment. We can take comfort in the evidence that absolute poverty is on the decline along with infant mortality, and that life expectancy and education rates for girls are improving, but we have to look deeper. Otherwise higher overall living standards will just mask the reality of growing inequality, despair, and violence.

A second illusion I want to talk about is the notion that “development” is just about them, not us. We used to think, and many people still do, that the world was divided between rich, “developed” countries, and poor “undeveloped” ones. The goal of development is to give poor people the skills, technologies and capital which would enable them to be like us. We didn't think too much about how long it would take for them to “catch up”, or whether the ecosystem could actually support billions more people consuming energy and resources at the level of people in the OECD countries.

We now see daily evidence that change is buffeting us too, whether it arises from climate change, economic competition from the Pacific countries, the education demands of a knowledge-intensive economy, demographic shifts including an aging population and a low birth rate, or other factors. Our response - quite naturally - is first, to deny these changes are significant, then look for a quick fix (usually technological), and finally demand that someone else fix the problem so that we can continue to enjoy our comfortable status quo. The trouble is that the status quo is no longer an option, and

the more effort we invest in trying to shore it up, the less energy and resources we can devote to finding something better to replace it with.

Economists estimate that GDP per capita in poor countries will not approach that of North America or Europe until 2100. More importantly, the global energy crisis and environmental changes mean that the consumption of resources at the North American rate is unrealistic. Since we cannot expect the poor to acquiesce indefinitely to a situation where one-fifth of humanity enjoys four fifths of the world's wealth, we too will have to make adjustments. At the moment, many Canadians are still in the denial stage (although on environmental awareness at least that is shifting fast). But consider: our relative affluence hasn't succeeded in making us happier, or more fulfilled. Despite the enormous growth of our economy over the past quarter century polls show us that people are not more satisfied with their lives or feeling less stressed. Endless acquisition, it turns out, is not a substitute for a sense of purpose and healthy relationships. Many people are looking for other sources of meaning, a better balance between work and life, a set of values not based on consumerism. In a world where fifteen percent of the population consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources, that has to be a good thing. But we shouldn't pretend that this is going to be easy or that it will not entail short-term pain. Part of our commitment to a healthy sustainable future is to help Canadians put our experience into a global context. Instead of fearing and fighting change, we must look for the opportunities it creates to improve not just others' lives but our own. Part of the reason for working with Africans and others is to learn from them, to tap into that vitality, sheer joy of living and courage they exhibit, the primacy they give to family and friendship and the valuing of children and old people.

A final illusion, and one particularly appealing to Canadians for obvious reasons, concerns the role of Canada itself. The image of the Canadian welcomed everywhere due to the maple leaf sticker or badge worn in a lapel or sewn on a backpack is one of our cherished national myths. And on a personal level, there is enough truth even today to sustain it. But Canada, the universally appreciated "helpful fixer", generous supplier of foreign aid, international Boy Scout with no colonial baggage – that era is over. It existed because of our enormous contribution to victory in WWII, our relatively robust foreign policy in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, our bicultural heritage and an enlightened and quite generous aid program.

But as a number of commentators have observed, that is over. Canada no longer has a free pass. Our economy has dropped from 7th to 11th in the world, our military forces have been allowed to atrophy, and after a series of cutbacks our aid program is not merely stingy, it is widely viewed as unfocused and ineffectual. We have to work to earn respect now, not sit back and accept it as our due. One way we earn it is by confronting the challenge often directed at us by friends and partners overseas: "how can you help us if you are not facing the development issues in your own country, the poverty,

illiteracy and homelessness, and – especially – the shameful neglect of your aboriginal people?”

That last issue, the despair in so many native communities, is our national shame. The leading cause of death among aboriginal youth, especially males, is suicide. In some communities, the suicide rate for children and adolescents is ten percent or higher. Think of it: if we projected that ten percent of the two hundred and fifty or so males in this room would take their lives in the next twelve months, would we just sit here wondering if we should do something about it? No, it would be a national tragedy, a scandal.

The question I ask myself as I look at the world today – facing unprecedented threats from climate change, previously unimaginable destructive capacity in the hands of small groups of people thanks to technology, instability and violence as wrenching economic change opens a widening gulf between its beneficiaries and victims – is, what form will this upheaval take, and how can we, the world’s “aristocrats” in terms of wealth and power, play a positive role?

And this brings me to EWB, and to you, its supporters and members.

What attracted me to EWB when Parker and George first came to talk to me in 2001 about their idea, was that they were not under the illusion that poor countries just needed a dose of good ol’ Canadian problem solving in the form of young engineers, nor that being Canadian and wanting to help was enough. They understood the complexity of development, the importance of local cultures, the ways in which skills and technology can either enhance disparity or create opportunity.

EWB set itself a lofty aim, to provide leadership in bringing about change. It talks in its annual report of how it creates that leadership role : through *innovation, insight, and influence* –through new ideas and approaches, a rigorous self-examination to determine what works and what doesn’t, and by inspiring and if necessary goading others. It chose a sector, the engineering profession that, (with all due respect) was not very present in Canada’s overseas development effort, it has worked to enlist the interest and support of the business community, and it has played an active advocacy role vis à vis policy-makers and the public. It crosses many boundaries: between the voluntary and for-profit worlds, and in the overseas and domestic foci of its program, in the age and diversity of its members, and its joining of engineering skills with knowledge from the social sciences.

EWB has escaped, so far, some of the illusions I referred to earlier. It does not believe that we have the answers to others’ problems, that technical solutions can solve challenges that are rooted in history, culture, and socio-economic realities we barely understand, or that Canadians don’t have to earn the right to work with others on these transcendent issues of our time. We earn that by being modest about what we can do,

appreciative of others' efforts – and willing to engage in making change in our own society. I read with interest a debate on an EWB blog that was launched when George posted a provocative article questioning the practice of sending people to work for change in other countries without being engaged in working on behalf of disadvantaged groups at home; the response from EWB members was lively and diverse, and indicated that a lot of people were asking themselves that very question. Robert Fox of Oxfam put this very well in his address; he said “We have the *opportunity* to help the South, we have the *obligation* to change our own country”. I would emphasize even more: *We earn* the opportunity to help the South by how we contribute to betterment at home.

I started by quoting Dickens' *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...* It was the worst because of the upheaval, the violence of the French Revolution, the wrenching change that cast everything upside down – position, authority, wealth. And it was the best for that too – because old systems which no longer served a purpose were discarded, new values of liberty, equality and fraternity embraced, and out of the “creative destruction” a new order emerged.

I believe we stand at a similar juncture today. Environmental changes, a decline in population in most industrialized countries, a powerful reassertion of cultural difference, the use of terrorism by small groups to achieve their ends, the emergence of new power centres in South and East Asia, are converging forces that will cause us to change. The question is, *are our societies resilient enough to adapt*, or will the changes overwhelm our ability to respond? (If you think I am exaggerating, go to Western Europe and see what just those forces are doing and the fears they are provoking among a growing part of the population). Will rich countries view the challenge as a global challenge, requiring a global response, or will we retreat into a “charity begins at home” mentality, in a sense building dikes against the rising seawaters at home while the Maldives and Bangladesh and other places disappear beneath the waves?

The answer, I believe, lies in the attributes EWB has identified as its strategies: *innovation* – not clinging to the status quo but accepting the risks of change, exploring alternatives, adapting our institutions however difficult that may be; *insight* – using our understanding of complexity and systems-thinking, and the knowledge derived from other cultures and ways of problem-solving; and *influence* – listening to people and advocating to government and business and the public for what we believe to be *right* and *necessary* and *just*. The good news is that on the environment at least, but also poverty and health and energy, there are unmistakable signs a global consciousness of the nature of the problems is emerging, and a will to fashion a truly global response.

You, who work with and support EWB, have a great advantage: you already understand the dimensions of the task ahead and you have decided to get engaged to make positive change happen. You understand that we need to work with others both in Canada and overseas if we are to be effective. You are listening to partners overseas like Patricia

Lumano, the Zambian farmer profiled in your annual report, and telling other Canadians too what she has taught you about endurance and resourcefulness and courage. You are reaching out to business leaders like the ones who recently created the Committee to End Homelessness right here in Calgary, business leaders who get it and who are beginning to harness the enormous power and influence of the private sector to focus Canadians on the need – and the opportunities! – of change.

Most of all, you are not shackled by the illusions that people like me held for so long. You can use the analytical and problem-solving skills of your engineering training, with your own boundless energy and creativity, to put EWB and Canada at the forefront of the global movement for change.

If you were to ask me “am I optimistic” that Western society is resilient enough to adapt to the challenges I have mentioned today, I would have to answer that what counts is not whether we are optimistic or pessimistic but whether we have hope. Optimism can just be a naïve belief that everything will turn out alright in the end but Hope refers to the bedrock conviction that positive change is possible, that we can create the kind of world we want for ourselves and our children. Optimism can be passive but hope compels us to act, to play our part. When I see EWB in action, when I look around this room, when I read the reports of your work, it is impossible not to have hope.

Robert F. Kennedy said, about the time that I set out for West Africa, “*Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*”

You are those people, and my hope is that you and those ripples will converge to form a mighty tsunami that leads to a better future for every human being on this planet!

Thank you.