

OPENING REMARKS

by

Howard C. Clark

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

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Welcome to Dalhousie - while we might have preferred to have you visit Halifax at a more attractive time of the year, perhaps this will ensure that we all stay inside and work. Because this is very much a working conference, a conference by invitation, a conference from which we hope to achieve real and workable results.

I do mean that - I was quoted in the local newspaper last week as saying there are too many conferences and I did mean that in terms of conferences that are events in themselves from which little flows. If this turns out the same we will have failed, so again I stress that we see this very much as a participatory, working conference, intended to achieve real and continuing results.

In the last century, universities have demonstrated remarkable competence in the advancement of science and the development and application of technology. It is in no small part then that science and technology now so seriously threatens the past world order. Yet at the same time, most intellectual leaders will agree that over the same time period, the influence of universities on society, their leadership in social and ethical thinking and moral development has seriously diminished. In the genuinely intellectual sense we are seen as increasingly irrelevant.

How ironic it is then that we come to this Conference to consider the role of the University in Sustainable Development. That term itself is one with which we all find difficulty because it is open to so many interpretations. But from whatever viewpoint one comes, it is abundantly clear that for a university it means much more than the addition of a new chair or department in environmental science, or in environment and economy, or an expanded recycling program, important and essential though these are.

Sustainable development when interpreted seriously challenges the very educational mission of the university and forces us to re-examine the basic precepts on which virtually every discipline is taught. It also questions the ability of the university to "re-cycle" intellectual talent, to adapt within constant resources to new and evolving needs, to better set the important priorities and cease less relevant activities. It challenges the institution itself to continue to develop sustainably rather than in the current growth ethic of academia.

If the university is to provide leadership to a consumer society in sustainable development, must it not first set its own house in order? Can universities provide leadership in debate of the social and ethical dimensions of sustainable development when we are all uncertain that the university should adopt any ethical position?

Yet, if universities do not provide leadership in the real understanding of sustainable development, in the production of graduates who genuinely live it, what hope is there for us?

These are the challenges we face and I hope this Conference can play some significant part in the re-thinking and critical analysis that is so urgently needed.

At the same time our efforts must be well-balanced between internal change and adaptation, and the leadership role which universities must play externally.

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