

UNESCO AND THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to Open the 10th Regional Conference of National Commissions for UNESCO in Asia and the Pacific, 30 November 1992, Parliament House, Canberra.

Australia takes great pleasure in hosting the 10th Regional Conference of National Commissions for UNESCO in Asia and the Pacific. In taking on this role we have followed the Chinese National Commission which was host to the previous Regional Conference in Beijing in September 1988. The recommendations which flowed from that Conference have effectively guided the work of National Commissions in the region since then and we hope that this meeting will prove to be equally productive.

We welcome your attendance most warmly, Mr Director-General, as we do the presence of the representatives of National Commissions not only from the Asia Pacific, but also from other regions. I am sure that we all recognise the leading role UNESCO has played in tackling issues such as illiteracy, raising awareness of environmental problems, and conservation of heritage sites. It has provided intellectual leadership in promoting programs on functional literacy, man and the biosphere, and the World Decade for Cultural Development.

By its very nature, the work of UNESCO captures the imagination. For someone like myself who has travelled widely, particularly throughout this culturally rich and diverse region of ours in the Asia Pacific, it is impossible not to be struck by UNESCO's achievements. I am talking here of UNESCO's achievements in their broadest sense - not just of conservation triumphs such as Borobodur, which are perhaps its best known activity. Equally, when I speak of the future potential for UNESCO's work in the region, I am not only thinking of the preservation of rainforests or of Angkor Wat or Old Hanoi - important as these are. I am also thinking of the wider scope for UNESCO to ensure that the dynamic economic and technological development which characterises this region is matched by the general social and educational advancement of the peoples of the region, not at the expense of their many unique cultures but building upon them.

There can be little doubt that UNESCO faces considerable challenges in this last decade of the century. In facing up to those challenges, UNESCO will need the support of National Commissions. At the most recent Executive Board Session, you spoke, Mr Director-General, of the good fortune of UNESCO in being able to rely on the network of National Commissions which are set up in most of the member states. You said, quite correctly, that they provide a framework within which the more enterprising sections of

the intellectual community can come together and express themselves at the national level.

One could take your statement one step further and say that the network of National Commissions in many ways constitutes the life blood of the organisation. Certainly properly functioning National Commissions are crucial to UNESCO's effectiveness. They form a vital link in providing the organisation with the necessary information to allow considered judgements to be made about program priorities and objectives. They also bring together representatives from a cross-section of the national community in a spirit of co-operation and innovation to promote the aims of UNESCO and to play an important part in the implementation of its programs.

Mr Director-General, you have intimated that you envisage a stronger role for National Commissions and that this will be reflected in the Draft Program and Budget for 1994-95. We would encourage this, but at the same time sound a note of caution. The capacity of the network of National Commissions to function effectively will depend very much on the ability of UNESCO to respond. When National Commissions speak, they want to be certain they are heeded. The Commissions will only be strong when they are convinced that their work contributes effectively to the objectives of the organisation.

We are conscious of the fact that the Asia Pacific region is one where countries such as China, Japan, India, Indonesia and ourselves have well-developed National Commissions with extensive domestic and regional links. On the other hand, we have smaller Pacific countries and some newer UNESCO members which have not yet been able to set up National Commissions. We see an important need for UNESCO to assist this latter group as much as possible to develop a network of National Commissions. We in Australia would wish generally to see the strengthening of the connections between the National Commissions, UNESCO in Paris, and UNESCO field offices. If these three elements interact harmoniously and productively then the organisation and member states will be the beneficiaries.

Mr Director-General, we noted with interest the comments you made at the last Session of the Executive Board concerning the "mission" of UNESCO. You spoke of a revitalised UNESCO in an era where previous landmarks are fast disappearing and where it was essential to consider the future role of the organisation within the context of reforms to the entire UN system. We were encouraged by your statements, which occurred against the background of what you will be well aware is a widespread view in recent years that UNESCO had rather lost its way. We all have to recognise and acknowledge that with the complexity and pace of change of world events, the increased demands and conflicting priorities imposed on the organisation, and the loss of financial support it was inevitable that the path for UNESCO to follow became very much less clear.

We sense that UNESCO is now making a concerted attempt to reassess its objectives.

There is a recognition by the organisation and by many member states that the serious trade and economic deficits in many developing countries have had very grave consequences for education at all levels, for transfer of scientific and technical knowledge, and for absorbing the rapid advances in fields like informatics and telecommunications.

In the aftermath of UNCED, there are important issues of environment and development which require the involvement of UNESCO. In such areas as tropical forests, water resources, desertification and biodiversity, there are challenges for UNESCO to develop effective environmental education programs and to feed in the expertise it has built up in its scientific programs such as oceanography, hydrology, geology and Man and the Biosphere.

But if UNESCO is to contribute effectively to the attack on these problems, it must set its goals out clearly, define its priorities within the core programs of education, science and technology, culture and communications, evaluate how best to develop programs that match priorities, and be prepared to operate principally as a facilitator of projects and not as a provider. We believe that, in the past, UNESCO has taken on an agenda which was just too diverse, with the consequence that a vast number of program actions have been generated in a way which has prevented the organisation from more effectively tackling core priority issues such as the eradication of illiteracy.

We await, with keen interest, the 1994-95 Draft Program and Budget. We believe that you, as Director-General, sought and were provided with a clear mandate by the Executive Board to refocus activities on the priority programs, to reduce considerably the number of program actions and to improve the Draft document itself so that it would be more transparent. We have been encouraged to see the Executive Board focus on some of these thorny issues and to note what we believe is a general consensus that the Board must become more focused and more dynamic in addressing program priorities.

For each of us as member states there must be a willingness to work cooperatively in furthering the work of the Board. For program priorities to be successfully implemented there must be a readiness to accept the elimination of peripheral and non-core activities. In this regard, the most recent session of the Executive Board in October provided helpful guidance on program priorities and concentration. But the further refinement of this process requires UNESCO to have clearly defined objectives and performance evaluation criteria for each of the major program areas.

It also means that UNESCO has to operate within realistic financial parameters. All of us know that the organisation has been facing financial difficulties in recent years and the current 1992/93 biennium has been perhaps the most difficult. The arrears from previous

years and the non-payment of contributions by some members states in the current period mean that UNESCO has been struggling to carry out its programs. We would urge you as Director-General to take a hard-headed approach to this issue and to adjust expenditure to the current level of resources available to the organisation.

In summary, our hope for a revitalised UNESCO is to see an organisation that is distinctly leaner, focused on a discrete number of well-defined programs and activities, and able to provide predominantly "upstream" support which complements the work of other UN agencies. We envisage program actions which are precisely defined, have measurable objectives, planned outcomes and follow-up procedures that include critical evaluation.

In terms of the organisational structure we would encourage UNESCO to continue to put in place the management/staffing systems that have emanated from the recommendations of the Hammarskjold-Wilenski report. We see distinct benefits for UNESCO's work in having a more streamlined agency with an emphasis on maintaining a core group of professional and support staff and increased reliance on short-term contracts for other professionals to execute specific projects.

In what I have been saying I should not over-emphasize the distinction between UNESCO itself and its member states with their National Commissions. We need to bear in mind that member states, by their inertia or neglect, have allowed UNESCO to pursue directions with which we are not in agreement. It is true that the multilateral system has burgeoned since its establishment in 1945, often seeming to take on a life of its own. It is not true, however, that the reform of that system is beyond the capacity and energy of member states, provided they have the determination to succeed.

Let me say in closing that my remarks have been directed to seeing UNESCO play its rightful role in a revitalised UN system. Its efforts in providing training in basic science and technology has been valuable and should continue. The follow-up to the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All has been a major initiative of UNESCO and has been a spur to countries to devote more effort and resources to overcoming illiteracy: this has been extremely important, given the fact that one adult in four throughout the world still remains unable to read or write. The Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage has now completed 20 years of work. Its record of achievement has been substantial in linking together the conservation of nature and culture and we, in Australia, have welcomed and supported the work of the World Heritage Committee.

This is a noteworthy list which clearly shows what UNESCO is capable of doing. For our region I believe that a UNESCO which maintains a vigorous role across the kind of core programs that I have referred to will play an important part in providing the scientific and educational benefits that underpin modern economic development. A UNESCO which has

demonstrated that it is focused in its actions, is promoting relevant programs, and is on track in pursuing reform will provide sound and convincing reasons for countries like the United States and Britain to rejoin.

The agenda of this Conference gives scope for the participants to discuss in more detail a number of the issues which I have addressed today. I hope that there will be a vigorous and fruitful exchange of ideas which will be helpful in guiding the work of all of us in the region, and I have much pleasure in declaring the Conference open.

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