



Routledge Studies in Modern European History

THE BRANDT COMMISSION AND THE MULTINATIONALS

PLANETARY PERSPECTIVES

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ROUTLEDGE

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9 Cancún: From Utopia to Apology. The Opening towards a Neoliberal Global Market Order

Towards Cancún

After the presentation of *A Programme of Survival*, the commissioners, with the exception of Peter Peterson, who withdrew, continued to work with the aid of a heavily reduced secretariat, which relocated to The Hague.¹ Meeting there in May 1980, the commission worked on selling the report's case, with one eye fixed on the upcoming global summit, which the commission itself had proposed.

The previous chapter described the unfortunate timing of the report's publication during a global economic and political storm. Now the American presidential election campaign hindered work on the summit. However, the commissioners could continue to exploit their contacts. In industrialised countries, interest in the report at the highest political level was meagre, but the commission was gratified to see that a growing number of individuals and groups were organising workshops, courses, and seminars on it in many parts of the world. In a letter to his commissioners in December 1980, Willy Brandt told his colleagues that he'd been reliably informed that, despite earlier doubts, the summit would in fact take place. In June 1980 in Vienna, Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky together with Mexico's President Portillo had held a meeting with ten foreign ministers in preparation for a summit in Mexico.² Against the backdrop of the financial maelstrom in which Mexico found itself, Portillo wanted to get some positive attention and present himself as a spokesman for the South.

However, nothing went to plan. For a start, Brandt missed the Vienna event altogether. He had heard from Austria's foreign minister that the Algerian government was playing down the importance of the report and didn't want it headlining the summit. This may have been an exaggeration, but in any case, by the time confusion was diplomatically ironed out, it was too late. Brandt had re-arranged his schedule and was no longer available.³ The incident demonstrates how tense and suspicious the situation became as soon as discussion moved beyond the inner circles of NGO cheerleading, and the encouragement of individual members of the public, and into the lofty political circles that mattered most. In terms of sources of support for



Figure 9.1 The Brandt Commission meeting in the Hague on 18 May 1980 to reflect on the reactions to its first report. Front row from the left: Joe Morris, Prince Claus, the Netherland's minister of development Jan de Konig, Queen Beatrix, Willy Brandt, Edward Heath. Second row from the left: Abdlatif Al-Hamad, Khatija Ahmad, Haruki Mori, Ernest Stern (World Bank), Eduardo Frei, Rodrigo Botero, Jan Pronk, Shridath Ramphal, Layaki Yaker, Göran Ohlin, Olof Palme. Third row from the left: Mohammad Sadli (representing Adam Malik), Antoine Dakouré, Anthony Sampson, Amir Jamal, Lakshmi Jha, Gerhard Thiebach (staff).

Source: © Rijkvoorlichtingsdienst (RDV).

the NIEO, Algeria was, as we saw in Chapters 4 and 7, perhaps the most prominent and radical, and it was concerned that publicising the report would distract attention from the campaign for a new order, impacting it negatively just as the Paris talks had done in 1976 and 1977.⁴

However, Brandt's biggest problem was not the Third World's radical voices. Brandt still had general support and retained a strong negotiating position in the Third World. To the astonishment of its leaders, his problem was that he lacked support in Germany. Though they both represented the Social Democrat Party (SPD), the difference between Brandt and his successor as Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, was not only marked by a political and personal chasm, but also by one of style. Brandt was a visionary, convinced that politics engaged people when it was inspired by dreams and visions of a better world. He and Shridath Ramphal were in full agreement on that point as the previous

pages have argued several times. Politics involved communicating the message that change was possible and then getting people committed to your cause. Schmidt, on the other hand, styled himself as a rational realist. During the 1980 election campaign, he said, "If you have visions, you should see your doctor," and it was clear to whom he was alluding. The NIEO's economic demands inspired Brandt. In crucial respects, he could completely get behind them. This was where the two men diverged politically. Ever since the meeting in Rambouillet in 1975, Schmidt's goal had been to establish a new European economic system with himself and French President Giscard d'Estaing as its architects. He blamed the oil price shock for the economic crisis in the North and shared Kissinger's view that it was crucial to reject the NIEO. Schmidt and d'Estaing had both been ministers of finance and more or less simultaneously become leaders of their countries. They envisioned a European system operating independently of both the dollar empire and the NIEO. As we've already seen, when he was chancellor, Brandt and UK Prime Minister Edward Heath had designed a European system independent of the dollar, which had foreseen a deeper, more federal, more visionary, and more intrastate integration than the interstate solution Schmidt and d'Estaing were working on.

Another division between Brandt and Schmidt was their attitude to the Cold War. After 1970, Brandt had decisively contributed to détente, while around 1980, Schmidt became part of a development that re-escalated tensions. In 1976, the Soviet Union deployed a new generation of intermediate-range ballistic missiles, the SS-20s, which were capable of being launched almost anywhere from a mobile vehicle and which had a range that would have allowed them to reach most of Europe from within Soviet territory. In response, in 1979, NATO announced that it would begin to station American Pershing II ground-launched missiles in Western Europe. It was obvious that at least some Pershing missiles would be deployed in West Germany, and this triggered a heated debate within the country that divided the SPD. Brandt's left wing stood against Schmidt's right wing and refused to budge. The economic crisis triggered by the second oil price shock and the 1979 Volcker shock had reinforced division between left and right. Several stimulation packages led to growing state debts while unemployment remained high. Schmidt and d'Estaing designed a system imposing budgetary discipline and austerity to keep the European currencies tied closely together. The situation became even more complicated in May 1981 after François Mitterrand won the French presidential election with the promise of a generous Keynesian program, leaving Schmidt isolated but giving hope to the Left in both Germany and Europe.

The G7 summit in Venice in June 1980 more or less consigned the Brandt Report to the filing cabinet while showering it with vague compliments and promising nothing. Considering the report was only four months old, this was gross rudeness. The G7 in Ottawa in July the following year, still with Schmidt but with Reagan replacing Carter and Mitterrand replacing d'Estaing, maintained Venice's polite silence, even though only three months remained before the Cancún summit. The Ottawa summit host, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre

Trudeau, had envisaged using the meeting as a platform for the Brandt Report. After all, there were close ties between the commission and Trudeau. But he found himself isolated on the point. Brandt talked to Heath about the lack of interest among the leaders of the Western world, and Heath recalled that many opposition Members of Parliament had called for a proper debate on the report's proposals. But, he noted, "from the government of the day, there was a deafening silence."⁵ The G7's indifference did not reflect the strong reception of the report in global civil society.

There was a special session of the UN General Assembly in September 1980 to discuss the restructuring of financial institutions, but nothing useful came out of it. The South stood against the modifications that others wanted to make to the NIEO. There were also divisions within both the North and the South, but those in the South were more conspicuous. However, there was tension between OPEC countries, the LDCs, and the newly industrialised countries (NICs) such as South Korea, Taiwan, Mexico, and Brazil. Their common complaint was that a few rich countries wished to continue to control the Bretton Woods institutions and financial flows. They demanded a transfer of power to the UN's institutions. The OPEC regimes had seen their cash surplus erode over the past few months. When the LDCs asked to borrow more money to service their debts, the NICs were frightened their dynamic growth rates would be put at risk.⁶

At the end of May 1981, Brandt convened his commission in Berlin. The task was to generate publicity for the report and prepare for the Cancún summit, which was due to take place a few months later. The commissioners undertook media events, seminars, and conferences on the report, but those in power remained unmoved. The commissioners and other influential Third World leaders believed that Helmut Schmidt was alone in being able to convince Reagan and Thatcher of the report's importance, but Schmidt rejected the role. At a closed dinner during the commission's Berlin conference, the matter came to a head. In an after-dinner speech, he roundly criticised OPEC states for their pricing policy, the East for their arms deliveries to the South, and the South for not controlling their population growth. According to him, they were all responsible for the global situation and for imposing a profound economic crisis on the industrial North. The twenty-one commissioners attacked Schmidt, some with diplomatic reserve, others openly. Schmidt had behaved condescendingly and given the alarming impression of not recognising the gravity of the global situation. News of the speech and the commissioners' reaction to it immediately reached the press, who wasted no time in revealing the unvarnished truth.⁷

One might think that Brandt should have been present at a global summit on a report with his name on the front of it, but, because the G7 ignored him, he and his report were treated like stateless citizens in search of asylum. Reagan, Thatcher, Schmidt, and the most radical Third World leaders, such as the Algerian president, demonstrated a lack of interest in agitating for a debate on the report. In the circumstances, it was quite an achievement that

Brandt, Kreisky, Portillo, Ramphal, and their supporters managed to convene the summit at all. In any case, it failed to fulfil their hopes.

Early on, Schmidt's SDP/Liberal coalition government decided not to make any effort to get Brandt to Cancún. Germany was represented by the Liberal Party's Foreign Minister Dietrich Genscher because Schmidt had to stay home to undergo surgery to install a pacemaker. Because of the tension within the governing SDP party around the Pershing deployment issue, Genscher managed to appropriate a lot of power to his foreign policy department, and he gave Brandt's Report short shrift. Portillo offered Brandt a place on the Mexican delegation and a ride to Cancún in his presidential plane. But protocol couldn't cope with the irregularity, and neither could Brandt's self-respect. Of the commissioners, only Amir Jamal and Lakshmi Jha were present, as members of the Tanzanian and Indian delegations respectively. Gerhard Thiebach, in charge of the commission's office in The Hague, and James Quilligan were also present but couldn't get access to the meeting room.

Since Brandt was not there to represent the report, he and Shridath Ramphal wrote a five-page letter to national leaders. The pair urged them to enable the global round of negotiations to commence under the aegis of the UN. They demanded recognition of the need for urgent action through a global food program, as well as a global energy strategy; additional financial flows to developing countries; reforms allowing more Third World participation and influence within the World Bank and the IMF; and better-balanced world trade. Also, the Cancún meeting needed to increase efforts towards a higher public consciousness of the North/South issues. They referred to Cancún as a meeting of last resort. Cancún was not an end but a beginning, they concluded. The letter's focus was on the report's ambitions for 1985, while its goals for 2000 were less prominent.⁸

Cancún

At the beginning of August 1981, twenty-two foreign ministers met in Cancún to prepare the upcoming summit. It was the first such event to be held with representatives of both developed and developing countries. Before Cancún, leaders had only met in the UN. The goal of the developing countries was to re-open negotiations there since they'd lost momentum in 1977. The meeting would provide the pretext for a re-launch. However, this was not necessarily the United States' aim. Foreign Secretary Haig talked airily about shared commitments and shared responsibilities for a solution to the North-South issue. It became later clear that by shared he mainly meant more responsibility for the South. It was unclear where the other industrialised countries stood. While it spread general benevolence and optimism, the foreign minister meeting hid rather than laid bare diverging expectations of what the summit might be capable of. Haig talked about a new beginning to the North-South dialogue in a way that could have been interpreted whichever way you liked.

The key question was whether the crisis was viewed as a northern one that required a northern solution or a global one that required a North/South solution. The North/South solution would be a kind of Marshall Plan as suggested by the Brandt Report, i.e., northern recovery through industrialisation and economic expansion in the South, a kind of global Keynesianism in which the elimination of North/South obstacles to trade and investment would lead to recovery. An article in *The New York Times* a few days before the meeting hit the nail on the head: “The [Reagan] administration and its equally myopic predecessors [Ford’s and Carter’s] have not perceived the indissoluble link between economic recovery in the industrial North and promotion of growth in the developing South.” At the Ottawa G7 summit in July, Pierre Trudeau worked hard but in vain to get Reagan, Thatcher, and Schmidt onside. His message was that “the world economic crisis is North’s No. 1 foreign policy problem.”⁹

The Brandt Report’s approach departed from the idea of redistribution of wealth triggering new dynamics and taking the world out of the crisis. In Reagan’s oppositional view, wealth had to be created not divided, and the developing countries themselves had to take more responsibility for productivity and growth. Each country had to put its own house in order before a new era of growth could begin. Private initiatives were vital to developing trade and capital flows. Aid was only for the least developed countries. The report proposed reforming the Bretton Woods institutions, supplementing them with new ones, like the WDF, and making the United Nations the framework for negotiations. The United States wanted to maintain concentration of policy-making and negotiating in the World Bank and the IMF.

In a series of preparatory meetings, the United States refused to be bound by any formal commitments. Four themes were suggested for discussion: food, trade, energy, and finance. Despite dampened expectations, developing countries hoped to use Cancún to launch global negotiations within the UN.¹⁰ However, just a few days before the summit, Ronald Reagan sent a sobering message. In a speech, he asserted that the United States contributed more than any other country to the development of the Third World. He believed that the market economy supported by Bretton Woods institutions would satisfy any other needs they might have.

Cancún was a bustling seaside resort situated where the turquoise-blue Caribbean Sea meets the Mexican Gulf at the north-eastern tip of the Yucatan peninsula. In 1970, the area had few inhabitants, but before long, a rash of hotel construction had established the place as a tourist centre. Delegations from twenty-two countries met in the Sheraton Hotel (Algeria, Austria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Guyana, India, Ivory Coast, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tanzania, UK, United States, Venezuela, West Germany, and Yugoslavia). UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim was also present. He had received the Brandt Report’s first copy and he stood in for Brandt in Cancún. Reagan resisted the idea of travelling to Cancún but, with the United States as the country making

the largest donations, his participation was non-negotiable. Portillo visited the White House to convince him. Reagan capitulated on the condition that Cuba would not be represented.¹¹

Beyond Reagan, the other leaders included Thatcher, Mitterrand, China's premier Zhao, Indira Gandhi, Nyerere, and Trudeau. Delegations of not more than ten people accompanied each leader. The Sheraton was a sort of island that a massive security presence had sealed off from the rest of the tourist resort, and the meeting took place underground. Jacques Attali, an advisor to Mitterrand, described the room as a *salle-bunker, au sous-sol d'un hôtel-bunker au coeur d'un ville-bunker*. Cancún was the first summit with this kind of security measure. The leaders sat round a circular table accompanied by two advisors.¹² Commissioner Jha sat behind Indira Gandhi, and behind Nyerere sat Jamal. The media cabal was 2000-strong, attesting to the global interest in the report a year and a half after its delivery.



Figure 9.2 Heads of State and Government at the Cancún North-South Economic summit on the beach for a photo 23 October 1981. From the left front row Ronald Reagan (USA), Simeon Aké (Côte-d'Ivoire), Abdus Sattar (Bangladesh), Chadli Bendjedid (Algeria), Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FRG), Pierre Trudeau (Canada), Jose Lopez Portillo (Mexico), Prince Fahd (Saudi Arabia), Ramiro Saraiva Guerreiro (Brazil), Zhao Ziyang (China), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines). Back row: Sergej Kraigher (Yugoslavia), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Margaret Thatcher (UK), Zenko Suzuki (Japan), Forbes Burnham (Guyana), François Mitterrand (France), Indira Gandhi (India), Alhaji Shehu Shagari (Nigeria), Torbjörn Fälldin (Sweden), Luis Herrera Campins (Venezuela), Kurt Waldheim (UN). Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.



Figure 9.3 Cancún Sheraton Beach the meeting room. Ronald Reagan conferring with his treasury secretary Donald Regan. Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The morning session on 22nd October was formal with prepared official statements. Then the discussion began. There were some moments of tension, but the talks were mainly informal and fluid. Leaders talked and listened and addressed each other using first names. Additional to the group sessions were twenty to thirty-minute bilateral appointments. Reagan met with the heads of state of all the developing countries, and this attentiveness impressed them. The other G7 leaders held three or four such meetings each. Nyerere was particularly insistent on the need for a new world order with better terms of trade and credit conditions for the South in his discussion with Reagan. A few days before the meeting, Mitterrand had sent a letter to the co-chairs, Portillo and Trudeau, proposing a focus on two issues: the establishment of an energy affiliate to the World Bank and the opening of global negotiations before the end of the year. These were core demands of the developing countries.¹³ So representatives of the Left, both from the South and the North, had high hopes for Mitterrand, but in the end, he disappointed them by maintaining an astonishingly low profile.

After the summit, Jha sent an extensive report to Willy Brandt. He reported that the meeting had begun with Pierre Trudeau's election as co-chair. Trudeau substituted Austria's Bruno Kreisky who had been taken ill. There followed a series of brief "carefully prepared" statements by each participant, speaking in the alphabetical order of their country's name in Spanish. Each speaker endorsed the principles of interdependence and

mutuality of interests and spoke of a willingness (though occasionally with some reservations) to go ahead with the UN's global negotiations, for which, up to that point, there had been a failure to agree either agenda or procedure.¹⁴

The time pressure and the limited number of participants in Cancún (not to mention the fact that they had nominated themselves to be there) precluded meaningful decision-making. The summit was a meeting to discuss some critical global problems. There was strong support for a program that would step up food production, particularly in developing countries. Many emphasised the need for external financial backing. As opposed to speaking about cash transfers, Reagan lectured about "sending out teams of experienced men to concerned countries to identify the bottlenecks and the possibilities in each." Many statements endorsed the proposal for the establishment of an energy affiliate of the World Bank, though Reagan expressed a preference for keeping whatever new authority this affiliate would have within the World Bank itself. Representatives of the North spoke in favour of deploying greater private investment, which, according to Jha, did not meet with any "doctrinaire negation" from southern spokesmen. However, a need was expressed to recognise the problem that "private capital only goes to areas of low risk and high profitability." Discussion on finance covered a wide field. There was a general acceptance that while foreign private capital could play a valuable role, it could not substitute Official Development Assistance, even though such assistance was declining because of the economic crisis.

Third World speakers commented on approaches to financial and monetary issues expressing hopes about the imminent revival of global negotiations. There was agreement that the Bank and the IMF should retain operational autonomy. There was also agreement that global negotiations in the United Nations needed to discuss these issues further. The South interpreted this to mean that the Brandt Commission's World Development Fund would be on the table. The North interpreted it differently. Still, Jha was optimistic: "... [T]he issue can be resolved once the political will to get on with the negotiations and not just block them" is there. As Jha saw it, that was the message the speakers wished to give, and the one they would bring to the UN.

While Jha and the southern countries were investing their hopes in United Nations negotiations, most in the North were concentrating on private capital, the multinationals, and foreign direct investment. Jha seems to have put an unrealistically positive spin on things. Publicly, the leaders agreed that the fact that they had met to discuss global economic problems in itself was a step forward, which is standard diplomatic speak for "no real success."

While Trudeau was disappointed that there was no explicit agreement on how to proceed in the global negotiations, almost all the participants referred to the meeting as a success based on a genuine will to understand each other's positions. Reagan surprised the Third World leaders with what they read as his positive attitude towards them. He emphasised triumphantly that the meeting proved, in contrast to some people's expectations, that the

United States was not at all isolated. Mitterrand assumed parity with Reagan by describing the summit as a French-American duel in which he had achieved progress on both the energy affiliate idea and on restarting global negotiations. At the press conferences, the delegations addressed their domestic audiences and claimed success. Guyana's president appreciated that Reagan had listened to the southern leaders and that the concept of global negotiations had gained momentum.¹⁵ The truth was that the negotiations had lost momentum because there had been no agreement on what the term meant.

Most observers saw the results of Cancún as disappointing and lacking substance. The rejection of the proposal to institutionalise the summit was a bad sign.¹⁶ Political science and international economics professor Walter Goldstein summarised the meeting:

... the two-day debate was somewhat desultory and fragmented. A wide range of economic issues were raised, but none was effectively resolved. This suited the spokesmen of the North, who wanted to safeguard their market leadership against political attacks by self-appointed tribunes of the depressed masses. But it left the prime ministers and foreign secretaries of the LDCs frustrated and divided. They had secured a hearing for their criticism of a market system that was permanently skewed to favor the strong and wealthy, but they came away with no assurance that the distribution of resources would ever be changed.¹⁷

Reagan adopted Kissinger's approach of dilute and divide. The stage was foggy, but it was not from the gunpowder smoke of battle, because there was no battle. There was fog on the road they believed they were walking. Walter Goldstein, again:

The severity of the crisis facing the LDCs was generally recognized ... and it was agreed that something ought to be done. Unfortunately, no firm proposals were put forward and the conference adjourned *sine die*. It may prove to have been the last meeting of its kind. The richer countries are determined to hold future discussions in their home grounds — in the private chambers of the World Bank, OECD and OPEC, or in the specialists' sessions at GATT — leaving the UNCTAD nations free to wage "revolutionary warfare" in the windy, pointless debates in the UN.

The economic dimensions of the North-South crisis were accepted with little comment. No one raised the charge that the poverty of the South had been exaggerated, or that it had been created (as radical critics insist) by the inequitable, imperialist exploitation fostered by Western capitalism and by its most aggressive entrepreneurs, the multinational oil companies, banks and manufacturing corporations. Nor was the

counter-charge aired: that the political mismanagement of the national economies and the corruption of governments are the worst obstacles to development that the LDC regimes must overcome. The basic facts of the crisis were accepted without dispute.¹⁸

There were a few dissenting voices. The Brazilian delegation maintained that if Reagan had given the impression of a partial concession on the Bank and the Fund, he remained intractable on global negotiations. The general feeling was that Reagan had moved only slightly on key issues. Thatcher had been somewhat more positive about global negotiations, but Mitterrand had disappointed the South.

While the leaders described the summit as a success in general terms, the international press were more critical. The British media was mostly negative. The Guardian headlined with “Spirit of Cancun, merely a ghost.” *The Financial Times* wrote that the gathering was so inconclusive that even the participants seemed unsure of what they’d been part of. French journalists stated that the meeting ended without any clear commitments and argued that everything was uncertain because everything still depended on what Reagan would do.¹⁹

Overall, the press reports from Cancún were contradictory and inconclusive. There were too many critical issues and there had been too few recommendations to provide a comprehensive understanding. The focus was on the leading personalities, notably Reagan, as if his presidency was just a continuation of his acting career. On the world stage, he insisted enthusiastically and theatrically about “the magic of the marketplace” and the vigour of private enterprise to solve the world’s ills. Reagan was not interested in the idea of global negotiations and did not care what the term meant or about trying to understand it. Third World leaders believed that he had listened to them, but he hadn’t. He’d seduced his audience. Nations had to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, he argued. Indira Gandhi remarked that most people would be happy to have boots. The *Economist* was not alone in considering Cancún a cul-de-sac. The central conclusion was that the North was more concerned about generating wealth than repairing the inequalities of its distribution. The focus was on accelerating growth and expanding world trade. And on that subject, the South remained divided.²⁰

The discrepancy between the leaders’ estimations and those of the press provokes the question of whether the leaders were naïve or play-acting. In analysing a letter from Nyerere to Trudeau, Guia Migani, French decolonisation historian, leans towards the latter. She quotes Nyerere:

We did not go to Cancun expecting to change the world in two days, so our failure to do that is not an indication of what may or may not have been achieved. But despite the brave face we have been putting on it in public, I have grave doubts about whether we really made much headway at all. The American position possibly did move slightly — we shall know

for certain about that within the next few months. But the doubt is there; there was certainly not a clear yes from them on Global Negotiations, on increased assistance, on a World Bank energy affiliate and no indication at all that they are willing to discuss reform of the international financial institutions. We have to keep working on them. But is this really all that we can do?²¹

Nyerere concluded the letter by noting that it had been possible to organise the summit without the Soviet Union and argued that it should be possible to take some action without the United States. The Cancún conference was a grin-and-bear-it charade in which the South hoped for global negotiations and got nothing. Margaret Thatcher explained in a 20-minute face-to-face meeting with Yugoslavian President Kraigher that the phrase “global negotiations” meant very different things to different people. It was a piece of jargon. Thatcher was looking for “the widest measure of agreement on the meaning of the phrase” and from there, to “discern the most practical ways to make further progress.”²² But rather than being a step forward, the broad definition, in which global negotiations could mean everything and nothing, was an obstacle to progress. Thatcher’s handwritten notes from the meeting suggest that there was also a further attempt to slow down the process by calling the next talks “preparatory talks on global negotiations.”²³

Thatcher’s delegation summarised the first day in a telegram to London. The general debate was “on predictable lines, though speakers avoided confrontation. Algeria followed the traditional G77 approach in advocating structural change, while Brazil and India adopted a more moderate and practical approach. All speakers except Reagan supported global negotiations.” Reagan’s counter-suggestion was to hold preparatory talks about global negotiations outside of the UN General Assembly.²⁴

The verbal acrobatics involved in loading the concept of global negotiations with as much meaning — or non-meaning — as possible prevented the Third World leaders from articulating their actual problems. Also, the term “structural reform” invited a variety of definitions. For Algeria, it meant reform of the Bretton Woods institutions and the establishment of a World Development Fund. For the North, it was a euphemism for “structural adjustment” and austerity.

When Thatcher met Nyerere in Cancún, she asked how his negotiations with the IMF had gone. Nyerere answered that he had understood the austerity rationale that underlay the IMF package, but if he were to implement it, there would be riots in the streets of Dar-es-Salam. To suggest that a country like Tanzania, characterised by primary production, should devalue its currency by 50 or 60 percent was ridiculous, he said. Such a devaluation would prevent Tanzania from selling anything beyond raw materials and would radically increase its import costs. He did not expect the IMF to write him a blank cheque, but he could not accept such unrealistic conditions.²⁵ However, these sorts of problems were not on the agenda in Cancún. In a separate

20-minute entertainment featuring Thatcher, Mitterrand, and the German Foreign Minister Genscher, much of the discussion was purely social, but there was time to make an important point. The three European leaders agreed that it had been good that they had been relatively quiet during the debate because it had encouraged the developing countries to express their views. It was evident that the participants wanted to agree on an outcome “which would be acceptable to all or, at least, not embarrassing for them.” Thatcher said that it was clear that the developing countries wanted and needed more aid. However, their “constant effort ... to turn sound financial institutions into unsound ones” was not acceptable. Turning “sound financial institutions into unsound ones” alluded to the structural adjustment programs against the plan for World Development Fund.²⁶

The North/South movement had begun a new phase in 1974. The Brandt Commission had tried to contribute to its momentum, but Cancún, the occasion that was meant to have seen the fulfilment of the dynamics by giving it an institutional framework, was the occasion that buried it. The election of Thatcher in 1979 and Reagan in 1980 signalled a radically new approach to debts, development aid, public welfare, unemployment, and the North/South gap. Reagan and Thatcher explicitly turned their backs on basic Keynesian principles. Cancún was a forum of world leaders covered by a vast media army that prompted worldwide public attention, and in which the new American president was the principal actor, this time on the world stage. It was a great show. Many did not realise what had happened, but almost everyone realised that something had. Stage smoke is not usually an indication of clarity and transparency. However, looking back at Cancún, it is clear that Keynesianism died there, and, in its place, neoliberalism was born, though it would have to wait a decade to be named. It was a birth clouded in smoke, but it was a birth. It was not the shift from the one to the other ideology and discourse, because there was no such single point, but it was a decisive milestone in a long transformation with deep implications for the global North/South relationships. Cancún was the systematic rejection of the NIEO and the Brandt Report. The context of the rejection was the first global summit that assembled leaders from both the North and the South, the summit requested by the Brandt Commission to implement and carry forth its proposal. The summit became the birth of global Reaganomics.

There is no little irony in this conclusion, both in terms of the breakthrough and its obscurity. Cancún was the summit for which the Brandt Commission had eagerly longed. The commission had envisaged an event in which their proposals for a kind of global Keynesianism would have been laid out, prior to kickstarting political implementation. Willy Brandt would be the protagonist garnering all the praise. Instead, G7 leaders accepted the idea of the meeting but were intractable in their refusal to allow Brandt to participate. The Brandt Report can be seen as a plea for the role of negotiator to be assumed by the United Nations rather than the Western-biased

Bretton Woods institutions. In response, the United Nations had sent a Secretary General with almost no idea of what the summit was about. It would have been a small gesture on the UN's part to let Brandt represent it, or to allow him equal billing with Waldheim in its delegation. But it made no such gesture. The summit was a diplomatic insult to Brandt and his commissioners. In Germany, it was seen as a personal affront to the ex-Chancellor. Everything had been orchestrated in Washington and silently approved in Bonn.

It was as if the early years of Willy Brandt's political career had caught up with him. The contempt he had faced in a philistine homeland was renewed now on the world stage. Certainly, Brandt enjoyed strong support from the Third World, although mixed with scepticism. However, the wave of support for the NIEO had abated and the term "Third World" had begun to lose its meaning, Third World support could no longer be regarded as political hard currency. Mitterrand still believed or wanted people to think that he represented an alternative to the United States and arrived in Cancún garlanded with the expectations of a hopeful Left. But when the meeting was over, he stood as a symbol of the Left's disappointment.

There was no big political and ideological struggle when the milestone on the road from Keynesianism to neoliberalism was passed. In terms of global opinion, there had been an insidious decline in support for Keynesianism and a commensurate rise in support for radical market-liberal ideas for quite some time, but, in retrospect, Cancún symbolised the shift. Reagan was the chief director and actor. In fact, the show had begun a couple of weeks before the summit. At the beginning of October, Reagan refused a courtesy visit from Brandt, who was visiting Washington for a conference on "Eurosocijalism and America." By refusing to see him, Reagan showed how uninterested he was in Cancún, though by that stage, at least he had promised to participate. From the beginning, the summit looked set to fail. The 2000-strong media circus, which was there largely because of the public's interest in the Brandt Commission, only realised how inauspicious things were after the meeting ended.

Cancún was Reagan's first world summit and became in retrospect a symbol, or, better, a manifestation of the road to "structural adjustment" austerity that the World Bank and the IMF launched in 1981 and which from the end of the 1980s was called the Washington Consensus. It heralded market opening in the South instead of the North, pretending that as partners, the North and South were equal, and it unfettered the financial markets, loading them with energy and preparing the way for the next big bubble. Reaganomics comprised trickle-down propaganda and monetarism. Later it became financial *laissez-faire*.

Reagan made his view clear in Cancún. He emphasised how the world could not solve hunger and poverty overnight, and that massive transfers of wealth do not automatically produce well-being. The summit swept Brandt's proposal away. Reagan offered a future of prosperity and human fulfilment lit by

ideas of economic freedom and the incentivised individual. The president proposed a plan composed of trade liberalisation, the development of energy and food resources, and an improved climate for private capital investment.²⁷ In a letter to Shridath Ramphal after the meeting, Reagan asserted that Cancún “was an extremely constructive and positive” experience. However, he took a swipe at the idea of restarting global negotiations when he stated that too much time had already been wasted on words and conferences. There was a need to return to the practical issues and the institutions where real progress had been achieved and could be further accelerated. He had the World Bank, the IMF, and the GATT in mind. Reagan concluded:

I am convinced that our approach to development must emphasize two efforts — the effort to revive world growth and expand open trade, investment and financial relations, and the effort to provide co-operative assistance to achieve self-sustaining growth in the poor countries, particularly in food and energy.²⁸

Reagan assured the end of the NIEO. Noting that the Carter government had “overspent, overtaxed, and overregulated,” he emphasised that international organisations doing the same thing were equally wrong, and he opposed the establishment of some gigantic new international bureaucracy. The only institutions worth praising were the IMF and the World Bank in its post-McNamara era of fiscal conservatism. From Reagan’s radical market liberal perspective, development connoted economic freedom, private investment, and the liberalisation of global change. Reagan’s defiance was the backdrop against which, after Cancún, the Brandt Commission decided to take up the gauntlet and continue its work by writing another report in defence of its proposals.²⁹

Report 2: Common crisis

In May 1980, when the commission met in The Hague to reflect on the report’s dissemination, four thousand people came together to listen to the commissioners. The meeting took place at the time of the general euphoria that Brandt, Heath, and Ramphal enjoyed and were partly responsible for, as we saw in the previous chapter. One year later, in the same triumphant spirit, there was a public presentation and much debate at the Technical University of Berlin. Through this period, the commission’s main aim was to prepare for Cancún in October.

In January 1982, the commissioners met in Kuwait to discuss what had happened in Cancún. Only two commissioners had participated and there was general agreement that the summit had been a disappointment and that the commission should become a lot better at lobbying for and promoting its ideas and its proposal. They concluded that, by the end of the year, they should publish a brief, second report of perhaps sixty to seventy pages. They

called it a memorandum. Besides the disappointment over Cancún, the economic crisis, which had grown worse since the summit, underpinned their decision. The meeting established an editorial group that would work in London under Heath and Ramphal and stay in close touch with Brandt. The memorandum would complete the work in *A Programme for Survival*. Robert Cassen became the principal author and was assisted by Anthony Sampson. Work on the drafting was undertaken in a meeting in Brussels in September and another in Ottawa in December. The report was brief. The visionary horizon 2000 was gone and a text that everybody could agree on could be adopted after less than a year in Ottawa. The commission duly published its second report in February 1983 under the name *Common Crisis*²⁹.

A year after Cancún, the radical market liberal ideas that hovered over summit became more potent. They forced the commission to retreat from its bold vision aimed at 2000 to a defence of its emergency program aimed at 1985. At the same time, the language shifted from utopian to apologetic. The titles of the reports, *A Programme for Survival* and *Common Crisis*, reflected the change. Three years after the publication of the first report, the global economy's prospects were even darker. The colour of the cover of *Common Crisis* was black: black for death and mourning. The cover of *A Programme for Survival* was red: red for action. It is unclear whether there had been any conscious thought behind the choices, but the reader could not avoid seeing



Figure 9.4 The Brandt Commission met in Kuwait in January 1982 and decided to proceed towards a second report. ARAB, Stockholm.



Figure 9.5 Crossing the finish line the second time with a laughter. Shridath Ramphal and Willy Brandt in Ottawa in December 1981 after the adoption of the text for Report 2.

Source: © James Quilligan.

the difference. Report 2 was a plaintive apology dressed in black, a warning of the apocalypse that would follow a failure to activate the emergency program. It sat in stark contrast to Report 1's confident, relaxed argument aimed at 2000. The reports represented a shift from optimism to pessimism, from attack to defence. The commission predicted that the international recession, that had begun in 1980, could deepen into a depression with mass unemployment in the North and the threat of economic collapse in parts of the South. The dangers to the world's financial system were acute, and there was an immediate risk of growing disruption to international trade. As in *A Programme for Survival, Common Crisis* contained an introduction by Brandt. He repeated the mantra of the first report, that change is inevitable, and he asked whether the global community would take "deliberate and decisive steps to bring it about." If it didn't, change would force itself upon the world through circumstances over which the international community would have little control.³⁰ Never before had the survival of humankind itself been at stake, and never had it been capable of destroying itself in the way that it was now. Everybody knew how the crisis of the 1930s had ended. It had only happened a generation earlier. So, everybody should understand the present danger threatened by the current economic turmoil.

Brandt's use of almost religious vocabulary in his plea to convert to the faith before time ran out should be seen in contrast to the confidence with which the radical market liberals used their new language of structural adjustment, market governance through civic networks (instead of through corrupt state hierarchies), and in the way the social dimension had been squeezed out of the concept of reform (see Chapter 5). The radical market liberal language relocated responsibility from the state to the individual. Equality meant giving equal chances, not promising equal outcomes. The fact that everyone started from a different place in their scramble for individual self-realisation was no longer important. The radical market liberals represented the future. The Keynesian language about equality for everyone by 2000 no longer galvanised people, and it was the radical market liberal language that enforced the retreat. *Common Crisis* featured a plea for the World Development Fund and international taxes, but it was more a nod to the fact that the time had not yet come for the cherished idea than a strongly renewed argument for its immediate implementation. The commission was retreating from its vision of 2000 to a 1985 line of defence.

The proposals in *Common Crisis* were directed towards "creating conditions leading to world economic recovery" in order to avert global economic collapse and "subsequent chaos and human suffering." The report wanted to restore confidence in the banking system and prevent strangulation of global trade through protectionism. It argued that increased resources be given to the IMF through a significant new allocation of special drawing rights and that IMF quotas should be doubled, at least. The World Bank's overall resources for both program and project lending, including lending for structural adjustment, also needed a boost. The 0.7 percent figure established in 1970 (that 0.7 percent of the incomes of rich countries should be redirected in the form of aid to low-income countries) needed urgent implementation. The official debts of all the least developed countries should be waived. Informal coordination between the IMF, the World Bank, other official lenders, and the commercial banks was essential in negotiating debt rescheduling. The commodity fund for stabilising the prices of raw materials should be ratified. New international commodity agreements should be urgently negotiated. Under the aegis of the World Bank, a new energy agency, which would increase energy self-reliance in developing countries, was needed. Increased food aid was crucial, too, as long as it didn't disincentivise Third World food production.³¹

The negotiation process between the North and the South had become an obstacle to progress and needed improvement. Organisational aspects and procedures needed reform, as did some attitudes in both North and South. Within the UN, there had to be a readiness to negotiate in small groups and on single issues, and more determined leadership by like-minded countries. Then a new global round of negotiations might bear fruit. Another North/South summit, if properly prepared, should provide further impetus for the talks.

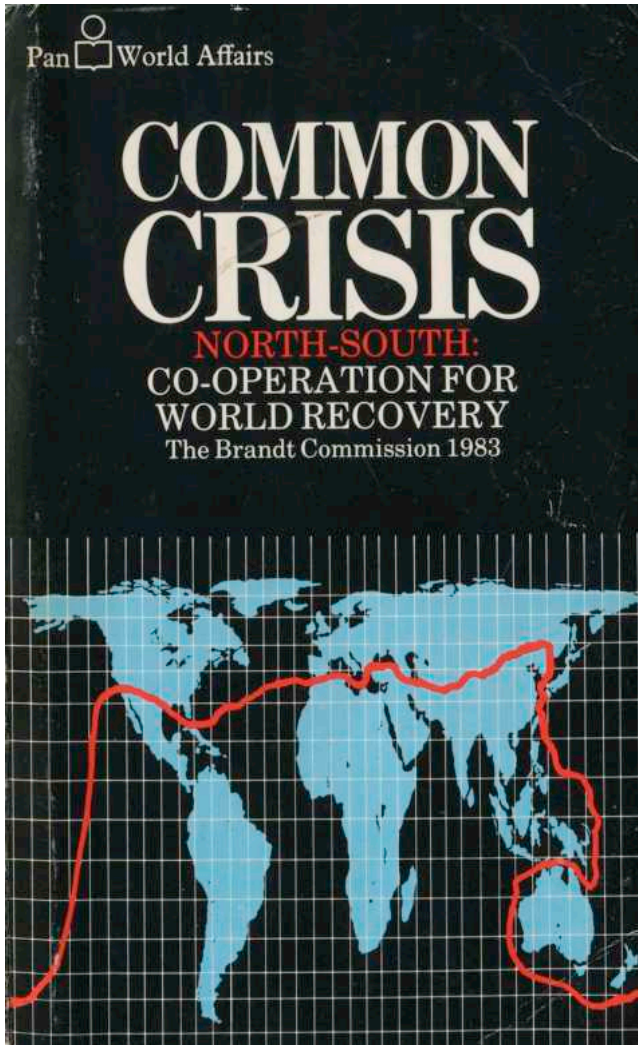


Figure 9.6 Apology in black. Cover from Pan Books.

The commission commented on global reactions to the preceding four consecutive years of stagnation and crisis. The great majority of countries were deliberately restraining economic activity, while trying to limit imports and expand exports. This development was to the detriment of all, the commission said. Industrial countries aimed to get inflation under control. Many had attacked the problem by placing too much emphasis on monetary control and implementing fiscal policies that were counterproductive and had resulted in heavy unemployment “and all the

symptoms of economic decay.” To avoid currency outflows and depreciation of exchange rates, countries were maintaining higher interest rates than they would have wished in response to those in the United States (see the Volcker shock, Chapter 5). Industrial economies spread their troubles to developing countries. High oil prices in the North had led to payment deficits, and the North’s uncoordinated policy response increased the adjustment burden of the oil-importing developing countries.³²

The first thirty pages set the tone of *Common Crisis* by analysing a global economic crisis that united the North and the South in a vicious circle. Since the problem entangled North with South, the message was that the solution also had to be coordinated by both. Against the backdrop of a deep global economic crisis, the commission’s analysis came to concentrate on the immediate situation and its reaction to it. 1985 was now only two years away. The threats had become ever more present while the idea of 2000 seemed to have lost both clarity and relevance.

From utopia to apology

Nobody supported Willy Brandt’s idea that politics needs to build on visions more than Shridath Ramphal as we have seen. In 1979, Ramphal published *One World to Share* – over 400 pages of speeches that he’d made since 1975, with an introduction by Barbara Ward. His utopia was characterised by equality brought about by making real the NIEO. An understanding of mutual interests shared by both North and South was crucial for this new world, he argued. He was convincing and he provided hope that profound common human interests could be actualised. Ramphal’s message was that humankind is either moving towards increasingly responsible planetary institutions or to catastrophe.³³ But the movement towards utopia lost most of its momentum after Cancún. Meanwhile, a new utopia was generating movement in new directions.

Utopia literally means nowhere, the land that does not exist. It has an unreal, dream-like, imaginary dimension. On the other hand, a utopia can be real to the extent that people believe in it. The utopia of an international order based on collective coordinated and converging planetary interests did not ignore the contextual, contentious, and contradictory nature of existing attempts to define state interests at the national level, to say nothing of previous attempts to define global orders or systems. However, Ramphal’s utopian argument envisioned a way to overcome all contradictions and difficulties. Utopia demanded a legal framework that guaranteed an ordered world and allowed for progress through economic growth. On that basis, utopia was a world of justice, order, and stability.³⁴

Ramphal's utopia and Brandt's vision were, as we argued several times on the previous pages, identical concepts. Brandt reflected in retrospect on his lost vision:

Were we simply talking to the air? Had we miscalculated the chances of having our proposals put into practice, or had we failed to take adequate account of certain factors such as population explosion? However that may be, North-South relations did not improve, they actually deteriorated in the eighties. Our thesis of growing mutual dependency did not hold good. Statistically speaking, the mutual economic involvement of industrial and developing countries has not increased; on the contrary, the two sides have moved even further apart, and it appears that fewer countries are really "developing" at all.³⁵

Successful utopias hint at ways to make them real, though there will always be a sense in which they're unachievable. If one strives too hard for utopia, the whole idea can collapse. Undersell the idea, and it suddenly seems mealy-mouthed and unconvincing. The failure of neoliberalism, as seen in the speculation bubble of 2008, is an example of striving too hard and collapsing. The insidious decline of Keynesianism epitomises the mealy-mouthed, unconvincing undersell. The NIEO's switch from imagining utopia to apologising for it was the development of which Shridath Ramphal repeatedly warned.

The second report's defence became apologetic, falling back from the vision of 2000 to the acute emergency of 1985. It defended its emergency program, couching its proposal in less utopian terms, having by force adjusted to the new global reality in which Reagan and Friedman were the protagonists.³⁶ The Brandt vision disappeared in the shadow of the new, mobilising, radical market vision, which, a quarter of a century later, realised its human-made destiny in a giant speculation bubble that precluded apology.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Jan Pronk, 19 November 2020.
- 2 Letter from Willy Brandt to the commissioners 15 December 1980. FES- SPD-PV-Nord-Süd-Komm 51.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Prashad, *The Poorer Nations*, 81.
- 5 Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 611.
- 6 Walter Goldstein, "Redistributing the World's Wealth: Cancun 'summit' discord," *Resources Policy* 8, no. 1 (1982): 28–29.
- 7 Several newspapers in West Germany and beyond reported on the dinner from the same angle. See, for instance, "Nord-Süd-Kommission in Berlin. Ärger nach einer Kanzler-Rede," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 June 1981.
- 8 Letter, 11 September, 1981. FES. SPD.PV-Nord-Süd-Komm 51.
- 9 Ronald E. Muller and Arthur L. Domike, "Cancun's Meaning," *The New York Times*, 18 October 1981; Interview James Quilligan 26 December 2020.

- 10 Carl Geldart and Peter Lyon, "North-South Monitor," *Third World Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1982): 17.
- 11 Jean-Phillipe Thérien, "The Brandt Commission: The end of an era in North-South politics," in *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas*, ed. Ramesh Thakur, Andrew F. Cooper and John English (Tokyo and New York: United Nations University Press, 2005), 38–39.
- 12 Guia Migani, "The road to Cancun. The life and death of a North-South summit," in *International Summitry and Global Governance: The Rise of G7 and the European Council, 1974–1991*, ed. Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol and Federico Romero (London: Routledge, 2014), 174–197.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 182–184.
- 14 Undated letter Jha to Brandt, received 27 November 1981. FES. SPD-PV-Nord-Süd-Komm 51.
- 15 Migani, "The road to Cancun," 187–191.
- 16 Thérien, "The Brandt Commission," 39.
- 17 Goldstein, "Redistributing the World's Wealth," 25.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 19 Migani, "The road to Cancun," 189.
- 20 Goldstein, "Redistributing the World's Wealth," 39.
- 21 Letter from Nyerere to Trudeau, 3 November 1981. Quoted in Migani, "The road to Cancun," 189.
- 22 Record of a conversation between the UK prime minister and the president of Yugoslavia between 4pm and 4:20pm, 22 October. Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/PREM_19/699_f_132. Retrieved 21 Dec 2020.
- 23 Margret Thatcher's handwritten notes from Cancún. Thatcher Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/PREM_19/699_f_137. Retrieved 21 Dec 2020.
- 24 Telegram from the Cancun delegation desk by 230830Z no. 30, 23 October 1981. Thatcher Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/PREM_19/699_f_103. Retrieved 21 December 2020.
- 25 Record of a conversation between the UK prime minister, President Mitterrand and Foreign Minister Genscher 23 October, between 4:40pm and 4:50. Thatcher Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/PREM_19/699_f_108. Retrieved 21 December 2020.
- 26 Thatcher Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/PREM_19/699_f_106. Retrieved 21 December 2020.
- 27 Prashad, *The Poorer Nations*, 79.
- 28 Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin, 2012), 360.
- 29 The Brandt Commission, *Common Crisis. North/South: Cooperation for World Recovery* (London: Pan Books, 1983).
- 30 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 13–16.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 16–18.
- 33 Barbara Ward, "Introduction," in Shridath Ramphal, *One World to Share: Selected Speeches* (London: Hutchinson Benham, 1979). xi–xxvii. Ramphal continued his work on utopia after serving on the Brandt Commission and published a follow-up: Shridath Ramphal, *Our Country, The Planet: Forging a Partnership for Survival* (London: Lime Tree, 1992), dedicated to the memory of Barbara Ward with a Foreword by Willy Brandt.
- 34 Generally, about utopias in Bo Stråth, *Europe's Utopias of Peace 1815, 1919, 1951* (London: Bloomsbury 2016), pp. 1–22. The understanding of utopia there

builds on, Martti Koskenniemi's pioneering book on international law, *From Apology to Utopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). The utopia in international law, as international lawyers outlined it from the 1870s on, was the belief that legal provisions can settle all future conflicts; that law is unambiguous, clear, and applicable to all cases. This condition proved not be the case when one party referred to a conflict as self-defence and another as aggression. This triggered the equivocal and apologetic language characteristic of attempts to refer to the law from both positions.

- 35 Brandt, Willy. *My Life in Politics*. Translated by Anthea Bell. (London: Hamish Hamilton), 1992, 350.
 36 Ramphal, *Glimpses of a Global Life*, 318–319.

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