



*Routledge Studies in Modern European History*

# **THE BRANDT COMMISSION AND THE MULTINATIONALS**

## **PLANETARY PERSPECTIVES**

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ROUTLEDGE

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Commission played an essential role in facilitating informal exchanges between defensively oriented western researchers and Warsaw Pact civilian analysts, for instance and most notably Georgy Arbatov.

In chapter 6 of the report, the commission listed a catalogue of forty-four measures that it proposed should be taken. Of these, thirty-six dealt with arms limitation and disarmament, of which twenty demanded change within two years and sixteen were medium-term measures that aimed at change within five years. The report put forward a belief that talks and agreement through mutual understanding were the key to arms limitation and eventual disarmament. In fact, there were proposals for thirty-two new talks, of which four would be between the superpowers, twenty-four were East/West oriented, and five dealt with the North/South problem. The Palme Report proposed creating a nuclear-free zone either side of Europe's Iron Curtain along with regional security zones and peace zones maintained through negotiation in regional conferences.

In a debate with the commission's secretary Anders Ferm, the peace researcher Johan Galtung complained that efforts to establish peace were being hindered by an emphasis on consensus achieved through diplomatic negotiations and the idea of common security. The peace movement, he argued, should receive more attention and, without its input, prospects for peace were diminished. To achieve real change, he preferred activists putting unilateral pressure on government over multilateral diplomatic "talks" in the mould of the Palme Commission.<sup>7</sup> Both Galtung and Ferm agreed that the Palme Report had not received the attention and debate it deserved. It sought a place of moderation and negotiation in the debate between the peace activists and the superpowers (with their deteriorating relationship), but no place was available. However, a few years after the report, the chance for détente emerged when Gorbachev entered the stage during Reagan's second term as president. After 1990, there were two giddy decades of euphoria about the neoliberal market and the "end of history" narrative. The problem of nuclear proliferation disappeared from the scene, but since the 2010s, the issue has reemerged in the form of a multipolar world full of competing powers, which are, again, thinking in terms of interest spheres. Yes, even millenarist thoughts that guided the way towards World War II are recurring and a full-scale war haunts Europe with threats of the use of nuclear weapons. The Palme Commission's idea about the necessity of building trust as a basis for disarmament has become more urgent than ever.

### **The Brundtland Commission**

In 1982, Mostafa Tolba, Egyptian microbiologist and executive director of the UN Environment Program, asked Norwegian ex-Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland whether she would chair a new commission. The United Nations had shortlisted her alongside Edward Heath and Jimmy Carter, who had recently handed over the presidency to Ronald Reagan after one term in office. Brundtland had left office in 1981 and completed her work for the Palme Commission in April 1982. She accepted the task of running the

new commission when Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar offered it to her in December 1983.

The World Commission on Environment and Development had twenty-one members. Shridath Ramphal was the only one from the Brandt Commission. There were twelve from the “Third World” (a decreasingly used concept), six from the industrial North, and three members from Eastern Europe. As usual, members were politicians, scientists, and high ranking international civil servants. Among them were Canadian Maurice Strong, first executive director of the UN Environment Programme and organiser of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972; Ma Shijun, Chinese ecological pioneer; Bernard Chidzero, Zimbabwean finance minister, economist, writer, and holder of various United Nations and later World Bank positions; Susanna Agnelli, Italian parliamentarian, member of the UN Human Rights Commission and granddaughter of Giovanni Agnelli, the founder of FIAT; Hungarian biologist Istvan Lang; Russian zoologist Vladimir Sokolov; Emil Salim, Indonesian development economist and Minister of Environment; and Nagendra Singh, Indian lawyer working in the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Jim MacNeill, Canadian environmentalist and Director of Environment at OECD became the commission’s secretary-general at its secretariat in Geneva and the lead author of its report.

In her foreword to the landmark report *Our Common Future* (1987), Brundtland referred to its connection to the Brandt and Palme Commissions and their reports’ titles. After *Common Crisis* and *Common Security* came *Our Common Future*. She emphasised the intertwined relationship between environment and development.<sup>8</sup> The opening aphorism – the earth is one, but the world is not – reflected Ramphal’s thinking and vocabulary.

However, the connection was strongest to Brandt’s first report, *A Programme for Survival*. There were undoubtedly links to his second report, *Common Crisis*, especially about what would happen if no action was taken. However, the tone of *Our Common Future*, which continuously referred to the concept of sustainability, was of promise and hope, not of the apocalypse. It promoted a vision in which the needs of the North and the South could be reconciled. *The Limits to Growth*, the Club of Rome’s report in 1972, was more outspoken planetarily in the way it played down the distinction between the North and South, the rich and poor. But in *Our Common Future*, the search for a shared destiny, and how to manage the reconciliation of economic development and environmental protection, was based on these divisions. The Club of Rome’s report focused on the limits rather than the possibility of growth.

The Brundtland Commission had its roots in the debate of the early 1970s. It continued and reformulated the discussion that *The Limits to Growth* and the UN conference in 1972 had provoked. No doubt also influencing it were the RIO Report and, of course, the Brandt Report’s discussion of the environmental and climate problems arising from development.

Of those that came after Brandt, Brundtland's Commission, along with Palme's, had the most substantial connection to the set of problems facing the world in the 1970s, first formulated by the NIEO and the Club of Rome debate that had outlined the link between development and the environment. The Brundtland Commission's perspective was genuinely planetary. Its report's introductory chapter, titled "From One Earth to One World," described the earth as a planet in the universe and the world as a human settlement. The following three parts dealt with *Common Concerns*, *Common Challenges*, and *Common Endeavors*. Respectively, they dealt with threats to the future and how to combat them through the international economy and sustainable development, challenges faced by the extraction of natural resources, and how to combine the environment and development by triggering joint endeavours to shape the future.

Sustainable development was the Brundtland Report's cornerstone. It promoted "the greening of international relations," according to MacNeill, and brought environmental problems to the top of the political agenda.<sup>9</sup> The commission's branding of sustainability and the sustainable environment made a lasting impact on the environmental debate. More than particular proposals and ideas in the report, the conceptualisation of the sustainable environment was its lasting legacy. Market-liberal ideas had gained hegemonic power at the time the report was presented, but rather than clash with them, it circumvented them. It attracted the attention of the banks and the industry that were guided by the market-liberal agenda.

Pollution pricing was not one of the Brundtland Commission's proposals, but it emerged as a practical response under its influence. *Our Common Future* emphasised that sustainable development meant the North's patterns of consumption had to change and that it would be necessary to adopt lifestyles compatible with the planet's ecology. Sustainable development required painful choices.<sup>10</sup> However, as Heather Smith argues in a review of the Brundtland Report, "the radicalism was muted and bent to the will of the dominant pro-growth discourse." For better or worse, the concept of sustainable development became part of mainstream discourse. By indicating that the free market could resolve the problem of carbon emissions, the report blurred the line between sustainable development and sustainable economic growth.<sup>11</sup> Smith refers to Wolfgang Sachs, one of the most passionate critics of the Brundtland Report, who argued that sustainability became the bandage for the problem of development and that sustainable development had little to do with the environment. She quoted Sachs: "It is not the preservation of nature's dignity that is on the international agenda." Instead, the deleterious effect of human-centred utilitarianism will be bequeathed to posterity. Sachs criticised the sense of management that pervaded the sustainable development discourse and "the general inability to look at the broader structural causes of environmental degradation." Unwillingness to reconsider the logic of competitive production was at the root of the planet's ecological plight.<sup>12</sup>

In an extension of Sachs' argument, the trade of CO<sub>2</sub> derivatives emerged as a kind of green sale of indulgencies. Because of their capacity to store CO<sub>2</sub>, trees are the most recent product to appear in the greenwashing market emerging in the wake of the Brundtland Report. Today, campaigns for reforestation and climate justice urge us to "plant for the planet," to put billions of plants in the soil with little reflection on the problems of monoculture and the importance of biodiversity. Only the amount counts. Once again, economics suffocates ecology.

However, as Heather Smith also concludes, the fact that the commission produced no policies that resulted in fundamental change is no reason to write the Brundtland Report off as meaningless or toss it in the dustbin of history. Regardless of interpretation, the impact of the Brundtland Report was that it is one of the paradigmatic statements on ecological modernisation. The emergence of sustainable development marked a new era in the discourse on the planetary environment. Still, fifteen years after Smith made this evaluation, sustainable development remains what she appositely described as "a slippery, flexible and imprecise concept" that still has the power to draw in those looking to justify their approaches to environmental protection. There is power in the idea of sustainability, even if it is a case of "greenwashing."<sup>13</sup> The power comes from its flexibility. Its strength is also its weakness. The meaning of sustainability lacks precision and therefore has subsequently allowed many economic and political interest groups, not least global corporations, to brand various economic activities as sustainable when they're not. The debate even introduced a distinction between strong and soft sustainability. The concept became ever more watered down, eroding its serious intent.<sup>14</sup>

Sustainability killed the idea of limits that the Club of Rome had introduced. The Brandt Commission, too, had trouble seeing the conflict between resource limits and Keynesian growth. At any rate, it did not confront the contradiction. *Because* of its Keynesianism, it failed to embrace the global ecology it declared it wanted. The environment was a field in which Third Way social democracy easily became neoliberal thought using sustainability as a bridge.

### **UNCED 1992 and Agenda 21**<sup>15</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, or the Earth Summit) celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Stockholm conference and fired the starting pistol for the emissions trading scheme (or cap and trade (CAT)). CAT offered an alternative to governmental regulation and control of pollution. The "cap" is the politically agreed limit of emissions over an agreed period of time, given in permits to polluters who, in turn, can buy them for money ("trade") if they want to exceed their allotted emission levels. Emission trading was market-driven within a carbon budget, where economic incentives supplemented