

GUEST WORD

Robert F. Meagher*

THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY?

The years of rising expectations about world economic and social development, which were largely a result of the good will and financial support of the United States, have ended. The United States has now become hostile and petulant about certain limited challenges posed by a small number of poor countries. If former Ambassadors Scali and Moynihan are to be believed, we now live in an era of "The Tyranny of the Majority," and the poor of the world are pushing the United States around. This is a gross exaggeration. The United States remains the most independent power in an increasingly interdependent world. The wide gap between it and other countries, allies and antagonists, continues: the poor of the world play, at best, a minor role in the world power game.

That game has, however, seen the advent of a new group of players, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Some of the countries belonging to OPEC—notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iran—now have the capacity to create economic havoc in the developed countries of Western Europe and North America. To do so, of course, would not be in their national interests; they are politically conservative and have thrown in their lots with the NATO powers. Furthermore, they depend on those powers for imports of capital goods, technology, and food. Encouraged by certain NATO powers, these three nations also depend on the West for arms with which to fulfill a misguided dream of military superiority over their neighbors.

The OPEC countries are also important for what they may do in the future. In the context of those North/South encounters which became publicly visible in 1974 with the passing in the United Nations of the resolution on the International Economic Order and the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, the OPEC nations can choose, with the power of their reserves of capital, to become leaders of the Third World or to join the ranks of the developed countries. Without

*Robert F. Meagher is Professor of International Law at The Fletcher School. He is currently writing a book on the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States.

that OPEC support of a revision of the world view of the wealthy countries, the poor of the world will not only remain poor, but, as a result of their demands for a more equitable world order, may become poorer because of the antagonism they have aroused in the developed nations. For instance, in recent years the debts of poor nations have soared to over \$200 billion, foreign aid in real terms has declined, and the influence of external forces (including some transnational corporations) has increased.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), modelled ideologically after the Economic Commission for Latin America, and directed at the time of its establishment by the Commission's former Secretary-General, Raul Prebisch, became in 1964 a training center and meeting place for representatives of the poor nations. UNCTAD developed an articulate program of change in the structure of international economic relations that was supported by more than 110 countries containing 70 percent of the world's population. Those countries learned quickly that the ability to pass resolutions does not ensure their implementation, and before the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) embargo in 1973-74, they had not found a way to increase their bargaining power.

A dramatic increase of the bargaining power of all the developing countries, like the one achieved by the OPEC nations, would be a dream come true. However, the continuing weakness of the developing countries was evident at the Fourth UNCTAD Conference in Nairobi in 1976. At that Conference those countries urged three new programs: an integrated program for commodities, debt relief, and cheap technology transfer. None was accepted, all were deferred.

The strategy of the United States toward the Third World (at least before the Carter Administration) has been to attempt to return to the *status quo ante* of the period before the OAPEC embargo. The following tactics have been used: the attempt to co-opt OPEC countries into the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) camp by stressing their new status as capital exporters, in order to break the unity of UNCTAD; the removal of development issues from institutions in which developing countries have the majority and the creation of new institutions, such as the Council on International Economic Cooperation, in which developed countries meet primarily with the wealthier developing countries; the review of development issues *ab initio* within those new forums in order to delay decisions and to increase the pressures of debts on the developing countries in the hope that those pressures will bring the poor to their senses. The strategy is an effort to maintain the strength of the United States and to

preserve the belief that the strategies of the Third World will fail. It is a negative approach.

Robert McNamara, the President of the World Bank, has proposed the establishment of a high-powered international group to examine North/South relations. This proposal is one more opportunity for the United States to reject the policies of the recent past and to return to a policy which is economically wise and morally correct. The international appeal for equity, equality, and dignity is no more than an attempt to raise to the international level the domestic general welfare concepts now accepted within the developed countries. It should strike a familiar chord to the laborers, farmers, and poor of the developed world who have undergone struggles in this century. They too recognized that their large numbers did not provide them with the power to become a tyranny of the majority.