

Open Letter – Montreal Conference: Refusing to adapt

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As each year, the International Economic Forum of the Americas organizes the Montreal Conference which brings together some of the most important decision-makers in the world. Bankers, business men, directors of international financial institutions and politicians meet to discuss the human condition, as they did a few months earlier at the Economic Forum in Davos. This year, the Conference is particularly important. These personalities who come together in Montreal are the ones who established and supported the financial and economic system that has collapsed since the subprime mortgage crisis, a symptom of a far wider bankruptcy: continuing food, environmental, energy and social crises, clearly demonstrating that the foundations of today's economy are no longer solid.

This year's Conference title is full of promise: "Adapting to a New World Order". Are the invited participants going to express their 'mea culpa' and propose to relaunch the world economy on new foundations? A full examination of the program reveals that very few new ideas will be raised and that solutions to the crisis, the effects of which event organizers recognize, will no doubt simply result in the re-introduction of existing policies.

Free trade and exploitation of natural resources

International trade is once again considered solely from the point of view of free trade. Participants will hear about "business opportunities", competition, and public-private partnerships on an international scale, even though the latter have shown themselves to be ineffective in almost every case. Free trade agreements are de-regulation tools: is this really what we need during a crisis, when this same de-regulation has caused the bankruptcies and abuses for which we now are paying? Nothing leads to believe that these agreements will be approached in a new manner that will put a priority on cooperation between countries, the respect of human rights, equity, and protection of the environment.

The presence of Alvaro Uribe Vélez, President of Columbia, and Catherine Ashton, Trade Commissioner for the European Union, clearly demonstrates a desire to promote two free trade agreements, one between Canada and Columbia and the other between Canada and the European Union. The first, now in the ratification process, raises lively opposition. It particularly favours Canadian mining interests, little concerned with respecting the environment and working standards. It is being concluded with a country in which human rights are seriously violated and

where unionists and defenders of human rights are regularly assassinated, without the guilty being pursued.

Sustainable development and energy are also on the program. However, we note a lack of critical distance with which these subjects will be approached. Instead of choosing environmental specialists, the Montreal Conference prefers to give the floor to players who are both judge and defendant. Gérard Mestrallet, CEO of GDF Suez, a firm which relies on exploiting nuclear energy and natural gas, will give a conference titled “Energy and sustainable development: Where are we?”. Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, manufacturer of airplane engines, oil and gas tanker equipment, and household appliances, will raise the issue of innovation and sustainable development. Rio Tinto, one of the largest mining groups in the world (aluminum, gold, copper, coal, diamond, iron) will present the Rio Tinto prize for sustainability!

And democracy?

The Montreal Conference of June 2009 is closing its eyes to the new world order and the crises we are experiencing. No strong or new proposals have emerged from the preliminary program. There are no thoughts concerning the irresponsible activities of the banks, the need to limit speculation, or stabilize the economy. Nothing to fight poverty or counter inequality (these two words are in fact absent from the program). Nothing to launch true development based on renewable energy and more responsible consumption of energy, natural resources and water.

In the comfort of the Place Bonaventure Hilton Hotel, Paul Desmarais, event organizer; Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Robert B. Zoellick, President, World Bank Group; Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, and their cohorts will continue to reflect behind closed doors on how to maintain the interests of the giant corporations, without taking into account the effect of their decisions on populations. In fact, this conference gives very little place for contradictory debate to players whose ideas diverge from those of the owners of the multinationals. And the registration cost for the Conference is bound to discourage the participation of anyone who does not earn an enormous salary.

For their part, our elected officials, Jean Charest, Raymond Bachand, and Lawrence Cannon, will serve as presenters for the main conferences, while the themes, “Sustainable Development, Health and Energy” and “International Trade and the Americas” will be covered with the participation of Rio Tinto and RBC Capital Markets. This collusion between the business world and elected officials, that excludes the rest of civil society, is a step backward for democracy.

Who will have to adapt to the new world order? And who will benefit? During the Montreal Conference, we join many voices around the world who reply that it is not up to the people, and in particular the poorest of the world, to adapt and pay for the faults and irresponsibility of the business and government elite who persist in defending a vision of the world and the economy that is socially, environmentally and humanly unsustainable.