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Address by
Mr Anwar Ibrahim

Head of the Delegation of Malaysia
at the twenty-fifth session of the General Conference

on the occasion of his election to the presidency of the
General Conference at its twenty-fifth session

Paris, 17 October 1989

20 OCT. 1989

Excellencies, Ministers,
my colleague Mr Vargas, Chairman of the Executive Board,
Mr Federico Mayor, Director-General,
Mr Putzeys Alvarez,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I ask for your indulgence to permit me to thank members of the Executive Board for endorsing my candidature and my colleagues in the Asia and the Pacific Group for their support. Indeed, I am deeply grateful to all of you for having given me and my country Malaysia this great honour, which I, in all humility, accept, in full realization of the enormity of the responsibility that you have entrusted to me. I am sure you all share my appreciation for the work of Mr Putzeys Alvarez, who has steered Unesco superbly during the past two years of his presidency.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, when the Unesco Constitution was adopted at the closing session of the 1945 General Conference in London, Ellen Wilkinson, the then President of the Conference, read the famous opening declaration of the Constitution (drafted by Archibald MacLeish): '... since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed ...'. This spirit lingers on as amplified in the Seville Statement and in the recommendations made by the International Congress on Peace in the Minds of Men recently held in Côte d'Ivoire.

We may also find some solace in recent triumphs of peace leading to the termination of hostilities, a definite reduction in regional conflicts and even limited arms control. None the less, peace is but another manifestation of freedom. In our search for peace, therefore, freedom must assume the role of a universal form. The great French philosopher Rousseau once said that man is born free, yet he is everywhere in chains. In the contemporary world these chains are the shackles of illiteracy, social injustice, economic disparity and political hegemony. Freedom from these bonds is the only road to peace!

This is a time of decision because in several ways we must realize that the vision of past generations, however wise and well intentioned, needs to be further advanced. Our vision must be of a habitable and sustainable future not just for our planet, the earth that we must nurture and protect, the earth that we must cure of the ills we ourselves have inflicted upon it. This vision, forged in cataclysm, tempered by self-revealing horror at the suffering of mankind, should not manifest itself just in the form of institutions, but should present itself as a concrete agenda of work, of practical tasks underlying the role, the direction and the achievements of institutions. We need to look afresh at the Constitution, to analyse its terms in the full light of experience and contemporary circumstances. With this insight we must refine and distill what was best in that vision, to amend its idealism and to incorporate new thoughts.

Let us begin afresh by acknowledging an important truth: not all growth is good growth. The cancer cell grows and spreads the disease, causing agonizing death. We can grow learned beyond our ability to administer our knowledge ethically, causing the end of wisdom. We can grow so rich in material means that we distort our sense of what is valuable. We can

accumulate riches and then fail to observe that nothing priceless, or inherently valuable, is left to us either within or beyond our hoard of treasures. Let us recall the words of T.S. Eliot: 'Where is the Life we have lost in living. Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge. Where is the knowledge we have lost in information'. We live in a time when the world is awash with information that daily increases, updates, indexes and downloads itself. We, as an organization charged with communication and mutual understanding, should above all set ourselves the task of facilitating a reintegration of information with knowledge and knowledge with wisdom if we are to avoid Eliot's prophecy that we bring ourselves 'farther from God and nearer to the Dust'.

For the history of all humanity has been littered, even tormented, with great ideals that failed in implementation. The rush to the right rhetorical framework has clouded the analysis of what is tolerable and what is intolerable in effecting the transition. The time has come when we must have the humility to lay hold upon and make sense of our ignorance amidst the ever proliferating wealth of our information and knowledge. If peace was the first watchword of the Constitution of Unesco, then I am struck by the fact that ignorance was the second. Our Constitution places emphasis on ignorance of each other's ways and lives. We have not abolished that ignorance, nor have we created or constructed a firm foundation for its antithesis, mutual respect for the plurality of mankind in its many cultures, as systems of thought, as bodies of knowledge, and as views of being within this One World - our world. How did we construct a science and technology that systematically degrades the environment? How did we come to a view of scientific and technological progress that offers us the estimable potential of computerization, but also has the attendant capacity to disemploy or underemploy the creative and intellectual capacity of the majority of our people? We desperately need our ignorance to make sense of where progress has brought us, to determine where we ought and how we wish to progress.

No organization, ladies and gentlemen, is better placed to effect this change in human consciousness than this body - Unesco. Unesco presides over those fields of human endeavour where we usually choose to bask in our glorious claims to knowledge. Therefore it is we, gathered here and committed to this Organization, who must now have the humility and courage to highlight the true dimensions and radical implications of human ignorance. I am indebted for this insight to the philosopher of science J.R. Ravetz, who argues that grasping this interconnection, this indissoluble mixture, is the only way we can make sense and progress within science itself.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, no people, no system, no ideology, no world view is without values, ethical precepts or, in old-fashioned terminology, a moral code. We live in one world, a world of global interconnectedness, but we do not live all in the same way nor with the same quality and kind of connection to this one world. In making policy and planning, in the making of decisions and their implementation, we often ignore and are even ignorant of the very impact the diversity of mankind has on our expectations. We seem rather obsessed with uniformity. The space we have made for plurality appears as a window-dressing of cultural entertainment, as 'high art' for museums and exhibitions. This has its place, but it is too narrow a view to be of meaning in sustaining a peaceful, mutually interdependent future.

It is unnecessary, perhaps, to mention all this here at Unesco. Our Organization has become embattled for seeking to alter this situation through its own vision of a new world information order and now a Medium-Term Plan. The time has come not to abandon the objective, but to tackle the question of whether the groundwork has been properly laid for mutual comprehension of the objective that was set. It is time to contemplate the hardest question of all:

whether any vision of a new world order has been adequately equipped with the proper perspective and appropriate rigour of analysis and dialogue on salient principles. For without that rigour we cannot make the need for a new order comprehensible, nor can we make it relevant to the needs of all peoples. The consequence is that we entangle the threads of seeming rejection, presumed alienation, with those of deep-rooted vested interests and structures of power. Undoubtedly, participatory intellectual growth implies free flow of information. It necessitates thought, choice and power. Unesco has the ethical responsibility to ensure that the elements vital for the flowering of human intellect are not dictated, but are disbursed across the global community.

It is time to explore a new way of attaining universal aspirations. But this is no easy remedy. It means a departure from the current emphasis on form to a concentration on achieving actual benefits, through such means and formal organizations as are most suitable according to our own values, our own circumstances. Quite simply, it has not been part of the march of modern progress to contemplate, investigate or analyse such options.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the legacy of history means that some peoples and nations have enjoyed particular and special benefits. We must all beware of failing to make the distinction between cultural pride and cultural chauvinism. Equally we must all be able to distinguish between the right to continue to be ourselves, wherever we are and in whatever we do, and the ease with which this becomes cultural imperialism that denies the same freedom to others.

Plurality means sharing responsibilities and obligations through shared access to the exercise of power, and participation in choices and decision-making over the use of real resources. It was not a comfortable choice; it remains a contentious choice and one that is not without ongoing problems. But it was an honourable and essential part of genuine universalism within a plural world. There is no rhetoric of great visions that does not entail and devolve into hard decisions, difficult choices. That is why the service of great visions needs humility, the humility to make the unwelcome change. There is no people and no nation that can or will be able to escape this truth, and it is this universal realization which should unite us in the endeavour and the selection of appropriate means to make a genuine, peaceful, equitable, habitable, sustainable plural future.

For the Organization there must be, firstly, a concentration upon the enduring crime against humanity of illiteracy. We cannot accept a world in which information is proliferating exponentially when vast sectors of humanity are denied access to the means to harness this information, and more importantly to exercise choice, discrimination and control over the impact this information has on their lives. We must be an organization that not only campaigns tirelessly to draw attention to this crime against humanity, but also an organization that stimulates and facilitates whole new approaches to effective remedial action that is appropriate to the needs and circumstances of those we seek to assist.

This task has a vital link with the second cornerstone of our action. We cannot fit ourselves to serve this vision of a plural future unless we too go out to encounter plurality and learn from each and every situation what it specifically needs. We cannot exist as a bureaucracy that has wonderful ideas and rhetoric, but is remote from the seat of the problems on which we ponder. We have to be an organization that relishes the heat of the kitchen, enjoys getting soil under its fingernails: we have to make our vision work appropriately by translating it into the actual circumstances of different countries and their diverse peoples. Bureaucracies, especially global

bureaucracies, must learn the lesson we have garnered from experience: any bureaucracy, consciously or unconsciously, seeks to uniformitize. It sets up its own dynamic and always runs the risk of fostering the very ailment it was established to cure.

Those who work for us must articulate a truth which is increasingly being recognized: that solutions to our own problems are out there, in the world, as we each in our own way know it and experience it. Finding this solution, however, requires marshalling, selecting and thinking through the whole available legacy of human thought and ideas and tailoring them to be appropriate to our own needs in ways that best serve to overcome our problems. Only in this way can we make it clear that all solutions to problems must come through learning from people how their priorities and questions challenge our knowledge and highlight our ignorance in order to generate appropriate attainable solutions that are relevant to the very people who experience the problem.

Our task, ladies and gentlemen, is to promote awareness of the distinction between information and knowledge, and to focus attention on the distinction between the free and the balanced exchange of quality information, that is, information that is relevant and that generates an evaluative, critical capacity for mutual knowledge. Knowledge depends upon selecting, ordering, refining and manipulating information so that it can be the key to wisdom.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unesco works for universality; it is a symbol of human unity and brotherhood. Therefore, it has to maintain this role-image and continue to promote greater visibility with a view to universality. It is imperative that we remind ourselves that we all belong to a single community, the international community. Member States of Unesco are not distinguished in terms of the 'cold war' dichotomy. We continue to remain together in this Organization because we respect each other as equals; we have developed a spirit of understanding and negotiation in all matters that concern our common interests.

It is unfortunate that the universality of this Organization, its role in member countries, its adherence to its charter, its concern for universal developments are open to question. For some sceptics, its very survival is at stake. We should realize that peace and freedom cannot remain hostage to the whims of a political tribe. We must understand that disputes are resolved not by ostracizing, but through involvement. We should recognize the indispensability of international co-operation, multilateralism and the full appreciation of the principle of universality.

There is yet another dimension of the universal character of Unesco. While we uphold the principle of equality of status among Member States, we should not ignore the fact that Unesco is equally responsible for ensuring that it fully respects and values the role of its Member States. In other words, the universality of Unesco calls for equality that is manifested as equal representation of its Member States and at the same time equal representation of Unesco within Member States. However, given the incongruous state of the world, I would be amiss to perceive equality *de facto*. Nevertheless, Member States and their specific needs can be accommodated within the broader concept of equality.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, a clear look at Unesco's Constitution would indicate that it is essentially a community of nations committed to the cause of intellectual enlightenment rather than to flexing political muscles.

At the risk of being repetitive, I do perceive the political genesis of our intellectual milieu. It is intellectual growth rather than political hegemony that must remain the hallmark of Unesco.

We are meeting at a critical juncture in the history of our Organization and in meeting the challenge of charting its future course. It is gratifying to note that many pertinent issues have been deliberated by the Executive Board. They are to an extent contained in the Draft Medium-Term Plan (1990-1995) that is now before you.

With your understanding we will endeavour, with your co-operation we will strive, and with your wise counsel, ladies and gentlemen, together we shall succeed! Thank you very much.