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Every Man's Responsibility: The Environment - Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie at Ricker College Convocation

Edmund S. Muskie

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"EVERY MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY -- THE ENVIRONMENT"

Address by Senator Edmund S. Muskie
Convocation, Ricker College
Houlton, Maine
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We live in an age of extremes. Our technological genius has made the world . . . smaller -- we travel farther in less time -- we know almost instantly what is happening on the other side of the world -- and our affluence has made possible far-reaching travels for more and more people.

Adventurous man, uncertain of his fate in the world, is even reaching out to explore the untracked reaches of space.

Richer College is part of a broader effort to encompass the mysteries of the earth and space, and to become part of a wider world. Your program of Muslim-world studies and your Black-studies program reach far beyond the dreams of those who founded Houlton Academy. But they do represent an intellectual exploration which is consistent with the earlier voyages from Maine ports to many parts of the world.

The ultimate objective of all our exploring -- physical and intellectual -- should be to have a sense of our own place and a knowledge of ourselves. If we do not know ourselves, we can have no idea of where we are going, or what we are likely to be.

I have come back to that conclusion time and again in the twelve years I have travelled in our country and abroad as a Senator and national candidate. The more I see of our country and of other lands, the more I am aware of what we bring to our tasks and our relationships from the place of our birth and our growth.

I would like to share with you the observation of a Swedish public servant, Rolf Edberg, on that point:

> "Every individual carries a set of about a hundred thousand genes--an inheritance he has received from all the living beings who preceded him and concentrated their qualities in him. That is the heritage he will pass on. If all the genes from the world's three and a half billion people were baked together, they would form a small ball with a diameter of about one millimeter. The contents of this small ball is what holds us together as a species, and is, essentially, all we own as human beings."

Two lessons can be drawn from that point.

First, in dealing with the world and in making changes in it, we must recognize how closely we are bound up in our environment. This is what makes the current concern over the environment so important.

Second, for those of us who have enjoyed the benefits of living in Maine, there is a special heritage which we should understand and seek to protect.

The tragedy of man's reaction to environmental threats has been a consistent pattern of "too little, too late." We have survived this pattern because the threats have not been the ultimate threats to man's survival. They have been costly, obnoxious and local.

Today, we have discovered that environmental threats can be fatal, even when they have been unnoticed. This is true of radioactive hazards, automotive and industrial exhausts, insecticides, and a host of other products and activities connected with our daily lives.

The response to those threats will not be easy. The environment is comprehensive and complex. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, the noise we hear, the buildings, objects, trees, flowers, oceans, lakes, rivers and open spaces we look at and through which we move. And it is the vehicles which move us.

The environment involves the relationships between all the forms of life which share the planet earth. Our every action affects that environment. Through our ability to manipulate the physical world, we have also magnified our effects on it.

We have just scratched the surface of understanding the nature of the changes we have made in our environment. Even as we seek to correct the abuses of the past, we find bigger threats looming over us.

We build municipal and industrial waste treatment plants to eliminate the gross discharges of sewage and other organic wastes. Yet while we do, we know that lakes are "dying" because of man's assaults on waterways.

We install electrostatic precipitators to reduce the discharge of smoke and dust from factories and power plants. Yet while we do, we know that the supersonic transport threatens us with noise and atmospheric changes.

The SST and other technological achievements are thrust on us by those who insist that getting from one point to another faster is good for us even if it involves further damage to our environment.

We face the terrible prospect that the American dream of the good life may turn out to be a nightmare. We must start devoting as much energy and ingenuity to eliminating man-made hazards as we do to harnessing energy and materials to our desires.

As I noted earlier, the guidelines for such a course are not as clear as we might like. Many of the hazards we face are not obvious; their impact may not be known for many years. Our experience with cigarettes and radiation provide two examples of the long-term, low-level effects of contaminants on individuals.

There is, moreover, the difference between being non-sick and being healthy. Being non-sick is just existing without enjoying. Being healthy requires an attractive and stimulating man-made environment, coupled with a natural environment in dynamic balance.

All of this adds up to the need for an environmental policy which is --

(1) designed to correct the abuses of the past;
(2) aimed at eliminating such abuses in the future; and
(3) planned to improve the quality of our design and development of communities, industrial units, transportation systems and recreational areas.

Such a policy must be carried out in the context of an increasing population. Because of the leisure and affluence it will have available, it will make greater demands on resources and the natural environment.

We are not well-equipped to undertake such a policy today. Federal, State and local jurisdictions overlap in some cases and leave gaps in others.

We have not established appropriate relationships between environmental protection programs, land and water use patterns, resource allocation policies, tax systems and urban designs.

We have not developed techniques to make deliberate public decisions where short-term economic gains and long-term public interests collide.

We have not developed an adequate understanding of the conflicting needs, desires and demands for resource use and development.

And here is another problem: as citizens become more aware of the environmental threat, their tactics will switch to confrontation -- in the streets and in the court-room. This may not be the most orderly way to approach our problems. But it will be the only way if we do not devise more effective methods for the protection of the public interest in a healthy environment.

Congress has been trying to develop systems for improving the environment from the national level. We have a base on which to build in the Air and Water Quality Acts, the Solid Waste Act, and the Environmental Quality Act.

The immediate success of those programs depends on the resources we are willing to commit for their implementation. The Water Quality Act, for example, requires an appropriation of $1.25 billion in fiscal year 1971, if we are to make any meaningful progress in reducing the backlog of needed sewage treatment plants. I have estimated that we shall need to spend an additional $25 billion over the next five years -- $12.5 billion at the Federal level and $12.5 at the local and state level -- to continue our campaign to eliminate major sources of municipal sewage.

Beyond this, we must upgrade the capacity of the Federal government to organize itself and to insure consistency in its attack on the pollution problem. I have recommended the creation of an independent Environmental Quality Administration to pull those efforts together. Such an agency would be charged with the responsibility for developing and implementing Federal environmental quality standards, supporting basic research on problems of environmental quality, stimulating and supporting research on control techniques, and providing technical assistance to State, interstate and local agencies. But equally important, it would reflect the national commitment we need if we are to avoid ecological disaster.

The national government cannot do the job alone. Indeed, it should not try. Individual citizens, acting through their local and State governments, must develop effective programs for meeting the enviornmental crisis in the places where they live. If we do not fight contamination everywhere it strikes, we will find ourselves with plenty of laws and no real progress.

Maine has an opportunity to lead this campaign. In spite of our water pollution problems, which are severe on all of our major rivers and many of our smaller streams, we have an advantage: we are not caught up in the rapid concentration of population which has resulted in virtual destruction of natural resources in other parts of the country. Our air pollution problems are isolated, rather than spread over the entire state. And we do have sufficient open space to plan for future growth.

Since 1957, we have made some gains. In that year, we rewrote the law to help improve the quality of our streams and we started the State matching program for sewage treatment grants. We have made some gains in our efforts to combat water pollution. Unfortunately, we have not moved fast enough.

The Legislature still clings to the rigid, outmoded and inadequate water classification system. It refuses to change the water quality standards approach used in the Federal Water Quality Act. The enforcement procedures in the State act are not sufficient. The recent refusal of the Legislature to provide for adequate thermal pollution standards and to guard against reduction in water quality standards jeopardizes the State Water Quality program under the Federal Act.

In these areas, the Legislature has offset the valuable gains made on oil pollution and industrial site selection legislation.

If Maine is to protect its unique qualities, and if it is to meet the needs of its citizens, it must broaden its view of the environmental crisis and what it must do to avoid it.

Effective action against pollution does not consist in mounting the barricades against this industry or that industry. Effective action in protecting Maine's advantages does not mean sacrificing job opportunities for the sake of those who have the money to enjoy the rustic life.

A truly effective program to protect and enhance the quality of life in Maine will balance economic growth with conservation. It will involve more attention to community planning, to preserving their traditions, and to making them attr active yet useable living places for new generations.

A sound program of enviornmental protection will involve strict requirements on plant locations and design. It will insist on the most effective means of preventing harmful discharges in our rivers -- for old companies and new.

The time has come for us to explore the possibilities of making Maine a model place for living -- a place in which men and women can find fulfillment in their jobs, their communities, their relationships with others and in harmony with their environment. It need not be an exploration marred by partisan quarrels and bitterness. If it is, we shall destroy the sense of community which is so important to a healthy environment.

This exploration will depend on our knowledge of what Maine's resources are . . . an appreciation of how those resources relate to each other . . . and an understanding of who we are and what we have inherited. And it will require a commitment to build soundly on that inheritance.

I can think of no better place to launch such an exploration than a campus like yours, where you have combined an eagerness to know more about other lands and peoples with a determination to contribute to the society in which you live.

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