

MORRIS MILLER, 83 ACADEMIC

Economist was 'great warrior of peace' and sworn enemy of Third World debt

A consultant to three levels of Canadian government, he put out financial fires for the UN and the World Bank, and went all over 'a world that is obscenely unequal, unfair and immoral'

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TORONTO -- 'Greed is good,' cooed the go-for-the-jugular capitalist Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Just three years later, a more sobering motto was sounded by Morris Miller, who was a bit better grounded in the real world: "Anxiety can be good for you."

We have nothing to fear but lack of fear itself, Mr. Miller wrote in *Peace Magazine* in 1990, and self-deceiving illusions can be dangerous. "When surgery is needed, Aspirin is no cure," he warned. "We are living an illusion and must act to counter the global malaise that now afflicts us."

Long before U2 singer Bono's crusade, Mr. Miller recognized that malaise as foreign debt, which was crushing not only developing nations' treasuries, but their hope.

That the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer was hardly news, but Mr. Miller, ever the economist, cited depressing evidence. The average income in the developing world was a little less than \$400 (U.S.) per capita, he found at one point. In the industrialized world, it was about \$24,000, a ratio of 1 to 60. Two decades earlier, the ratio had been 1 to 30. "It has doubled in one generation!"

An even more revealing comparison was between the world's richest fifth and the world's poorest fifth: The ratio was 1 to 140. And one out of five people earns less than \$1 per day.

He minced no words: "We have a world that is obscenely unequal, unfair and immoral. We live in a period when poverty is not only tolerated, but is exacerbated." Part of the rationale for the tolerance is a sense of futility: Poverty, he said, is thought to be too wide and deep to be seriously alleviated, let alone eradicated.

The global condition is "deplorable and getting worse." Between a third and half of humankind is not getting enough to eat or clothe itself, "or live in pride, hope, or human

dignity. In fact, their conditions are worsening ... Not since the conquistadors plundered Latin America has the world experienced a [financial] flow in the direction we see today."

It was a depressing scenario to be sure, but Mr. Miller believed there was a way out. Industrialized countries had to do more and needed to regroup in a way that the United States, Japan and Western Europe would work together to re-establish some degree of global financial stability. In other words, co-operation.

Put another way, he felt that the days of American economic dominance had to end, to be replaced by a new type of international management that takes into account the economic slippage of the U.S. and the stronger position of its two main capitalist rivals.

As for already poor countries which must service ballooning foreign debts, "they are cannibalizing their economy to survive at a level that can hardly be called living. Is it any surprise that these nations are tinderboxes, ready to explode into rioting and civil breakdown?"

An economist and development expert who worked for three levels of government - provincial, federal and international - Mr. Miller was known by his family as a "great warrior of peace."

The son of immigrant Jewish parents, he grew up in Montreal. His mother had come from Poland, while his father, Louis Mazur, was from Ukraine. He was raised not in the storied St. Urbain Street neighbourhood, but in more uptown Outremont, graduating from Strathcona Academy and going on to study first political science and then commerce at McGill University.

He then headed to the London School of Economics, where he befriended another Outremont intellectual, Pierre Trudeau. The two bummed around Europe one summer, and they remained friends for the rest of Mr. Trudeau's life.

Following completion of a master's degree in 1949, Mr. Miller travelled the world, witnessing wrenching poverty and inequality. Back in Montreal, he wrote a play, *The Flame Within*, that was staged at the Canadian Drama Festival.

Following PhD studies at Harvard University, where he completed everything but his dissertation, he began teaching economics at McGill. One of his students was future *Star Trek* star William Shatner. Family lore has it that one day, Mr. Shatner informed his professor that he would not be making a future for himself in finance, to which Mr. Miller said something like, "Maybe that's a good thing."

Mr. Miller teamed up with Mr. Trudeau again in the early 1950s to attend an economic conference in Moscow, where Mr. Miller was extended a very rare invitation to visit China. Can my friend Pierre come too? he asked. No, he was informed, Mr. Trudeau was not invited. Mr. Miller went anyway as part of a Western delegation that helped Mao

Zedong celebrate the anniversary of the revolution that had brought him to power in 1949.

Only decades later did Mr. Miller discover why Mr. Trudeau had been unwelcome in China. In Moscow, Mr. Miller had worn a tweed jacket, and Mr. Trudeau his customary sandals and shirt. The Chinese wanted only respectably attired Westerners.

The RCMP, however, did not take kindly to Mr. Miller's travels in the communist world, and they pressured McGill to relieve him of his teaching post. So in the mid-1950s, he and his new wife headed to Regina, where he took a job as director of research and planning at Saskatchewan's natural resources ministry.

In Ottawa for two years, Mr. Miller helped guide a federal conference called Resources for Tomorrow, which examined policies related to economic development and the environment at two levels of government.

After a brief stint as an economist with the United Nations in New York, he spent four hectic but fruitful years in Rome working for the Food and Agriculture Organization, a UN agency. He travelled throughout Africa and Asia, developing self-aid programs on water, food, infrastructure, health, education and the plight of women.

Continuing with the UN years later, he worked for the agency's Resources Development Group and was deputy secretary-general of a conference in Nairobi on new and renewable energy resources. He tangled with the Saudis and Americans on the rising cost of propane, which millions of poor had to use to cook their food.

Where did his passion for economic justice come from? "He must have been born with those views," offered Claire, his wife of 55 years. "The big thing for him wasn't so much the politics as the human being involved. His attitude was that we need to help people not exploit people, and it was very clear for him that there were choices to be made."

In 1968, Mr. Miller went to Washington to work for the World Bank, which kindled his later view that the bank and its sister organization, the International Monetary Fund, were still operating on the outdated rules of the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, which put the U.S. dollar at the centre of the global financial system. To him, that made no sense, but he felt the United States couldn't admit that its influence had waned, nor could it cede any more of its power.

Back in Ottawa in 1975, he worked for the Treasury Board and the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, and directed a task force on federalism for the Privy Council.

But the World Bank again beckoned, and he returned from 1981 to 1984 as an executive director representing Canada, Ireland and 10 Caribbean countries. The experience provided fodder for his 1986 book, *Coping is Not Enough*, described in The Globe's Report on Business as "a cry of frustration at the way the IMF and the World Bank are

short-changed by the United States, which is responsible for about a fifth of their finances but has been the biggest brake on the agencies' expansion.

Mr. Miller warned that urgent work needed to be done to avert a major crisis in the world economy. For one thing, since its initial payment to the World Bank of \$635-million in 1947, Washington had contributed only \$479-million more, an amount "that is less than the misplaced or stolen weaponry the Pentagon reports each year, or less than the cost of one destroyer." The price of oil was also a factor in global economic instability: "Both in 1973 and 1978, OPEC pushed on the accelerator," Mr. Miller wrote. "The United States in 1979 slammed on the brakes and the rest of the world, like unbuckled passengers, went through the windshield."

He did not let Canada off the hook, accusing it of a sycophantic approach when it came to Third World debt reduction: "There's always pressure to placate the Americans," he stated. "I don't think the Canadian government gave a damn when it supported structural adjustment. They just wanted to support the U.S., who only wanted to help the banks get their debts serviced."

As for asking international bankers to exercise social responsibility, "you might as well ask cats to bark. Banks are not in the business of providing charity."

Between 1986 and 1995, Mr. Miller led or took part in some 20 overseas missions for UN agencies, the World Bank and the governments of Canada, Poland and Mexico to examine fiscal and development issues and the alleviation of poverty.

He spent the final 20 or so years of his life as a consultant on development issues and a professor at the University of Ottawa. He found a haven at his cottage in the Laurentians, where he loved to fish with his grandchildren. To the best of his family's knowledge, he never caught anything.

With current economic arrangements unsustainable, the key question for Mr. Miller was whether new policies to redirect capital to help poor countries would be adopted voluntarily or whether circumstances will force changes. Under that second option, he warned, "we will reap the whirlwind."

MORRIS MILLER

Morris Miller was born on June 15, 1924, in Montreal. He died of cancer in Ottawa on Feb. 17, 2008. He was 83. He leaves his wife, Claire, his children Riel, Shereen and Leona, and eight grandchildren.