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Journal Title: ITU news

Journal Issue: No. 9(1998)

Article Title : Vice-President Al Gore inaugurates the Minneapolis Conference

Page number(s): pp. 1-2

Vice-President Al Gore inaugurates the Minneapolis Conference

"Four years ago, I asked you to help create a global information superhighway. Today, I thank you for what you have done to bring about the most stunning revolution the world has known and I challenge you to build on this unprecedented opportunity by putting these new global networks to work, helping people", said United States Vice-President Al Gore. Mr Gore, who inaugurated the Plenipotentiary Conference at the Minneapolis Convention Center on 12 October 1998, was speaking to an audience of more than 1200 delegates from around the world. He underlined five major challenges which he described as a "Digital Declaration of Interdependence":

- Improving access to technology so everyone on the planet is within walking distance of voice and data telecommunication services within the next decade.

- Overcoming language barriers through technologies with real-time digital translation so anyone on the planet can talk to anyone else.

- Creating a "Global Knowledge Network" of people working to improve the delivery of education, health care, agricultural resources and sustainable development, and to ensure public safety.

- Using communication technology to ensure the free flow of ideas and support democracy and free speech.

- Using communication technology to expand economic opportunity to all families and communities around the globe.

Mr Gore also warned that the Year 2000 computer problem could stall much of the world's progress in international communications if not solved in time. An extract of his statement has been reproduced on pages 3 to 7 of this issue.



Al Gore addressing the delegates

Photo: A. de Ferron (ITU 980109)

MINNEAPOLIS



The flags of the Conference flying in the streets of Minneapolis

Photo: A. de Ferron (ITU 980110)

Other dignitaries who spoke before Mr Gore were:

- Ms Sharon Sayles Belton, Mayor of Minneapolis
- Paul Wellstone, Senator of Minnesota
- Arne Carlson, Governor of Minnesota
- Pekka Tarjanne, ITU Secretary-General.

Mr Tarjanne singled out the new generation of satellite systems known as the global mobile personal communications by satellite or GMPCS as the best illustration of modern "technological imagination". "The implementation of GMPCS is of enormous symbolic importance. It means that the Members of the ITU have succeeded in establishing the technological basis for achieving the goal of universal access to basic telecommunications which was established in 1984 by the Independent Commission for Worldwide Telecommunication Development — otherwise known after its Chairman as the Maitland Commission", the Secretary-General declared.

He added that with GMPCS in place, the world was perhaps 90% of the way there. He cautioned,

however, that although GMPCS and many other developments were providing the technological basis for universal access to basic communications and to information services, what he likes to call "the right to communicate", the real work was only beginning.

The first plenary meeting of the Conference was opened by Walter Mondale (former United States Ambassador to Japan). The Conference elected Ambassador Thomas L. Siebert as the Chairman of the 1998 Plenipotentiary Conference, along with six Vice-Chairmen (see page 8 for the Conference structure).



Pekka Tarjanne

Photo: A. de Ferron (ITU 980111)

As we go to press, Mr Siebert's main role will be to keep the Conference on track and act as a "backroom" negotiator to help in reaching consensus on the many issues before the Minneapolis Conference. He brings with him a wealth of experience in diplomacy and tough negotiations, having been both United States Ambassador to Sweden and a telecommunications attorney specializing in practice before the United States Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Ambassador Vonya McCann, of the Department of State (United States), presided over the meeting of heads of delegation, paving the way to the agreement of the Conference structure in the first plenary meeting. ■