

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## Promoting Human Rights

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We want to affirm what so many Canadians proclaimed before the committee: that the international promotion of human rights is a fundamental and integral part of Canadian foreign policy. It is a vital and natural expression of Canadian values. Moreover, the promotion of human rights is in conformity with the international legal rights and obligations that Canada has accepted freely, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The effective promotion of human rights internationally faces many challenges and practical obstacles. It is rejected in some quarters as unacceptable interference in the affairs of sovereign states. We insist, on the contrary, that the behaviour of governments, like that of individuals, is subject to universal values. It is not interference to pass judgement on a government's conduct and to adjust relations with that government accordingly. Actions such as terminating aid or trading relations are exactly the opposite of intervention in the internal affairs of another country.

The promotion of human rights has been attacked by others as a disguised attempt to shift the international agenda away from the problems of poverty and economics. This is certainly not our intention, as the earlier discussion of international development makes clear. We believe with the Canadian Council of Churches that "basic needs—food, water, shelter—[are also] inviolable rights, without which it is impossible for human beings to sustain life." (34) This is why we reaffirmed help to the poorest people and countries as the primary purpose of the Canadian aid program. Of equal importance, we affirm Canada's support for collective as well as individual rights, including the rights of workers and women and of religious and cultural minorities. We strongly endorse the argument of Edward Ratushny that Canada should refuse to choose either individual or collective rights over the other. "We should simply take the position that all rights are important, and there is no reason why individual rights have to be detracted from in order to support collective rights." (25:36)

Apart from the need to clarify its meaning and purpose, human rights policy faces a number of practical obstacles, not least of which is the absence of any agreed-upon enforcement mechanism. It is essential that human rights policy combine an adherence to principle with respect for careful procedure and practical results, the object being actually to relieve injustice. In considering the instruments available to promote human rights internationally, we think it useful to make a distinction between *protecting*