

UN FOR A MODERN AGE

As the United Nations turns 60, Canadians are well placed to ensure that the organization effectively upholds the cause of collective security in a changing world.

By all accounts, San Francisco in the spring of 1945 was a dynamic destination. Lester B. Pearson found it “lovely and hospitable.” Charles Ritchie called it “lively as a circus” and added, “Nowhere could have been found in the world which is more of a contrast to the battered cities and tired people of Europe.” The two diplomats had arrived in this pleasing metropolis as members of the Canadian delegation to the post-war San Francisco Conference. There, over the course of eight weeks, 50 nations thrashed out the final wording of the Charter of the United Nations.

Today the world hails the Charter, signed on June 26, 1945, as a monumental achievement. What’s forgotten is the feuding and frustration of cobbling it together. Then, as now, there was scepticism that fine words by diplomats could do much to create a safer world. There were worries that the organization might fizzle, just as its predecessor the League of Nations had.

Fighting hard for the principle of collective security: Lester B. Pearson addresses the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco in 1945.



photos: CP

Mr. Ritchie in his revealing diaries described the San Francisco meetings, where “quick-witted men sitting quite still hour after hour listening to people saying at almost infinite length things which could be said in a sentence or two.” Escott Reid, another member of the Canadian team, recalled gatherings of morose colleagues in which “we bemoaned the errors the conference had committed and the weakness of the Charter.” Mr. Pearson confessed, “The organization of the conference seems to be pretty hopeless.”

The outcome, happily, was not. The document was endorsed, and Canada’s negotiators won plaudits. “When the chips were down the Canadians fought harder and more effectively for the principle of collective security than anybody else,” said *The New York Times*.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan addresses the General Assembly.

