

The UN, disarmament and Canadians

stage of over one hundred new states, most of them economically disadvantaged and with political institutions which are weak and uncertain. These changes were accompanied by a multiple increase in the complexity of international relations impinging on every aspect of our lives. Whether it be the law of the sea, commodity agreements, radio frequency assignments, public health standards or any of a thousand other problems requiring international agreement, we rely on UN-associated institutions to bring them about and make them work.

The first purpose of the United Nations is to maintain international peace and security. It has a very mixed record in its efforts to attain this goal, but who can gainsay that on many occasions it has risen above contentious debate to provide an institutional mechanism and peacekeeping forces to prevent or stop hostilities. Time and again it has proven its value as a locus for negotiations between parties involved in disputes or even active hostilities. Who can dispute the fact that it provides the only global platform to urge an end to nuclear madness?

Majorities do count eventually

But what about the dimension represented by acrimonious political debate — the kind which led the American Ambassador, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, to say that such debate frustrated the goal of conflict resolution? The logic of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's position would dictate dispensing with those debates, which might grant temporary relief to those who don't want to listen but would do nothing to solve the underlying problems. She would no doubt insist that argumentation as it is conducted at the UN doesn't solve them either. But is that really an accurate perception? There are two dimensions to this question, cause and effect.

As to cause, governments no more than people are ever willing to give up strongly-held positions or vested interests, unless or until they become convinced that their interests would be better served by a shift. Since emotions as well as logic are usually involved in this process, it is certain to be long and painful. But shifts do take place, and the interminable arguments that go on year after year in the UN undoubtedly contribute to those changes.

As to effect, who can say that the thirty-year stalemate in the UN over the Middle East did not help to influence President Sadat to seek reconciliation with Israel, or that at some other time in the future it won't play a role in promoting wider agreement? Who is to say that sooner or later the pressure of world opinion, as expressed repeatedly and forcefully at the UN, will not lead the Russians to find a way out of Afghanistan? And who would deny that constant pressure in the General Assembly has had a significant influence on the attitude of Western nations toward colonialism and apartheid, which has certainly changed substantially over the past two decades? Who could pretend that Western responses to the demands of the Third World for a new international economic order, limited although they may be, have not been stimulated by pressure in the UN? All of this is to suggest that we need to be more understanding of the forces that shape such debates and more patient in our expectations that they will some day come to an end.

Patience and understanding, of course are passive virtues. If the UN is to continue what can we as Canadians do by way of active and positive measures to make it a more effective institution? First and foremost we should show the new Secretary General that we support him, both in the political dimension of his role and in the mammoth task he faces in his attempt to gain control over and rejuvenate an unwieldy and hidebound secretariat. He should be invited to Canada and encouraged in the course of consultations to provide strong leadership in dealing with the issues confronting him. We should re-examine our own role for areas of undesirable passivity. We have been active in furthering negotiations on a new international order, in the area of human rights, and the law of the sea, but are we doing all we can in support of arms control and disarmament, or in lending our good offices to help resolve disputes in some of the world's trouble-spots?

Equally important, is enough being done to help improve understanding by Canadians of the relevance to them of the UN, which, with all its flaws, is a mirror of our faltering efforts to overcome the unhappy legacies of history and learn to live and work together for the common good? Its shortcomings are our shortcomings, and we should never forget that hard fact.

This year marks the election of a new Secretary General who comes from the developing world. It also marks on the one hand a recrudescence of the cold war and on the other the Second Special Session on Disarmament. It marks a serious world economic recession and renewed efforts to move toward a new international economic order. It marks challenge and opportunity. What will be our response? □

CONCERNED? You should be.

Disarmament, development, the environment, human rights... affect everyone. Many Canadians are unaware, however, of the vital operations carried out in each of these fields by the United Nations and its family of agencies.

The United Nations Association is the agency in Canada devoted to promoting Canadian interest in the United Nations and related international issues. Our Information Service and educational programs and activities encourage Canadians to share their concern while assuming a more responsible role in our interdependent world.

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