

John Holmes

The United Nations at 40: An Upbeat Assessment

It may seem paradoxical to start the fourth decade at its end, with an assessment of the United Nations, and particularly of the General Assembly, at 40. On the other hand, because of his long involvement—and hardly anyone has had a longer one—John Holmes can set the fourth decade in perspective through comparisons with earlier years. His is a large canvas, while many of the other contributors properly concentrate on a single part.

John Holmes was not only there at the outset; he served in the mission in New York during Canada's first period (from 1948 to 1949) on the Security Council and he was again closely involved with United Nations affairs during seven years (1953 to 1960) as assistant under-secretary of state in External Affairs. He also served as a diplomat in London and Moscow. From 1960 to 1973 he headed the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. All this experience has gone into the authorship of important books on Canadian foreign policy: the two-volume work *The Shaping of Peace*, which focuses most sharply on Canada's UN record. In February 1986, he wrote an essay for *The Ottawa Citizen* after attending the 40th session of the General Assembly as a member of the Canadian delegation, and the following is a shortened version of that essay:

"Forty years ago, in January 1946, the first session of the UN General Assembly opened in London. I was in the back row as an adviser to the Canadian delegation, full of awe and hope and anxiety, the mood of the times. During the 40th session, recently completed in New York, I was privileged to spend three weeks with the delegation as an 'observer' at the invitation of the Secretary of State for External Affairs.

"There had not been a 40-year gap in my experience of the Assembly. For the first 15 years I had been actively involved. Then, as a member of various UN boards and as a compulsive student of international institutions, I had tried to keep in touch. How did the battered Assembly look to one who had experienced the first fine, but not so careless, rapture and who had been around during what has been mythologized as 'the golden age' of Canadian diplomacy at the UN?

"A stranger is easily dismayed by the cacophony, but as an old hand I came away heartened by the behaviour of the Assembly and even more so by the skill and enterprise of the Canadians. I should make clear, however, that I have more of a Hobbesian than a Utopian approach to international institutions and take for granted that the sense of community is a fitful growth. I was neither surprised nor greatly dismayed by a good deal of raucous rhetoric and scholastic debates on meaningless or malicious resolutions. After all, I could still hear in those halls the echoes of Andrey Vyshinsky and Krishna Menon in full rancorous flight; and a few weeks earlier I had listened to Barbara McDougall being pilloried in the Canadian House of Commons.

"The General Assembly, of course, is not the House of Commons. It is not a legislature. It is not, as its critics would like to portray it, the United Nations. It is one important but not supreme body in a vast, loosely connected system of UN bodies without which we could not fly airplanes, send cables,