

# The defensible United Nations

by Stephen Lewis

I like the United Nations. I have only been around this lovely and byzantine organization for about seven months but I quite like it. I am a shameless apologist. I think it is a first-rate international institution and I do not much care for the gratuitous detractors. There are problems, there are imperfections, there are deficiencies in the United Nations system. But I have often asked myself, as I view it in a novice's way, could it be otherwise after forty years?

We are often worried by the capacity of the superpowers — indeed, all of the Permanent Members of the Security Council — to thumb their noses with impunity at decisions which are taken at the United Nations. That happens from time to time in a way which is disconcerting, unnerving, occasionally frustrating. We know of the proliferation of nation-states, and the way this has engendered within the arena of the General Assembly an excess of rhetorical spleen, some aggressive posturing and occasional extremist attacks. It bothers some more than others. (I quite enjoy it: but then, I have been given to hyperbolic frenzies all my adult life so for me it is merely finding a milieu which is palatable.)

## Not there yet

All of us are bothered by the truth that some problems seem endlessly intractable. We have not got peace and disarmament; we have not solved the problems of the Middle East; we cannot seem to handle Namibia and South Africa. That is the crisis of credibility which some so often relate. And on top of all of that, there is the sense of incremental change. The detractors would describe it as a kind of immobility that leads to inertia, compounded by mismanagement.

When you set out that litany it is, I admit, a little unnerving. I am inclined to say "so what?" Sure it is frustrating, sure it is difficult, all of us have to cope with these truths, all of us have to understand their nature. But it does not for a moment — this is what is so important, and it is inconceivable to me that people do not understand it — it does not for a moment invalidate the tremendous contribution which the United Nations makes; it does not for a moment render us impotent; it does not for a moment diminish the value of working to reinforce the strengths of the United Nations.

Now, in a way which bespeaks a certain innocence, I sometimes wonder about the perceptions and motives of various of the detractors.

For some time, it seems to me, the expectations have been extravagant: the achievement of peace and the rule of law is not ushered in over forty years. Forty years is a whisper in the passage of time. We have not had an atomic conflict in forty years and part of that is attributable to the United Nations. Is that not an object worthy of celebration?

For others who are critics of the United Nations, the principle of sovereignty is not understood. Sovereignty is rooted in the Charter of the United Nations. It is not possible for the United Nations to impose its will on sovereign states. You cannot just say to Ethiopia — as much as some would wish it — that the government has to have a ceasefire; has to recognize the rebels; has to open supply lines to Eritrea and Tigre. You cannot just say to Iran and Iraq: "We determine that you end your berserk war; we insist that you bring yourselves to heel before this organization."

## UN is its members

It is not the institution of the United Nations, the body corporate, which is the problem. It is the behavior of individual nation-states which is the problem. And it is a profound misunderstanding of the United Nations and the way it operates not to recognize that simple truth. There is no capacity under the Charter to interfere in the internal affairs of member countries. Those are difficult and aggravating complexities. They are also complexities which allow the place to work.

And then there are other critics who are quite simply malevolent and they do great damage. They pretend to be dispassionate, analytic, concerned. Poppycock. They are, by and large, neo-isolationists in their views of the world, and they are made up of the Heritage Foundation and others of their ilk. The Heritage Foundation and its

---

*Stephen Lewis is Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations. This article is based on an address he gave to the United Nations Association of the United States in New York earlier this year.*