

The UN, disarmament and Canadians

break down, and the hostilities generated by Soviet moves to dominate Eastern Europe became preeminent. The first decade of the UN's existence made it a cockpit for cold-war rhetoric. The Security Council was paralyzed by a steady stream of Soviet "Nyets."

Membership explosion

An important element in these developments was the make-up of the organization at that time. The membership during the whole of that period had grown only from fifty to sixty, and only four nations (Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia and South Africa) came from the African continent. Voting power in the General Assembly lay primarily in the hands of the developed Western nations, although the Latin American group occasionally gave evidence of a degree of independence which presaged the future attitudes of the non-aligned group. The central concerns of the Western nations were the maintenance of peace in the face of the new and awesome threat of nuclear annihilation, and the strengthening of Western concepts concerning human rights and the rule of law. Their efforts in the direction of economic and social justice were modest, and exemplified by the establishment of the specialized agencies and support for their programs. Technical assistance formed a very small component of these activities and the idea of UN involvement in such matters as trade policy and the economic rights of the Third World was not acceptable to most members.

The period from 1956 to 1960 was tremendously important for the United Nations because the number of members jumped from 60 to 100. Almost all of these new



The author presiding at a session of the Security Council

members were from the Third World, including twenty from Africa. This influx marked the beginning of the shift of voting power from the developed nations to those from Africa, Asia and Latin America. It also flagged the advance to preeminence in the UN of issues of primary concern to this Third World, in particular the end of colonialism and apartheid, a new deal economically, and the withdrawal of Israel from the occupied Arab lands in Palestine.

In the last twenty years the membership of the UN has grown to over 150 and the developed world, including both the Western nations and the Soviet bloc, has become a small minority. This increase in the membership is, of course, simply a reflection of a major change in the world geopolitical situation. During that time the political and ideological boundaries between the major power groups have changed very little, but for the rest of the world, which thirty years ago was largely made up of a few colonial empires, there has been a metamorphosis. We now have a hundred or more new nations.

To each his own UN

Thus, the historical evolution of the organization has shaped the UN of today. The more powerful nations, and particularly the permanent members of the Security Council, see the UN as simply one of a number of agencies through which they pursue their national interests. These interests may or may not be altruistic and in support of the general benefit of the international community. For them, the UN may be a useful tool, a nuisance to be railed against, or an obstruction to be brushed aside, depending on circumstance. The other nations of the world, lacking the same capacity for independent action, are perhaps for that reason more attracted to collective solutions, especially when they offer alternatives to the hegemonistic interests of the great powers. They would, in varying degrees, like to see the UN play a more central role. The weaker and poorer nations rely heaviest on the UN, because by making common cause they can dominate the agendas and voting patterns in the General Assembly and subsidiary organizations, as well as in the Specialized Agencies, and utilize them as platforms to support causes for which they lack the economic, military or technological power to implement.

The consequence of this situation is that differences between the major powers and their allies are rarely brought to the UN unless one side or the other wishes to utilize it as a means of demonstrating wide international support, or unless some agreement has been reached which the parties wish to make global, or unless the issue is transcendent, such as nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, the major concerns of the Third World, especially the situation in the Middle East, apartheid and colonialism in southern Africa, and the need for a new international economic order, are brought up in every possible way on every possible occasion and debated at great length and repeated to the point that even their protagonists don't really listen to what is being said.

This leads inevitably to the question, "Is a UN which is regarded as a sideshow by the great powers and has been turned into an echo-chamber for the unreal aspirations and one-sided political views of the Third World, worth keeping? Is it irrelevant and incapable of meeting the need for a centre to harmonize the actions of nations?"

To this the answer must surely be that as an organization to fulfill the goals of the Charter it is indeed an imperfect instrument. But for all that, it is indispensable and if it were to vanish we would have no choice but to invent something to take its place. The last thirty years has seen an end to colonialism and the appearance on the world