

A FORCE IN HUMAN RIGHTS

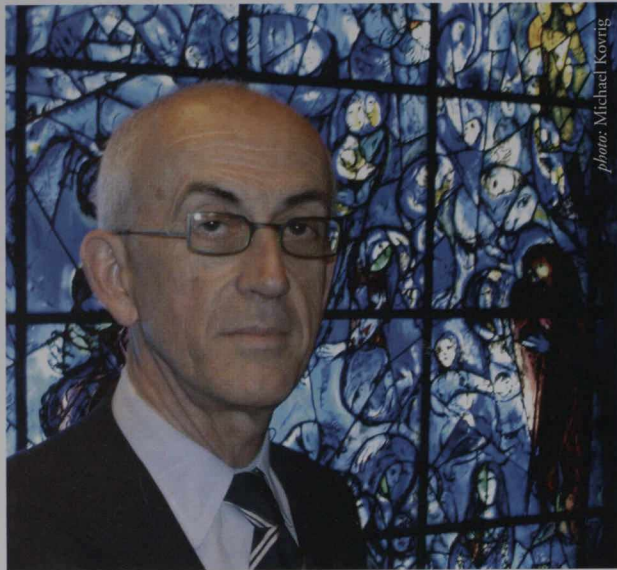


photo: Michael Kovrig

Ambassador Gilbert Laurin: The process of setting standards in human rights is painstaking but has an impact.

Gilbert Laurin brings a world view born of the Canadian Prairies to the country's mission at the United Nations.

As a child growing up in St. Boniface, Manitoba, Gilbert Laurin liked maps. He'd stick the point of his compass on his hometown, situated almost exactly in the centre of Canada, and draw ever-widening arcs until he reached the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. From an early age he was determined to see the world.

With a career that has taken him to Marseilles, Paris, Damascus, Rome and now New York City, where he nears the end of a four-year appointment as Canada's Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, he has well realized his goal.

Mr. Laurin, 60, says that his job working alongside fellow Ambassador

Allan Rock, Canada's Permanent Representative to the UN, is the best in the foreign service. But his diplomatic calling began almost by chance. After attending the University of Manitoba and Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, he was practising law in Vancouver when he saw a recruitment ad for the foreign service. "I didn't want to say one day that I didn't have the courage to follow my dream, so I applied and took the exam, and, to my great surprise, I was accepted."

He began at the Department of External Affairs in 1980 as an immigration officer, then spent a stint working on women's issues in the Human Rights Division, a pivotal period because it reinforced his interest in human rights and forced him to "reflect on things I had previously taken for granted." His interest in human rights has stayed with him throughout his career and is at the crux of much of his work today.

Mr. Laurin is proud of Canada's leadership at the UN. "There really are things for which we are well known, our expertise in peacekeeping, in women's and children's concerns, in disability issues; our contributions to policing in Haiti; and our role in the development of an international criminal court," he says. "We're also known in a general way as a bridge between the Americans and developing countries. We understand both and can help bring the two together."

The process of setting standards in human rights, a key role of the UN, is painstaking but has an impact. "You start with resolutions stating that people have rights and countries have

obligations, states get more comfortable with the idea, and year after year things build until someone says it's time for a legally binding instrument," he says. "The first thing you know you're negotiating that instrument, and at the end of the day it will make a real difference to the lives of people everywhere."

Mr. Laurin has relished all of his postings, but the UN trumps them all, with a range of issues that is both challenging and exhilarating. A typical day recently included a meeting about the transfer of some of Canada's peacekeeping responsibilities in the Golan Heights to Ukraine and another meeting organized by the Mexican government on UN reform.

Living in the Big Apple is "constantly exciting," he says, adding that he and his wife Maureen Girvan especially enjoy its vast cultural offerings. "New York is a city that is second to none, with a quality of life that is unbeatable."

Working in one of the world's most influential international organizations, Mr. Laurin feels right at home. He credits his Francophone Prairie roots with imparting him with a cosmopolitan outlook that has stood him in good stead.

"St. Boniface and Winnipeg were very ethnically diverse. You met people with different languages and customs and realized the world is not a very homogeneous place," he says. "That kind of diversity makes people more open and eliminates fear and hostility."

Simple words, but ones that could describe Mr. Laurin's own efforts at the UN. 🍁