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CANADA AT THE UNITED NATIONS

An Address by W.H. Barton, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to the United Nations Association in Canada, Winnipeg, May 13, 1977

In our program, my subject, "The Canadian Perspective – Canada at the United Nations", is presented in the context of the more general heading "the management of change", and I shall try today to shape my presentation within that general framework.

At the outset, I feel I must pose the question: Do we manage change or does change manage us? Perhaps the most we do is manage our adaptation to changes that come upon us willy-nilly. For example, the men and women who drafted the UN Charter and represented their governments at the time of its adoption no doubt would have agreed to the proposition that we live in the age of the nation state. And, indeed, the Charter itself states that the organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members. But I strongly doubt that they could have conceived of the lengths to which this concept would be stretched. Paul Martin may have had some idea of the consequences of the initiative he took in 1955 to work out a package deal on membership, but I suspect that even he did not foresee the day when we should have nearly 150 nations, most of them desperately poor and some with populations of only a few thousand.

The example I have cited is, of course, the first and perhaps the most fundamental change – one to which Canada, like all other member states, is still in the process of adapting. Let me mention some other fundamental changes in the UN. First, in 1945 the primary responsibility of the organization was seen to be the maintenance of peace and security. Today, let us be frank, the UN has adjusted its sights to a somewhat more modest role.

The UN has been able to fulfil an important – indeed vital – support function through the establishment and operation of peacekeeping forces, observer missions and investigative bodies. Canada has always been an active supporter of the UN in this respect, and this sense of involvement led us to play a leading role in the establishment of all the different UN peacekeeping activities over the years. Our appreciation of the importance of this function has also meant that, notwithstanding the circumstances of the termination of UNEF and the withdrawal of our troops in 1967, we were prepared to participate in the new UNEF and in UNDOF in 1973.

Security Council resolutions also have had value in providing a negotiating structure – for example, Resolution 242 on the Middle East. It can even be argued that General Assembly resolutions on peace and security matters, anodyne or prejudicial though they may usually be, do serve a useful purpose. But, except in one case, the permanent members of the Security Council have been unable to agree on the application of