

# A Triumph for Human Rights

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There are many milestones that mark the progress of humanity's search for freedom and dignity, such as the Magna Carta in Britain, the American Declaration of Independence, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. With each of these milestones, one nation took a step forward and set an example for others to follow.

Then 40 years ago last December, not just one nation but the world took a bigger step than ever before. There was no bloodshed, no violent revolution, and very little drama. Yet December 10, 1948, will be remembered as the start of a new era for human rights and freedoms.

On that day the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By doing so it ensured that human rights could never again be ignored by the international community.

The Universal Declaration now is recognized as one of the finest accomplishments of the United Nations (UN), and one that Canada can reflect on with pride: John P. Humphrey, a Canadian and the UN Director of Human Rights from 1946 to 1966, played a key role in its drafting.

The declaration, which proclaims that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity," includes 30 articles spelling out a range of fundamental rights and freedoms. It says that the people of all nations are entitled to these rights and



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freedoms simply because they are human beings, "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, birth or other status."

Few of the ideals embodied in the declaration were new. They stretch back hundreds of years and have been expressed by philosophers and world leaders many times. They are among the oldest and most deeply rooted aspirations of ordinary people all over the world.

But the declaration marked a new approach to pursuing those ideals. Before 1948, human rights were considered a "domestic" concern for each country, and not a proper subject for international attention. The experience of two world wars — and unprecedented violations of human rights — made such a restricted view intolerable.

With the Universal Declaration, human rights were recognized for the first time as a legitimate concern transcending national and political boundaries. Despite the enormous differences in social, economic, legal and political systems in countries

represented at the United Nations, the declaration was passed without a single dissenting vote. Member nations gave a commitment to respect human rights at home and to work for the universal recognition of these rights abroad. And they accepted a common standard of achievement to measure their progress.

The goal set by the declaration is very high. It includes, for example, all the most widely recognized civil and political rights, such as the right to life, liberty and security; freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention; equal protection of the law; freedom of opinion and expression; and the right to take part in the government of one's country.

In addition, the declaration broke new ground by addressing social and economic conditions. It identifies a range of basic social and economic rights, including the right to social security; the right to work under just and favourable conditions; the right to equal pay for work of equal value; the right to education; and the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being. Perhaps most important, it states that "everyone is entitled to a social and economic order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be realized."

The Universal Declaration was adopted by a UN General Assembly resolution, which in itself is not generally legally binding. However,