

5. Hanging In

The 1980's were a time of crisis for the UN. International confidence in the organization had fallen to a dangerous low, along with its financial resources. US policy in those years was to downgrade multilateralism, and in particular to constantly criticize the UN, leaving some of its agencies or remaining half-heartedly without paying dues, while at the same time demanding management reforms as a condition of payment or a possible return. It was a confrontational method that did much damage to UN finances without seriously tackling the problems. In spite of the blandishments of emissaries from Washington and from much of the Canadian media to follow this line, Canada stood fast in its commitment to the UN and its agencies. This is not to say the need for reform was not recognized, but rather that the Canadian choice, after a careful examination of all the alternatives, was to work for reform from within. Superpowers may assume the luxury of unilateral action, but for smaller and middle powers the need for an effective global system is obvious.

II. CANADA AND UN REFORM

Innovation and Growth - 1945-1980

From the start Canada's approach has been "reformist": Pearson was one of the first to advocate a revisionary conference ten years after San Francisco. This did not take place but another of his initiatives, the idea of a UN force following the Suez fiasco, was a major innovation for a security system paralysed by superpower rivalry. The breakthrough engineered by Paul Martin in 1955 that allowed the admission of 16 new member states is regarded as a major reform success (it profoundly changed the UN) and was motivated not only by principles of multilateralism and universality, but by a recognition of the advantages of admitting more middle powers with a point of view similar to Canada's own.

During the 1978 session, when the General Assembly virtually ground to a halt, and the need for streamlining its work became particularly pressing, Canadian Ambassador William Barton, sceptical of the promised review, convened an 18-country group which carried out the job with despatch; the new rules they put forward were implemented at the 1979 session. It was an initiative that presaged the next phase of Canada's reform activity at the UN.

Process Reform - 1980's

Dissatisfaction and disappointment with the UN's performance and its chronic financial troubles mounted in the 1970's, culminating in the post-1983 period when US actions seemed to threaten the fundamentals of the UN system itself. In response, Canada defended "process reform" based on existing structures rather than radical transformation. For example, in UNESCO and the FAO Canada campaigned for improved management and budgetary practices with some success, though without concrete proposals for fundamental change.