



Statements and Speeches

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A TIME FOR REDEDICATION TO UNESCO

Address by the Honourable Monique Vézina, Minister for External Relations, to the UNESCO General Conference, Sofia, Bulgaria, October 21, 1985.

...Canada's commitment to the ideals and the mandate of UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] is unaltered. We need a UNESCO. The world needs a UNESCO. It represents a key element in the UN system. Today though, UNESCO is somewhat representative of the general state of affairs in the UN. It has been called a "test case" for that system and for its reform, and so it is. Its rapid growth in membership — at 160 member states, it is now one of the largest specialized agencies — has ended the automatic majority of Western countries.

Its emphasis on financial discipline and restraint has been an indispensable factor in the process of reform. UNESCO's role as the intellectual arm of the UN system remains unique and valuable. But like other parts of the UN family, its programs have gradually taken on a new dimension — to accommodate the needs and aspirations of developing countries. In the case of UNESCO, this has meant extending additional technical assistance and development aid. While this flows directly from UNESCO's intellectual concerns, and while I, as minister responsible for Canada's co-operation programs, am quite aware of the needs in this area, it has unfortunately led to diffusion and fragmentation. UNESCO has perhaps responded too easily and too uncritically to requests from member states.

In the vital area of public perception, UNESCO has not done as well as other agencies in the UN system. The media in much of the world have treated it severely, and sometimes, unjustly. The allegations have perhaps been exaggerated, although press reports, at least in Canada, have been a little more positive of late, in recognition of the genuine progress that is now starting to occur in this organization.

But the fact remains that the crisis is still serious. UNESCO still does not enjoy the complete confidence of some members, certainly not of some of its major donors. UNESCO is not alone among intergovernmental institutions in facing problems. But UNESCO's problems are more visible. We need to improve its performance, to show that it can do its job and that its job is worth doing.

We are all in this together. Can we rededicate ourselves to the original ideals of UNESCO? Can UNESCO concentrate on areas of undeniable need which also command widespread support? Can it reduce overlap with other multilateral bodies? Can it respond to the challenge of zero real budgetary growth by weeding out less crucial activities in order to increase its effectiveness and credibility? In short, can reform succeed, and how quickly?

It is no easy task to alter policies, attitudes and traditions that have developed over 40 years. It is particularly painful for an organization of 160 member countries. Nor is it easy for UNESCO to approach its work in a less political, more responsible fashion. Organizations of governments are political by nature. What we ask is not whether, but that UNESCO eschew, sterile ideological controversy.
