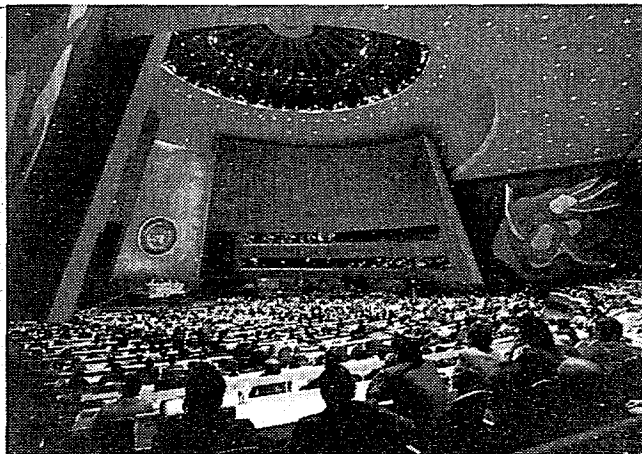


Briefing Paper #1

CANADA AT THE UN



UN 15097 MILTON GRANT

“Young Canadians are prepared to accept their role in the global community.”¹ This commitment made on behalf of Canadian youth, is of course part of a Canadian tradition. It reminds us of Canada's record of active participation in the history of the United Nations.

Canada took part in the San Francisco Conference where the final text of the United Nations Charter was prepared. Since that time our country has continued to provide ideas, personnel and funds to the organization. Our participation in peacekeeping operations has earned Canada a special place in the international community. Equally important is our support for economic, social and humanitarian initiatives of the United Nations. Canada's UN activities reflect a broad public interest evident in the existence of private organizations such as the United Nations Association in Canada (UNAC). Despite the criticisms that are levelled at the UN, Canada's preferred approach to international peace and security is one based on a system of international law and support for the United Nations.

SAN FRANCISCO

An opinion survey published in January 1945 revealed that 90% of Canada's population supported Canada's entry into the UN. The House of Commons approved Canadian participation in the San Francisco Conference by 200 votes to five. This meant that the members of the Canadian delegation who went to San Francisco took with them the support of the vast majority of their compatriots. In 1945, Canada already had 25 years' experience in the League of Nations, the old international organization which the UN replaced.

The Canadian delegation, led by Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, included the Justice Minister, Louis Saint-Laurent, the Canadian Ambassador to the United States, Lester B. Pearson,

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some government officials and Members of Parliament. Canada's three political parties were all represented in the delegation.

Although Canada's contribution to the Conference was not on a level with that of the major powers, its participation was nonetheless notable for several reasons. Canada played an active part in the final preparation of the Charter's articles on the main organs of the UN, namely the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Secretariat.

While recognizing that the UN's strength rested with the major powers, Canada insisted on having Article 23 of the Charter stipulate that when non-permanent members of the Security Council were elected, consideration should be given to the contribution made by members of the UN to peacekeeping, international security and other UN goals. Moreover, and also at Canada's request, the Charter stipulates that the Council may request military participation by a State that is not a member of Council only if this State participated in making the decisions leading to the military participation. Thus the Charter allows small and middle powers to play a part in an important field.

The efforts of the Canadian Delegation also made it possible to give the General Assembly broad powers though these did not extend to making recommendations on questions of peacekeeping and international security as long as the Security Council was handling them successfully. As Canada intended, this would enable the Assembly to take up the slack if the Council was blocked by a veto and would set a clear dividing line between the powers of these two main UN organs.

Some members of the Canadian Delegation, including Lester B. Pearson, felt that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) would be a very valuable instrument in the search for international peace and security. Canada paid very special attention to the wording of the parts of the Charter dealing with ECOSOC. The existing Charter contains a number of Canadian proposals, some of them designed to facilitate relations between the UN and its specialized institutions, and to consolidate the position of ECOSOC as coordinator of the activities of these institutions. Another Canadian idea adopted by the Conference was to increase the powers of ECOSOC by authorizing it to not only make recommendations but to prepare (or to have

prepared) reports and studies on questions within its frame of reference. Finally, the Conference accepted three Canadian proposals designed to protect the independence, integrity and competence of the Secretariat (Articles 100, 101 and 105 of the Charter).

In San Francisco, Canada showed that a middle power could use its experience and potential to play an important part in organization. Canada introduced a method of operation known as “the functional approach.” This involved working like a potter who shapes an object as he creates it and is not restricted by a preconceived form. In the context of United Nations committees, this approach meant that the Canadians sought to reconcile viewpoints rather than to impose solutions. The method had proved effective in the years of negotiation and compromise which preceded the foundation of the Canadian confederation itself. A *New York Times* journalist, who had covered the San Francisco Conference, later paid tribute to the Canadian effort saying that “When the chips were down, the Canadians fought harder and more effectively for the principle of collective security than anybody else.”

Of interest in passing is a linguistic contribution made by Canada to the San Francisco Conference, and later to the first General Assembly. Canada did not yet have an official policy on bilingualism but was nevertheless the only country to insist on having accurate and well-written translations in both English and French.

KEEPING THE PEACE

When the first United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) had come to a close, Canadian delegation leader and Justice Minister Louis Saint-Laurent remarked that a transition had been made from barbarism to a sort of “international feudalism.” Many times, when this “feudalism” gave rise to confrontations, the UN was able to make use of Canada's talent for negotiation. This was the case in the membership deadlock of 1955. When it was founded, the UN had 51 members. Five years later the number had risen to 60. Then between 1951 and 1955, all membership applicants were rejected by the veto power of the

1. From a statement made by Kay Worthington on behalf of Canadian youth during the 1985 Canadian visit of United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar.