

The best United Nations we have

by William H. Barton

On June 7 of this year the United Nations General Assembly convened in Special Session to consider what can be done to reduce the distinct possibility of nuclear doomsday and to divert the enormous expenditure of resources for armies and armaments to more constructive and productive purposes. During the four weeks of debate upwards of one hundred and fifty presidents, prime ministers or foreign ministers are speaking, a sheaf of resolutions are being adopted, and agreement is being reached to meet again five years from now — assuming, of course, that we haven't blown ourselves up in the meantime.

That Session exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the United Nations in this, the thirty-seventh year of its life. On the one hand, the Session provides a forum for the nations of the world to come together to articulate their desire for peace and to try to agree on mechanisms to negotiate measures of disarmament and arms control. On the other, it demonstrates once again that the organization has no corporate powers to take action, except to the extent that the members states agree that it should do so. And since there is no agreement on real progress, the arms race goes on as if the Special Session had never been called.

From the human point of view it serves as a rallying flag for the thousands of concerned individuals in every country of the world to demand that governments bring a halt to the suicide race for more and more arms. But it also shows how ineffective the UN is in touching the much larger mass of people who remain apathetic, cynical, disbelieving or even hostile.

Thus the question of whether or not the Special Session is useful is a highly subjective one, calling for value-judgments which in a larger sense must be called into play when attempting to assess the UN itself as an institution and to determine what we should reasonably expect of it.

UN is its members, that's all

The fact is that Canadians have always had difficulty in recognizing the United Nations for what it is. In the public mind, and all too often in the speeches of our politicians, we attribute to it a corporate identity which it does not possess, and seek to hold it to account for its inability to take positive action when international peace is threatened, or some other critical development arises which in our view calls for international action. The reality is that it is, in effect, a standing diplomatic conference of member states, and its accomplishments are entirely dependent on

the degree of common purpose which develops on any particular issue. Common purpose, of course, means more than the simple act of voting in the same way, it encompasses also the commitment of resources necessary to turn words into deeds. In that respect no member is in a position to cast the first stone.

These are difficult times; we are locked in the most severe economic recession since the thirties, with devastating consequences for all, but especially the developing nations; great power relations are at a low ebb; there are wars, threats of wars and violent social upheavals in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas; basic human rights and the rule of law are under heavy attack. Can the UN fulfill its useful role as envisaged in the Charter as nations seek to cope with these problems, and can we as supporters of the goals of the United Nations Charter help to see that it does?

To answer these questions we must look at the UN and see it for what it is. The organization came into being with one enormous advantage — a Charter which sets out the universal goals of mankind — peace, economic and social advancement, the dignity of the person and the rule of law. In this sense it reflects the aspirations of mankind; but it also reflects the reality that we live in an age when the concept of the sovereign nation-state is supreme. Each nation exercises the power at its disposal to the best of its ability in an effort to achieve its purposes. The United Nations is not an embryo world government; it is a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of their common ends. Unfortunately, these common aspirations set out in ringing language in Article I of the Charter, are given widely differing interpretations and priorities by the different countries.

The UN of today, like every other polity, national or international, has been shaped by its history. When it first came into existence it reflected the common goals of the victorious allied powers in the Second World War. There were only fifty member nations and most of Africa and Asia were colonial appendages of European powers. As the war drew to a close the Allied unity of purpose began to

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