

Canada and the United Nations: 50 Years of Partnership

In the spring of 1945, Canada and 49 other nations gathered at the San Francisco Conference. These 50 countries drafted and adopted the Charter of the United Nations, a new international body created to prevent military conflict by, among other means, removing its underlying social and economic causes.

Canada's delegation to the conference included Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King and two future prime ministers, Louis St. Laurent and Lester B. Pearson. They took an active role in defining the mandate of the organization and ensuring the strength of the General Assembly, the UN Secretariat, the Economic and Social Council and the specialized agencies.

Canada quickly earned a reputation as an objective mediator and an effective conciliator capable of identifying common ground and purpose in the midst of diversity. Canada remained prominent in the early days of the UN as the organization and its agencies began to evolve. In 1945, a conference in Québec led to the creation of the Food and Agricultural Organization; and Montreal was chosen as the headquarters for the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Individual Canadians played a leading role in the early years: Dr. Brock Chisholm helped to establish the World Health Organization and served as its first director general; John Humphrey of McGill University established the Division of Human Rights in the UN Secretariat and produced the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948; Yvon Beaulne made a substantial contribution to the work of the UN Commission on Human Rights; Adelaide Sinclair was involved in the creation of the United Nations Children's Fund in 1948; Napoléon Leblanc worked to build the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; Lester B. Pearson served as President of the UN General Assembly in 1952-53; Paul Martin was responsible for breaking the logjam of applications for UN membership caused by vetoes by either the United States or the Soviet Union. His proposal to admit a block of countries led to the admission of 16 nations in 1955, paving the way for the continual growth of the UN to its present 185 members.

Lester B. Pearson is credited with creating the concept of peacekeeping in response to the Suez Crisis of 1956; and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. Since then, Canada has developed considerable expertise in peacekeeping. This activity has built the country's international reputation and enabled Canada to play a role proportionately greater than our actual military strength might indicate.