

Canada abstained on about one-seventh of the resolutions adopted. This is not a high rate of abstention compared with the voting records of other countries from the Western group. In this context it should be remembered, however, that Western states are now a small minority of the total membership of the General Assembly; they often face the choice of opposing resolutions favoured by the majority or of abstaining on them. Abstention is often an acknowledgement that positive but not yet satisfactory progress towards consensus has been made, as well as an encouragement to persevere on that road.

D. Majority and minority: the Charter system

Third World countries are concerned about the privileged status enjoyed in the UN by the traditional major powers, four out of five of which are industrialized countries. Collective action in the General Assembly is one of the few ways open to them to press for reform of the international political and economic system, even though the Assembly lacks the power of the Security Council. They do not always vote the same way on major issues, but they have gradually developed a system of regional consultation and voting that, on matters of joint concern such as trade preferences and the terms of aid, they have extended to include more than 100 countries.

It is sometimes said that the majority of United Nations members exercise a "tyranny" over the minority in the General Assembly by abusing their numerical strength, disregarding in the process the Charter, the prerogatives of the Security Council, and the rules of procedure of the General Assembly. Spokesmen for the majority have pointed out in reply that Western states had themselves constituted the majority of earlier years and, as authors of the Charter and rules of procedure of both the Security Council and the General Assembly, had not hesitated to advance their own ends. These are understandable reactions. In fact, however, on many issues before recent sessions of the General Assembly (Cyprus, Korea, the Spanish Sahara, the numerous decolonization and disarmament proposals, etc.), national and regional considerations rather than any mechanical majority on the whole determined the final voting alignments and, as we have seen, almost 50 per cent of UN resolutions are adopted by consensus. The "tyranny of the majority" may be a striking metaphor, but in the complex and rapidly-evolving political context of the United Nations it cannot be accepted at face value.

The general conferences of the Specialized Agencies provide the same opportunities to the Third World for initiative and majority support as the General Assembly, but this is not true of their executive bodies, where the major industrial countries have maintained a significant influence under various customary or constitutional arrangements. Apart from the provisions for weighted voting, which protect their interests in the IBRD and the IMF and in subordinate international financial institutions, they effectively possess a collective veto in the ILO as members of the ten states of chief industrial importance; they are assured of quasi-permanent membership in the executive bodies of such technical agencies as ICAO, the IMCO, and the IAEA by