

Last year, the world celebrated the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. The birthday was an uneasy affair. The celebration was bittersweet as world leaders were more often prone to damn the organization with faint praise rather than honour its undisputed achievements or underline the vital nature of its work. It was appropriate in this inhospitable climate that the Secretary-General's original plans for the commemoration, a special conference to consider the various proposals for reform of the United Nations, be postponed until after the anniversary celebrations.

As we contemplate the long list of suggestions to restructure and reenergize the United Nations, we may be tempted to think that the UN at 50 is experiencing an exceptional mid-life crisis or an unprecedented existential challenge. In fact, as we glance at relatively recent history, we cannot fail to see that the UN was challenged even before the Charter was signed and that it has been demonized almost constantly during its half-century of existence.

To say that the UN is imperfect is simply to remind oneself that it is a human institution. No one ever expected the work of the UN to be a sinecure. An association of 185 sovereign states is not an ideal basis either for managing the present or devising the best possible future. Even though the UN has been and will continue to be demonized, it remains an institution of vital importance to the international community – not just to the nations which are its formal members but to “the Peoples of the United Nations” in whose name the Charter was proclaimed in 1945 and who, for five decades, have so often turned to the UN and its agencies for solutions to the varied problems of their individual and collective lives. The UN is truly a necessary institution. We all have an interest in the success of the United Nations; we also have an awesome responsibility to see that it will endure.

What I propose to offer this evening is a personal perspective on the past, present and future of the United Nations as well as an assessment of its importance to Canada. Although not an historian, I believe that some knowledge of the origins and development of the United Nations is vital to an analysis of the condition of the organization today and to a prognosis for its future.

The United Nations was not the first attempt in this century to craft an organization whose primary objective was to maintain peace in the wake of a global war. An earlier effort, which had given birth to the League of Nations, was a dismal failure whose spectre would haunt those who, during the Second World War, set about to draft what would become the Charter of the United Nations. Without dwelling on all the many and varied reasons why the League of Nations failed, or on the disillusionments and disappointments of the two decades which we now describe – aptly, if sadly – as the “interwar years”, I would like to make a few brief observations about the relevance of that experience to the establishment of the United Nations.