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Canada in the United Nations

A Tradition of Service

September 1989

Whether as diplomats, non-governmental activists, members of peacekeeping forces or UN employees, over the last four decades numerous active and committed Canadians have participated in UN activities and worked to promote the important process of change and reform.

During the UN's first decade, Canadians were prominent in the launching of most of the major specialised agencies. The Food and Agriculture Organization was born at a conference in Quebec City, while the International Civil Aviation Organization was later established in Montreal. Dr. Brock Chisholm was a central figure in setting up the World Health Organization and became its first Director-General.

Canadians were leaders in other early activities. In 1946, John Humphrey, a professor of law at McGill University in Montreal, set up the Division of Human Rights in the United Nations Secretariat and he remained head of this post for nearly 20 years. He was responsible for writing the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and guiding it through to adoption by the General Assembly in 1948.

Judge John Erskine Read was a member of the International Court of Justice from 1946 to 1958. During those 12 years, called "the most active period in the court's history," the Court gave 30 substantive decisions. Two of them, the Corfu Channel (1949) and the Anglo-Norwegian Fisheries (1951) cases, were important in developing the Law of the Sea.

In the early 1950s, efforts to extend UN membership to a number of newly independent states became deadlocked. Paul Martin, then Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, took the initiative in 1955 to break this logjam by sponsoring a resolution which succeeded in the acceptance of 16 new member states. This constituted one of the most far-reaching initiatives Canada has taken at the UN.

Lester B. Pearson on the UN:

■ "The principle of collective security is fundamental to the Charter. It is based on the conviction that aggression in any part of the world constitutes, in the long run, a threat to every other part. If it is true that we cannot tolerate a city of residential suburbs surrounding slums and degradation, it is equally true that we cannot be safe in a world community which condones lawless aggression in any part of it."



Earlier, in 1949, Lester B. Pearson had been influential in the intense discussions which ended in agreed action over Palestine. Later he tried to negotiate an early end to the Korean War. In 1956, Mr. Pearson initiated the most famous — and the most often praised — Canadian endeavour when the UN was faced with the crisis over Suez. In November Canada took the lead in setting up the United Nations Emergency Force, and these peacekeeping troops provided a buffer between Israeli and Egyptian forces for 11 years. For his work in the General Assembly, and for his negotiating skills which brought all sides to support the peacekeeping operation, Lester B. Pearson, then Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Mr. Pearson's success might easily have faltered within weeks had there not been a remarkable Canadian soldier on hand to create the United Nations Emergency Force and to lead it through some very sensitive situations. Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns was experienced in the politics and logistical problems of the region, and was instrumental in securing the withdrawal of the combatants. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the first UN peacekeeping force, the International Peace Academy presented Lt.-Gen. Burns with the first distinguished Peace-Keepers Award in recognition of his outstanding service to the cause of peace.

Yves Fortier on the UN:

■ "The United Nations has proven its mettle, successfully weathering a number of storms in recent years. There is a renewed sense of purpose and optimism — to resolve old disputes and to get on with the work of building a prosperous global economy and healthy environment in which all can share."

