

Some situations that may lead to an abstention may be described as follows:

- a) support for the general thrust of a resolution, but with significant objections to certain of its provisions (for example, the resolution at the twenty-ninth session to establish a "Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States");
- b) concern by the abstaining nation to preserve impartiality in a dispute involving third parties since it does not wish, because of its obligations as peace-keeper or eventual role as mediator, to appear to be favouring one side or the other (for example, a number of resolutions on the Cyprus, Middle East and India-Pakistan questions);
- c) concern that the adoption of a proposal, whose general objectives might otherwise be acceptable, may prejudice future negotiations by influencing the terms of reference, or predetermining the status of the parties, or prejudging which parties are to participate, or other similar factors (for example, Canada has abstained on a number of resolutions concerning the Palestine Liberation Organization on the grounds that it does not wish to prejudge whether the PLO is the "sole" or "only legitimate" representative of the Palestinians);
- d) dissatisfaction with unrealistic elements in an otherwise well-meaning proposal, which may have prevented a more acceptable resolution from coming forward (for example, during the Suez crisis in 1956 Canada abstained on the U.S. cease-fire proposal because it contained no provision for implementation such as a peace-keeping force).

The use of an abstention is not confined to a few countries, or to countries of a certain geographical or ideological group. It is very rare in the General Assembly for a vote to be taken without some abstentions, and the number can have a marked bearing on the significance and impact of the vote. In the event that Canada decides to abstain, consideration may be given to the number, status and affiliations of other countries that may also be intending to abstain, i.e. "the company one keeps". Members are normally entitled to make statements explaining their vote, either before or after the vote is taken. Canada gives very careful consideration to such explanations of vote, including as appropriate the reasons that have caused it to abstain. These explanations form part of the official record and often have a political impact greater than the numerical tally of the vote.

Misunderstanding in Canada about abstention appears to be based on the belief that it reflects a refusal to "stand up and be counted", either because the Government has no policy on the issues at hand or prefers not to reveal its policy. This is not a correct assumption. For Canada, an abstention is a conscious, active and positive decision, taken for one of the reasons outlined above; it is not the result of indifference or indecisiveness.

The table in Appendix C shows that Canada abstained on about one-fifth of the resolutions adopted at the regular sessions of the General Assembly in 1972 and 1973, and on about one-sixth of the resolutions adopted in 1974 and in 1975. At UNGA XXXI