



Statements and Speeches

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STRENGTHENING THE UN SYSTEM

Statement by Stephen Lewis, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to Plenary, United Nations General Assembly, New York, December 17, 1984.

Some 24 hours from now, this part of the thirty-ninth session of the General Assembly will conclude. It is therefore not the time for elaborate and lengthy speechifying. But my country cannot let this moment pass without making a few succinct and pointed observations.

To put matters quite simply, Canada is both weary and impatient with those who make a fetish of impugning the worth, legitimacy and relevance of the United Nations. It happens all too frequently outside this body. It even happens, on occasion, within. In Canada's view, the time has come to launch a concerted campaign to defend and to strengthen the United Nations. There is no better moment to start than in the fortieth anniversary year.

No one in this Assembly would deny that the United Nations, and many of its organic parts, have frailties. The litany of deficiency is well-rehearsed: time and again the detractors tell us that the polarization between the superpowers reduces the United Nations to impotence; that the rhetorical excesses are extravagant; that speeches and issues and arguments coagulate in the throes of repetition; that the institutional processes are antiquated; that the incremental changes are slow to the point of inertia.

To each allegation, there is, alas, some truth. There is some pardonable despair — one can understand the feelings of futility when behaviour at the UN turns to rancour or induces immobility. But to succumb to the allegations seems, to Canada, to miss the point on two fundamental grounds. First, the expectations are pitched too high. The United Nations, with the greatest will and idealism in the world, was never meant to be a panacea. It is an institutional arrangement within which individual nations operate, and the commitment and co-operation of each of its sovereign states delimits the measure of its effectiveness. Back in 1946, curiously, in his first report to the United Nations, the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, put it well: "The United Nations is no stronger than the collective will of the nations that support it. Of itself it can do nothing. It is a machinery through which the nations can co-operate. It can be used and developed in the light of its activities and experience, to the untold benefit of humanity, or it can be discarded and broken."

That brings me directly to the second point. The United Nations has obviously not yet scaled the heights of untold benefit to humanity, nor is it yet, in any sense, discarded or broken. The reality lies somewhere in between, and the reality is impressive indeed.

Just take a look at this session. Whatever the inevitable frustrations of individual member states, even at times over procedural matters like those of last Friday, we have had a General Assembly which galvanized itself around Ethiopia; passed, by consensus, a formidable declaration on the economic