FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Statement by Mrs. Alene Holt, Canadian Representative
on the Third (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)
Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, on
November 20, 1959

...The history of this item in the United Nations has
en long and difficult. It is now 13 years since the Assembly
solved that "Freedom of information is a fundamental human right,
d the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations
consecrated". In the last few years, a deeply-rooted divergence
opinion has unfortunately arisen in this Assembly on the content
the basic concept of freedom of speech and opinion, and the
rpose which a convention on freedom of information should serve.
uld it help to insulate countries against news and opinions they
nt to control or should it help to bring about a more universal
spect for freedom of thought and expression within and across
ntiers? It is easy for a Canadian to make a choice between these
o alternatives.

We have in Canada - and we are proud of it - an old and
stinguished tradition of freedom of speech and of the press.
nadians are very jealous of their rights in this field and would
and no interference with or arbitrary restriction of what they
gard to be one of their principal liberties. It follows that Canada
convinced of the desirability of a convention that would safe-
rd this most important human right and ensure its world-wide
servance.

As it stands now, the Draft Convention prepared by the
c Committee of the General Assembly does not appear to promote
eedom of information. In addition to being as a whole much too
rmissive, the text is lacking in clarity in many places while it
pears to contradict itself in many others. Surely, our job here
not made easier through the fact that we must base our discussions or
a definite text that, apart from any question of substance or
objectives, would need to be substantially recast and streamlined if
it were only to look like an international instrument.

Madam Chairman, I am aware that in the past tempers have
ten flared up on this subject and Glasnes of opinions have been
commonplace. This is why I am ready to confess to a certain feeling
of anxiety when I approach this item. I cannot forget that an
important principle is at stake here which I would not like to see
ssified to short-term ephemeral considerations. It is indeed because of the very
portance that is attached to freedom of information
that I will try and contribute as much as I possibly can to the work
of the Committee on that complex problem. I will do so in the hope
that a useful common denominator will emerge as a result of our joint
efforts. In this connection, I do not quite see the possibility
that, at some stage of our work, a majority of delegations might come
round to the view that it might be advisable to reach agreement first
on what we all mean by freedom of information and governments in regard to that
think should guide individuals to struggle with a convention. For this
freedom before contenting of Information would deserve care-
purpose, a Declaration of Freedom of Information in itself but also
would be valuable politically in this light,