

FOREWORD

Canada's election to serve on the Security Council of the United Nations during 1977-78 marks the fourth time Canada has served on the Council. There are five permanent and ten non-permanent members of the Council, the latter being elected for two-year periods on the basis of representation of the main regions of the world. Canada's membership of the Council is bound to draw attention again to the nature of the United Nations as an institution and to its place in Canadian foreign policy.

Attention is all the more likely to be paid to these matters because the recommendations and decisions of the General Assembly, the Security Council and UN agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have become a subject of public debate and controversy in a way that is new in Canada. During the first years of its history, the UN was often regarded as futile or irrelevant because the major decision-making body, the Security Council, was paralysed by the veto. Efforts were made to transfer the peacekeeping powers of the Council to the Assembly, where the veto did not apply, and under the leadership of Dag Hammarskjold and Lester Pearson the UN was able to intervene effectively between Israel and Egypt in 1956. The Council resumed its authority in the 1960s when it responded to requests for peacekeeping assistance to the Congo and to Cyprus. Canadians by and large supported these UN operations, especially as Canada played a leading role in them, while remaining largely unaware of the less dramatic non-security functions of the UN - economic and social co-operation, development of international law, definition of human rights and freedoms, etc.

Towards the middle of the decade of the Sixties and since then, however, these non-security functions began to become the major concern of the UN, which included 82 members in 1959 and now has 147. The new members saw the UN as a major instrument for the modernization of their economies and the redistribution of wealth from rich to poor countries. They also set to work to enlist the help of the UN in freeing the remaining colonies, especially in Africa, and in the campaign against racial discrimination that focused on South Africa. Finally, the war between Israel, Egypt and Syria in October 1973, followed by the oil embargo and the dramatic increase in oil prices, had the effect of reinforcing demands for a new international economic order by the use of "oil" leverage. This new strength was apparent in 1974, when the Assembly passed a resolution admitting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as an official observer of Assembly proceedings, and in 1975, when the Assembly identified racism with Zionism. Debate on these subjects spilled over into the Specialized Agencies of the UN, bedevilled the agendas of technical conferences, and appeared in the eyes of many Western observers to discredit the UN system as a whole.

There is a danger, in these circumstances, that the functions and procedures of the UN will be misunderstood or, if understood, will be dismissed as at best ineffective and at worst harmful. There have always been critics of the UN, but there have rarely been so many critics or so much misinformation. Before we write off the UN, we should consider its value as well as its weakness, and we should be ready to offer proposals for reform unless we believe that a universal organization having similar purposes is unnecessary. A common misconception is that the UN is somehow separate from its members in the sense that a piece of machinery is separate from the person who uses it.