

Thirty-Second General Assembly: improvement over recent years

By Ross Francis

In his speech to the General Assembly last fall, the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs, Don Jamieson, startled many both in New York and at home with the blunt statement: "What Canadians are saying is that the performance of the United Nations is not good enough".

Those who had read the UN Secretary-General's annual report would have been less surprised, for Mr Waldheim had raised the related question of "the political will of governments to utilize existing institutions for the constructive purposes that they were designed to fulfil". Without this political will, he warned, coupled with self-restraint and statesmanship, the confidence of governments in international institutions might be eroded. He concluded that it was easy to blame international institutions for shortcomings that were the direct result of the conflicting policies or actions of governments.

Mr Jamieson, for his part, said that he could not agree that "the organization and its member states are powerless to remove the root causes of those major tensions that now require all of us to live out our lives in the constant shadow of impending disaster". Like Mr Waldheim, he stressed to the foreign ministers present the need to make the United Nations more effective.

As an organization with 149 members (Djibouti and Vietnam were added last fall) that have widely differing objectives, the General Assembly could scarcely be expected to change its habits within a single session. Many of the debates were reminiscent of the UN at its worst - repetitive, unconstructive, leading to resolutions that contributed little to the solving of the problems with which they dealt. But most observers detected encouraging signs of improvement. The General Assembly demonstrated its ability to make decisions quickly - by condemning aerial hijacking, for example. (A cynic might conclude that, as perhaps the world's largest *per capita* users of jet aircraft, diplomats are particularly sensitive to threats to their safety, regardless of ideology.) Members were in-

creasingly sensitive to the charge that the UN had been one-sided in its condemnation of violators of human rights, attacking only those out of favour with the majority, and were willing to consider, if not yet to implement, reforms. Of perhaps greater long-term significance, the Assembly successfully completed its lengthy negotiations to reorganize the economic and social structure of the UN.

Record number

Judged by the number of resolutions it passed, the Assembly could be considered a record success, with a total of 262, requiring a 495-page book to contain them. Those who have come to believe that fewer resolutions taken seriously by more people are better than the reverse were not impressed by the record. They were, however, pleased with another - that of the 158 resolutions accepted by consensus or without objection. This figure demonstrated that the non-aligned nations, which made up the bulk of the membership, were more interested in carrying the rest of the membership with them than in relying on their automatic majority to push through resolutions. Of the resolutions requiring recorded votes (11 were non-recorded), Canada voted for 54, voted against nine, and abstained on 30. Canada was, therefore, able to support over 85 per cent of the resolutions. Incidentally, in view of the widespread Canadian impression that abstaining at the UN is a uniquely Canadian form of behaviour, it is worth while noting that Canada did so less than the other Western countries on the Security Council: Britain, 34; France, 44; Germany, 36; U.S.A. 36.

The Assembly debates on the Middle East were unquestionably the most disappointing. The dramatic events in the area

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