

What is relatively new is the amount of time that the assemblies and governing bodies of the Specialized Agencies and the technical conferences devote to political issues. The type of political debate normally associated with the General Assembly and the Security Council threatens increasingly to dominate the agendas of technical meetings and to undermine their capacity to deal seriously with substantive issues. To use the Specialized Agencies as political sounding-boards may be irritating but is essentially harmless; to attempt to use them as political instruments to achieve objectives extraneous to the traditional competence of the agencies and the declared purposes of the conferences could in the long run destroy the usefulness of the technical side of the UN system. The conclusion arrived at by some observers in 1974-75 was that political differences between the industrialized countries and the developing countries, especially over Middle East issues, could indeed endanger the whole UN system. The U.S.A., French and Swiss decisions to suspend or reduce their shares of the regular budget of UNESCO in protest against anti-Israel actions was symbolic of this mood.

During the latter half of 1975 and into 1976, however, it was becoming apparent that, even though the rhetoric of political confrontation is sometimes in evidence at technical meetings, the level of substantive disruption is relatively low. Member states are unwilling to sacrifice their national interests for debating victories. Given the great diversity of national interests, action based on resolutions sponsored by the majority and opposed by the minority is usually difficult to organize or takes place on issues of peripheral interest to a large number of supporting states. At the UN Law of the Sea Conference, for example, the vast majority of participants interpret their national interests without reference to traditional alignments or popular rhetoric.

This is not to argue that "politicization" is a minor problem that will soon disappear. Conferences on special subjects may continue to be disrupted by issues arising out of the conflict in the Middle East or racial discrimination in South Africa as long as these situations endure. Human rights will not soon be honoured in all states. At the same time pressure for radical change is increasing in the field of international economic co-operation and is most unlikely to abate. The implementation of the "New International Economic Order" throughout the UN system therefore presents a major challenge for the future. Those who advocate revolutionary change both in international relations and in the UN itself are likely to prevail over more moderate elements unless the North-South dialogue achieves substantive results.

C. Voting procedures: the use of abstention

In the one-nation-one-vote General Assembly -- where states with populations of medium-sized Canadian cities have the same numerical voting strength as the Soviet Union, the United States or China -- some votes can be considered simply as non-binding polls of world opinion, or of the world's governments. The effective "moral authority" or international political influence of a General Assembly vote may vary greatly; if there is significant opposition to a resolution although it has carried numerically, or if there is a