

Recap of 31st General Assembly: relative tranquillity at last

Geoffrey Pearson

Three more members were admitted to the United Nations at the last session of the General Assembly, bringing the total to 119. Of this number, 85 African, Asian and Caribbean countries pay the minimum assessment of .02 per cent. These facts reflect the most important reality about the Assembly today — it is numerically dominated by countries with very low national incomes, most of which are former European colonies. Accordingly, their interests are heavily concentrated on questions of economic and social development, colonialism and racism. Other traditional concerns of the UN, such as disarmament and human rights, remain prominent but tend to be viewed through the powerful prism of "inequality" rather than as distinct phenomena. In the same way, the Arab-Israeli dispute acquires a peculiar "resonance" in UN committee rooms, attracting all those delegations with recent memories of the struggle to determine their separate destinies, as well as those who see in Arab wealth an escape from bondage to the money-markets of the West. And, as well, the link between racism and apartheid in Southern Africa that colours debate on this subject with "a passionate intensity", while the abuse of authority in many other parts of the world is passed over in relative silence.

If "inequality" is one key concern at the UN, another and related interest is "accountability". Most governments recognize that the organization of world politics and will remain, hierarchical, and that a body of close to 150 sovereign members cannot act effectively as a negotiating forum. It is accepted that smaller groups — the 18-Member Committee of the Conference on Disarmament, the 27-member Conference on International Economic Co-operation, the Conference on the Middle East, for instance — must do the real work. But the Assembly watches their activities closely. If there is long delay or deadlock, the Assembly is likely to call for a special session of its members, meeting outside the regular fall timetable, or to

demand that plenary bodies, such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development, assume full charge of the agenda. Peace and security issues, which are the legitimate business of the Security Council, are given a regular airing by the Assembly, where resolutions can be carried with large majorities despite their lack of mandatory force.

The General Assembly session under review was one of relative tranquillity if viewed against the rather tumultuous sessions of the preceding two years. There was a greater appreciation by member states of the value of consensus, especially in view of U.S. reactions to the "tyranny of the majority", and there were signs of movement on certain major issues that encouraged moderation. Debate on the Middle East, a source of much controversy in 1975, was generally subdued, owing in part to the U.S. election and to the difficult situation in Lebanon. Western initiatives with respect to Rhodesia, culminating in the convening of the Geneva conference, introduced a degree of restraint in the debate on Southern African matters. Nevertheless, there was also a tone of growing impatience detectable in African speeches. There was tacit agreement by both sides in the "North-South dialogue" to await the results of the CIEC in Paris, of which Canada serves as co-chairman, and the follow-up negotiations to the May 1976 UNCTAD conference held in Nairobi.

Major items of interest to Canada at the session were the elections to the Security Council and the follow-up to the Habitat conference in Vancouver. Canada was elected to the Security Council for its fourth term beginning January 1, 1977,

Mr. Pearson is Director-General of the Bureau of United Nations Affairs in the Department of External Affairs. He joined the Department in 1952 and has served in France, Mexico and India. He was formerly Chairman of the External Affairs Policy Analysis Group. The views expressed are those of Mr. Pearson.

*U.S. election
and Lebanon
quieten
Middle East
debate*