

United Nations. Within four months, in January 1989, I was sitting at the Security Council table representing Canada, which had just been elected to its fifth two-year term as a non-permanent member with the largest majority any nation had ever garnered since the birth of the Organisation. During those two years, the Council, in succession, dealt with crises in the Middle East, Southern Africa, Central America and Central Asia. Afghanistan, Panama, Nicaragua, Namibia, Iran, Cambodia, Lebanon, Romania became my daily briefs. In August 1990, issues relating to the war in the Persian Gulf monopolised the agenda of the Security Council.

And all the while, to the east of the building on the East River, the world was being transformed. The Cold War ended. The Berlin wall came down. The Soviet Union disintegrated. Nelson Mandela was freed. As I said when I returned to private life in Montreal, in January 1992, I did not miss the practice of law for one moment during my term in New York.

I mention this personal involvement with the UN so as to explain my perspective regarding how these dramatic changes impacted the United Nations. As well, from a front row seat during those momentous years, I was able to witness Canada's evolving commitment to the Organisation.

When I arrived in New York in September 1988, my colleagues and I could already discern the first signs of constructive cooperation between member states. The Cold War was beginning to thaw noticeably. I recall my amazement when I listened in December 1988 to the intervention in the General Assembly by Mikhail Gorbachev who called for the primacy of international law in the political conduct of States. Conflicts which, in a previous era, would have provided an occasion for ritual confrontation and recrimination were now amenable to discussion, negotiation and resolution. The Security Council became able, for the first time since 1945, to play its proper and legitimate role in confronting the world's international security challenges.

What the world was witnessing was nothing less than an earth-shattering revolution. Command economics based on Marxist ideology were collapsing in the Soviet Union and beyond. The nuclear arms race was ending. Democratic institutions triumphed over totalitarian alternatives. Respect for human rights was growing. If the United Nations itself was not the cause of these dramatic changes, it certainly lent considerable momentum to the new world order which appeared on the horizon.

The Canadian role in the revitalisation and modernisation of the UN during those exciting years was crucial. But this was mainly a quiet, non public role. Canada also played a very prominent, visible role at the UN when the Gulf War began in August 1990.

When the world began to react to Iraq's brutal invasion of Kuwait, it was not foreordained that the UN would be the focal point of international action.