

□ SEEKING A NEW BALANCE: REFORM AT THE UNITED NATIONS □

Julie Loranger, who headed the Branch since September 1985, has recently left us. This is probably a good time to take a look at the United Nations, and the part Canada plays in it. As I recall the past two years, I am struck by the contrast between the turmoil at the United Nations and the calm that prevails here. In New York, this has been a period of continual crisis, largely manufactured, but sometimes also real. The Organization has gone beyond its 36th point of no return, I think — or was it the 37th? I know for sure it has missed its umpteenth turning point...

When people realize that I work “for the United Nations”, they usually ask me two questions: Where do the United Nations stand? Are we always such “boy scouts”? I normally answer the first question seriously, even if I interpret it as meaning that the organization is on its last legs. This is because I am impressed by the durability of multilateral institutions. After all, I have attended meetings in the “Latvia” room of the Palais des Nations in Geneva and eaten using cutlery stamped with the initials “L o N”. The second question always makes me blush. I would like to answer that we have been forceful, and the world has been stunned and trembled with admiration. That would be a lie. Actually, I still firmly believe in the organization. Canadians must have defending the United Nations bred in their genes. We will be the very last people to crank up the system to make it work.

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entirely by the latent energy naturally inherent in any large institutional system. Used to crisis, accustomed to defeats or half-victories, the United Nations now rarely dare to innovate, to pioneer, to show leadership. The political maturity of institutions, like that of human beings, may perhaps depend on the accumulation of scar tissue. The

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result (as in debates in the General Assembly, for instance) is the basic philosophy of not always yielding to the slightest temptation to make waves, to commit excesses and to be dramatic. Another result is inertia or melancholy

that often expresses itself in guarded attitudes and ultimately in conservative and even timid programs. The member states tend to form blocs, to vote with their friends instead of getting to the crux of issues. A wealth of economic, social, cultural or scientific activities are perpetuated: limited, specific activities, each valid in itself, each having an impact, but unconnected and inconsistent, forming no general trend. No one knows which way to go, what pace to follow, nor do they believe they have the strength and the will to achieve a goal whose very definition escapes them.

Standing out against this bleak background are the three crises that have recently shaken the United Nations: most important was a crisis of political will, but there was also a management crisis and ultimately a financial crisis. These circumstances also explain the kind of choice available to the member states. Either the system continues to function poorly, unintelligently, under the influence of its bureaucratic tradition, or it is given new impetus by the member states themselves.

It is encouraging to note that when Congress instructed the United States to exert severe financial pressure, most member states reacted and showed themselves open to reform. In many respects, however, “reform” is still a vague notion. There is a passing flexibility, a fleeting appetite for something new. The challenge is to give it substance, to ensure that reform will eventually mean concrete change, new systems, new procedures, perhaps restructured mechanisms. Canada and other reformers have taken two gambles: that conditions were ripe for structural adjustments, and that an im-