



Statements and Speeches

No. 83/6

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

An Address by the Honourable Allan J. MacEachen, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs, to the Canadian Human Rights Foundation, Ottawa, April 22, 1983

I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the sixth annual conference of the Canadian Human Rights Foundation — devoted to the topic of human rights and Canadian foreign policy. I am especially pleased to be able to speak to you at a time when we have just passed an important anniversary for human rights in Canada and as we approach a landmark anniversary year for human rights in the community of nations.

This past Sunday marked the first anniversary of the proclamation of the new Canadian Constitution. That historic document, with its Charter of Rights and Freedoms, affirmed in an unequivocal fashion our fundamental determination to respect and guarantee the basic human rights of all our citizens in Canada.

The second anniversary of which I spoke is that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations almost 35 years ago. Dr. John Humphrey, your Foundation's President, was present that day in December when the Declaration was adopted. And, as he will readily attest, that particular document was instrumental in moving human rights from the periphery of international relations to a central place in the conduct of foreign policy among nation states.

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration, the international community has moved a considerable distance. The United Nations has elaborated more than 20 legal conventions and covenants. It has set standards for human rights, and opened for public scrutiny and debate the human rights records of many countries. Other agencies and organizations — from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization to the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and various regional organizations — have been equally active in widening the scope of human rights activities and in asserting the need for more effective measures of protecting fundamental rights.

The trend towards greater prominence for human rights in the conduct of international relations has been fully supported by Canadians. In their letters to me, to other members of Parliament and to the media, they have made their concerns known. They are shocked by torture, enforced disappearances and summary executions. They are unanimous in opposing the institutionalization of racism and the perpetuation of wars and conflict leading to massive flows of refugees. Non-

governmental organizations have been formed — and are certain to grow in number — to register their concern and to take action in their own areas of commitment.

The Canadian government fully shares these concerns. We support the efforts of Canadians who are moved by reports of violations and who are determined to act in defence of their fellow men and women in many parts of the world. Today, before a Foundation with a membership distinguished by its competence and experience in the fields of both domestic and international human rights, I want to emphasize the depth of this commitment, and to review with you some of the central aspects of Canada's approach to international human rights issues.

Canada's approach is one of dynamism and realism. We are determined to press forward on a number of fronts and in a variety of ways. We want to strengthen the international legal regimes which sustain the work of the UN, the ILO and other organizations. We need to fill gaps in such fields as inhumane treatment and punishment, and in freedom of religion and belief. In addition, Canada attaches a high priority to encouraging more widespread ratification of the existing human rights instruments, particularly the two international covenants. At the same time, we are seeking to improve the means for promoting and protecting human rights, through, among other things, better implementing machinery within the UN and more effective publicity for the human rights activities of the UN and other bodies.

Canada has stood firmly in defence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we have participated in the gradual process of elaborating new instruments based on enduring principles. We have also been pragmatic, building upon precedents and cases over the years, probing for new opportunities to secure breakthroughs — whether in a particular area, such as torture, or by means of a new mechanism, such as an investigative working group on disappeared persons.

I am committed to this dynamic policy on international human rights. It is essential that Canada respond to the legitimate concerns of Canadians, and it is entirely right and appropriate that we accord human rights its place as one of the main principles of Canadian foreign policy. But I am equally sensitive to the difficulties of promoting human rights effectively in a tougher, more hostile world. And for that reason, I believe Canadian policy should and must remain rooted in a certain realism — a realism that recognizes the principles to which we must adhere, and which, at the same time, acknowledges the constraints on our international activities, particularly in the current environment of distrust, disillusionment and insecurity.

Current international tensions impinge on human rights in many ways. In tough economic times, many governments merely pass off their problems to the poorest in their societies, adding thereby to the depth of their misery. In other circumstances, economic problems are used as excuses for added measures of repression, or for a more secure state of siege by authoritarian regimes.

The main political problems of the 1980s have complicated solutions to specific human rights issues. In such areas as Central America, the Middle East, Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, it has become difficult to isolate human rights problems from the political environment of confrontation. In East-West relations, human rights have become an increasingly prominent and divisive issue. The Helsinki Final Act, signed in 1975, set basic standards for the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the freer movement of individuals across the frontiers between East and West. Lamentably, in spite of strenuous efforts on our part, the Soviet Union and certain other East European states still fall far short of meeting these standards.

Human rights have also — and unfortunately — been the subject of more frequent exploitation for other than humanitarian purposes. I am disturbed by this use of human rights principles as tactical weapons in larger wars of ideology or economic interest. It complicates the work of international organizations, and seriously compromises the ability of the international community to respond quickly and fairly to humanitarian tragedies.

These problems directly affect international efforts to promote human rights. International enforcement mechanisms, when and where they exist, are still very much in an embryonic stage. The concept of due process is not often appreciated. Much depends on how governments can present their cases, and whether there exists a degree of influence and persuasion which one government can exert on another government. Thus, the problem we share, as Canadians concerned with human rights violations in many regions of the world, is how to promote human rights in the most effective manner in an international environment which is less than favourable to the full promotion of human rights.

Canada's experience in human rights matters has enabled us to take different approaches to a variety of situations. Each situation, of course, has its own set of imperatives and complications, its own array of difficulties and areas for constructive action. In any situation, we have to keep one criterion in mind — effectiveness. This is the key guide to our actions, and the measure which determines how we proceed and in what ways.

Canada has paid special attention in the past few years to multilateral activities, particularly in the UN Commission on Human Rights. Here we have taken two main approaches. First, we have sought action on "generic" or thematic violations of human rights, such as torture or discrimination on grounds of religion. We have then sought to define these violations, and to put into place legal regimes which would progressively develop into protective bodies working against these violations. Second, we have sought opportunities to develop new human rights machinery for monitoring violations or acting upon reports of violations. The working group on disappeared persons is a notable example of a Canadian initiative combining both approaches in a single vehicle that has become increasingly effective since its initial creation in 1980.

The bilateral approach to human rights is equally important, and is an area of especially great public attention. Canada has not hesitated to speak out publicly and forcefully in many cases, for example with respect to human rights violations in Poland, El Salvador, Guatemala, South Africa, and Afghanistan. In keeping with our insistence on effectiveness, we have also used a variety of other channels, at different levels and on different occasions, to make known our concerns to the governments responsible.

Bilateral pressures can be effective. So, too, can concerted actions taken by a number of countries with respect to severe situations. But there are limitations and dangers, in any single approach, which have to be weighed carefully in advance.

Canada will not sell arms to any government whose human rights practices are wholly repugnant to Canadian values. Where gross violations of human rights or conditions of conflict make the provision of an aid program impossible, we are prepared to terminate or suspend our assistance, as we did in Uganda under Idi Amin and as we have done in El Salvador and Guatemala. But we do not break diplomatic relations, because it would serve only to deny us an important opportunity for contact and limit our abilities to make on-site assessments. Similarly, where our aid programs meet our principal objective of helping the poor, we cannot penalize the less fortunate for the errors of their governments. Cutting off trading relations by individual countries such as Canada is unlikely to be effective unless part of a concerted international approach to the problem.

To these two complementary approaches can be added another way in which Canada helps the cause of human rights, namely, humanitarian assistance. Although we can sometimes stop violations of human rights, it is frequently impossible to repair the damage to society, to groups or to individuals. Canada has responded generously to the victims of persecution. Our long-term commitment to those who are oppressed takes second place to no country. Our commitment continues, in the form of direct assistance to refugee organizations, in food aid and grants to non-governmental organizations, and in our acceptance into Canada of thousands of persons displaced by a variety of wars and tragedies.

Canada is determined to play an effective, responsible role in international human rights. Our policies are rooted in the values of compassion and concern which all Canadians share for the disadvantaged and the threatened. Our policies reflect a heritage which has always emphasized the primacy of rights and freedoms. They are a legacy of the more than 350 000 displaced persons who have found their way to Canada over the past 40 years in search of a country where principles of human rights are respected and honoured.

The commitment of the government in promoting human rights domestically and internationally is firm. Our record speaks for itself, and our willingness to co-operate

with you and other non-governmental organizations is a sign of our adherence to the principles enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. You have an essential role to play. You have powers which complement those of government, and ways of influencing the media and other countries that we do not. You have contacts abroad that are unique and useful.

Together, we can achieve a great deal. We intend to continue the creative dialogue which we enjoy with non-governmental organizations such as your own. Even when we disagree on tactics or actions, we can unite around our common objectives. But the path is long and arduous. I count on organizations such as the Canadian Human Rights Foundation to help us along that path, and to help us back if we stray.

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