

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 57/26 THE PRESENT POSITION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Address by Mr. L.B. Pearson, Secretary of State for External Affairs, to the Women's Canadian Club, Saint John, N.B., April 4, 1957.

There have been doubts and criticisms levelled recently--in Canada and in other countries--at the United Nations. On the other hand, hopes, perhaps exaggerated, have been raised about what the UN Assembly can now do because it stopped the fighting in Suez.

Our present preoccupation with the future of the Organization is, in fact, due to a large extent to the dramatic events of last autumn in the Middle East when the United Nations moved in, via the Assembly, in a way which captured the world's attention and caused both praise and criticism.

For myself, I remain firm in the belief that our world Organization remains an indispensable agency for international co-operation. If it did not exist, something like it would have to be found or else we would lapse into a state of international anarchy in a divided world with the forces of freedom on one side, the forces of reactionary Communism on the other, facing each other in fear and hostility across an unbridged chasm, and with the uncommitted millions of Asia and Africa trying to remain aloof or perhaps form their own alignments.

It is not a cheerful picture; and it makes it all the more advisable to have a new and realistic look at the United Nations, especially in the light of our recent experiences at the General Assembly.

One aspect of the situation - which those experiences have emphasized -- concerns the position of individual states, especially in voting power. The voting rules of the United Nations Assembly are certainly not ideal. It is easy enough to portray as absurd an arrangement by which Luxembourg, Cambodia and the United States have one vote each; when any rational approach would result in some form of weighted voting by which power and responsibility would be related to voting rights. It can be argued that no national government could be

run on such a basis of inequal distribution of representation and responsibility, although one should not forget that in the United States Senate, one-third of the members representing only a very small percentage of the population of the country could, theoretically, prevent any treaty becoming effective.

The fact remains, however, that the United Nations is an association of sovereign states each, in theory, equal to every other one. In any event, what matters most is not theoretical possibilities, but the use to which votes are put in practice. The record here is not unsatisfactory.

The larger powers, because they are the most powerful, do influence the voting of the smaller powers; do exercise far more power than a single vote would suggest. As an example during the weeks before the Israeli withdrawal from Egypt, a mathematical majority could probably have been secured in the Assembly for sanctions to be imposed against Israel. However, the issue was never presented to them for decision. Why? The influence of the United States and other countries, including Canada, was sufficient to prevent the Assembly from taking this action which would have been premature and unwise. The members at least the majority of them recognized the facts of power and the impossibility of taking effective action on sanctions without United States support, even if they desired to do so. They knew that diplomacy was going on behind the scenes and that a solution might be forthcoming which might be at least of a character which they could not openly oppose. So sanctions were never put to the vote.

At the recent Eleventh Session of the Assembly which was dominated--and at times disrupted--by Middle Eastern issues, voting power was used to pass some resolutions which were futile, others that were silly, and one or two that were unfair. But it would be hard to prove that any of them were dangerous or extreme, and some of them were of positive peace-preserving value. There were extreme speeches made and some irresponsible moves attempted. But the resolutions which secured the requisite two-thirds majority were usually the product of reasonable compromise.

The picture which is being built up in certain quarters of a majority of the votes of the United Nations Assembly lined up irrevocably against the West, demanding that the Western democracies give up their territories or hand over their treasure, is not an accurate one. It is based more on impressions from the controversial political harangues which so often disturb Assembly proceedings, than on a study of actual results. Good results, however, often command less attention than violent polemics. Unfortunately, conflict and controversy are their own best publicity agents, while quiet achievement seldom gets a headline.

Discouragement and defeatism about the United Nations arises also from a faulty understanding of the Charter and the power of the United Nations. We must never forget that the United

Nations is not a government, let alone a super-state. Its Assembly can't order anybody to do anything. Its votes are only recommendations and therefore in that sense are not as important as those of a national parliament. Peoples become disillusioned when recommendations, which they confuse with orders, are not carried out; or, even worse, carried out only in certain circumstances.

It is also irritating and can be harmful for responsible countries to be unfairly censured by a majority vote or to have impracticable or unfair resolutions directed against them when other members seem either to escape censure or ignore it. But one can easily exaggerate the damage that is done. It is regrettable, of course, that certain Western countries get far more than their fair share of censure, while far worse offenders escape. It is not true, however, that the Western powers are the only ones who suffer from this practice. There is also vigorous and effective criticism of Communist and of Asian States.

Nevertheless, there is, I admit, at the present time an "anti-colonial" bias in the Assembly which often operates unfairly against certain of its members. For good reason; this rankles. It is irritating, for instance, to hear the word "colonial" used only in respect of those powers who have acquired overseas territories which they have led to or are leading to freedom and self-government. I am thinking particularly of Great Britain, whose great glory is the transformation by her own deliberate policy of her colonial empire into a Commonwealth of Nations. To listen to attacks on Great Britain and France as "colonial empires" when the Soviet Union, which holds under an iron despotism so many millions of subject people, is relatively immune from such attack is, I confess, hard to take. It should not, however, be seen out of proportion. It should not be assumed, for instance, that these colonial issues would not exist if the United Nations did not. They certainly would and probably in more dangerous forms.

Certainly the record of the recent Assembly on the most important items in its agenda does not warrant a charge that it behaved irresponsibly or fanatically, or that it was invariably hostile to the West. Let me give one or two examples.

(1) ALGERIA

It is charged that the Assembly's "interference" in Algeria, part of metropolitan France, would justify the French for rejecting completely the role of the United Nations. The French this year, however, wisely altered their previous tactics and tried to come to terms with the Assembly by participating in debate with moderate and reasonable statements, in which they were able to make their own case more widely and favourably known. The Assembly produced a very mild resolution on Algeria,

which the French accepted and which was approved by all members. The final resolution, in fact, served the best purpose which a United Nations Assembly can serve. It allowed members to blow off a certain amount of steam and eventually to compromise and, as a result, to produce an atmosphere more conducive to fruitful negotiations between the conflicting parties.

(2) CYPRUS

The British, like the French, had agreed this year to put their case to the Assembly rather than deny its right to consider the question at all as ultra vires the Charter. The debate was far from one-sided and served, in fact, to expose the fallacy of some of the more extreme anti-British positions. Although the Greeks, the Turks and the British had insisted that they could not accept any compromise, they were quite happy in the end to accept a mild and, I hope, useful resolution.

(3) WEST NEW GUINEA

On this other "colonial" issue, the results were somewhat different. A resolution supported by almost all the Asian and African countries as well as some South American countries and the Soviet bloc did not secure the requisite two-thirds majority vote in the Assembly and, therefore, lapsed. The Dutch spoke firmly but moderately and reasonably, and they undoubtedly profited in goodwill from this approach. As no decision was taken by the Assembly, no requirement was made of the Dutch to take any action at all. The intervention of the United Nations, therefore, did not, because of the provisions of the Charter result in any interference with the rights of a Western country. It is doubtful, furthermore, whether the debate which took place fanned the flames of anti-colonialist nationalism any higher than they would have been driven through the usual channels.

(4) DISARMAMENT

The debate on this subject ended in unanimous agreement on a purely procedural resolution after a somewhat routine discussion. While there is clearly not very much agreement among the Great Powers on the substance of this question, they do agree that although this subject must be considered within the framework of the United Nations, the full Assembly is no place for serious discussion. The Russians started off with the usual propaganda attack, but they subsided quickly and stuck to an understanding reached with the Americans before the debate that there would be no examination of the substance of the subject in the unwieldy full Assembly, and that it would be referred again to the Sub-Committee.

These annual exercises on disarmament cannot be said to advance the matter very far, but they do keep the subject before the public. This year the Assembly proved a useful forum in which to push the Great Powers towards more serious consideration of limiting nuclear tests, a move in which the Canadian Delegation assisted. There is much to be said for the practical arrangement by which the responsible powers work on such subjects as disarmament in a small private committee, but are subject in the Assembly to the pressure of public opinion from other delegations.

The issues which I have mentioned, were, of course, not nearly so important as those of Hungary and Egypt. It is primarily for the handling of these questions that the United Nations has been accused by some of unwarranted interference; by others of ineffectiveness; and by many of laying down double standards of behaviour.

THE MIDDLE EAST

It is not possible yet to pass a final judgment on the actions of the United Nations over the Egyptian crisis. If we assume that the military invasion of Israel, followed by the intervention of Great Britain and France if it had been not interfered with, would have resulted in the over-throw of Colonel Nasser and his replacement by a well-disposed Egyptian regime, by the establishment of international control of the Suez Canal and by progress towards a solution of the Palestine question, then one may consider United Nations intervention wrong and ill-advised. If it is felt, however, as I myself feel, that military action of the kind taken could have accomplished none of the purposes that I have mentioned, that, on the contrary, it would have driven the Egyptians to invite Communist help, have split the whole Asian-Arab world from the West in bitter hostility, and imposed heavy, perhaps unbearable, strains on the Commonwealth Asian members, then, the sooner it was stopped by international action the better for all concerned, including, in particular, the British and the French themselves.

From this point of view, United Nations intervention was an essential service to peace. Certainly there could not have been international intervention by any other agency. Intervention by the other Great Powers on their own would have had, I believe, disastrous results. Any effective international action outside the United Nations would have required collaboration between the United States and the U.S.S.R., which was obviously impossible. Or, at the least, it would have required close collaboration between the Big Three of the West. Even if that had been possible - and, unhappily, it was not - it would have met fierce Arab-Asian resistance and the threat of Russian interference.

In my view, the role played by the United Nations last November was important, yes essential, for the preservation of international peace and security. Whatever may happen now,

and there is much to make us uneasy about the present position of the United Nations in the Middle East in attempting to carry out Assembly directives which are, in places, too vague and uncertain, I believe that a grave crisis last November was prevented from developing into something far worse by action of the kind which could only have taken place within the United Nations. Our subsequent efforts to move from a cease-fire, to pacification and to a permanent solution, may or may not succeed, but even if they do not, that will not prove that the action of the United Nations in November 1956 was wrong.

The role of the United Nations Assembly, it seems to me, became more questionable later on when the effort to secure an equitable basis for Israeli withdrawal from Egypt was the issue. It is undoubtedly a handicap to have an Assembly with a large number of members committed strongly and in advance to one side or the other. This awkward fact has contributed to the difficulty of securing the necessary majority for any United Nations policy except for one not clear or definite enough to ensure a solution of substantive problems. To get the necessary votes, we have too often watered down resolutions or, even worse, replaced them by "hopes and assumptions". But it is foolish to assume that the situation in question could be handled more easily if the United Nations could only be ignored. Would we be better off today in the Middle East without UNEF or the mediatory efforts of the Secretary-General? In diplomatic activities outside the United Nations, would there be a constructive role, or, indeed, any role at all for middle powers who, without immediate interests involved, should, therefore, be able to take an objective and impartial view of issues? The only feasible alternative to negotiation through the United Nations would be the imposition of a solution by unilateral action by the United States or the U.S.S.R. or by the joint action of the United States and the U.S.S.R. with all the risks to peace that this would involve; which has always been a nightmare of the European countries and is, as we all know, inconceivable at the present time or in the foreseeable future.

HUNGARY

It has also frequently been alleged that the Assembly sanctioned a double standard of morality in its attitude towards the U.S.S.R. over Hungary in contrast with its action towards the United Kingdom, France and Israel over Egypt. Undoubtedly there is a question of a double standard of morality involved. It is a perplexing and worrying aspect of the matter. But it is not the United Nations as a body but certain of its members who are guilty of trying to establish this double standard. The Assembly, as a body, has followed the same procedure in regard to Hungary and to Egypt. It requested the U.S.S.R. to withdraw from Hungary and the United Kingdom, France and Israel to withdraw from Egypt. The Russians treated United Nations resolutions with contempt, and the other members (even though their actions were in no ways comparable with the aggression of the Soviet Union) complied. Is the guilt for this varied response

to be placed on the United Nations Assembly? Or is it, on the contrary, to be placed squarely on Russia, where it belongs?

To attack the United Nations as an institution for failing to save Hungary from Russia is misleading and perhaps unfair. The attack is based to some extent on the erroneous impression that the African-Asian group refused to condemn Soviet action in Hungary after having denounced the British and French Governments over Egypt. It is true that some members of this group were slow to recognize the brutal nature of Soviet aggression and inclined to suspect a deliberate effort to divert their attention from Egypt. When it was clear to them, however, what was happening, the great majority of them strongly denounced Soviet action, and only the "hard-core Arabs" abstained from the condemnation which was voted.

The reason the United Nations did not save Hungary was that it could not; not that it would not. The fault lies not in the Organization as such, but in the hard facts of Soviet policy and the cold war, with peace balanced precariously on the edge of the atomic deterrent.

It would be rash, and might be fatal, if we tried on all occasions to take UN enforcement action in order to see that justice is always done without any regard to the consequences; or without, to be perfectly frank, any regard to the big blunt fact of the Red Army. We certainly must not become the prisoners of our fears, for if we do our diplomacy is doomed, and the future would be grim indeed. But neither must we indulge in threats and gestures which may provide an easy escape for our emotions, but cannot be followed up by effective action. In the case of Hungary, for instance, if we had intervened through the United Nations by force, the first victims would have been the Hungarians themselves, and the rest of the world might have followed into the abyss.

The world as it exists in reality does not cease to be the same world when it is reflected in the mirror of the United Nations. If the picture it reflects is a sombre one, attacking the mirror does not help much. The United Nations did not create the picture we see today. It did not create the cold war, or anti-colonialism or Colonel Nasser. It is idle to blame it for these things.

If we want to solve our difficulties, we have to go to the roots of the problems themselves, and we do nothing to advance this process; indeed we hinder it by seeking to weaken or pull down the United Nations.

I admit - and I deplore the necessity for the admission - that the United Nations as an institution could not drive the Russians out of Hungary by force, and it could not have persuaded any of its members to do so on their own. However, it did what it could. It gave the U.S.S.R. an opportunity to reach a negotiated settlement and offered its good offices for that purpose.

But the U.S.S.R. spurned the United Nations, which then could only mobilize public opinion - though this itself was important - in order to make the nature of Soviet aggression clear to the world, and to put the Russians morally on the spot.

This United Nations action, inadequate as it must have seemed to many, may, however, have had some effect on Soviet policy. The argument that the Russians don't care at all about international opinion does not hold water. They gave every indication last autumn of anxiety over the international reaction to their actions in Hungary and even seemed to have been reluctant for this reason to do what they eventually did. This reluctance was not, of course, based on moral considerations, which have no effect of any kind on Russian policy, but on a feeling that their action might have an adverse effect on their prestige and, therefore, on their diplomacy especially in Asia and Africa. Although United Nations pressure did not save Hungary it had some effect - and what it had was good.

AFRICAN - ASIAN GOVERNMENTS

Another criticism of the United Nations is that it is increasingly dominated by a majority of African and Asian countries allied from time to time with the Soviet bloc and Latin America; a majority which is alleged to be irresponsible in its attitude to international problems, which is dominated by an irrational hatred of Western "colonial" countries, and unwilling or unable to contribute to the wide-ranging technical and economic aid measures which it so often proposes to others. It is alleged that this situation is growing more acute, accentuated by the admission of a large number of new members last year, and that it will soon be entirely out of hand.

That there is an element of truth in the charges can hardly be denied. But it is not the whole truth, or even a major part of it. The Africans and Asians, with or without the Soviet bloc, do not dominate the Assembly. If - and this is a big "if" - they all vote together they can prevent the necessary 2/3 majority being obtained for any resolution. Their power at its strongest, therefore, is a power not to impose, but to frustrate; not positive, but negative.

What has happened is that the Western Powers themselves no longer have that dominating influence on the actions of the United Nations which they had in the past. It by no means follows, however, that the West is now automatically frustrated in its efforts to secure a necessary majority for its measures. It does follow that it must work harder to get support for them.

The fact is that there is no "Afro-Asian bloc" at the United Nations. As one Asian representative to the United Nations said recently to a member of our delegation. "The Afro-Asian bloc does not exist but many European countries are doing their best to create it." These countries themselves are careful to speak of their "group" not their "bloc", and there

are few groups within the United Nations which are less united and disciplined. The lack of cohesion in the group is a fact which should dispel some of the exaggerated fears of the Europeans.

The patterns within the group continue to shift, and often in the right direction. Provided groups do not become hard and inflexible blocs they can be a good thing rather than a bad thing for an Assembly which faces, perhaps a greater threat from anarchy than from bloc voting.

The aim of the West, therefore, should be not to oppose the development of an African-Asian group, with results that would certainly be negative, but to show a friendly interest in its workings and maintain the most co-operative relations possible with its members, very very few of whom want to team up with the Communists against the West; at the United Nations or elsewhere.

These African-Asian Governments, let us not forget, represent one of the most important forces of today; the surge of awakening millions of a long submerged world to political freedom, with a passionate determination to secure a better life than they have known in the past. Their emergence on the world scene, it is true, presents us with new problems. But these are the product of inevitable historical processes, not of the United Nations: The United Nations provides, in fact, a framework within which this evolution of international society which is going on can take place with the most peace and the least pain. Mankind marches on and we of the West must march with it, while trying to play our part in directing the march to a good goal. If we do not, there will be far more trouble even than we have today.

FRAMEWORK FOR DIPLOMACY

The detractors of the United Nations, ignoring realities, see it merely as some extra-planetary body with a life of its own, independent of national states, but with a tendency to interfere with relations between those states and as a body over which right-thinking nations who should continue to run the world have no influence at all. That, as I have tried to point out, is not an accurate picture.

Some supporters of the United Nations, on the other hand, tend to regard it as a body on which they can cast their burdens and thereby simplify - and even evade - problems of national policy and national responsibilities. This can do the United Nations as much harm, perhaps, as open opposition to it. The United Nations is no substitute for wise national policies, and it is wrong and even dangerous to give the impression that it is. But it can and should supplement those policies by providing an international framework within which we can pursue an active and realistic diplomacy for the solution of problems.

Certainly it would have been infinitely more difficult, in my opinion, to get out of the difficulties in which we found ourselves last November if the nations of the world had not been gathered together in New York. It is true that one works at times in the United Nations under the white light of intense and often ill-advised and distorted publicity; at other times, in the shadow and under the threat of majority pressures which do not lead to moderate and responsible conclusions. Nevertheless, there have been great achievements to the credit of our world organization, and they should not be forgotten in the frustrations and setbacks we have also suffered. These setbacks would have occurred perhaps in a worse form if there had been no United Nations. The achievements might not have been possible at all without it.

The United Nations has now existed for ten years, during which time it has struck deep roots in the hopes, in the emotions and in the aspirations of the free nations and peoples of the world. Its very existence is a fact, the importance of which cannot be overlooked. We should work with and through it to the greatest possible extent. We should make the very best we can of it. We can try to alter and improve it, and we can and should resist certain wrong trends. But we do not serve the cause of peace and progress when we seek to weaken and denigrate the world organization. We do serve that cause when we try to support, strengthen and develop it.

I know of no better way of doing this than to restore and reinforce the closest possible co-operation between the British, American and French delegations at the meetings of the Organization. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that this co-operation should not be wider and include many other delegations. But I want to see the kind of "togetherness" if I may use that word, between these three delegations which once existed and which can be of such great even essential, value not only to the United Nations but to peace itself. Indeed, in the tense and difficult days in which we live, nothing can take its place.

It must continue to be a major principle of Canada's foreign policy to take advantage of every possible opportunity to bring this about.

S/C