



# STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION  
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 52/51     An address delivered by the President of the Seventh Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Mr. L. B. Pearson, at the dinner of the American Association for the United Nations, New York City, October 23, 1952.

...In building this great home for the United Nations I am quite sure that all who laboured on the problems of construction thought first of its foundations realizing that the base on which the superstructure was to rest must be the starting point for all that followed. We would do well, as we pause tonight to think for a moment about the United Nations and the great complex of agencies and activities for which it is responsible, to reflect for a few moments on the foundation on which these activities rest. Without its solid establishment, the superstructure of our hopes and our dreams for achieving the aims of the Charter would -- sooner or later -- crack and crumble away.

Our foundation is anchored on the purposes which the United Nations are intended to serve. Those purposes are inscribed in the preamble to the Charter, itself. Let us never forget, amid the perplexities and discouragements that surround us, that the ultimate aims of our Organization have not changed. Only men and policies have changed in the seven long years since the Charter was written; since those days in San Francisco when we glimpsed the promised land which men, victorious against aggression and tyranny, had been given a second chance to reach,

To achieve these ends, the "Peoples", not governments or parliaments or dictators -- the "Peoples" pledged themselves to practise tolerance and to live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, to unite their strength to maintain international peace and security, to ensure that armed force would not be used save in the common interest; and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all.

These remain today the aims of the United Nations, which we have been striving to achieve and which we must not abandon. These are the principles that underlie the plans and the action for collective security which we have taken; the measures to effect peace between warring states, the efforts to develop and extend the whole range of economic, social, cooperation over a widening area of the globe; the programmes of technical assistance; the humanitarian work of the specialized agencies; and the movement that has steadily led to independence and self-government. These principles provide the framework for the consideration of the host of problems with which the seventh session has just begun to deal. If we remain true to them, they are capable

of withstanding the stresses and strains of the long years ahead, of supporting the superstructure of our hopes and aspirations, of embodying our design for a better world through international co-operation within the United Nations..

Whether these principles can be translated into policies and practices, into action for peace, depends in the last analysis on what, for want of a better description we may call "public opinion" -- the fundamental attitudes, sentiments and feelings of men and women everywhere towards our Organization, its failures and its achievements. Governments themselves can do little if there are not these forces behind them.

Public opinion has been called by Montaigne, "a powerful, bold, and unmeasurable party." If it could be so described in the world of the sixteenth century, what would Montaigne have said of its force and influence in our modern world? The size of the public has enormously increased, the power of new mechanical media of information and communication has become colossal, and its effect on our minds and nerves insistent and at times shattering. Space, which once kept the clash of controversies from exercising an immediate impact on opinion, has been annihilated or rather harnessed. Tomorrow's headline now causes trouble today. The emergence of a world public, subjected to all the battering and the cajolery of press, radio, and television, has radically transformed the whole basis not only of the handling of foreign affairs, but of the formation of opinion which determines what will be handled. Today these affairs are no longer the exclusive preserve of hushed foreign offices and top-hatted diplomats. They are not now merely the concern of a few of the people some of the time. They are the direct and personal concern of all the people all the time. When we think of the United Nations in which some 60 countries are now represented with hundreds of millions of men and women of many races and creeds; of communities in every corner of the earth at varying stages of material well-being and technological progress but all eager and alive to the currents of today, we get some idea of the size and complexity of the world public. Inevitably its opinions take many forms and express themselves in many ways. They include not only the thoughtful editorial in the encyclopaedic Sunday editions of North America, or their thinner but equally important counterparts in Europe and other parts of the world. They include also discussion in a village community in Asia; or the petition of a tribal community in the heart of Africa. This is a far cry from the formulation and expression of opinion in the easy, elegant and quiet days of the nineteenth century. But the change is one which has come to stay and which we should accept without reservation, if for no other reason than that of necessity. It is idle to try to make the Niagara River run back over the Falls.

Within the United Nations, and particularly in the General Assembly, we see these new forces of world opinion vigorously at work. In the United Nations, and particularly in the General Assembly, we find their strongest reflection because the United Nations Assembly is above all a world forum. Sometimes we are inspired, sometimes frightened, by what we see and hear. We should not, however, be too distressed because Assembly meetings are often acrimonious and contentious. At times the very violence of the disputes in the United Nations is evidence of the

fact that member states are deeply concerned about the effect produced by their arguments; though it may also be encouraged by the immature and mistaken assumption that words must be violent to be effective. There would, I think, be more cause to worry about the United Nations if the debates ever generated into an elaborate exchange of meaningless courtesies which avoided any realistic reference to outstanding issues and disputes. Then, indeed, futility would have been reached. Neither extreme of violence or indifference is, however, necessary. It should be possible in every circumstance of United Nations discussion to combine courtesy and conviction.

In free democratic states, this world public opinion which is manifesting itself in so many new ways, operates through political parties. The United Nations Assembly, however, does not of course work in this way. Yet we hear a good deal about "blocs," which some feel to be the international counterpart of domestic parties and groups. There are such "blocs", but they vary greatly in their degree of internal consistency, and their membership changes on particular issues. There are -- so to speak -- chips continually falling off the old blocs. One newspaper the other day described these main blocs as the Soviet, the Latin American, the NATO, the Arab-Asian, and even indicated with a quite remarkable degree of precision, if not of accuracy, just exactly how many votes each bloc "controlled." In some ways this kind of speculation is of a similar order to the informed guess-work that is now going on in an unnamed country about the prospects of two political parties, and perhaps with about the same degree of accuracy. The point is, however, that "blocs" -- or the regional groupings which take shape in our world Organization, and have their roots in geography and history -- would exist even if the United Nations did not. The United Nations has brought these groups together and given greater publicity to them -- but has not created them. In any event we can agree that the United Nations gives us at least the chance of getting to know better the folks in the next "bloc."

Public opinion on specific United Nations issues will often differ greatly from country to country, because the United Nations often has to deal with differences and disputes between states and groups of states.

That is its business -- difference and debate. In every dispute there are at least two sides -- I often wish there were only two! -- and where national interests and opinions are involved, there will be strong feelings on both sides. The United Nations has to recognize this. It is not a supra-national organization which can control these feelings by law, and by force if the law is broken. It is an association of sovereign states joined together for common purposes. Therefore, each national representative has a responsibility to his own government (which, in turn, must heed its own public opinion). In disputes between governments, therefore, whatever action the United Nations takes is likely in greater or less degree to disappoint (or even infuriate) one of the protagonists. This has been true of some of the issues with which the United Nations has dealt in the past. It will certainly be true of some of the issues now before us at this seventh session. That has already become apparent.

There is, however, another -- and more encouraging -- sense in which the United Nations can be said to rest upon public opinion. In this other sense, public opinion

is developed -- or should develop -- out of the obligations and the responsibilities which fall upon all members of the United Nations towards each other and towards the United Nations itself, and to the principles of the Charter. It is in this sense that public opinion should underlie all our work. It is this which leads the parties to a dispute to bring that dispute to the United Nations, and which impels all member states to bring their judgment -- which should be an objective and a responsible judgment -- to bear on its settlement. In doing so, the members of the United Nations are bound to use to the full the processes of discussion, conciliation, compromise and peaceful settlement. We are never bound to any particular solution for a particular problem. But we are all bound to advocate, support and follow peaceful means and the principles of the Charter in the consideration of any problem which faces us.

The unswerving acceptance of this by all peoples would provide an unshakeable foundation of public opinion on which our Organization could securely rest. In free countries -- and with the aid of societies such as yours -- that public opinion can be established. It responds to our highest hopes. It springs from many sources deep in the experience of human beings throughout the world. It listens to many propagandas, most of them contradictory, and keeps steady in the tornado of contending claims. It seeks through the clash and conflict of discussion and debate to separate what is true from what is false. It learns by experience. It needs to be empirical, for the truth is often between two extremes. Above all, it must have freedom; for its very existence, and criticism is of its essence. It is rooted in faith, in the value of free speech and free thought; in the fundamental principle of free decision, freely reached. If that faith is betrayed and destroyed in our countries or in our U.N. discussions, the United Nations will disappear. If, on the other hand, it is weakened by exploitation or abuse, by using the United Nations rashly and provocatively in the name of free discussion, the United Nations may also disappear.

I should like here to pay my tribute to the band of newspapermen and broadcasters from all parts of the world who have worked day in and day out for many years to inform themselves and to tell the story to others of the United Nations. I know they have the reputation for being a pretty hardboiled group; but I know too that underneath their sometimes weary and disillusioned exteriors, there is a deep understanding of what this great experiment is all about, and a devotion to the United Nations cause which is very genuine and should not go unmentioned.

There are other supporters of the United Nations who are more than merely fair weather friends, and for whom we should be grateful. They include the members of your Association, who have never lost faith and hope, or flagged in good endeavour.

In some quarters it has become fashionable to belittle the United Nations and even to consider it a failure. This defeatist attitude results I think from an unduly pessimistic interpretation of developments in and out of the United Nations and is unwarranted. The United Nations remains today of transcendent value as the only near-universal centre for international cooperation in fields of common international concern. In this day and age of interdependence, if the United Nations did not exist, we should have to create it anew. It is, as I have already said, a world platform where grievances, real or imagined, can be voiced and heard.

It is a medium for world-wide cooperation between countries at different levels of technical progress and economic development. It is a place where tensions between countries or groups of countries can be, and have been, held in check and prevented from exploding in open conflict. It is a channel for the transition of dependent countries towards independence through organized and orderly processes. It is, finally, a meeting place -- indeed almost the only remaining meeting place where the states which stand and face each other across the Great Divide can at least talk to -- or at least at one another.

In the months and years ahead, we know that the United Nations may face new challenges. To meet these the supporters of the United Nations everywhere in the world will have to muster all the responsibility, all the steadiness and all the flexibility at their command. They will need above all patience, because there will be no quick solutions to many of our common problems. With many of them we shall have to live for a long time. Continuing, let alone increasing, tension is hard on the nerves. The United Nations, however, must persist in preventing that tension deteriorating into open conflict. We shall be provoked; but we must resist provocation. We shall be frustrated in our attempts to work out settlements in crucial areas of the world; but we must resist the temptation to react to rebuffs by tough and provocative retaliation. We shall be faced with propaganda hostile to everything we believe in; but we must answer patiently and methodically the incredible charges made against us. We must adjust our thinking to the realities of the times in which we live, and not count on any magic formula from the past to change those realities over night. Our best course -- indeed our only course -- will be to persist in strengthening our collective capacity within the United Nations to resist aggression, and to continue with diligence and perseverance the search for solutions to problems as they arise, or as opportunity offers. We will have to seek to avoid undue elation when we succeed, or undue despair when we seem to fail. Only in this way can we hope to bring about conditions which may one day make possible that settlement over a wider field, which we all seek and will not cease to seek.

In the search for peace which means something more than the absence of atomic war, the United Nations continues to play a vital part. We who believe in the ideals that inspire it, must continue to support it with all the vigour and intelligence and determination we possess.

---