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AN OPTIMISTIC ASSESSMENT OF UN ACHIEVEMENT

An Address by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, to the Twenty-Seventh Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, September 28, 1972.

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It is a current commonplace, Mr. President, to take a dark view of the performance and prospects of the United Nations. One respected international commentator observed just the other day: "The United Nations organization has never been weaker than it is now"; while your predecessor, Mr. Secretary-General, has called the phase through which the organization is now passing "a time of trials".

There is ample evidence to justify a sense of defeatism. The international community often seems incapable of preventing war, powerless in the face of acts of terrorism, apathetic at the spectacle of starvation and misery, and irresponsible in its willingness to risk permanent damage to the environment. We seek to explain this by observing that, in a world of sovereign nation states, the United Nations is bound to reflect the weaknesses of the international society that produced it. Time and again, national egotism seems to be the ruling principle of that society.

This is at the root of the world's deep anxiety. For the better part of this century, we have known nationalism has imperfections. Yet mankind is not about to do away with sovereign states. Indeed, the events of the century, by breaking up old empires and multiplying new sovereignties, have acted as a stimulus to nationalism. New states are not willing to deny themselves the advantages they believe older states have gained from national independence. Certain great tasks of social and economic construction are indeed impossible except in conditions of independence. And while some advantages of independence may prove illusory, even this is irrelevant, since the Charter establishes national sovereignty as a fundamental principle.

These are powerful considerations. In the face of them, it is unrealistic to plan for an international order in which the system based upon sovereign national units has been replaced. Instead it is more hopeful and more sensible to work to transform the existing system, encouraging it when necessary to produce the antidote to its own poisons.

There have been encouraging developments in this sense recently. Even in the brief space of time since we last met, relations between the great powers have undergone a remarkable transformation. Earlier this year, in Moscow, the two nuclear super-powers signed a Declaration on Basic Principles governing their relations, an agreement limiting anti-ballistic-missile systems, and an interim agreement on the limitation of strategic arms. Furthermore, the Soviet Union and the United States have reaffirmed the undertaking in the Non-Proliferation Treaty to pursue their negotiations to end the nuclear-arms race and bring about actual measures of nuclear disarmament. The nuclear sponsors of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have a particular responsibility to adopt measures to curtail the nuclear-arms race and thereby prevent further nuclear proliferation. One such measure would be a ban on all nuclear testing. Surely it is time for the two super-powers to end underground tests, for the two states that continue to test in the atmosphere to cease their testing and for a complete test ban to be concluded.

The international community has a right to expect that the agreements concluded in Moscow will open the way to more far-reaching nuclear-arms control and disarmament measures. But it by no means underestimates the historic significance of what has already been accomplished. Surely this amounts to a recognition that the search for a one-sided strategic advantage has become self-defeating and illusory, and that the way ahead lies through a stabilized nuclear balance to nuclear disarmament itself.

In this same brief space of time, to Canada's great satisfaction, the People's Republic of China has taken its rightful place in the United Nations. Relations between China and the United States, and between China and Japan, have witnessed a dramatic improvement. In Europe, breeding-ground of two world wars, the most significant steps in this generation have been taken to reconstruct relations between the Federal Republic of Germany, on the one hand, and the German Democratic Republic, Poland and the Soviet Union, on the other. The first general negotiations on co-operation and security in Europe since before the Second World War will soon begin, as well as negotiations to bring about a mutual and balanced reduction of forces in Europe.

Caution says that all these developments are only beginning. But they could mark the greatest change in the international order since the United Nations was founded. If we are right to say that the United Nations reflects the international order on which it is based, can we be wrong to hope that these beginnings will sooner or later transform the United Nations as well? There are other hopeful developments also. Dialogues have now begun between the two halves of Germany and Korea. These face enormous difficulties. But we can expect that, in the not-too-distant future, the universality of the United Nations will be strengthened through the extension of membership to the peoples of the divided countries. It will be strengthened also as self-determination brings the era of colonial empires to its final end, especially in Africa, where the most intractable problems of securing human dignity and freedom are posed.

Although the recent proceedings of the Security Council give little support to the view, surely also it is no longer visionary to conceive of situations in which the Council will function as was originally intended, by consensus of the permanent members of the United Nations as a whole, through co-operation rather than confrontation.

We founded the United Nations, as the Charter says, "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". More has been accomplished in this past year to remove that danger than in any year since this organization was created. Certainly, so far as the risk of a general nuclear war is concerned, the hopeful evolution of great-power relations evokes deep feelings of relief, gratitude and satisfaction from us all.

It would be a bitter irony if the safer, saner world that seems at last a possibility rather than a dream should turn instead into a world in which the stream of violence simply cuts new channels. Time and again, the smaller countries have called for an end to the nuclear-arms race, an end to nuclear confrontation. We have sought an international order in which the great powers would conceive it neither as their interest nor as their obligation to attempt to police the world. Now the great powers, in their own interest and in the interest of us all, are moving in this direction. Is the new security and freedom that will thereby be available to all countries, large and small, to be dissipated in new forms of violence? Must we admit that only the fear of nuclear escalation has allowed us some limited success in the past generation in controlling recourse to force?

Yet the international community still has no answer to the dilemma of deciding at what point local violence has such wide and obvious international implications that it can no longer be accepted as a purely domestic matter. We struggled with this problem last year in the crisis in Bangladesh. And, even where violence is plainly international from the outset, our means of dealing with it are often pitifully weak. There are those in the world who appear to believe that the norms of civilized international life are not for them. They consider that they have a right to pursue their grievances with kidnapping, piracy, murder and wholesale terror and violence.

The problem is growing. It has become world-wide. My own country has had its tragic experience of violence of this sort. Canadians instinctively share the horror and shock that these acts produce wherever in the world they may occur. The Canadian Government understands only too well the agonizing choices governments face when called upon to deal with a sudden nightmare of violence.

Terrorism takes many forms. It is called forth by a wide range of complex situations. The rights and wrongs of these situations are bitterly contested. It is simple realism to recognize all this. But the problem cannot be ignored because it is difficult; there must be no truce with terror. Some acts of terror are the work of deluded and demented criminals; others, of frustrated and desperate men willing to sacrifice their own lives and the lives of innocent people in what they regard as a noble cause. When we agree

that the cause is noble, we are tempted to condone the terror. But are we wise to do so? The act we condone today may be the one we regret tomorrow, when it is turned against us. For terrorism in the end affects everyone; it is an attack on civilization at large. Violence breeds violence, murder answers murder, and order dissolves in chaos.

Therefore, Mr. Secretary-General, we approve your initiative in seeking to have the subject placed upon the agenda. A number of delegations have reservations about the debate upon which the Assembly is to enter. Some fear it will be too diffuse to be useful; others that it will be too narrow to be constructive. It need be neither. The Canadian delegation looks upon it as a way to focus international concern upon the whole range of acts of terror, and to stimulate action both by international bodies, such as ICAO and the International Red Cross, and by governments acting within their own powers or under bilateral agreements. The means of dealing with the problem will be as varied as its forms. Some international legal instruments already exist for the purpose. These should be quickly strengthened through ratification by as many states as possible. Perhaps new international machinery and new international legal instruments will be necessary as well. Then let us create them. How can the world, which has declared slavery, piracy and the drug traffic beyond the pale of civilized life, fail to outlaw terrorism? The Canadian Government, which has already amended its domestic law, entered into bilateral negotiations to limit terrorism in the form of hijacking and ratified the international conventions concerned, stands ready to contribute to the strengthening of international law to outlaw terror.

The task is formidable. But the United Nations has responded to challenges of equal difficulty in the past. Since we cannot expect national loyalties to disappear, we must work to temper these loyalties by a growing sense of responsibility on the part of individuals and governments to the international community at large. I suggest that a consciousness of this responsibility is growing in ways unknown to previous generations.

Consider the field of human rights. It would be easy to multiply examples throughout the world of violations of human rights. The task of creating and ensuring respect for accepted international standards has been daunting. Deep historical and cultural differences have produced widely differing views of the true source and proper extent of individual rights. These differences are profound. How can we legislate them out of existence? Yet in the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, the international community has legislated successfully. In doing so, it has recognized that there are limits to the exercise of state sovereignty, and that certain rights attach to individuals -- among others, rights to life and freedom, to liberty and personal security, to fair, prompt justice, to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to leave any country, including one's own. The task now is to ensure that these rights are honoured in practice. So far as my own country is concerned, I am glad to say that the constitutional difficulties which have delayed Canadian ratification of the Human Rights Covenants are well on the way to being overcome. Through national experience and international example, Canadians have come to appreciate that the field of human rights is another sphere in which national and international obligations reinforce each other.

Some of the most serious challenges to the honouring of human rights today lie in Africa. In South Africa the very system of *apartheid* does violence to the concepts embodied by the international community in the covenants on human rights. In Rhodesia, an illegal regime continues to deny to the majority of its citizens even the hope of the basic rights to which they are entitled. And now, in Uganda, a new form of danger has arisen. I do not wish to enter into the substance of the question. Obviously, however, the situation in Uganda requires the exercise of the greatest restraint on the part of the Ugandan Government if the Asian community is to be allowed to leave in conditions of reasonable dignity and security. Humanity on the part of other governments is required as well, so that the tens of thousands who may ultimately be affected by enforced expulsion may have a generous reception in the many countries of the world where their talents could find new and useful expression.

The great programs for economic co-operation between the developing and the industrialized world are another instance in which a growing sense of obligation to the international community has become an expression of enlightened nationalism. The whole notion that this world venture should be undertaken at all has only become part of general public consciousness in the last 20 years. And, once again, those who are looking for reasons to be discouraged after a relatively brief effort find their case ready-made. From the statistics of the first Development Decade, we know that *per capita* incomes in the developed countries -- already far higher than in the Third World -- have been growing at not much less than twice the rate of incomes in the developing countries. We know that, in the developed countries, the consumption of energy *per capita* is five to ten times the world average, and that, quite apart from the difference in protein content, the intake of food in calories is almost twice as much *per capita* as in the developing world. These gaps are great. Some of them are growing. Meanwhile, the efforts of the developing countries to strengthen their economies are partially absorbed in supporting populations that, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, are growing at the rate of between 2, and 3 per cent a year -- double or more the rate for Europe and North America.

The resources devoted to attacking these problems of development and disparity are undeniably inadequate. If they are to be increased in quantity and quality, the developing countries must continue their heroic efforts, while the developed world finds ways of increasing the measure of its participation. The attack must focus equally on social issues, given the interdependence of social progress and economic growth.

In Canada, I am glad to say that sustained public consciousness of these problems has permitted the Government to make steadily-increasing resources available for programs of economic co-operation. I expect this trend to continue. It will be combined with an intensified search to ensure that the co-operation is extended in the forms we are best fitted to provide and our partners best fitted to use. Hand in hand with this will go measures to improve the terms on which the developing countries have access to our markets.

In economic relations generally, discouragement at some current tendencies would be justified. There is still an inadequate international framework within which to adjust the trading relations of the developed with the developing economies, and the market with the socialist economies. Among the major trading nations, there are distressing tendencies towards protectionism, associated in part with the growth of trading blocs. International monetary machinery labours under extraordinary strains and requires urgent strengthening.

Yet all these problems are recognized. They are under repeated attack, in ECOSOC, UNCTAD, in the IMF and the GATT, in the regional economic commissions and elsewhere. And not without success; in the last analysis, a sense of common purpose leads gradually to overcoming national differences. If we wish to measure our progress, we have only to recall the economic chaos of the period between the two world wars. Then rampant nationalism combined with economic ignorance to bring the world economic system down in ruins. How many of the political failures of that period can be traced to economic failure! For all its faults, the present world economic structure, and the institutional framework for economic co-operation which has grown up under the United Nations, is an infinite improvement.

But perhaps the most dramatic example of the rapid development of an international conscience and sense of international responsibility concerns the protection of the environment. Even ten years ago, threats to the balance of nature were a matter for specialists. The public generally, and governments generally, were hardly aware that problems existed. In a matter of a few years, we have awakened to the risk that we may be doing irreversible harm to the natural order that sustains life upon the planet.

The Stockholm Conference was the world community's first response to this challenge. It will undoubtedly take its place as one of the major conferences in United Nations history. Through the declaration of the conference, it has established a kind of "environmental charter", providing a sound basis for the development of international environmental law and other co-operative measures for the protection and enhancement of the human environment. The recommendations for action agreed to by the conference demonstrate the willingness of governments to work towards this goal. The endorsement of these recommendations consistent with the spirit and sense of purpose displayed by the declaration will, in the Canadian view, be one of the major achievements of this Assembly.

The Stockholm Conference declared fundamental principles of international environmental law. The international community now has an opportunity to make a further advance in strengthening the international legal regime as it affects the environment. This is in relation to the law of the sea.

Canada, like many other countries, is in favour of convening the third Law of the Sea Conference in 1973, but only if preparations are adequate. This will be possible if the Seabed Committee is able to hold two further sessions during 1973. Then the Conference could be formally launched with an organizational meeting in the fall of 1973.

Those who wrote the Charter had certain clear ideas about what was needed to preserve international peace and security. They inherited some social, economic and legal machinery and devised more. But the most farsighted of them could not have foreseen many of the problems that have preoccupied the United Nations since. The whole range of exercises in peace-keeping, the transition to the post-colonial world, the machinery for economic co-operation between the developed and developing countries, the extended protection of human rights, the work accomplished in relation to the environment, the seabed and outer space -- all have called forth activity unimaginable in 1945.

In a remarkable way, the organization has risen to these demands. It has done so by creating a large and complex family of agencies -- so large and complex, indeed, that strong administrative leadership is as crucial to the continued authority of the United Nations as political leadership itself. To ensure that the machinery functions at maximum effectiveness on a sound and equitable financial basis is a problem of the first order. The Canadian delegation will work to ensure that this problem receives the steady attention it deserves.

Considerations of cost and complexity are, however, a reminder that a price has to be paid if the United Nations is to be flexible and dynamic. I contend that it has displayed these qualities. The successive challenges of the last generation have been met with only two changes in the Charter, to increase the membership of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. Apart from this, we have built upon the Charter machinery, giving a living interpretation to the Charter itself. While it has been difficult in practice to secure the required degree of agreement to amend the Charter, this does not seem to have prevented the United Nations from keeping up with the times. Canada is ready to look seriously at any specific proposals to amend the Charter or make it work better, if these have broad support among member states. But I am not convinced that a new Charter that could be agreed upon now would be better than the Charter written in 1945.

I have struck a hopeful note; I may be criticized for that. But I am convinced this is the right perspective. We have to concentrate on the problems of the day. This Assembly will have to concentrate on measures to prevent terrorism, to consolidate our first advance in the environmental field, to secure administrative and budgetary reform, to protect human rights in Africa and elsewhere, and to develop international law, especially the law of the sea and the law governing air-piracy. Meanwhile, the Security Council may well be obliged to deal with threats to peace -- for example, should the current tension in the Middle East rise dangerously. All these matters are sources of deep concern. To deal with them successfully -- to deal with them at all -- will, we know, lead us at times into anger, frustration and despair.

It is, therefore, a healthy corrective to lift our heads from these problems on occasion to remind ourselves of the great work the United Nations has accomplished in the past, and to seek to trace those currents in human affairs that give hope that its greatest accomplishments lie ahead.