



Statements and Speeches

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A TIME FOR REDEDICATION TO UNESCO

Address by the Honourable Monique Vézina, Minister for External Relations, to the UNESCO General Conference, Sofia, Bulgaria, October 21, 1985.

...Canada's commitment to the ideals and the mandate of UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] is unaltered. We need a UNESCO. The world needs a UNESCO. It represents a key element in the UN system. Today though, UNESCO is somewhat representative of the general state of affairs in the UN. It has been called a "test case" for that system and for its reform, and so it is. Its rapid growth in membership — at 160 member states, it is now one of the largest specialized agencies — has ended the automatic majority of Western countries.

Its emphasis on financial discipline and restraint has been an indispensable factor in the process of reform. UNESCO's role as the intellectual arm of the UN system remains unique and valuable. But like other parts of the UN family, its programs have gradually taken on a new dimension — to accommodate the needs and aspirations of developing countries. In the case of UNESCO, this has meant extending additional technical assistance and development aid. While this flows directly from UNESCO's intellectual concerns, and while I, as minister responsible for Canada's co-operation programs, am quite aware of the needs in this area, it has unfortunately led to diffusion and fragmentation. UNESCO has perhaps responded too easily and too uncritically to requests from member states.

In the vital area of public perception, UNESCO has not done as well as other agencies in the UN system. The media in much of the world have treated it severely, and sometimes, unjustly. The allegations have perhaps been exaggerated, although press reports, at least in Canada, have been a little more positive of late, in recognition of the genuine progress that is now starting to occur in this organization.

But the fact remains that the crisis is still serious. UNESCO still does not enjoy the complete confidence of some members, certainly not of some of its major donors. UNESCO is not alone among intergovernmental institutions in facing problems. But UNESCO's problems are more visible. We need to improve its performance, to show that it can do its job and that its job is worth doing.

We are all in this together. Can we rededicate ourselves to the original ideals of UNESCO? Can UNESCO concentrate on areas of undeniable need which also command widespread support? Can it reduce overlap with other multilateral bodies? Can it respond to the challenge of zero real budgetary growth by weeding out less crucial activities in order to increase its effectiveness and credibility? In short, can reform succeed, and how quickly?

It is no easy task to alter policies, attitudes and traditions that have developed over 40 years. It is particularly painful for an organization of 160 member countries. Nor is it easy for UNESCO to approach its work in a less political, more responsible fashion. Organizations of governments are political by nature. What we ask is not whether, but that UNESCO eschew, sterile ideological controversy.

In Canada's view, the reform momentum is now on track. It is engaged. We hope it is firmly engaged.

For example:

- the draft program and budget for the next biennium represents a great improvement over previous such documents;
- it is based on the principle of zero real growth with no increased assessments attributable to the withdrawal of member states — a key achievement in Canada's view;
- greater precision and discipline in program and budget presentation are evident throughout;
- there is more program concentration yet more decentralization of activities;
- a central evaluation unit has been established and evaluation procedures are showing signs of improvement;
- the temporary committee's recommendations on administrative, financial and managerial reform — and a timetable for their implementation — will or should produce changes all member states will welcome and support. (My government applauds in particular the proposal to establish a mechanism to follow up the implementation of the reform measures.)

But the reform is not entrenched and much more hard work lies ahead. Further substantive changes will be required in the next biennium. They must be reflected in the next medium term plan, which will chart UNESCO's direction into the mid-Nineties. It is a key element in ensuring that UNESCO will evolve and set itself on a more constructive course — for the crisis in UNESCO is not simply a product of "middle age" doldrums. It is visibly a product of past cumulative neglect on the part of many members, a group from which I do not exclude Canada. It needs renewal, a reinvigoration of energy and commitment by us all.

There is broad agreement, I think, that we need to craft a very different kind of medium term plan for 1990 to 1995 — one that charts a general course, with options, towards stated objectives; a flexible plan that allows for change under the guidance of the executive board; and one that facilitates the need for further concentration in the core areas of UNESCO's competence. This would no doubt go a long way to guarantee UNESCO's future vigour.

The executive board has a clear responsibility to provide firm leadership and guidance in the quest for renewal. Recent meetings of the board have provided evidence that it has the capability to act like a governing body. The compromise recommendation to this conference on the draft program and budget for 1986-1987 was the result. It was adopted by consensus. That consensus was hard won, but it is very fragile; some would say, in an increasingly precarious state. Canada will work to preserve the consensus. We are not completely satisfied with the contents of the compromise package, nor, I know, is any member state. But it is our view that the extent of the improvements which this package represents signifies that change is achievable.

I said earlier that we were realistic and pragmatic in our expectations for the outcome of this conference. I believe that if the consensus holds, if the conference ratifies the draft program and budget along the lines of this set of actions, and if the next biennium unfolds in this direction, UNESCO's future will be more assured.

The Director General and the Secretariat have been helpful and co-operative in facilitating change. They have provided the executive board with a solid foundation on which to base its recommendations. The 23 C/5 represents a massive improvement over previous 23 C/5s, for example. The Director General and his staff merit our congratulations.

I am sure that the public scrutiny of the past few years and the internal turmoil to which the organization has been subject have been wrenching. The drive to efficiency and economy, after all, means doing more with less. The Canadian government, and I would venture most governments, is faced with the compelling need to reduce the size of our bureaucracy and maintain or enhance the effectiveness of our programs. This is a world-wide phenomenon and the multilateral system cannot remain unaffected.

But it is not enough to place all the responsibility for reform of UNESCO on the board, the Director General and the Secretariat. It is the member states which are UNESCO — which run UNESCO — and it is for us to take the hard decisions. This means accelerated co-operation among and across all the regional groups. It means that moderation and good sense must prevail. This in turn requires compromise and the realization that 1985 — this conference — is the beginning of what must be a long but steady process towards revitalization.

Nonetheless, 1985 is a critical year in the evolution of our organization. Reform cannot not be achieved overnight. Nevertheless, several governments — including my own — have stated that they will review their status in UNESCO following this meeting in Sofia, after the results can be analyzed and conclusions drawn.

The fact is that the end of 1985 is a make or break period. Either the current crisis will be defused and the way cleared for substantial reform on which to build further — or the crisis will deepen. The compromise resolution which the board has asked conference delegates to ratify is a considerable achievement. This conference must now take the decision as to whether it represents a sufficient start towards genuine reform, pointing the way to further improvements during the next two years.

Many countries, East and West, North and South, take the view that major program 13 on human rights, and to a lesser degree, major program 3 on communications, are key indicators of success. Need I say that the large majority of UNESCO activities are very worthwhile — although some are not administered as efficiently as we would like. They essentially carry on without controversy. The politicized issues relate to only a few programs but these assume an importance disproportionate to their cost. The structure and content of parts of programs 3 and 13 have thus been the object of great attention, by member states and by the media.

For our part, we are encouraged that the divisiveness of the debate over a new world information and

communication order has been relaxed by the practical co-operation which characterizes the work of the international program for the development of communication, in meeting the real needs of developing countries.

The essential outlines of the human rights, peace and disarmament program are still somewhat unfocused, I admit. Agreement by the board on its main principles was difficult. Harder still was the task of setting priorities for actions to give effect to these principles. More work is required in this area before we can be certain that it will be a process that evolves so as to match Canadian interests and correspond strictly to UNESCO's mandate. For example, Canada agrees — although with some reservations — that program 13 might include a seminar to examine the contentious issue of the link between human rights and the rights of peoples. This is a necessary step towards the proper understanding of human rights in its individual and collective dimensions. The proposed meeting should take into account the work done and the difficulties encountered on this issue by other UN bodies.

In further support of what I said earlier concerning the usefulness of UNESCO's activities, I want to underline the importance Canada attaches to the organization's endeavours in the fields of science, of status of women, and of education.

Looking just at the major programs in the sphere of education — adult education, literacy programs, democratization and improvement in basic education, equalization of access for girls and women, education of the handicapped, and so on — Canada has participated actively in defining these programs, and supports them with enthusiasm. I would like to mention in passing that Canada is a candidate to the governing councils of the International Bureau of Education, the World Heritage Committee, and the International Hydrological Program.

Canada also believes that reform means compressing and at the same time strengthening UNESCO's programs, not only to match its reduced financial circumstances but also to ensure its future vitality. We understand that expenditure cuts may at first be seen to conflict with the aspirations of some countries. However, the entire executive board has shown its desire to deal maturely with this conflict by adopting a compromise solution and putting it forward in good faith. They believe that UNESCO needs to work better and that it can be improved. Canada has an important stake in its proper functioning and so we shared in the consensus.

As one speaker here has said: "this consensus was built on sacrifices on every side We will not go back . . . on our concessions because it is a matter of integrity." Canada is of the same mind. Let me, on behalf of Canada, say this: we will take pains to see that the compromise, adopted by consensus by the executive board in Paris and expanded as necessary in Sofia, is protected in our debates here. The compromise is not perfect. But one could not reasonably hope for more at a time when the process of reform is scarcely under way.

Canada has worked hard to help bring UNESCO this far, to show that the test case can be won. If we fail to maintain, indeed accelerate, the existing momentum for reform, the loss will not be confined to UNESCO. The United Nations family as a whole will suffer. If we succeed, it augurs well for the future of the multilateral system as a whole — and for continued international co-operation in all of UNESCO's areas of expertise. The next few weeks will be exciting. I wish us all good luck.

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