

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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THE QUESTION OF RACE CONFLICT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Statement by Dr. R.A. MacKay, Permanent
Canadian Delegate to U.N., made in
the Ad Hoc Political Committee November 9, 1955

The Canadian Delegation has been hesitant to intervene in this debate because Canada is a country without wide experience of the problems of a multi-racial society. It has seemed to us that in a question as grave and as complex as the present item, the members should, as far as possible, confine their efforts to the promoting of practicable solutions. The problem facing us is not one which can be solved by rhetoric. The Canadian Delegation is not at all sure whether the discussion of this subject, session after session at the General Assembly, has advanced or retarded the cause of the inhabitants of South Africa, whose interests should be our only concern in raising the issue.

Canada's attitude toward the question now before the Committee, and toward other questions of human rights, has been stated on more than one occasion during the debates at previous sessions of the General Assembly. This attitude has been one of firm support for practical efforts designed to win universal respect for human rights without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. It has long been a matter of Canadian policy and indeed an essential part of the Canadian way of life to adhere to practices in keeping with that general principle. This is not to say that prejudice in the matter of these human rights has been eradicated in Canada, nor that the manifold problems of populations of mixed origin have been solved in my country. Racial prejudice is one of the most deeply rooted of human emotions and by no means confined to persons of European origin. In Canada we have had our own failings of a private and public nature, and we have not yet attained perfection, but we believe that we are moving steadily in the right direction.

In speaking in this debate we are humbly aware that Canada is more favourably placed than many other countries. The vast majority of Canadians are of one race even if they differ in language, religion and custom. Distinctions of race, however, pose the most difficult and complex problems. We can easily imagine how acute these problems must be in areas, like the Union of South Africa, where a relatively small and advanced population finds itself in the midst of a large and relatively backward majority of another race. In these circumstances it seems to us that speedy solutions are clearly out of the question and that the scope and nature of the problem must be borne in mind by all those who offer solutions.

Having said that, I am bound to say also that we in Canada have grave doubts about policies and practices adopted to meet the problems of race differentiation which are based on notions of racial superiority. Any form of discrimination in our view is more likely to exacerbate than to solve the underlying problem. It is clear also that policies of this kind are inconsistent with the basic principles of human rights which underlie the Charter of the United Nations. And certainly to this extent the situation in South Africa is a matter of deep concern to member states.

For this reason and because Canada has favoured a broad interpretation of the Assembly's right of discussion, Canadian delegations in the past have not opposed the inscription of this item, nor argued against the Assembly's right to discuss it.

It has become apparent, however, that some delegations are disposed to press the matter far beyond mere discussion. Acting has been proposed which seems to us to undermine another basic principle of the Charter, that is, the sovereign equality of all the members of the United Nations. We have in mind the decision supported by a majority of members to establish the United Nations Commission on the Racial Situation in the Union of South Africa. This Commission has from a distance kept the situation in South Africa under surveillance and has now made three reports to the Assembly. Canada did not support the establishment of the Commission nor its continuation, although we did, of course, respect the decision of the majority of the Assembly and the conscientious efforts of the distinguished gentlemen who had served on the Commission.

From its inception we have doubted the wisdom of the procedure. Aware that the Government of South Africa was not disposed to cooperate with the Commission, we viewed its establishment not only as bordering on the kind of intervention which the Charter prohibits but, and this was a much more compelling reason in our view, as a procedure which would not yield worthwhile results. Not the least of the obstacles hampering the Commission's work has been its inability to enter the area in which the source of complaint lay.

We are strongly of the opinion that the test of practicability should be applied before proposals of this kind are adopted in the United Nations. Our fears about the inefficacy of the Commission have, we think, been borne out. Although it has produced a wealth of material on conditions in South Africa and although as a compilation its reports may be useful, in its recommendations the Commission has all but admitted its inability to come to grips with the main problem. Several delegations drew similar conclusions in the course of the general debate. I recall particularly the thoughtful interventions of the distinguished representatives of Sweden, Mexico and New Zealand. The Commission too has shown itself fully aware of the practical limitations on its work.

In arguing in favour of continuing the Commission, some members have referred to the need for maintaining the pressure of public opinion on the South African Government. They have emphasized that the reports of the Commission have helped to keep the problem before the public eye. While I agree that those arguments have some validity, I wonder

whether too much weight has not been attached to them. It is our impression, an impression which has been strengthened from hearing the numerous quotations which various speakers have cited during this debate, that public opinion has been aroused and has been closely focused on the problems of Africa, particularly those of South Africa. We are led to believe that the racial problems of Africa have in recent years attracted ever-growing attention not only outside the affected area but, it should be noted carefully, by important groups and individuals within the countries concerned. This widespread awareness is undoubtedly here to stay and in our view will continue to grow, whether or not action is pursued in the world forum of the United Nations. There seems little likelihood that there would be any slackening of the pressure for a satisfactory solution to those problems, even if the Assembly were disposed to allow the "breathing space" to which the New Zealand representative referred.

Several delegations in the course of the general debate -- and I have in mind the useful intervention of the distinguished representative of Pakistan -- referred to the loss of prestige to the United Nations if we appeared to relax our efforts to find a solution to this most difficult problem. I wish to assure those delegations that the Canadian Delegation shares their concern and has the interests of the organization foremost in mind. We believe that the risks to the prestige of the United Nations are greatly increased if the Assembly decides to adopt courses of action which are clearly not capable of producing workable results. As I have said, we have come to regard the work of the Commission in that light, notwithstanding the considerable efforts of its members. It is therefore with the future of our organization very much in mind that we argue against the continuation of the Commission.

I have dwelt on these matters at some length because I wish to make clear to the Committee why my delegation will not support the seventeen-Power resolution. As we read it, the draft resolution is concerned primarily with the continuation of the Commission. We have always had reservations about the functions of the Commission and we see little reason now to suppose that any greater practical value will be derived from its work in the future than in the past.
