



Statements and Speeches

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THE UNITED NATIONS A FIRST-RATE ORGANIZATION

Speech by Stephen Lewis, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to the National Convention of the United Nations Association of the United States of America, New York, April 29, 1985.

...The fortieth anniversary, as everyone knows, is a time for stocktaking. I like the United Nations. I've only been around this lovely and byzantine organization for about seven months but I quite like it. I'm a shameless apologist. I think it's a first-rate international institution and I don't much care for the gratuitous detractors. To be sure, all of us understand there are problems, there are imperfections, there are deficiencies in the United Nations system. I've often asked myself, as I view it in a novice's way, could it be otherwise after 40 years? Do you know of any human agglomeration which is unsullied after 40 years of evolution?

The litany of deficiency is as well-known to you as it is well-known to the protagonists here at the head table. We're often worried by the capacity of the superpowers — indeed, all of the permanent members of the Security Council — to thumb their noses with impunity at decisions which are taken in the United Nations. That happens from time to time in a way which is disconcerting, unnerving, occasionally frustrating. We know, all of us, of the proliferation of nation-states, and the way this has engendered within the arena of the General Assembly an excess of rhetorical spleen; some aggressive posturing; occasional extremist attacks. It bothers some more than others....

All of us are bothered by the truth that some problems seem endlessly intractable. We haven't got peace and disarmament; we haven't solved the problems of the Middle East; we can't seem to handle Namibia and South Africa. That is the crisis of credibility which some so often relate. And on top of all of that, there is the sense of incremental change. The detractors would describe it as a kind of immobility that leads to inertia, compounded by evidence of mismanagement.

When you set out that litany it is, I admit, a little unnerving. But without being disrespectful I'm inclined to say so what? Sure it's frustrating, sure it's difficult, all of us have to cope with these truths, all of us have to understand their nature. But it doesn't for a moment — this is what is so important, and it is inconceivable to me that people don't understand it — it doesn't for a moment invalidate the tremendous contribution which the United Nations makes; it doesn't for a moment render us impotent; it doesn't for a moment diminish the value of working to reinforce the strengths of the United Nations.

Now, in a way which bespeaks a certain innocence, I sometimes wonder about the perceptions and motives of various of the detractors.

For some, it seems to me, the expectations have been extravagant: the achievement of peace and the rule of law, as indicated in your ceremonial this afternoon, is not ushered in over 40 years. Forty years

is a whisper in the passage of time, all of us understand that. We haven't had a nuclear war, we haven't had an atomic conflict in 40 years and part of that is attributable to the United Nations. Is that not an object worthy of celebration?

For others who are critics of the United Nations, the principle of sovereignty is not understood. Sovereignty is rooted in the Charter of the United Nations. It is not possible for the United Nations to impose its will on a number of sovereign states. You can't just say to Ethiopia — as much as some would wish it — that the government has to have a ceasefire; has to recognize the rebels; has to open supply lines to Eritrea and Tigre. You can't just say to Iran and Iraq: we determine that you end your beserk war; we insist that you bring yourselves to heel before this organization.

It isn't the institution of the United Nations, the body corporate, which is the problem. It is the behaviour of individual nation-states which is the problem. And it is a profound misunderstanding of the United Nations and the way it operates not to recognize that simple truth. There is no capacity under the Charter to interfere in the internal affairs of member countries. Those are difficult and aggravating complexities. They are also complexities which allow the place to work.

And then there are other critics...who still are quite simply malevolent and they do great damage. They pretend to be dispassionate, analytic, concerned. Poppy-cock. Folderol. They are, by and large, neo-isolationists in their views of the world, and they are made up of the Heritage Foundation and others of their ilk.

I want you, if you will, to forgive this moment of disrespect — I am a guest in your country — but I want to say to you, because it has distressed me, that the Heritage Foundation and those of its supporters, specialize not in insightful analysis, for heaven's sake, but in inspired sophistry. They are fundamentally anti-internationalist. They do not believe that the national interests of the United States should ever be subsumed in the interests of the greater international community. And I want to say to you that that makes me impatient. Groups of people who do not understand the moral and human imperatives of the international community in 1985 demonstrate a philistinism for which none of us should have any time.

Yet it does great damage; I have to admit that. And although it saddens me to say so, people of such views within this country and other countries — in particular, the Heritage Foundation — engage in easy slanders of the Secretariat for which the Secretary-General is hard-pressed to respond; they put Third World countries on the defensive; they provoke many Americans into needless opposition. So they need to be dealt with in precisely the fashion which was put to you: not as an obsession, not as an *idée fixe*, not as a preoccupation, but as a group which wields influence and therefore has to be responded to. I'm engaged in the self-immolating chore of reading tract after tract, monograph after monograph, article after article disgorged by the Heritage Foundation. Before long, I hope it will be possible thoughtfully to document the flaws, the weaknesses, the generalizations, the partial truths, the factual errors in what will amount to a dossier of indictment. In other words, in a rational, persuasive and thoughtful way, to fight back in the defence of the United Nations. Indeed, I hope that we can mount a coterie of ambassadors at the United Nations, champions of the United Nations, and gradually, over time, take

our message right across the United States of America. We must say strongly and fervently and unapologetically that this is an institutional forum which deserves the celebration of humankind, not witless and gratuitous criticism.

In any event, that said, I think we should move to the strengths. This afternoon's ceremony drove it home for all of you. I don't want to go into it in great detail because there isn't all that much time for embellishment; but when you are summoning the arguments in defence of the United Nations, let's not retreat into the old dialectic.

Think for a moment — number one if you will — of the specialized agencies. I've often thought to myself, as surely you have, that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) almost single-handedly legitimizes the nature and character of the United Nations. Just reflect on it for a moment. Four hundred thousand youngsters under the age of five saved every year by UNICEF. Saved from death every year by UNICEF. When I stood in a refugee camp five or six weeks ago in the Sudan, right on the border with Ethiopia, to which 80 000 Tigreans had made a migration desperately seeking survival... when I stood in that camp and chatted with the doctors from *Médecins sans Frontières*, and asked them how it was possible to keep children alive in circumstances of such eviscerating desolation, they said to me that "part of the reason is that we have these little packets of oral rehydration therapy to distribute — 15 000 of them a day — and in that way, Mr. Lewis, we keep hundreds of children alive". Now it is important for the world to be reminded over and over again, with unself-conscious vigour, that you'd never have that outcome without the United Nations. That's the kind of thing which the world body achieves.

More still, you have the United Nations Development Program which spends \$675 to 700 million (US) each year, turning such amounts into further billions of dollars of projects which speak to the economic long-term viability of the countries whose present economies verge on catastrophe because of the African famine. Beyond that, you have the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), which day in and day out saves tens of thousands of people, and provides shelter and vaguely civilized environments, whether in Pakistan or in the Middle East or in the Sudan. One could set out — as you know as well as I — specialized agency after specialized agency doing ennobling work; indeed — dare I say it — including the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Therefore it's important when summoning the arguments in defence of the United Nations not to forget the specialized agencies.

Nor — number two — is it possible to forget the kind of very special political environment which is created within the United Nations, despite all of its difficulties. Throw your minds back, if you will, to the fall of 1984, recall with me that the world had not been at the negotiating table in Geneva for more than a year; that everybody felt we were perched on the precipice looking into some cataclysm of human destruction; and that the superpowers weren't talking. Lo and behold Andrei Gromyko comes to the General Assembly and makes a speech within which there is a hint that perhaps the bargaining process can be reinstated; and Ronald Reagan comes to the General Assembly — third year in a row, unprecedented in the history of presidential contributions since 1945 — and makes a speech within which there is a kernel of hope about reinstating the negotiations, and a few months later

those negotiations are consummated again in Geneva. I say to you what I think is palpably true: that could not have happened without the existence of an international agency through which ideological opposites can speak to each other, however obliquely. That is one of the great values of the United Nations.

And so to point number three: the question of some of the intransigent issues which seem to be so frustrating when we deal with them. Let me look at the most difficult of all, arms control and disarmament. Let me remind you, if I may, of the First Committee in the United Nations. Time and again, year after year, in what some would call a suffocating process — I would call a liberating intelligence — we deal with resolutions on a comprehensive test ban, on the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons, on the non-proliferation treaty, on the nuclear freeze, on nuclear winter, on a ban on fissionable materials, on the reduction of conventional arms — all of these resolutions, one after the other, addressed with vigour and passion and fervour by the countries involved. Yet, say the critics: you never achieve anything — resolution after resolution is passed and then not embraced by the superpowers. But the fact of the matter is that such a view of the process is both trivial and distorted, because whether it is in the First Committee in the fall, or whether it's in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, or whether it's in the United Nations Disarmament Commission in May here in New York, we keep the pressure on the superpowers. They have to vote, they have to take a stand, they have to meet and speak to every single one of those resolutions — it's absolutely inescapable — and that in itself, in a very important, if unacknowledged, way helps to maintain a glimmer of sanity in an otherwise lunatic environment. One should therefore applaud and recognize the value of those arms forums, even though we recognize as well that the ultimate decision will be made in Geneva.

Point number four: let me remind you of the emerging role of the Secretary-General. I think it's important to note what Edward Luck said: this is a new kind of Secretary-General; a man who is redefining the office in the contemporary world. We haven't seen his like since Dag Hammarskjöld. And that's a terribly important thing to understand.

I had the pleasure of accompanying Pérez de Cuéllar on a three-day state visit to Canada in early March. He's an immensely impressive and formidable advocate one on one and in small groups. I observed him talking with my Prime Minister, with my Minister of External Affairs, with a number of senior public servants, and every time he met them in argument he did not retreat. He engages in an advocacy which is quite unrelenting and effective.

What it has done for Pérez de Cuéllar and the United Nations, I think, is to have created a sense of interventionist diplomacy on the one hand, and preventive diplomacy on the other, both of which are giving a new *raison d'être* to the United Nations system. It doesn't always work, of course. What in this world does? But I remind you that when Pérez de Cuéllar wanders off to Southeast Asia to try to deal with Kampuchea; when he deals with the Soviet Union and Pakistan over Afghanistan; when he makes visits to Iran and Iraq; when he deals with the parties in Cyprus; when he moves heaven and earth to sustain the Contadora process in Central America, what Pérez de Cuéllar is doing is bringing the force of his office under Section 99 of the Charter to bear in a way which is ultimately helpful and civilizing.

What did Governor Cuomo say this afternoon: "The world is still talking; still striving?" That's precisely what Pérez de Cuéllar is reinforcing in his endless peripatetic wanderings around the planet. It is of immense value. Occasionally, it allows for a cessation of bombing civilian populations in a war like Iran/Iraq. Sometimes it may even result in reconciliation in a place like Cyprus — perhaps in the next year or two — that would be an enormous achievement for the United Nations. Sometimes it brings parties back to a discussion together which they would not otherwise contemplate. Always it prevents, to some extent, a mere fire from becoming a conflagration.

In the context of the United Nations, of the international community, all of that is immensely important: just keeping nations talking. Winning trust, as Pérez de Cuéllar does, is of immense significance. Pérez de Cuéllar is trusted by everyone. One of your potential new members of the executive board (Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick) trusted Pérez de Cuéllar, and I sense that her discerning judgments were selective. Mr. Troyanovsky, the Soviet Ambassador, trusts Pérez de Cuéllar; Botha of South Africa trusts Pérez de Cuéllar. Pérez de Cuéllar is a man who — as I said — is giving a new definition to the role of the Secretary-General. That role is not to be lightly impugned or disparaged.

Finally — point five — I remind you of the continuing process, year after year in the General Assembly and in the committees associated with it, where we achieve concrete things. That, too, is a matter to be celebrated and brought to the attention of the American community. Last session of the United Nations — my first session — there was an important resolution on international drug trafficking, which resolution is now on its way to becoming an international convention. There was, after seven years of painful drafting in Geneva, a Convention on Torture; a convention which will permit us, after 20 countries have signed and ratified it, to identify publicly those who continue to engage in the obscenity of torture. And then there was, of course, the extraordinary response to the African famine.

I want to point out that historians may look back 20 or 30 years hence and say that the response of the United Nations to the tragedy of Africa was perhaps its finest hour. Not only has the United Nations managed to galvanize tangible international support in a way that has never been experienced before; but in an equally exemplary fashion, it has put in place, on the ground in the 20 countries involved, the kind of co-ordinating and distributing leadership which is literally saving thousands of lives. I was proud when I was in the Sudan to watch the work of the United Nations personnel in UNICEF and the UN Development Program and UNHCR. It was something to behold — not only the extent of their commitment, but the way in which the United Nations was delivering food directly into the mouths of those who were starving, and doing it with a level of mastery and resolve which speaks to an extraordinary international body. These matters are matters which should convey pride and consequence by all of us who speak fervently for the international body. The fortieth anniversary is a good time to reassert the focus and to deal with the distortions.

The United Nations is simply not as bad as some would have it. Certainly it's polarized in the General Assembly, but not terminally for heaven's sake. The General Assembly remains a forum to which the leaders come. Everyone believes now that Gorbachev will come at the end of September 1985. Do you think that is some kind of incidental inconsequence? It's important that Gorbachev be there, and it is fascinating that he regards the United Nations as an institution sufficiently worthy to address on the fortieth anniversary of its life.

Certainly there is extremism. I understand that. But as Ed Luck said, there is tangible in the United Nations a new spirit of moderation, particularly from some of the developing countries. All you have to do is look at the document "The Declaration on the African Economic Crisis" to see the extent to which the African countries accommodated the interests of the developed world; the extent to which they sought a *rapprochement*.

I say this to you cautiously — I want no one to take offence — but I think that the supporters of the United Nations — even some in this room — are excessively defensive. It is not necessary to be so defensive. It is not necessary to be dragooned into the arguments of the detractors. The arguments are not terrifically persuasive and they are riddled with self-serving sophistry. It is necessary simply to accumulate the defence and to set it out chapter and verse. Don't be intimidated by those who are critics. Don't succumb to the blandishments of vilifiers. The United Nations is a first-rate organization with the simple deficiencies of time and age and circumstance.

So what do you do in a situation like that? You analyze it, you speak to its strengths, and then you go out and advocate its work.

Perhaps all of this is, in a sense, self-centeredly Canadian. I hope not. It's a little easier for Canada — we're a middle power, quite unthreatening as you can see, utterly non-nuclear, and a particular advantage in being bilingual so that we have special access to the francophone world. We have, above all, a lasting and visceral commitment to multilateralism which is ingrained in, and endemic to the Canadian character.

We share this continent with you, the United States; we are good friends, and we hope that we can in the future share as well Canada's more positive view of the United Nations. I've learned as I travelled over the past number of months that it is not hard to convey a more positive view of the United Nations. There's a yearning everywhere amongst people to affirm the validity of the international community and of an international organization. It's important, I think, to stand resilient and passionate in defence of the United Nations.

The Charter may, here and there, be under siege; but it's still an incomparable blueprint for a more just, civilized, humane and tolerant international community. One day we shall achieve it — infidels of all varieties notwithstanding. And so to this audience: the dreamers, the idealists, the pragmatists, the artisans in the vineyards of human betterment, the indefatigable apostles in the cause of peace — to all of you who are tenacious, and unrelenting, I wish you well. I salute you, and I ask you never to be cowed.

S/C