



Statements and Speeches

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STRENGTHENING THE UN SYSTEM

Statement by Stephen Lewis, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to Plenary, United Nations General Assembly, New York, December 17, 1984.

Some 24 hours from now, this part of the thirty-ninth session of the General Assembly will conclude. It is therefore not the time for elaborate and lengthy speechifying. But my country cannot let this moment pass without making a few succinct and pointed observations.

To put matters quite simply, Canada is both weary and impatient with those who make a fetish of impugning the worth, legitimacy and relevance of the United Nations. It happens all too frequently outside this body. It even happens, on occasion, within. In Canada's view, the time has come to launch a concerted campaign to defend and to strengthen the United Nations. There is no better moment to start than in the fortieth anniversary year.

No one in this Assembly would deny that the United Nations, and many of its organic parts, have frailties. The litany of deficiency is well-rehearsed: time and again the detractors tell us that the polarization between the superpowers reduces the United Nations to impotence; that the rhetorical excesses are extravagant; that speeches and issues and arguments coagulate in the throes of repetition; that the institutional processes are antiquated; that the incremental changes are slow to the point of inertia.

To each allegation, there is, alas, some truth. There is some pardonable despair — one can understand the feelings of futility when behaviour at the UN turns to rancour or induces immobility. But to succumb to the allegations seems, to Canada, to miss the point on two fundamental grounds. First, the expectations are pitched too high. The United Nations, with the greatest will and idealism in the world, was never meant to be a panacea. It is an institutional arrangement within which individual nations operate, and the commitment and co-operation of each of its sovereign states delimits the measure of its effectiveness. Back in 1946, curiously, in his first report to the United Nations, the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, put it well: "The United Nations is no stronger than the collective will of the nations that support it. Of itself it can do nothing. It is a machinery through which the nations can co-operate. It can be used and developed in the light of its activities and experience, to the untold benefit of humanity, or it can be discarded and broken."

That brings me directly to the second point. The United Nations has obviously not yet scaled the heights of untold benefit to humanity, nor is it yet, in any sense, discarded or broken. The reality lies somewhere in between, and the reality is impressive indeed.

Just take a look at this session. Whatever the inevitable frustrations of individual member states, even at times over procedural matters like those of last Friday, we have had a General Assembly which galvanized itself around Ethiopia; passed, by consensus, a formidable declaration on the economic

crisis in Africa; achieved, by consensus, a potentially powerful convention on torture; accepted, by consensus, a resolution on international drug trafficking; and reached, as well, a consensus on outer space.

In other words, whatever the defects in process and substance, whether in plenary or in committee, the fact remains that this was a productive thirty-ninth session, reflecting urgent human concern, considerable vision, and practical measures of response. As such, it stands as a microcosm of the continuing United Nations response and experience.

That experience has, over the 40 years, nurtured the welfare of humankind. And that is why gratuitous, fashionable assaults on the United Nations, to diminish or to demean it, just will not do.

The various agencies, whether the United Nations Children's Fund, the UN Development Program, the World Health Organization or the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, represent all in all, the finest expressions of human aspiration and dedication. The triumph of international peace-keeping is one of those rare reflections of sustained international sanity. The prestige and influence of the office of the Secretary-General augur well for the future direction of this entire organization. Indeed, the present incumbent has won the trust of every member state — as well he might when one thinks of his skill and initiatives on Afghanistan, on Cyprus, on Lebanon, on Iran-Iraq, to name but a representative few. It is not so much a solution which is required here; it is rather the inspired knack of keeping doors open, countries talking, a vital process going. These modest initiatives help to keep the world on track when all around us there is menace, alarm and hostility. If the United Nations system did not exist, it would be somehow recreated.

To be sure, that section of the Charter which speaks to the most important goal of all — international peace and security — has proved the most intractable. If human survival is the ultimate *raison d'être* of the United Nations — and what else could be? — then we have, admittedly, a long way to go. But given all of the other cumulative accomplishments, 1985 should be seen as the year when we marshal every conceivable energy to encourage the superpowers to negotiate, to compromise, and to agree. The process appears to have started — we should now heed the words of the Secretary-General delivered so eloquently in this Assembly just last week.

None of this is meant to be sanguine. Canada understands just how tough and complex the issues are. And we understand, equally, that the United Nations is an easy target for invective, and derision. But the quality of the critique is fundamentally unsound — there is more villification than analysis; more axes to grind than hatchets to bury; and sometimes, silence from those who fear the future or favour the *status quo*.

The fortieth anniversary is surely the occasion to turn it all around, and to restore to the United Nations that central role envisaged in the Charter.

To do that it will be necessary to attempt some internal reforms. They will be difficult to achieve. We shall have to approach every aspect of process, of procedure, of structure, and of substance with

immense caution and sensitivity. Here my delegation pays tribute again to our Secretary-General. His three annual reports, individually and collectively, provide us with clear, relevant observations on many of the problems which beset this organization. More than that, he has offered constructive solutions. Those reports are the starting point for future work on ways and means to strengthen the role and effectiveness of the United Nations. This need not involve elaborate new structures or committees; that could even prove counterproductive. It might be best to begin with more informal contacts amongst interested member states to identify those areas of common concern which are amenable to improvement, and then to identify improvements of real consequence.

In his first speech to the UN Economic and Social Council, if I can harken back to the words of the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie said: "While old problems will be solved, new problems will arise. The advance of science and the whims of nature and circumstances make that certain. But we are agreed to tackle our problems as we know them with stubborn and relentless energy. We will cross other bridges when we come to them." Now is the time to reinforce and then to cross those bridges.

Only this Assembly brings all of the international issues and all of the member states together. That is its unique role. Improvements here will have a telling impact on other United Nations bodies and on the difficult issues facing us. You, Mr. President, and I say this with heartfelt appreciation, have already instituted some much needed reforms in this Assembly. Let us continue that example. Perhaps now is the time to streamline our agenda and to eliminate routine, undebated items. Perhaps we should allocate more items from plenary to the committees. Perhaps we can arrange to have more current, less ritualistic, debates on individual items. Perhaps — dare I say — some repetitive items have exhausted their utility and can be dropped from the agenda. Perhaps greater use of informal contacts across regional groups would generate greater agreement.

The Charter begins with the words "We the peoples of the United Nations." Now is the time that we, the peoples of the United Nations, gathered here in this General Assembly, reflect on our past and, more important, tackle our future, particularly in the fortieth anniversary year, with that self-same stubborn and relentless energy to which Trygve Lie referred.