



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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No. 50/42 THE UNITED NATIONS: A PRACTICAL VIEW

An address delivered by Mr. R.G. Riddell, Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to a meeting of the United Nations Association and the Canadian Club, in Toronto on October 24, 1950.

It is a common interest in the United Nations which brings us here today and a common desire for its success and for the fulfilment of the great ideal which it embodies. But I am sure that in present circumstances we must do more than praise the United Nations and we must go further than merely reassert our belief in its principles. A fifth anniversary in the life of an organization is a good time to take stock. This is an occasion to ask ourselves, in the most practical terms, what the United Nations is worth and what it can do.

I am glad to be able to take part with you in this stock-taking, just because I am fresh from the conference rooms where the Fifth General Assembly of the United Nations is now in session. At Flushing and Lake Success, it is often hard to see in perspective what is happening. I can think of no more useful exercise for a member of a Delegation to the United Nations Assembly than the opportunity to talk it all over with interested and informed people who are watching our activities at a greater distance.

Certainly it is not easy to see the wood amongst the heavy undergrowth which springs up each autumn at Lake Success when the General Assembly meets. Nor is there much leisure during the Assembly itself to reflect upon the progress of the organization. A Delegate's life is by no means a restful one. It starts each morning at delegation headquarters with a full Delegation meeting at nine o'clock -- a meeting at which the Delegation as a whole tries to sort out its activities on the six main committees of the Assembly, and to foresee the day's agenda. This agenda may include subjects as practical on the one hand as relief for Korea and as abstruse and theoretical on the other as the effect upon multilateral treaties of reservations by signatory states. The Delegation must prepare itself for the day by attempting to see in advance the decisions which will have to be taken, the votes which must be cast, the subjects on which policy will have to be stated. It will have also to look ahead to decisions in the future about which it must seek instructions from the Government. When this meeting is over, the Delegation must transport itself twenty-five miles to the meeting place at Lake Success and there engage upon the business of the Assembly until meetings close at six o'clock. When the Delegates go back to their quarters in the evening, with the five official languages still ringing in their ears, there are reports to be prepared and memoranda to be written, speeches to be drafted in preparation for the next day's meeting.

But if a Delegate who is engaged upon this marathon has any disposition to feel sorry for himself, this inclination is quickly forgotten by his sense of being caught up, for the moment at least, in a complex drama. It is a drama acted out upon a vast and sometimes shadowy stage, peopled by a strange and varied company of actors, none of them knowing certainly the theme of the drama and some doubtful even of the roles they are expected to play or the lines they are called upon to speak. All of them, I think, have occasional moments of discouragement, when they are tempted to believe that the play is but an inconsequential farce. But all of them equally are at times lifted up by the sense of being part of some great new epic in human affairs, the beginning of a cycle of enormous consequence upon the stage of human history.

We cannot be sure, of course, that a final curtain will not be rung down on the United Nations amidst scenes of violence, for I do not suppose there has been a time in history when people were so uncertain of their ability to solve by peaceful means the problems of their international relations. But I am quite sure of this: on the stage at the moment the action is vigorous, there is substance and significance to the theme, and there is more sense of purpose and direction in the drama than at any time since 1945.

There are many ways of looking at the United Nations. One may regard it as a piece of political machinery, designed to carry out negotiations amongst nations for the settlement of international problems. It may also be regarded as an organization the primary object of which is, through activities in the field of social and economic welfare, to remove the causes of war. Or, alternatively, it is sometimes regarded as a great international parliament, where the major issues of world affairs are talked out. If we regard the United Nations in this light, the importance of the process lies in the public debate itself rather than in the practical consequences which come from it. Again, the United Nations is sometimes regarded primarily as a security organization, the central purpose of which is to guarantee its members against invasion or attack. I think that all of these definitions of the role of the United Nations are in part correct, and if we are to make any true estimate of the effectiveness of that organization, we must examine it in all these roles.

If, to begin with, you consider the United Nations as an instrument for settling political problems, you will be surprised at the number of specific and practical international questions which find their way onto its agenda. The best example I can pick out is the disposition of the former Italian Colonies. In some ways, it is an accident that this subject is on the agenda of the United Nations, because responsibility for Italian Colonies was originally kept by the great powers at the end of the war. But when the great powers failed to agree, the question was brought to the General Assembly. This is new procedure, for the custom has always been for the victors in wars to divide up the spoils that they take from their enemy. We have now, however, for the first time, an effort being made in an international organization to clean up some of the aftermath of war. A settlement of the Italian Colonies problem is being worked out in the Assembly of the United Nations. It is not being a particularly quick or tidy process, and it

would probably not get high marks for efficiency. There have been conflicting views about what should be done and it has been difficult to get a two-thirds vote in the Assembly for any plan. In the end, however, I think the solution will be a reasonably good one and it will reflect, in a way that has never before been possible, the judgment of the international community about one part of a post-war settlement. I do not wish here to go into details about what is a somewhat technical political question concerning the future of the group of North African territories -- the Fezzan, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Eritrea, and Somaliland. I mention the problem simply as an illustration of the way in which the General Assembly has been forced to take hold of a complicated international problem, in much the same way as our own Parliament is occasionally forced to deal with a difficult and complicated internal problem such, for example, as freight rates. The Assembly is working towards a solution of this problem by using generally accepted parliamentary procedures: discussion, negotiation, adjustment and compromise. There are other political problems about which the Assembly has also acted as a kind of international parliament. Palestine is one, the political situation in Korea is another. Whether or not we are happy about the recommendations which the Assembly made in these cases, it nevertheless acted as a kind of legislature, and its acts affected the disposition of territory, the government of people, and relations amongst states. I am confident therefore that there is already in the United Nations the beginnings of an international legislative process for the conduct of international affairs.

I said that the United Nations was sometimes regarded primarily as an organization for economic and social welfare. It is, of course, perfectly reasonable to expect an international organization, upon which we pin our hopes of peace, to do something about the economic and social causes of war. The United Nations has provided itself with a great deal of apparatus for dealing with these problems, and there are perhaps times when we feel that there is more apparatus than product. However this may be, the machinery is there with which to work. There is the Economic and Social Council. In the field of welfare there are the Social Commission and the various Specialized Agencies; there are also the economic commissions of the Economic and Social Council, and the various relief agencies organized under the United Nations. Many of these organs have already done work of very great importance, in terms of human lives, rescued from the scrap heap and given the chance of a fresh start, it seems to me that the record of the International Refugee Organization is a remarkable one. Another project for the rescue and rehabilitation of refugees is now taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean amongst the Arabs who were displaced as a result of the war in Palestine. This job is under the direction of a very able and practical Canadian, Major-General Kennedy, and I know that the work he is doing will have long term results in the economic life of the Near East. An even greater work of relief and rehabilitation is now beginning in Korea, where the effects of a devastating war which burst upon that country must be repaired. All these activities, moreover, may be regarded as part of a new and imaginative effort which is being made through the United Nations to raise the standard of living of backward countries. This effort has now been organized into what is called the Technical Assistance Programme, and another Canadian, Hugh Keenleyside, has recently been appointed Director of the

Technical Assistance Board. The establishment of this Programme is a recognition in concrete and practical form of the necessity, if peace is to endure, of raising the standard of living in under-developed countries. The hope is that, as a result of technical assistance, people in economically backward countries may be helped to raise the standard of living of their people, by using their resources to better advantage, by growing more food, by developing more power, by bettering their standards of education, by adopting technical health and welfare services which will remove some of the causes of poverty. The Technical Assistance Programme has only begun, and no one is yet certain whether it will fulfil its great purposes. It is, however, a good and encouraging example of the use of United Nations machinery, with the object of serving an immediate and practical purpose in international affairs.

I spoke also of the United Nations as a world forum - a kind of international town meeting, in which the issues of international affairs could be defined and discussed. This function of the United Nations is, of course, of mixed value, for the tendency of some countries to make of the United Nations a sounding board for propaganda is at the moment one of its greatest handicaps. However, I believe that from the welter of words that is poured out at Lake Success, the voluminous, verbose, prolific and often times tedious debate that goes on, there may come a clarification of the issues in international affairs. This I think is particularly true of the issues between the Communist and the Free World. The Cominform states have sought again and again to use the platform of the United Nations as an instrument for spreading their propaganda. When the debate has been pressed home, they have shown on every issue which they have raised, that in the last analysis they are unwilling to compromise with the free world on any terms save their own. We must admit that a good many of the debates at Lake Success are frankly of a propaganda character, and that they have no concrete or practical effect whatever in the lives of men and women. But in these debates, which for the most part centre around the great issue between the Communist World and the Free World, the Communist states gain no appreciable measure of support from governments beyond the reach of the armies of the U.S.S.R. By forcing these propaganda debates upon the United Nations, the U.S.S.R. has wasted a great deal of the time of the organization, but it has also, in spite of its persistent misuse of the language of democracy, revealed to the free community the true nature of its purposes, so that its support amongst member governments has steadily been reduced until it now includes only the pitiful captive states which surround it.

Amongst the various functions of the United Nations, its role as a security organization is of principal interest in the year 1950. This is often regarded as the central purpose of the United Nations. It has been held that basically the object of the organization is to create a system of collective security within which the member States will guarantee each other against the dangers of attack. With this purpose in mind, the states which signed the Charter accepted commitments far greater than had ever before been written into the constitution of an international organization. The chapters of the Charter which established

the Security Council as the body responsible for keeping the peace go much farther than is generally realized. Amongst other things, they commit the members of the United Nations - including this country, of course - to provide armed forces to be used at the direction of the Security Council, in accordance with agreements worked out by the Military Staff Committee and member states, for enforcement purposes. It was hoped that this machinery, by which force would be placed behind the rule of international law, would guarantee to the members of the United Nations, and particularly to its smaller members, the sense of security which they could not provide for themselves.

You are all familiar with the way in which the United Nations has failed during the period since the war to achieve this central purpose. The Great Powers were entrusted with special responsibility for working out the peace preservation machinery under the Security Council. When the Great Powers failed to agree on the methods by which this machinery should be set up, there was no further progress. The clear realization that the United Nations could not guarantee the security of its members and that, at the same time, there was developing within the Iron Curtain one of the most formidable military threats in history, forced members of the United Nations to look elsewhere for their security. The North Atlantic Alliance was created in response to their emergency and through it the Western world has gained some of the safety which we hoped would come from the Charter itself.

Up until a few months ago we had no reason to think that, in the present state of tension between the Communist and the free worlds, and with the Soviet Union exercising its veto in the Security Council, the United Nations would ever be the political fire department which it was originally hoped to create.

During the recent summer, however, there has been a surprising and spectacular development. When the Communist forces in North Korea broke over the 38th Parallel on the 25th of June, the Soviet Union was absenting itself from meetings of the Security Council. At the time the Soviet Union was pursuing a policy of trying to force its will with regard to the representation of China upon its colleagues in the United Nations and similar international organizations. It must now greatly regret this policy of abstention since it has completely and abjectly abandoned it. Consequently, when aggression took place in Korea, there was not only the will on the part of the free world to resist by collective action, but there was no one present who could throw the blanket of the veto over this bright flame of determination. What the international Communists of North Korea did not realize was that their act of aggression would raise basic questions of principle for the free nations - principle upon which they would insist on taking up a stand. Aggression in Korea was resisted by the United Nations. The burden of this decision has, of course, been borne by the United States. However, reality and substance were given to the collective effort in Korea, even within three months and this has been an impressive demonstration of the way in which the United Nations may become an instrument for collective action amongst the free nations.

It was a happy chance from the point of view of the free world that the U.S.S.R. was absent from the Security Council when the blow fell in Korea. It is obviously a chance which will not be repeated, for the U.S.S.R. has come back into all the organs of the United Nations, where they firmly keep their seats and indulge in no more walkouts. In order to be sure that, even in the presence of the U.S.S.R., the United Nations could operate as a collective force for the preservation of peace, the General Assembly has within the past ten days adopted a resolution which will greatly strengthen its hand. This is a resolution which will add to the effectiveness of the Assembly itself as a second line of defence if the Security Council is unable to act in an emergency. The title of the resolution is "United Action for Peace". It provides that, in an emergency, the Assembly may meet within 24 hours. It establishes a Peace Observation Commission which will be available at any time to perform in dangerous areas the useful work of observation which was carried out by similar commissions, specially created for the purpose, in Greece and Korea. It recommends to the United Nations that each member should hold in readiness forces which could be used for collective action in event of danger. Finally, it sets up a Committee to study the methods by which forces can most effectively be placed at the disposal of the United Nations for the preservation of peace. As you know, the Canadian Government acted in accordance with the third of these recommendations even before it was suggested in the Assembly. Canada has already established a Special Force which will be held in readiness to fulfil Canadian obligations under the Charter of the United Nations and under regional agreements within the terms of the Charter, which for us, of course, means the North Atlantic Treaty.

If the central purpose of the United Nations has been to act as a collective security organization, its central weakness has been the great division that has grown up between the Soviet Union on the one hand and the Free World on the other. This is a division which the Soviet representatives at the United Nations continually refer to as "lack of unanimity amongst permanent members of the Security Council". Again and again they say that if only the great powers would agree, the United Nations would prosper. But they speak of unanimity as though it were something that could be had merely for the asking. They overlook, or pretend to overlook, the fact that since 1945, they have abandoned, one by one, the working arrangements upon which the great and impressive united effort of the war was based. They have renewed the activities of international Communism, which they had held in abeyance during the height of the war. They have resumed the practice of isolating their people as much as possible from outside contacts. They have begun once more to present to their people a falsified and distorted picture of the Western world, and they do not permit anyone to correct this picture. They have renewed their practice of intervening through branches of the international Communist organization, in the internal affairs of other states. In regard to the great unsettled political issues of the post-war period, such as Germany and Japan, they have carried their power as far as their force could be made to reach, and they have then set up rigid and uncompromising demands for a settlement that would carry them even further than

they had already advanced. Gradually they have so frightened the people of the free world, that they have forced the United Nations into becoming the very instrument of collective defence which they thought they could prevent by means of the veto. Their sudden return to the Council chambers of the United Nations - a return which they have made in a bland and affable manner, in sharp contrast to their abrupt and hectoring demeanour of the past few years, is itself a tribute to the strength and influence of the United Nations.

Whether with this renewed strength, the United Nations can now serve as an instrument for resolving some of the outstanding issues between the Soviet Union and the non-Communist world, is the next great question which faces the organization. If there is any chance that it can perform this function, it will be only because it is strong in the support of its member states. For this reason it is encouraging to know that here, and in thousands of other cities of the Free World today, men and women are making known their interest in the United Nations, and in the policies which their governments adopt toward the United Nations.

I have been speaking of the United Nations as a practical instrument by which states like our own might try to put into effect in international affairs some of the policies which they hold to be to their advantage. I think this is a good way to look at the United Nations, because it prevents us being sentimental or unrealistic about it. We ask ourselves what are the things we want done in the world, and then we consider whether any of these things can be realised through this particular international instrument. I know very well, however, that the United Nations embodies a great and imaginative conception - the ideal of a world community. I know also that like all great movements in history, this one will prosper only as it is supported by the compelling force of public opinion. People must believe in it and they must believe in it sufficiently to hold to it through good times and bad. A wide and persistent popular demand during the war that a new effort to be made in the post-war period to establish an international organization played a very great part in the founding of the United Nations. For the difficult tasks that lie ahead, it is of the greatest importance that the United Nations should be sustained by an informed public interest and a conviction in the public mind that the purposes of the United Nations are valid, that the ideal is sound and worthy.

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