



Statements and Speeches

No. 78/14

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

A Statement by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Honourable Allan J. MacEachen, in the House of Commons, December 8, 1978.

On December 10, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Sunday is the thirtieth anniversary of that event. It should be used in Canada and all parts of the world as an occasion to review the progress or the lack of progress that has been made in these three decades towards guaranteeing human rights. More significantly, it must be used as an opportunity to identify what more can be done, both internationally and in Canada, to ensure that the rights and freedoms enunciated in the Universal Declaration are effectively enjoyed by all people.

The agreement 30 years ago on the principles of the Universal Declaration was a remarkable achievement by the international community, given the wide variations in political and social systems throughout the world. One of the people directly involved in that success was Dr John P. Humphrey, a Canadian. In his former role as the Director of the United Nations Human Rights Division, he oversaw the drafting of the Declaration. He is to speak on behalf of Canada at a special commemorative meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on December 11. The principles of the Declaration have been elaborated and defined in more than 20 international agreements. However, we are all painfully aware that the existence of those agreements has not created a world in which human rights are respected. In many countries there are gross violations of even the most basic human rights. Often these violations are perpetrated deliberately by governments, and on occasion by governments that have freely assumed legal obligations to respect those rights. The international community must find ways to rectify this unpalatable situation. Canadians look to the United Nations to do so.

The member states of the United Nations have not given it the power to oblige governments to respect human rights. But it is a forum where world opinion can and should be focused on those governments that persistently abuse the rights of their citizens. Canada is firmly committed to efforts to improve the performance of the United Nations in the human-rights field.

In Canada, we have made considerable progress in the past 30 years. That progress has been influenced by the international obligations we have assumed. Every province has adopted human-rights legislation and has established a provincial human-rights commission to consider complaints from individuals. The Federal Government has adopted important human-rights legislation and has established the Canadian Human Rights Commission....

In 1976, Canada became a party to the most important human-rights conventions, the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and on Civil and Political Rights and its Optional Protocol. The federal and provincial governments are aware that Canadian legislation and practice are not always totally consistent in every detail with the international obligations we undertook by adhering to the covenants. But they recognized that the covenants provide a standard against which Canadian performance can be measured to identify where improvements should be made. The Canadian adherence to the Optional Protocol has extended to individual Canadians the right to take their complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Committee when domestic legal remedies have been exhausted.

The thirtieth anniversary is being recognized across Canada by the provinces, by church groups and by non-governmental organizations. Among many other significant events, the Canadian Human Rights Foundation has conducted seminars and conferences across the country on the nature of Canadian obligations arising from our international commitments. On December 9 and 10, the Canadian Human Rights Commission, in co-operation with the Departments of the Secretary of State and of External Affairs, will hold a conference at which national organizations concerned with human rights will review progress in Canada since the Universal Declaration was adopted.

The federal and provincial governments are now preparing reports for the United Nations on the implementation in Canada of the two human-rights covenants. When the reports are completed, they will be made public. They will provide Canadians with important information on the state of human rights in Canada.

We are commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, not only as a reflection of the past and present importance of that historic document but also as an opportunity for us, as Canadians, to move forward. In doing so, we renew our commitment to ensure that everyone, everywhere, will enjoy fully the fundamental rights and freedoms described in the Universal Declaration.