



United Nations Association in Canada
Association canadienne pour les Nations Unies

Canadians and the United Nations at 60+

By Don Munton

Executive Summary

“We were there when the United Nations was founded,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper told the General Assembly in October 2006; “Canada has always been with you.” The Canadian public too has always been “there,” and with the United Nations. From the earliest discussions during World War II about a postwar security organization to replace the old League of Nations, through Suez and Iraq and Bosnia, to the attempts to build a stable Afghanistan, Canadians have supported the United Nations.

In 1945 Canadians overwhelmingly wanted a United Nations. They still do. They approve its mission, support its universality and afford it a vital role in the world. The evidence for this is based on findings that come from national public opinion polls conducted in Canada between the 1940s and the present day by the Gallup Poll, government departments and a variety of other survey research companies. The public has, from the outset, supported making UN membership inclusive. During the Cold War, Canadians wanted to keep the Soviet Union within the United Nations and, during the 1960s, to admit the People’s Republic of China. Canadians regard making the United Nations successful an essential goal and believe the organization is very important for Canada. Indeed, they regard it as our most important international association. The United Nations is central to the internationalist inclinations of Canadians.

Canadians supported the UN’s first attempts at collective security, in response to the invasion of South Korea in 1950, and at peacekeeping, during the 1956 Suez crisis. They have unfailingly backed the establishment of more recent missions elsewhere and have approved sending their own troops to participate, although sometimes with evident collective concerns about the safety of their troops and the difficulties of specific conflicts. Canadians also strongly insisted any military action against Iraq in 2003 receive UN Security Council approval. Rejecting unilateralism for multilateralism, they saw the organization as the essential source of international legitimacy in such cases.

At the same time, Canadians recognize the United Nations has not always been effective, are critical of its failings and seem particularly dissatisfied with recent performance. The criticisms however stem not from pessimism let alone rejection but from high hopes for its improvement and a deep desire for it to succeed. Canadians want the United Nations to do better, to be reformed and strengthened, and, in short, to play the active and effective role envisaged at its founding.