

Building a world community



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The United Nations and Human Rights

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In 1945 the United Nations recognized that you could not have world peace without respect for universal human rights. As a result the UN Charter included several significant provisions to this end and called for the establishment of a Commission on Human Rights, which was set up in 1946 with its first task the drafting of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Driven by the contributions of Eleanor Roosevelt, René Cassin and Canadian John Humphrey, the Commission completed the Universal Declaration in 1948, and it was adopted by the General Assembly by a vote of 48 to nothing, with eight abstentions. This was an outstanding achievement, an important landmark in human history. This was followed by international instruments dealing with genocide, war crimes, refugees, racial discrimination, torture and the rights of women and children.

All of this is to say that the UN has been extremely successful in adopting human rights standards applicable to the whole world, to all continents and all cultures. There has been however a serious problem with implementation. It was expected that the highest level of implementation would be accomplished by the passage of implementing legislation by the ratifying states, with human rights charters and human rights commissions in all states. Although many countries have done this, there are still too many wars, too many conflicts and too many human rights violations.

Canada has ratified nearly all the major human rights conventions, has legislated these human rights standards, set up human rights commissions, and adopted a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Nevertheless, in recent years Canada has failed to respect its obligations under several of these instruments – through the imprisonment of individuals without due process under security certificates; through the indiscriminate naming of innocent citizens to “no-fly lists;” and through the recent passage of [Bill C-51 \(The Anti-Terrorist Act\)](#). On July 23, 2015 the UN Human Rights Committee chastised Canada for several provisions in C-51 that were in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including its failure to provide appropriate oversight to prevent and correct abuses. The same UN report also censured Canada for its treatment of aboriginal children and women. In addition there are several instances where

Canada has fallen behind in its obligations to UN treaty-based reporting requirements, and its failure to support requests for more funding for the UN Human Rights System.

Canada is not alone in such matters. In fact there is no state without fault. But Canada should show the way in correcting such failings.

Taking international human rights obligations seriously domestically not only strengthens human rights protection in Canada. It also has major foreign policy implications. If we are conscientiously implementing our obligations at home, as well as acting on the recommendations from UN human rights treaty bodies, then we will be in a much stronger and more credible position to advocate that others also fulfill their obligations.

Signing on to key UN treaties allows us to press other countries to follow suit. Engaging in UN reviews in good faith means we can demand the same of other governments. And showing we are serious about implementation is essential, as that is where the international human rights system falls short, worldwide.

Our goal must be to strengthen the implementation procedures and the oversight mechanisms for all human rights standards. Canada in the past has shown great leadership in supporting UN peacekeeping, development and human rights. This is a proud tradition, which should be enhanced and continued.