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CELEBRATION OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Letter dated 10 December 1969 from the Permanent Representative  
of Canada to the United Nations addressed to the President of  
the General Assembly

I have the honour to submit for your consideration, and for that of delegations and the Governments of Member States, certain ideas for improving the procedures of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

By way of introduction I should like to recall that, when the United Nations was established, it was decided that the work of the General Assembly should be conducted in plenary meetings and in six Main Committees, with a steering committee known as the General Committee. In order to cope with an increasingly heavy agenda, the General Assembly set up an ad hoc political committee in 1949, and renewed it annually until 1956, when the decision was taken to establish it as a permanent committee. Over the years certain procedures have been developed, and have been incorporated in formal rules of procedure or, through long use, have become integral parts of the system.

Although the number of Member States has more than doubled, and the United Nations has taken on activities in the field of development that were only dimly foreseen when the Charter was adopted, the methods employed by the General Assembly in the conduct of its business have undergone virtually no change. The system is cumbersome and imposes a heavy burden on all delegations. With a view to improving the efficiency of the Organization, and, if possible, to making it easier for delegations and the Secretariat to prepare for the discussions in Plenary and in the Committees, the Canadian delegation suggests that the time has come to review

the procedures of the General Assembly and perhaps to institute some improvements. It seems to me that it would be particularly appropriate to undertake to review on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations.

During the twenty-third session of the General Assembly, the number of meetings held by each of the Main Committees was as follows:

First Committee:	67
Second Committee:	72
Third Committee:	93
Fourth Committee:	58
Fifth Committee:	65
Sixth Committee:	74
Special Political Committee:	46

It is evident that the work-load is very unevenly divided.

A study of the allocation to the various Committees of items on the agenda of the current session of the General Assembly reveals that the question of apartheid is being discussed in three Committees; problems of the human environment are being discussed in two Committees; there are two separate items on the problems of youth; and there are some items, such as housing and town twinning, that might have been discussed under the general heading of the report of the Economic and Social Council. Moreover, some items (e.g., effects of atomic radiation and freedom of information) appear on the agenda annually as a matter of custom, although there may be no important reason why they should occupy the attention of the General Assembly every year rather than once every two or three years. Other items appear on the agenda because it has become habitual for the General Assembly to refer a matter to the Economic and Social Council, with a request for a report to the Assembly at its next session, whereas the question of the desirability of bringing the matter to the attention of the Assembly at its next session might well be left to the Council (the Second Committee is to be commended for its efforts to reduce the number of requests for reports on matters referred to the Council).

The Canadian delegation is aware of various other ideas that have been put forward for rationalizing the agenda of the Assembly. It has been suggested, for instance, that at the twenty-fifth session of the General Assembly the items on

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the sea-bed and outer space, except for their disarmament aspects, might be referred to the Sixth Committee; that all disarmament, nuclear energy and related matters be referred to a single committee; and that more use be made of continuing committees or bodies within the United Nations family, following the example of the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament, to do preparatory work between the session of the General Assembly. If certain subjects were discussed less frequently, certain agenda items were merged with others, and the work-load were more evenly distributed, it might be possible to carry on the business of the General Assembly in six Main Committees rather than seven. There have been suggestions that the Assembly lasts too long and that the Main Committees might meet at different times of the year.

Each of the considerations mentioned above may be controversial. Taken together, however, they suggest that there is good reason for a thorough review of the methods employed by the General Assembly. To this end, the Canadian delegation proposes that consideration be given at the twenty-fifth session of the General Assembly to the initiation of a thorough study of the workings of the General Assembly. One way to pursue the matter might be to establish a committee of three distinguished persons with long experience of the General Assembly, who would be asked to examine the established system of committees and the allocation of agenda items, the organization of the work of the Assembly, documentation and the rules of procedure; to consider all suggestions that might be submitted to it with a view to improving the working methods of the Assembly; and to submit a report to the General Assembly at its next session setting forth any recommendations it might deem appropriate.

In this connexion, I should like to mention that the Joint Inspection Unit, in paragraph 198 of its report on documentation (A/7576), expressed the opinion that the system used by the United Nations for the holding of meetings was based on procedures that seem obsolete and that "new techniques have now been developed which should make it possible to overcome the handicaps arising from a highly bureaucratic system which has become extremely cumbersome". The Fifth Committee approved on 9 December a draft resolution in which the General Assembly would request the Joint Inspection Unit to submit a report on the matter. The proposed report would doubtless contain suggestions regarding the methods used by the General Assembly in its meetings, as well as those used by other United Nations bodies.

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Subject to what the reactions of Member States will be in the intervening period, the Canadian delegation would consider placing the matter on the agenda of the twenty-fifth session of the General Assembly. Meanwhile, it expresses the hope that other delegations, and the Governments of Member States, will give consideration to the problem. I am suggesting to the Secretary-General that, with a view to facilitating discussion of the question at the twenty-fifth session, he should have a working paper prepared containing a résumé of suggestions that might have been made for improving the procedures of the General Assembly.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter circulated as a General Assembly document.