



Statement by H.E. Bob Rae (Canada)

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I'm delighted to see all of you today. It's a great honor for me to be with you. I want to give a shout out to any Canadians in the room, but it won't be limited to that. There we are. Great to see you all.

I've just come off doing a phone message to a group of high school students in Canada, and I have to confess to them that I attended my first Students United Nations, as we call it, in 1962. So, you can figure out roughly how old I really am. I had the great good fortune of attending the International School in Geneva, where my dad was also the ambassador to the United Nations, and it was a chance for me to learn firsthand about the work of the UN.

So, I feel like when I was asked if I would come and speak to this group, I said, "of course." I'm thrilled to be with you. It's a great pleasure and privilege for me to be able to join you, and it's something that I feel very deeply about.

I think that we learn best by listening. We learn best by engaging with people from around the world. And we learn best by understanding that it is only through working with others and other countries and other people that we learn anything—and learn the need to move beyond the boundaries and borders that have been set for ourselves by others. But that in fact we have to learn, as time goes on, how to break these down.

So, I'm really thrilled to have a chance to say a few words to you.



And I want to start by describing a little bit what you already know: the challenges that the world faces.

Let's start with climate change. Climate change is actually a real thing. It's not a fake ideology. It's not something that many scientists made up and then imposed on the rest of us. It's actually a real phenomenon, and it's actually not very complicated to understand.

When the world started to industrialize, it also started to pollute. And the process of industrialization and the process of pollution went together—starting in Europe, starting in the UK, the first country to begin to industrialize on a large scale, and then in Europe and then around the world. And now, of course, everybody is pointing, because we associate the process of industrialization with the way in which we create wealth.

The problem with this is that the way we create wealth also changes the ecology of the planet. It changes the atmosphere in which we live. It changes the oceans, which we rely on for our life.

And so, we now understand better how these processes work. And we know that we have a very simple challenge in front of us. To describe it simply is not complicated, but to actually get it done is very difficult. We have to decouple the process of economic growth from the process of pollution.

It's not hard to describe. We have to learn how to make wealth without creating pollution—pollution that ultimately will make the planet unlivable. So, you don't have to be an alarmist or an extremist or anything else to say: we are, at the moment, not yet turning this curve down—this curve of emissions.



So, when the planet heats up and ocean levels rise and the planet dries out, it has incredible impacts on people. People can no longer farm in certain parts of the world where they could farm. They can no longer fish in parts of the world where they used to. It goes on.

So that's just one example of a crisis that we're facing. And we know it's a global problem. It's not like you can say, "If I pollute from my factory in Colorado, that affects the sky above Colorado and that's it." If I reduce the emissions from my factory in Colorado, then we won't have the problem in Colorado. It doesn't work like that. Once the pollution goes up, it goes everywhere. And that's what creates the crisis.

And then we have to find a way—well, how do we solve that? How do we deal with it? We can set standards, we can sign treaties, we can make agreements. But the problem is: can we make countries do what needs to be done?

That's just one example of how there are global problems that require global solutions. But the UN has to have the power to be able to deal with them. And that's what we call multilateralism. It's a complicated name for a very simple thing. Like groceries. Not complicated. Multilateralism is not a complicated concept. We have to learn how to work together. And we have to learn how to work without regard to borders and boundaries, because borders and boundaries prevent us from understanding the global nature of the problems that we face.

When this organization was founded in 1945, we were just coming out of the worst conflict that the world had ever seen. And it's because the people who were fighting that war decided that we had to change the way we did things if we were going to successfully move beyond what's called the scourge—the scourge of war. "To save future generations from the scourge of war." That's the opening words of the Charter: "We the peoples of the world."



So, what's interesting is that it says, "we the people," not "we the nation." It says, "we the people." And so that's the driving force that moves us. What can the peoples of the world do?

I've just been speaking this week to well over 2,000 young people who've been part of the Youth Forum here at the UN, and they are activists from around the world who come in unprecedented numbers to talk to the representatives of the UN who are here, and senators with more than 60 governments who've joined us to really emphasize the importance of youth engagement and youth participation.

And it is so critical for us to find a way to empower your voices and to encourage you to engage and to make a difference. Because that's how these institutions will change.

So here you are, sitting in the General Assembly. And I would like to be able to say that this is where it really happens. But that's only partly true. I mean, it is kind of cool to be sitting here. I know that. I come in here everyday, and I feel—how cool is this? I can go to the desk. It's got "Canada" on it. I'm there representing my country. I mean, it is a wonderful feeling.

But then we also have to get real. Because the UN's facing a challenge of credibility and the challenge of public trust. Because there's a gap between the aspirations that were set in 1945 and the realities we're facing today.

We have more than 140 million people in the world who are physically displaced because of conflict. And because we have more conflicts in the world today, more people being killed—to put it in its bluntest terms—more children being killed, more women being killed, more soldiers being recruited at the age of 12, 13, 14 to go to war, fighting guerrilla wars throughout Africa, in Myanmar, in the jungles of



Venezuela and Colombia and elsewhere. We have more people in conflict today than we've had at any time since 1945.

And you're sitting in the seats where delegates from different countries are sitting. And they say, "Let's try to help deal with this." And we find it very frustrating because the challenge that's facing the UN is that it depends on the willingness of nation states to actually do what needs to be done.

And that is the challenge that is facing you now, and it's the challenge that faces us. It's going to be facing us forever unless we give to this institution—or any institution—the power and the capacity to make change happen. And to make things happen that we agree need to be done.

Right now, if you pollute more than you agreed to do in the Paris Treaty, nothing happens. You don't pay a penalty. You don't pay a price. And so, we have this situation where one country is talking about leaving the Paris Treaty. And you say, "Because it's an infringement on sovereignty." And you say, "I'm not sure how it could." I wish it was. I wish it could infringe on sovereignty. But it doesn't. All it does is say Member States who signed are committed to doing certain things. But this is the bare minimum that we have to do.

So, if I may close by just making a couple of strong requests.

The first is that you will often hear people talking to you and talking to audiences like this who will say to you, "You are the leaders of tomorrow." You ever hear that expression? Somebody comes to you and says, "You're talking to your students. You're the leaders of tomorrow."



Well, I disagree with that statement. I don't think you're the leaders of tomorrow. I think you have to be the leaders of today. Because we can't wait until tomorrow for you to engage and participate and be the leaders that you have to be.

And in order to be a leader, you have to listen. And you have to learn. And you have to open your eyes and ears to people who are here from all over the world.

And one of the things that happens when you do that is you have to come to terms with the fact that there are people who actually think differently than you—because they live very differently than you. And so they think very differently than you. And they will have different opinions. They will have diverse opinions.

And let me say to you: diversity is not a bad word. Equality is not a bad word. Inclusion is not a bad word. Accessibility is not a bad word. These are the fundamental expressions of the common sense of decency, of humanity. And we should not be afraid to embrace them as concepts that are at the heart of what it means to live in a society—in a place that actually believes in taking care of people and actually believes in treating people involved with dignity.

There is a profound realization that comes to you when you're sitting in a hall like this: that the fundamental values of recognizing the dignity of difference and the power of unity really prevail.

The UN often acts by consensus. Consensus is a difficult thing to reach. If you reach a decision by a majority vote, you say, "Well, the majority has spoken." But if you've not persuaded the minority, you've got a problem. Because here at the UN, the key thing is: how do we mobilize countries to do what they say they're going to do? And how do we stop them from doing bad things?



So whether it's Russia invading Ukraine—and yes, that actually happened. Russia did invade Ukraine. And we are living with the terrible consequences of that. Or whether it's an injustice where a child is pulled out of his home and given a gun and told, “You go fight.” And that's an injustice and a horrible situation that we find in dozens of countries around the world. Or whether it's dealing with the social and economic problems that beset the world—people living in poverty, people not having the means to get a job, people being denied access to the Internet.

There are over 300 million people in Africa who do not have access to the Internet. We have a digital divide that threatens to create one part of the world being rich and another part of the world being damned to poverty for future generations.

These are all things we can change. But as I said, it's up to all of us to do this.

People sometimes say, “Well, you know, Mr. Rae, why don't you do it?” I say, “Well, I'm trying.” But I want everybody to do it. I want everybody to understand it's our shared responsibility.

So, I wish you good luck. I hope you've had a wonderful period of time here. I hope you've enjoyed the session. And I'm really, really appreciative of the opportunity to talk with you. And thank you so much for listening—if I may say so—incredibly quietly to what I've had to say.

Thank you so much. Merci beaucoup.