



Opening Statement by H.E. Bob Rae (Canada)

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I appreciate very much the opportunity to speak to you today, having taken up some time yesterday as well. I really have appreciated the chance to come to Geneva to meet with many heads of agencies as well as with many representatives here.

For me, as President of ECOSOC, it's not about New York or Nairobi or Geneva. It's about the whole of the UN and all that the UN does in all of its work. The work that goes on here is critically important, and I think we all recognize the importance of the moment we're in.

If you'll forgive me a personal moment: 63 years ago, a young blonde kid was sitting at the Canada desk with his dad, thinking what an incredible place the United Nations was. I now find myself—having said all my life that I would follow a different path than the one I wanted to be on at some time—back in Geneva, back here, and with my colleagues at the United Nations. So this is also a moment of personal emotion and reflection as I think about the course of my own life, of course, but not only that—the course of the world since those days in the 1960s.

The issues were very different then, and the membership of the UN was much smaller. But frankly, the challenges were the same challenges we face today: how do we represent ourselves, our own nation states, and advance the interests of our own governments? We're here to represent governments, but we're also here to do something different—to take us a step beyond where we've been in advancing the interests of the world.

And we all recognize, I think now more than ever, that we are at a tremendously difficult moment.

A couple of other observations: in a variety of jobs I've had helping organizations change—which has been part of what I've done for a living—someone pointed out to me years ago that there's a key difference between producer organizations and organizations driven by client, consumer, and citizen needs.



Producer organizations tend to think of the organization first and make certain assumptions about their lives and how they relate to the world around them. Organizations that are truly driven by the interests of clients, consumers, or citizens have to learn how to change quickly because circumstances change. And organizations that develop a culture where we put clients first, citizens first, and the interests of consumers first tend to be much more successful at embracing change and helping to make change happen.

Organizations driven by their own interests, or by the interests of their producers—or in fact, by the people who work in the organization and reflect less what is going on outside—have a much harder time reflecting change.

I can tell you a true story. I was once talking to members of a symphony orchestra about the fact that they were going to have to change because no one was coming to listen to their music, and the organization was facing a tremendous economic problem. A member of the orchestra at the back of the hall said, “Mr. Rae, can I interrupt you for a moment?” He said, quite seriously, “Look Mr. Rae, you have to understand that we play the best music in the world and we play it well. And if people don’t come to listen to us, that’s their problem.”

And I listened to that and said, “Just for a moment, reflect on what you’ve just said. Because the fact is, if no one is coming to listen to you, you really don’t have an orchestra. It depends on a relationship with an audience. It depends on a relationship with others.”

The fact is, we’re going through a moment in the life of this great organization—this great global system—which is neither just an organization nor just a system. I might even say, nor even a system. We have to understand that the people we are serving are the people that matter. The people whose interests we have to serve are our number one concern, our top priority.

Our top priority is not who delivers which service, which agency or other does what exactly. That’s not the critical question. The critical question is: how do we serve the people of the world most effectively and best?

In the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we have to develop that clear-eyed sense of exactly what is the challenge that we face.

Le deuxième conseil que je partagerais avec vous viens d’un philosophe politicien, M. Edgar Pisani, qui est un bon ami depuis très longtemps. Avant sa mort, j’ai eu plusieurs conversations avec lui sur ce qu’il a appris dans sa vie comme politicien, médiateur et homme d’État français.



Il m'a dit : « Bob, il y a trois choses. D'abord c'est plus important d'écouter que de parler. » Pour moi c'est une leçon difficile. J'ai l'habitude de parler. J'ai dit plutôt à Tom qu'il y a des gens qui ne comprennent pas la différence entre écouter et attendre à parler. Il y a une différence. Si vous pensez toujours que « je vais parler prochainement », cela veut dire que vous n'écoutez pas celui qui est avant vous. Il faut écouter profondément.

La deuxième chose, c'est qu'il est essentiel de réfléchir sur le fait que c'est possible que vous ayez tort. C'est possible que l'idée que vous avez ce n'est pas une idée fixe, c'est ne pas une réalité ou une vérité théologique. Ce que vous dites, vous devez le dire avec humilité, en comprenant que vous pouvez vous tromper.

Et la troisième chose est que vous devez créer un espace dans tout ce que vous faites pour que les deux autres choses peuvent arriver. Vous devez créer un espace pour la discussion, le dialogue, la conversation, où l'on peut réfléchir et agir.

Je vous recommande ces paroles comme nous discutons comment est qu'on peut changer, comment est qu'on peut faire avancer les choses, et comment est ce qu'on peut vraiment arriver à un point où nous sommes capables de changer et d'agir. Mais avant de changer, avant d'agir, il faut écouter. Il faut apprendre, et puis il faut agir.

When our founders created ECOSOC, it is important to remember that they did so with the belief that you can't just build lasting peace by ending wars. People say sometimes the Charter is about peace and security, and I say no—read the Charter. People often tell me what's in the Charter, but they haven't read it. Read the Charter.

The Charter is about peace and security, yes, but it's clear that the vision of those who wrote it was an understanding that it wasn't just coming out of six, eight, or twelve years of conflict—it was about understanding the economic and social disaster that had preceded the conflict.

In this city, we remember that one of our first organizations was the ILO, which was built specifically to deal with creating decent work and better relations between employers and employees. ECOSOC comes out of a sense that it has to be at the heart of international cooperation.

ECOSOC, we should proudly say, is a Charter body of the United Nations. Its duties and functions are set out in the Charter. Now admittedly, parallel to the process of creating ECOSOC,



the GATT was created, the Bretton Woods institutions were also created—all of that took place at the same time.

But as countries became independent and as the world began to change and transform, increasingly the UN became the place—and ECOSOC became the place—where all countries came together not simply as debtors or as those struggling to enter into the world of independence and codetermination, but as a place where we could discuss and share the operations and world of the whole organization.

We've created many institutions that have allowed us to do it—in fact, a bewildering number of institutions. And it's not inappropriate that after all this time, and with the crisis in funding that surrounds us today, we look at all of what's going on and say: how can we do what we're doing better? Not abandon it.

People say, "Let's get back to basics." We say yes—but the basics are what we do. The basics are coping with the development and humanitarian needs of people around the world, dealing with the impacts of climate change and conflict on people, on communities. Understanding that human rights matter as well—that people's sense of law and justice and the rule of law, and creating institutions that treat everyone with dignity, are an integral part of what the United Nations is all about and what ECOSOC is all about.

It is sometimes interesting to me that when we look at things like the erosion of trust in multilateral institutions, the crushing debt burdens, the dramatic shortfalls in funding—in all of these things, we must recognize that they become less chilling when we recognize that we actually have the collective capacity for change.

We have the ability to change things. We have the ability to say yes, things are terrible—but what can we change that will make this better? How can we pick up the pieces and convince ourselves, our governments, and nation states that this is a time not simply of disruption and chaos and conflict and death and war and starvation—it is a time where people struggle for dignity and life.

And it is that spirit—not of naïve, happy banana optimism—but a firm belief that from our own experiences, we know it is possible to make things better. Our ancestors made things better. And we have to make things better for future generations.

One of the ways we do it is not by worshipping at the altar of "everything has to stay the way it is." That is ridiculous. Even a great British conservative, Edmund Burke, said we must reform



in order to maintain the value of institutions. For institutions to survive, they must learn how to change and how to reform.

Let us go back to what I was saying before: we must keep our eye on who needs us right now. What is it we do that is valuable?

Let us remind ourselves of what we do that is valuable. The refugee fleeing violence today needs shelter right away, yes—but also needs skilled training for tomorrow. So when you say, “Does he need a humanitarian handout?” Yes. “Does he need help from humanitarian agencies?” Yes. But also from development agencies.

So it’s not choosing between humanitarian and development. Break down those siloes. Break down those ways in which we exclude what others are doing. Connect them up, link them together, and make it work more effectively.

There are communities recovering from drought. They need food assistance right away, but we also need to know how to build climate-resilient agricultural systems. Drought and heat are going to be with us for the foreseeable future. We are going to have massive flooding and massive forest fires. We have them today. In my own country, they are a terrible and horrific reality for the people affected.

That is our reality. Therefore, we have to figure out how we can become more resilient in the face of this. How can we rebuild?

We need peacekeepers. We also need functioning institutions, the rule of law, and yes, we need economic opportunity. That’s the kind of coordination ECOSOC was created to build.

Doing these things differently is what we are here to discuss—and what I know Tom Fletcher wants to talk to us about today. It’s about learning how to reset. Yes, it’s a humanitarian reset—but it’s not just a humanitarian reset.

The humanitarian work we do involves agencies and others spending billions of dollars every year—just in feeding the world, keeping the world from starvation, and giving people a place to stay in times of displacement such as we haven’t seen.

But as we’ll be discussing in Seville in just a few short weeks, we’re going to need new financing mechanisms that allow developing nations to escape the terrible cycles of debt in which they find themselves. We need new partnerships between governments, civil society, and the



private sector. We need new ways of sharing the burdens that capture both capacity and responsibility.

ECOSOC and the United Nations itself is not a global government. Let's not pretend that it is. It's a government that can't tax. What kind of government is that? It's a government that has to ask everybody for money all the time, constantly.

I remember my first week in New York and I said, "Isn't there anybody here who isn't just here to talk to me about money?" And the answer was no. That's what people want to talk about.

And it's true. That's something we have to accept. The only way the UN system becomes more successful is if we stop pretending we're a big government. We're not. We're a very fragile group of institutions whose well-being depends on the kindness and support of others.

Therefore, we have to convince them that what we do is worth it to them. We have to reinforce the message that we're not asking people to do something just because we think it's the moral thing to do. Of course we do—but that's not going to move the mountains we have to move.

What moves the mountains is convincing countries—and all of us—that it's our interests that matter. It's in all of our interests, both self-interest and common interest, to strengthen our common institutions.

And in strengthening these institutions, I don't mean strengthen them like rigor mortis. No—that's not strength. I mean strengthening them to be resilient and supple and capable of changing and delivering. That has to be our mantra all the time.

Whoever we're talking to—rich or poor—we have to remind everyone that working together makes us all better off. It makes us all stronger.

Economics is not just a transaction. It's about creating institutions and markets and prosperity that actually lifts all boats.

When we fight a pandemic in one country, it's not as if there's a wall that stops it from spreading. That pandemic doesn't know borders, frontiers, or boundaries. It doesn't know what language you speak. It doesn't know whether you're rich or powerful or poor. It knows nothing of these things.



So we have to take the lessons the world is teaching us—nature is teaching us—that we are so much stronger when we work effectively together. Strengthening our common institutions is at the foundation of what we have to do.

Whether you're sitting at a desk from Canada or any other country, it's important to remember that you're not just there to speak for your country. You're there to listen—to listen to what's happening to other countries and then take that message home and say, "We do have to think about these things. We cannot just ignore them. We cannot just pretend that the world is about us."

This narcissism that takes over so much of politics—where people think they're making progress by only advancing the interests of their country—ignores entirely the human reality that it's our relationships that matter. It's our connections with each other that matter. It's our ability to understand that we improve lives together by working together.

C'est comme le dit le Secrétaire général, « la solidarité est une nécessité ». C'est la même chose. Les deux sont essentiels.

So we have a choice over these next three days—but it will take more than three days. We know what that choice is. Do we keep working in siloes and pretend we are not facing massive forces that require us to change? Or are we prepared to change?

And in changing, we need to understand a couple of things. First of all, we need to understand that change is not easy. It means giving up some things that have value, that made a huge contribution. But change becomes easier when we think in a focused way about why we're doing what we're doing. Why are we here? And I don't mean this as some existential or theological question. But why are we here at the United Nations? What are we supposed to be doing?

I come back to where I started: we are supposed to be serving humanity. And we have to constantly ask ourselves the question: "How do we best serve humanity?"

If people say to me, "We're here because we're here," that's not enough. Or say, "My institution is always best and we do things differently, so please don't affect us with these changes." You say no—that's not good enough.

We have to build from the ground up. We have to do coordination. We have to do more steering and a little less rowing. We have to bring in a vast public that wants to serve. We have



to build relationships and partnerships. We have to make sure we're not simply doing things because that's how we've always done them.

And we have to be prepared, finally, to act. Listening and learning are important—but so is action.

I will close by quoting the famous Rabbi Hillel, who asked three central questions:

"If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?
But if I am only for myself, then what am I?
And if not now, then when?"

These questions don't go away. We have to speak up for ourselves—nothing wrong with self-interest. Advocating for what one has and wants is fine. But that can't be the end of the conversation.

You can't go through life with your hand on that horn all the time—although living in New York, you sometimes think some people can.

And we have to understand that if we don't do it now, and don't start doing it now, then we really are failing future generations who are depending on us—and the people out there who need our help right now.

Thank you very much. Merci beaucoup.