

The United Nations and Its Future in the 21st Century

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For better or for worse, the fate of humanity and our natural environment is intimately bound up with the fate of the United Nations, which is a unique and complex mixture of crystalline idealism and opaque Machiavellianism – with a bit of incompetence and (sadly) a dash of corruption thrown in. Anyone who wishes to understand and contribute to the future of humanity has to understand what is going on in the UN and this book is an excellent tool to aid that understanding. It comprises a series of eight lectures delivered between 1997 and 2004, reprinted from *Medicine, Conflict & Survival*, in the memory of Erskine Childers, who was an Irish UN worker and thinker, with much background information.

The breadth and depth of knowledge presented in such an easily absorbed way is truly mind expanding. Each contributor crosses and re-crosses the warp and weft of UN complexity in its history, its successes and its challenges. Razali Ismail, Malaysia's permanent representative at the UN since 1988, presents a view of substantial yet realistic wisdom in terms of the need for reform for the organisation. He identifies the UN's central problem in terms of its perception by its critics:

The United Nations has always been both less and more than what is hoped for. Proponents lament its inability to persevere and be more effective...Critics lament its over-extended involvement in international affairs.

Well known speakers are Professor Paul Rogers, Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University; Dr Caroline Lucas and Patricia McKenna, present and past Green MEPs; and Dr Jenny Tonge until recently a Liberal Democrat MP. Less well known are people like the Assistant Secretary General of the UN, Prof Dr Ramesh Thakur, and other UN officers such as Margaret Anstee, Jayanatha Dhanapala, Dennis Halliday, Rosalyn Higgins, Ramesh Thakur, Razali Ismail and Richard Jolly, who contribute years of experience in behind-the-scenes work.

The topic of UN reform is a constant thread throughout the book. No single template is provided, but the need for increased democratic representation is a frequent motif. Currently, UN General Assembly members are mere appointees of the Prime Minister: imagine how it would be if candidates for the General Assembly, perhaps refashioned into a World Parliament, had to offer themselves up for election.

'Civil Society' is the current buzz word, referring to the community of Non-Governmental Organisations who are slowly gaining access to the deliberations of the nations. But what is the democratic mandate of these free associations? They may have large paying

memberships, who may cease support if they do not agree with what is being put forward, but the feedback from most organisations that I belong to is not all that detailed.

The third recurring topic is the problem of the relation of the American superpower to the UN. Things were bad enough in the days of the Cold War, when there were two superpowers. Margaret Anstee, who was Director General of the UN office in Vienna from 1987 to 1992, relates that when they tried to set up a small office to give early warning of impending crises, the Soviet Union accused them of extending the Central Intelligence Agency, and the United States accused them of extending the KGB! Now, however, the dynamic has changed, with one superpower driving ahead with its own agenda. America has either set aside or undermined no less than eight international treaties.

At the same time, the superpower is undermining the functioning of the UN by starving it of funds. America owes one half of the debt that keeps the UN in a perpetual state of financial crisis. It is salutary to get the UN funding into perspective: UN peacekeeping expenses come in at 0.2 per cent of world military spending, UNICEF has a budget of 80 cents per capita (global), whereas the military have USD134 per capita, and the UN core budget stands at 4 per cent of the budget of New York City. With these tiny resources, it is no wonder that the UN often seems ineffective.

Not only do we get the benefit of the eight contributors, but the book also contains a valuable collection of UN reference documents. We have here the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Hague Agenda for Peace and Justice in the Twenty-first century, and two very important recent documents: the report of the High Level Panel (Our Shared Responsibility) and We the Peoples: Civil Society, the UN and Global Governance. These are worth reading in themselves, some for the clarity of purpose and the high principles that they express, and others for their immediate relevance as they determine what is happening on the international scene in coming months and years.

If there is any criticism to be made, it is that there is not enough debate on the role of the World Trade Organisation, and the question of the dominance of Trans-National Corporations over governments, whether democratically elected or not. This is a huge challenge to democracy and one that must be confronted as sharply in the debating chambers as it is in the streets outside G8 meetings. It is a pity also that there is no discussion of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, the idea that the international community has a duty to intervene in countries where human rights violations are taking place. This idea is slowly penetrating into the debate, but it raises deep questions over what kind of interventions are envisaged, and at what stage and in which way they should be activated. However, R2P was only a nascent idea in the period covered by these lectures.

Overall, this is a most valuable contribution to the current debate over the future of the United Nations, and deserves to be read at least once by everyone who takes an interest in current events.

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The Book Review Written by: Richard Lawson

Vijay Mehta is Chair of Uniting for Peace (formerly Action for UN Renewal), President of Mehta Centre and Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity. Vijay Mehta's new book *"The Economics of Killing: How the West Fuels Wars and Poverty in the Developing World"* will be published by Pluto Press in Spring 2012.