

Notes for a Presentation

by Paul Heinbecker

to the McGill Model UN ,

Is the UN Saving Us from Hell?

Montreal

January 24, 2013

Check Against Delivery

Dag Hammarskjold, the legendary Swedish Secretary General, once observed that the UN was not intended to take you to heaven, just to save you from hell.

Is the UN saving us from hell?

To answer that question, I will suggest answers to three related questions:

- Is the UN succeeding or failing?
- What should Canada do about it?
- What can you do about it?

Overall, in my judgment the UN is not failing, although Canadians would be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

It sometimes seems that hardly a week goes by without some Canadian government figure deprecating the UN.

The Prime Minister does little to hide his disdain for the world body.

At the Appeal of Conscience Foundation's annual New York dinner last September,

which is held at the same time as the UN General debate each year,
and which the Prime Minister did not attend,

the PM asserted that his government would not try to court every dictator with a vote at the United Nations

or just go along with every emerging international consensus, no matter how self-evidently wrong-headed.

As if the UN were populated by dictators

As if other Canadian governments were less principled than his own

Foreign Minister Baird delivered the Canadian statement in the 2012

General Debate,

deriding the UN as the locale of “fruitless, inward-looking exercises”,

and saying Canada would henceforth ignore UN reform efforts

He also flew back to New York in November to make it clear personally just how much the Canadian government opposes the Palestinian bid for Non-Member Observer State status,

decrying the Palestinians recourse to the 193 member UN as unilateral

and ignoring 44 years of unilateral Israeli settlement policy

Members of parliament, cabinet ministers, political staff and officials, and the government's allies in the press take their lead from these criticisms.

There is much disappointment with the UN in the air,

some of it fabricated,

some of it misplaced

and some of it legitimate

There are also sour grapes.

The frequency of Ottawa's condemnations accelerated dramatically after Canada lost the 2010 Security Council election.

But others are complaining, too.

Amnesty International,

has said that Kofi Annan's resignation as Joint Special Envoy on Syria was as a result of UN Security Council failure,

which showed that the UN is "tired, out of step and increasingly unfit for purpose"

The Syrian National Council, for its part, has been withering in its criticism of the UN and its efforts to broker a transition to a new system of government there.

So Is the UN Failing ?

The short answer is, no

But the longer answer is that it is — we are--failing the Syrian people

But the UN story is more complicated than that.

I think it is worth taking a few minutes to refresh all of our memories

of what has been accomplished under the UN banner,

of what needs to be valued

and what is worth preserving.

Otherwise, as Joni Mitchell once sang in another context, we won't

know what we've got till its gone.

What we've got is a lot,

and it shouldn't be casually deprecated.

By and large, the UN has succeeded in meeting all the goals set for it in San Francisco,:

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war;
- to protect human rights;
- to foster universal justice; and
- to promote social progress and better standards of living.

Driven by the memory of the 60 million dead in the second world war,

nation states have progressively brought the practice of war under the disciplines of international humanitarian law,

which seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict

and restricts the means and methods of warfare.

Aggression has been stigmatized,

and there has not been a war between major powers since

Korea.

According to the Human Security Report of 2010, over the preceding 30 years, the number of armed conflicts around the world had dropped by 80%.

Battle deaths had also decreased dramatically, as had overall lethality.

As for human rights, a whole corpus of conventions has been concluded, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic and Social Rights,

the Convention against Genocide,
the Convention against Torture,
the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,
the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against
Women,
and the Convention on Children's Rights,
to name some of the most significant.

These conventions are respected unevenly around the world but over time are being progressively assimilated into state practice.

To "foster universal justice", the international community has created an extensive criminal justice system,

which has seen some of the worst human rights abusers face justice in the Hague and elsewhere.

And last but not least, as regards economic and social progress,

for hundreds of millions of people, including in Africa,
poverty is down,
education is up,
and health is improved,
although the plight of the bottom billion remains to be
effectively addressed.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO) have all done major service to the world's poorest and dispossessed.

By 2015, 90 percent of the world's children will be immunized against the six major vaccine-preventable diseases—
pertussis, childhood tuberculosis, tetanus, polio, measles and
diphtheria.

The UN or its constituent bodies have concluded 45 treaties on the environment

from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change

to the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion

to treaties on migratory species and endangered species and

beyond.

The UN has passed 13 counter-terrorism treaties.

All told, over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices.

The member countries of the UN have, thus, spawned an extensive body of international law, treaties, norms, practices and institutions that govern most facets of interstate relations.

With these “apps”, the UN Charter has become the world’s central operating system,

the motherboard of global governance, making it possible for ideas such as the Millennium Development Goals to become policy drivers,

and for other organizations, notably NATO and the G-8 and the G-20,

as well as civil society,

to function more effectively.

All of this brings greater order, predictability and progress to global affairs,

and greater modernity, security and dignity to peoples’ lives.

To quote former Secretary General Kofi Annan again,

The UN is not a perfect organization, but we need it...

It is the organization that has the power to convene the whole world under one roof, to come and discuss common issues.

It is the one organization that tries to sustain the norms that allow us to live in a peaceful way.

Recently, we came up with a responsibility to protect.

It is only the UN that could have come up with that sort of a norm.

Who else?

Who else, indeed?

So, to put it bluntly, it would be short-sighted and wrong-headed to just write off what our parents and grandparents have achieved,

as if this generation had the wit and wisdom

—not to speak of will—

to start from scratch and do better.

But if the UN is not failing across the board, it is not succeeding across the board either.

Understanding why the UN succeeds and fails starts with the conception people have of the UN,

There is an assumption that it is almost a world government

And expectations of it are very high.

Most people in this room understand that the UN is far from being a world government.

But one of the hardest ideas to get across is that the UN is,

to paraphrase the old Pogo cartoon character,

us,

all of us.

The UN belongs to progressives and regressives, democrats and authoritarians, because that is the world we live in.

When we all agree, there is little we cannot do under the UN banner.

When we disagree, progress and action are much more difficult.

In any case, the UN is not some independent entity, run by a CEO ,
with a mandate and a capacity to act in the common interest as it sees
fit.

Nor is the UN a recalcitrant and indolent secretariat isolated from the
world in its iconic tower on First Avenue in New York.

The UN is the member countries, and is dependent on their common
purpose and will,

when those can be mustered,

to act.

It is like a parliament, presided over by a speaker.

But without a prime minister

If anyone is failing, it is the five permanent members of the Security Council,

who are so devoted to preserving their own veto powers that they are prepared to respect the vetoes of their peers, no matter how tragic the consequences.

The P5 are failing to find sufficient common ground to resolve the issues of the 21st Century.

To be fair, doing so is more difficult than it looks.

The disagreements are over big issues, some of them new, some not, but all undermining the peace in the 21st Century.

Transnational organized crime is threatening the security of people everywhere, but especially in Central America, the Caribbean and Mexico.

Africa, increasingly used as a transit way by South American gangs selling drugs to Europe, risks becoming a narco-continent.

Iran continues to test the limits of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and North Korea has broken through them.

An effective response to climate change remains elusive.

And the next pandemic never seems more than a plane-ride away.

Meanwhile Afghanistan struggles,

Pakistan seethes

And tensions rise in the South China Sea.

In sum, the problem the UN has is that not only are some of its members intransigent,

many of the its issues are intractable.

Members have incompatible visions of the future and disagree on the appropriate role of the organization and the grounds for collective action.

Perhaps most fundamental is the issue of philosophy.

Does the state exist to serve and protect the people, or is it the job of people to serve and protect the state?

If you believe that the state exists to serve and protect the people, your sympathy must be with people trying to overthrow a despotic government.

If, like the Russians and Chinese apparently do, you believe that the people serve the state,

you endow any government with legitimacy, including those built on secret police, torture, militias and coercion.

Whoever gets to the top in such a state,

however he (it's always "he") gets there, or stays there,

that person is the legitimate leader and should not be interfered with by outsiders.

The UN Charter, with its proscription of interference in the internal affairs of states, tends to accept the latter philosophy.

The positions that China and Russia are taking on Syria are legally, perhaps more accurately, legalistically, in line with Article 2 of the Charter.

A Middle East variant of the philosophical question is whether democracy is compatible with the Muslim conception of theocracy.

In the Muslim world, is the state the instrument of God, which the people can question only at the pain of heresy?

International practice in recent years,

which has seen outside intervention in several states and the bringing of justice to major human rights abusers, has tended to accept that the state exists to serve and protect the people.

Hence the adoption of the Responsibility to Protect,

which may be why the Russians and Chinese appear to have decided to make a stand on Syria.

But the philosophic question of who serves whom, the state or the people, is a major one.

And it is not yet resolved.

What Should Canada do in These Circumstances?

Here are five things the Canadian government could do in these very difficult circumstances to make global governance more effective,

beyond the declaratory statements.

First, and most basically, Ottawa should recognize the ongoing value of the UN to Canada.

It should stop sitting in judgment and start taking some responsibility for improving and reforming the organization.

Among other things, it should tackle the UN's governance issues,

especially Security Council membership, the veto and the process for selecting the Secretary General

which is less transparent than the selection of a pope

Second, Ottawa should recognize the UN's limits and promote minilateralism.

In an age of "messy multilateralism",

universal entities like the UN need "minilateral" groups of key countries

who can work together across regional boundaries to achieve results

that can be commended to the membership at large.

The G-20 is one such minilateralist invention.

The government could push its partners to broaden the mandate of the G20 to discuss security issues.

The government could also create new like-minded groups and promote the development of coalitions of the policy willing among the second tier countries of the G20

- Australia, Korea, Turkey Mexico and others-

to bring emerging security issues to the top tables.

Third,

Our world is transforming itself at a rate never before seen. How well countries cope with the pace and extent of contemporary change depends, as the experience of the financial crisis makes clear, on how

effectively they govern themselves, and how well they cooperate with others. Sound economic policies especially are of fundamental importance to national security and international leadership.

Governments with healthy fiscal books are better positioned to lead — to underwrite the provision of key global public goods and, in extremis, to use military force — than those incurring persistent deficits and dragging enormous debts. If the United States, now and for years to come the leading global power, is to continue to wield decisive influence, it will need to fix its myriad governance and economic problems. But, even then, a return to the dominant status quo ante is not in the cards; others can and will assert legitimate claims to participation in global leadership. The United States will likely find it beneficial — even necessary — to share authority, and advantageous to accept that others will sometimes work together without it. As the complexity and integration of the world accelerates, new forms of "minilateralism," entailing voluntary, exclusive and targeted governance approaches and deriving from

comparative advantages and issue-based interests, will take shape, complementing inclusive treaty-based agreements. These will also include new, informal partnerships among countries that are not themselves “great powers” by the traditional definition, but that nonetheless have compelling strategic interests, and the diplomatic and, sometimes, military capacity, economic strength and political disposition to make a significant difference. Other forms of cooperation, notably multi-stakeholder governance, comprising governments, industry and civil society, also seem likely to materialize in response to challenges arising in the global commons that defy conventional, state-based management.

Fourth

As in Kosovo, Canada should make clear to the Russians that it considers the Russian veto invalid in cases of major human rights abuses

In the meantime, Canada could promote legal action in the International Criminal Court or elsewhere against the perpetrators in Syria,

including Assad,

and assist by gathering evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity for use in a trial.

And fifth, the government should use its oft claimed special relationship with Israel to discourage an attack on Iran in the current volatile circumstances.

Conclusion

All of this is admittedly a tall order.

But we are facing potentially cataclysmic developments in the Middle East.

Such dangerous times demand leadership—from the front, side and behind—and its in Canadians' interests that Ottawa provide Canada's share.

Thank You