

Rotarians: To Do A World of Good

Notes from a Presentation by Paul Heinbecker*

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* Paul Heinbecker is Distinguished Fellow, International Relations, at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, and Director of the Centre for Global Relations, Governance and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University. He served as Canada's Ambassador to the United Nations (2000- 2003). This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions above.

Introduction

The world needs you.

It needs your abilities, it needs your commitment and it needs your passion, even if need be, your anger. More precisely the world needs Rotary to speak truth to power and to take some matters into your own hands. Your 1.2 million members and your 31,000 clubs in 131 countries give you an extraordinarily extensive and capable network. Your 100 year long history of helping others in your own communities and your recent track record of international successes, especially your polio-plus program, show what truly remarkable good you can do. You have the political savvy, developed over many years of cooperating with the United Nations and other international organizations, to have a disproportionate influence on our world. If you can harness these strengths, you have it in your power to do a world of good.

Challenging Rotary

I can see two ways in which Rotary members can have major positive impacts internationally. The first may surprise you—it is advocacy—i.e., changing the world “wholesale”. We need you to persuade your respective governments, and other governments around the world, that improved international governance matters, especially that the United Nations matters, and needs to be made to work better. Your engagement is urgently needed. If war is too important to leave to Generals, peace is too important to leave to Ambassadors.

The second thing Rotary members can do is programmatic—i.e., you can change the world “retail”, that is, one issue at a time. You can, for example, select discrete projects from among the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, which were agreed to at the UN in the year 2,000 and re-confirmed in New York last month, and make sure they get done, as you have largely done for polio. There are millions of lives to be saved.

But first, advocacy.

Is the UN still worth saving?

I know from spending nearly four years in the General Assembly, the Security Council and ECOSOC that the UN has all the problems you would expect a 60 year old institution to have, and more. I know, at the same time, from first-hand experience in nearly 40 years in government that the institution remains far more important than “professional” UN-bashers would have you believe. As a consequence of the steady stream of deprecation, people are for the most part only dimly aware of the UN’s strengths and all too conscious of its weaknesses.

Why We Still Need the United Nations

We live in a time of historical amnesia, strategic myopia and diplomatic inertia. When our security is under threat from seemingly every side—disease, terrorism, the climate, population growth, natural disasters—we need to remind ourselves why the United Nations is still vital, and why it warrants our support. If there is one lesson of 9/11 that we can all agree on it is surely that there is no security in a gated world. Engagement and cooperation, not isolation and unilateralism, are the keys to security.

It is timely that we carry out this reality check. The bad news is that last month, 154 world leaders came to New York and largely made the least of their opportunity to reinvigorate the UN. Too many UN members were either too satisfied with the status quo or too fearful to risk change. In avoiding making things worse, a major opportunity to make things better has undoubtedly been missed.

The good news is that 154 world leaders did come to New York and did re-affirm their belief in the centrality of the UN. They accomplished enough, and put enough in train, to permit the organization to soldier on. In any case, the truth is that we do not have many alternatives—unilateralism is achieving a good deal less than promised.

We need to go back to first principles, to review why the world needs a system of collective security based on the rule of law, to reconsider why it needs a system in which progress for the world's wretched is a priority, as well as for its rich, and to reconfirm that the United Nations is at the heart of that system. Most basically, we need to remember what the world looked like before Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Lester B. Pearson and the other architects of multilateral cooperation created the system they did.

A hundred years ago, the only protection against aggression was power. The only checks on would-be aggressors were the costs of fighting and the risks of failing. The issue was not law; it was ambition, and capacity. Alliances, which emerged in the 19th Century to deter aggression, ultimately collapsed and catastrophic conflicts followed. In World War I, as armies were democratized and war industrialized, 10 million people died. In World War II, with technology advancing, killing soldiers and citizens alike, 60 million people died—that is 60,000 times the death toll of Hurricane Katrina.

In World War III, with the advent of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, how many people would die? The generation that fought and survived the last world war, my parent's generation, knew that World War III could not be won... in any reasonable meaning of the word "win"...and must never be fought.

There had to be a better way and that better way was the United Nations. The world would prevent war cooperatively, where it could, and prosecute war, collectively, where it must. The UN would help the world develop new norms and standards of international behaviour. The UN and the Breton Woods institutions would promote economic growth and assist countries to provide better lives for their peoples. The UN would promote human rights and assist colonialism to pass into history.

What Has Worked at the UN

These aspirations for United Nations exceeded the organization's grasp. The UN has, nevertheless, served us well in the intervening period, far better than its critics realize or admit. Despite the Cold War, which saw international law breached by both sides, the UN gave birth to a body of international law that has stigmatized aggression and created a strong norm against it. That norm came to be much more respected than not, and the legal force of the Charter grew. While the prevention of World War III owed a lot to nuclear deterrence and collective defence through NATO, few would contest that bloody as the world has been in the last 60 years, it would have been a much bloodier place without the world body. There were fewer inter-state wars in the second half of the 20th century than in the first half, despite a nearly four-fold increase in the number of states.

The UN's "forum function" has been indispensable to preserving relative stability, helping in the process to create the political conditions underpinning a lengthy period of economic growth and technological advancement. "Jaw, jaw", to paraphrase Churchill, is better than "war, war". The UN has served as mid-wife to the birth of more than 100 countries since 1945, the great majority of which came into being peacefully.

The UN has given birth to concepts we take for granted now such as peace-keeping that provided a buffer between protagonists, so that the inter-state wars that did break out did not reignite when they ended. There have been 60 military interventions under UN auspices. More recently, as conflict has become relatively more frequent within states than between them, the UN has developed the process of peace-building, to help failing and failed states restore and re-create their institutions of government and the economy, so that they pose fewer dangers to their own citizens-- and to us.

The number of both internal and inter-state wars has diminished in recent years. The UN has assisted in 170 peace settlements. It has initiated an increasing number of conflict prevention initiatives and has been much more ready since the Cold War to authorize its members to use force to stop internal conflicts. It has helped scores of countries in their transitions to democracy—including Cambodia, Nicaragua, Bosnia, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, East Timor and, more recently, Burundi, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The UN has helped East and West avoid a nuclear Armageddon by, inter alia, pioneering arms control treaties and verification, notably, the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). That regime has made us all safer by limiting the numbers of nuclear-armed states, current challenges to the IAEA notwithstanding. This accomplishment was justly recognized by the Norwegian Nobel Committee a couple of weeks ago when it gave the 2005 Peace Prize to the IAEA and its head, Mohamed al Baradei. Incidentally, that brings the number of Nobel Prizes awarded to the UN to nine.

The UN has helped member countries create a body of international human rights and humanitarian law—over 500 multilateral treaties—that, as it has been progressively written into the laws of states, has helped an increasing share of the world's people live "in larger freedom". To take just one example, the creation of the International Criminal

Court. Now, the world's monsters can no longer sleep soundly in their beds, confident that they are immune to prosecution for abusing their own peoples, or others. It is both fitting and re-assuring that last week, Joseph Kony, the head of the Lord's Resistance army, the army of child soldiers in Northern Uganda, was the first person indicted by the new court. "Fitting", because he truly is one of the world's monsters; "reassuring", because the court is doing what its backers said it would do, prosecute the worst perpetrators of atrocities, not harass ordinary American GI's as the Court's opponents said it would do.

The success of the United Nations has gone far beyond its basic security purpose. In pursuing its second major vocation, economic development in the world's poorer countries, the UN has taken on the task of attacking abject poverty around the world. It has virtually invented the idea of sustainable development, reconciling the once polar opposites of economic growth and environmental protection. It was the UN that convened world leaders in the year 2,000 to establish the Millennium Development Goals, the time-bound targets covering eight crucial social and economic fields. It has helped the world to feed its hungry, shelter its dispossessed, minister to its sick and educate its children. UNICEF has inoculated 575 million children against childhood diseases. The UNHCR has housed 50 million refugees and internally displaced people over the years, including 17 million people last year. The UN Mine Action Service has assisted states party to the Ottawa Treaty in their destruction of 37.5 million landmines. The World Food Program fed 100 million people in 2003 alone. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs coordinated the massive international relief operation after the December, 2004, Asian Tsunami. It is assisting crucially in the international response to the South Asian earthquake and the Central American floods and mudslides. It even helped out in New Orleans when that city was tragically overwhelmed by hurricane Katrina.

More mundanely, the UN has regulated the world's air travel, coordinated its mail services, overseen its patents, regulated its shipping and apportioned its electromagnetic spectrum, among many other unsung but necessary tasks. From counter-terrorism treaties, to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, to environmental protection accords, to human rights conventions, to the spread of democracy, to the promotion of economic development, the UN has been indispensable.

What Has Not Worked at the UN

Sixty years is, nevertheless, a long time in the lives of institutions, as it is in the lives of people. Through the vicissitudes of time, the UN has not kept up with change nor lived up to all of our expectations. In fact, there have been distressing inadequacies. The ECOSOC became lost in the ideologies of the Cold War and North-South struggles and, consequently, has never lived up to the hopes of the Third World; much of its power has long since migrated to other international organizations. The behaviour of the Human Rights Commission, an Alice-in-Wonderland body where perpetrators escape censure and point the finger at others, would be funny were it not so tragic for the victims of the abuses.

Worse have been the conscience-shocking failures of the UN. The genocide in Cambodia, the millions dead in the Congo, and the ethnic "cleansing" in the Balkans are indelible stains on the soul of the world body. In Rwanda, even as 800,000 people were being systematically slaughtered, the Security Council played word-games about genocide, preferring to talk of "acts of genocide", splitting hairs in order not to trigger the mutually agreed obligation under the Genocide Convention to intervene in the slaughter. Now, it is Darfur that appeals to our collective conscience. Meanwhile millions have been expelled from their homes and thousands upon thousands have died.

What prospects do the victims have when UN members, especially its most powerful members, lose themselves in the complexities of sovereignty, ethnicity, religion, regional politics and economic interest and avoid acting?

The UN's failures, humanity's failures, take many other forms. Poverty traps rob the poor of their potential in vast stretches of the world, while the unfulfilled promises of assistance by some donor countries and the graft of some host governments combine to preserve the tragic status quo. New issues arise, notably religious fundamentalism and the potentially catastrophic combination of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction which, rather than eliciting a cooperative response, tempt the powerful to go it alone and the weak to turn a blind eye, jeopardizing as they both do so the very essence of collective security.

Fixing the United Nations

Some governments are just plain oblivious to the UN's weaknesses, or indifferent to them, trusting to fate to fix them. Others would just forsake the UN altogether and look to their own strengths in a dangerous age. The first course would condemn the UN to an existence increasingly on the periphery of humanity's vast need. The second course would condemn the world to repeat history in infinitely more dangerous circumstances. The wiser course is to adapt the institution that our parents bequeathed to us so that it serves our own times and safeguards our children's future.

It is too early to draw all the lessons from last month's failure to adequately reform the UN. Two or three lessons already do seem clear enough, nevertheless. First, absent the calamity of a world war, which provided the incentive to create the UN in the first place, across-the-board transformation of the institution will not work. Second, the membership will nevertheless agree to delimited changes, if they are well thought out, targeted on issues on which a consensus can be created and actively but patiently promoted by governments and civil society. That is precisely what happened with respect to the Canadian commissioned, and championed, report on the Responsibility to Protect, which was one of the few innovations adopted in New York last month.

What Rotary Can Do—Advocacy and Direct Action

And that suggests how Rotary can help. With these lessons of UN reform in mind, particularly the experience of the Responsibility to Protect, I see two, related challenges to Rotary Club members. First, advocacy; get involved in the big issues and keep your governments' feet to the fire. Second, direct action—take on a specific task yourselves.

Advocacy

Reform of an institution as complex as the United Nations, as Secretary General has said, is a process; it is not a destination. Making the UN function effectively is too important to leave to governments alone. Otherwise, where 191 countries come together, lowest common denominator outcomes are inevitable. Myopic ideology, sterile indifference or bureaucratic self-interest inevitably prevail.

In democracies, reform is usually the product of public pressure. As Rotarians, you need to make sure that your governments know what you want them, and expect them, to do. Make sure that they know that you understand the value the UN and want it to succeed. And make sure they know you really mean it—you are entitled to your just anger when they fail. Because when the UN fails, innocent people die, often in large numbers.

Last month's reform effort faltered precisely because governments felt too little pressure from the public and leaders left matters to take care of themselves, with entirely predictable and, indeed, predicted results. With a few worthy exceptions, happily including Canada's Prime Minister Martin, most leaders just did not take the need for reform seriously or personally enough.

So, advocacy of UN reform is one thing Rotarians can do. To be effective you would need to focus on a particular area of reform, for example, the proposed replacement of the failed Commission on Human Rights with a new Council on human rights. Another possible Rotary focus is nuclear arms control and disarmament. Arms control and disarmament are not rocket science. The fundamentals are easily mastered. It is a "disgrace", to quote Kofi Annan that governments could not find sufficient common ground on this crucial subject, to even mention it in the recent UN Summit "outcomes" document. The issue's absolute importance was one of the few things that candidate Kerry and President Bush could agree on in the 2004 US presidential debates. Now that the Cold War is over and danger arises from terrorists and loose nukes much more than from adversarial states, this field is ripe for re-thinking and accelerated action. A related field is the spread of small arms and light weapons. Small arms destroy 300,000 lives a year worldwide, mocking efforts to end conflict and rebuild states in Africa and elsewhere

A third issue that Rotary, with its world-wide membership, could look at is terrorism, where even an agreed-upon definition continues to elude UN member countries. Perhaps if Rotarians from different faiths, ethnicities and political systems interested themselves in this issue, "spoiler governments" would be less able to evade it.

A fourth possible focus is the mundane field of management, where the member countries, especially the largest member countries have been content to let the secretariat assume blame for the membership's failures. For Americans, this is particularly timely because some members of Congress have been condemning the Secretariat over the Oil-For-Food program while ignoring the mote in America's own eye on Iraq, where the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority apparently lost billions of dollars turned over to it by the UN.

A fifth possible advocacy focus, and potentially the most readily realizable task, is to promote the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Canada and the US have both subscribed to these goals, although US Ambassador John Bolton did try, ineffectively, to set them aside in the run-up to last month's summit, only to be contradicted at the Summit by President Bush.

A central feature of the goals is for the richer countries to establish a time-frame for achieving the target of devoting 0.7% of their GNP on development assistance for the poorer countries. Canada (and the United States) endorsed the goal literally a generation ago. But we have never established a time-frame. Last month in New York neither Canada nor the United States agreed to establish a date for reaching the goal. Both the UN and many development economists, including pre-eminent American economist Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University, are convinced that much more money could be soundly and effectively invested, not wasted.

In both countries, the development assistance issue is in important respects about communications. The people in both countries want to be generous, judging by their responses to the Asian Tsunami. Polling appears to show that they actually believe they are being generous. But, in fact, statistics collected by the OECD, an intergovernmental public policy think-tank, show that on a per capita basis they spend much less on the world's poor than almost all other rich countries do. In terms of GDP per capita, Canada ranks 15th and the USA ranks 21st. Nor do private charities in the two countries, welcome as their contributions are, even come close to filling the gap. If all the Nordic countries, the UK, France, Germany, Ireland and many other European countries can establish or achieve these targets, why can't Canada and the United States do likewise? These are a few of the many "wholesale" targets that a Rotary advocacy program could focus on.

Direct Action

The second challenge that I would be so bold as to pose to you is to make a difference yourselves by adopting a particular project or two, building on your extraordinary success on polio. There are many targets to choose from. Most readily identifiable are the "quick win" opportunities described by the major task force led by Professor Sachs.

They include among many other things;

- Providing free insecticide-treated bed-nets for all children in malaria-endemic zones—100 million children die every year from malaria,
- Eliminating public school fees for all Third World children, including girls,
- Providing free school meals for Third World children, using locally grown foodstuffs,

- Expanding women's access to sexual and reproductive health services, inter alia, to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV-AIDS
- Expanding the use of proven effective drug combinations for HIV-AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.
- "Twinning" with impoverished communities abroad to assist them to deliver basic medical services.

Perhaps you can get your respective governments to match your efforts.

Alternatively, you may wish to work on the eradication of another major disease, as you have been doing on polio. Tuberculosis comes to mind, someone in the world is infected with TB every second. Malaria and HIV-AIDS are also prominent; 4.9 million people were infected with HIV in 2004, 640,000 of them children. Almost 1 million people die every year of malaria, 90% of them children. There are many other less well known diseases that weigh particularly on the world's poorest.

Or you could endorse the fight for women's rights and needs, particularly literacy, and reproductive health services. Women are dying in child-birth in appalling numbers; many could be saved with small expenditures on medicines that Canadians take absolutely for granted. There are an estimated 771 million illiterate adults in the world, about two-thirds of whom are women. Each and every Rotary club could adopt at least one World Community Service Project and see it through to conclusion.

Conclusion

The state of the world's knowledge of what needs to be done as regards both governance and development is extraordinarily good. When it comes to action, the lack is not knowledge; it is will. What remains is for people of conscience and capability to stimulate their governments to act. In important respects, the world's governments are failing their peoples, but tears are not enough, citizen anger is justified. But anger is only a start.

There are things people can do themselves, especially if their governments cannot or will not do them. Rotary has the needed know-how, network, imagination, commitment and passion. On polio, you have shown you have what it takes to prevail. Few organizations are better positioned for international success than Rotary is.

Therefore, I urge you to: get angry, get involved, and get busy.

Because, if you do, there is a world of good to be done.

Thank you