

The UN Bashers Are Wrong *by Paul Heinbecker**

You almost have to pity the two-thirds of the world's leaders who are currently in New York for an intense week of diplomacy at the annual United Nations General Debate. How can they not see that "the UN is dysfunctional beyond belief" in the words of Canadian UN-bashers? For the perspicacious Canadian right, it must be a perennial puzzle why the great majority of government leaders seem to find it worthwhile to go to the UN each fall. Perhaps it's the shopping in New York that attracts them. After all, tough guys don't do diplomacy, at least not the multilateral kind unless it's about trade. To be sure, some smaller countries, notably Canada's new micro allies Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, have few other places to go. But whatever possessed the French, Indian, Turkish, Brazilian and South African Presidents and the Israeli, Iranian, Japanese and Italian Prime Ministers along with scores of counterparts from every corner of the globe again this year to attend such a complete waste of time? And how to explain that no American president in memory has missed a UN General Debate, 9/11 excepted? Evidently, they could all benefit from the fearless truth telling of Canadian UN critics.

Or maybe those in New York see something that our homegrown UN bashers do not. The latter are right that the UN needs reform. But so do the US Congress, the Russian Duma, the Japanese Diet, the Indian Lok

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Sabha, and the Chinese Politburo, to say nothing of the Canadian Senate. Few others find the undoubted flaws of the world body such that they should boycott it. Leaders go to the UN to present their views on the major issues of the day, to test their understanding of those issues against the thinking of their counterparts, and to engage with others to promote national and common interests. With so many leaders participating, General Debate week is an efficient and effective annual diplomatic market.

More broadly, what others see in the UN is that while the organization is insufficient to good global governance it is nevertheless indispensable to it. They understand that the UN Charter is the rulebook for the conduct of international relations, which all but a handful of pariah states see it in their interest to respect. The Charter is, in effect, the global Operating System. Its Apps are the literally hundreds of treaties concluded under UN auspices, on everything from humanitarian law and human rights to genocide, nuclear weapons, terrorism, the Law of the Sea, the environment, the International Criminal Court and far beyond. Together they constitute an extensive body of laws, norms, practices and entities that govern most facets of international relations. The G20 and G8 are innovative and necessary complements to the UN but not substitutes for it.

When people criticize the UN, it is usually the Security Council and the Secretary General they have in mind. Why doesn't the Security Council stop the war in Syria? Why doesn't the Secretary General do something?

The reason is that the UN is not an independent executive body with its own resources. The UN is us, the member countries. The problems the UN faces are often intractable and the members sometimes disagree on them. Some, the five Permanent Members of the Council (the P5), have vetoes over Security Council decision-making, a concession the rest of us paid in 1945 to create the UN. Absent a veto to safeguard their vital interests from majority vote, the Great Powers would not have agreed to create the UN. Consequently, when the P5 agree, anything is possible; when they do not, deadlock is the outcome.

The UN is not a world government. The General Assembly is more a house of governments (117 of 194 of them electoral democracies according to Freedom House) than a parliament, except in a rhetorical sense. The Security Council is not a cabinet and the Secretary General is more secretary than general, and certainly not a prime minister. He has little executive authority and, beyond recourse to the UN's bully pulpit, no power. Other countries understand these limitations and work through them .

All or most of the world's great security problems are on the UN's agenda for deliberation and, when circumstances permit, for disposition—the war in Syria, the Iranian nuclear program, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conundrum, arms control, international organized crime, terrorism and many more. As these are all issues our worldly, multicultural population cares about, Canada especially needs to engage in the search for solutions. The governments of Diefenbaker,

Pearson, Trudeau, Mulroney, Chretien and Martin all brought creative and constructive diplomacy to the UN table. What has been done before can be done again.

Further, it is worth remembering that beyond security, the UN does life-saving work. The UN High Commission for Refugees is giving refuge to nearly 34 million uprooted and stateless people worldwide, the equivalent of the entire Canadian population. Last year, the World Food Program fed nearly 99 million people in 88 countries. UNICEF has vaccinated over half the world's children against life-threatening diseases. This social work is vital in its own right and crucial to international security.

Others, notably President Obama, understand the UN's strengths and weaknesses. Earlier this week he said to the gathered leaders at the UN that

...For decades, the U.N. has in fact made a real difference – from helping to eradicate disease, to educating children, to brokering peace. But like every generation of leaders, we face new and profound challenges, and this body continues to be tested. The question is whether we [not *it*] possess the wisdom and the courage, as nation-states and members of an international community, to squarely meet those challenges...

President Obama has also clearly warned that the American people are no longer willing to shoulder a hugely disproportionate burden of

preserving the peace. Others will have to step up more. Diplomacy will be crucial in the multi-centric world ahead and much of it will be done at or through the UN. The reason why others are at the UN this week is that they understand these realities. The effect of heeding the advice of Canada's UN bashers is to sideline Canadian diplomacy in petulant irresponsibility. Ottawa would be better advised to re-engage and promote and protect our interests.