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THE UNITED NATIONS – LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARDS



The UN's Achievements

In all the day-to-day controversies, the UN's long-term achievements tend to be overlooked. Here are 10 achievements. They are not in any order of importance.

First, the UN has lasted three times as long as its ill-fated predecessor the League of Nations. The League was often seen as the “great experiment”, with the implication that it may not be here to stay (which in fact it was not). But the UN has outlasted all the predictions of doom. Even the current Bush Administration is not seeking to wind it up.

Second, virtually every country in the world is a member. The League of Nations never had that benefit. The US never joined and the USSR joined late and was expelled (over its invasion of Finland). Japan, Italy and Germany all resigned because of their aggressive foreign policies. Nowadays as soon as a territory achieves independence it seeks UN membership as part of its journey into the international community. East Timor is the newest member, at number 191. If President Bush is successful with his Middle East “roadmap for peace”, then Palestine will be the 192nd.

Third, the UN survived the Cold War. Winston Churchill forged the “Great Alliance” (US, UK and USSR) against the Axis Powers (Germany, Japan and Italy). He hoped to keep the Grand Alliance together in what became known as the UN Security Council to maintain international peace and security. But the Cold War broke out and hindered much – but not all – of the UN's work. The Cold War is over and the UN has survived.

Fourth, the UN has been a forum for decolonization. Colonization has been a feature of world history for as long as records have been kept. A century ago, the European domination of the world was taken to be the norm. Decolonization was a fixed agenda item for the UN's early decades. Almost all the empires have now been wound up.

Fifth, there is the UN's “functional co-operation”. Even during the height of the Cold War, countries were working across national lines to make the world a better place. Technical experts were brought together to. The vast network of UN Specialized Agencies enable the technical cooperation to go ahead, such as sending letters from one country to another,

exchanging ideas on educational material, and pooling resources on foreign aid. Diseases and pollution do not recognize national boundaries and they need to be combated by international co-operation.

Sixth, the UN has provided a platform for small states. Until 1945, a handful of states ran the world. They still do of course (though it is now a different collection of states, with other ones emerging, notably China and India). But the UN has enabled other countries to have a say in how the world is run. This has been important for countries Australia, which have other been only on the margin of international politics.

Seventh, there has been the progress in the protection of human rights. The 20th century saw both some of history's worst violations of human rights and yet also some of the most spectacular international advances in their protection. There is a still long way to go. Human rights are still being violated. But people know their rights are being violated, and so there is less resigned acceptance that such violations are an inevitable part of life. Additionally, people in other countries have a greater sense of obligation to assist others whose rights are being violated.

Eighth, the UN is the global centre for disarmament negotiations. Much remains to be done but at least some progress has been made in reducing nuclear and chemical weapons, and biological warfare has been scrapped.

Ninth, there is the protection of the environment. There was little thought given to the environment in June 1945. It is a sign of the UN's flexibility that it has been able to absorb the international protection of the environment into its workload. It has been able to get countries to work together on common environmental issues, such as through the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

Finally, the UN has been the international forum for non-governmental organizations. NGOs were involved at the 1945 San Francisco conference that created the UN and they have remained involved. Their work shows that governments have no monopoly over information and ideas. For example, NGOs undertake public education work, such as alerting people to the dangers of pollution and generating new ideas for coping with problems. NGOs provide an alternative route for people who wish to work for a better world.

UN Reform

We live in an era of great change and so institutions need to be ready to change to cope. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has tabled a report on how the UN can be reorganized to make greater progress in development, security and the protection of human rights.

This is one of the most ambitious documents ever tabled by a UN Secretary General. The report is notable for its wide-ranging ideas. Many media reports have focused on proposals for amending the UN bodies. But these come towards the end of the document.

Most of the report covers the substantive areas of UN's work. The report is well worth reading just for being an excellent overview of matters such as the environment, development and human rights. It provides a very good introduction to the UN's work and it is written in a reader-friendly way.

For example, at a time when Australia's foreign aid is at a record low level, the report reaffirms the UN target (which Australia has supported) of creating a timetable to achieve 0.7 per cent of gross national income to be provided as aid. The target should be reached by 2015, with 0.5 per cent being reached by 2009. This is a specific target that Australia should aim towards.

On natural disasters, with the Asian tsunami fresh in everyone's mind, the UN Secretary General recommends the establishment of a worldwide early warning system for all natural hazards, building on existing national and regional capacity. This is in keeping with another report the UN General Assembly has had on its shelves for 17 years: the report from the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues.

Indeed, it is the fate of both the 0.7 per cent development target and the non-implementation of the report from that Independent Commission, which makes me pessimistic about the current report.

There is no shortage of bright ideas on what ought to be done. The UN Secretary General is to be congratulated for bringing them together in one document. But there is a lack of political will to implement the good ideas.

There is a difference in worldview between how the UN is viewed by many members of the general public - and how it is actually used by national governments. The general public would like the UN to flourish as the international mechanism to assist with such issues as development, protection of human rights and protection of the environment. They therefore expect national governments to work for the greater international good.

But national governments see the UN as just another weapon in their armoury for safeguarding the national interest. They lack the idealism of many members of the general public. If the UN makes progress on an issue, then it is more because governments have found that it fits with their own short-term narrow nationalistic outlook, rather than any deliberate attempt to work for the international common good. Governments are not as naturally internationally-minded as are many of their citizens.

If this sounds too harsh, then look again at such commonsense recommendations as governments providing 0.7 per cent for foreign aid and creating international early warning systems for natural disasters. My fear is that governments will again fail to make much headway on these sensible ideas.

What has attracted much more interest are the recommendations for reforming the UN structure. The current Security Council consists the Big Five Permanent Members (each with a veto power) and 10 others elected for two-year terms.

The Secretary General has urged consideration of two options, both of which push the membership up from 15 countries to 24. Model A provides for six new non-permanent seats, with no veto power being created and three new two-year term non-permanent seats. Model B provides for no new permanent seats but creates a new category of eight four-year renewable seats and one new two-year non-permanent (and non-renewable) seat.

As Sir Humphrey would say in “Yes Minister”, either proposal is “courageous”. Full marks to the UN Secretary General for making the effort.

The report is being discussed later this year at the UN General Assembly. Let’s hope that Australia takes a leading and constructive role. At the 1945 San Francisco conference that created the UN, Australia was one of the most active delegations. The Howard Government has a fine legacy to live up to.

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