

The United Nations and Global Institutions

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This conference has well discussed the major characteristics of the United Nations, not least that it is at one and the same time a world organisation and an organisation of nation states. We have discussed reform, democratisation, and the role of citizens' organisations. But the UN is now under the greatest threat of extinction in its history. All the time-worn devices of juggling between accounts to keep the core budget funded have now been exhausted. Unless governments will allow the Secretary-General to borrow, the UN really will run right out of cash late this year. We also know that ideological antipathy to the United Nations is now more powerfully entrenched in the legislature of the United States than ever before.

All the hopes that peoples in ordinary, un-assuming countries around the world have invested in the United Nations, all that it alone can do for a very troubled world, is now in mortal danger.

But the financial crisis has long been with us. The ugly attitudes now out in the open have long been in the American woodwork. Equally, Europe stayed silent for years while the United States blatantly forfeited every last warrant to have the unique privilege of hosting the UN. All of this is part of a deep malaise and a pervasive threat to Northern democracy as a whole. If we do not act upon this malaise there may be less and less democracy, and there will be no UN to democratise.

The most powerful sources of this malaise are perceptions that have been induced in Northern citizens, distorting their view of the world around them in grotesque but extremely effective ways, and severely reducing their ability to make their governments accountable to them at home and abroad.

At all times human beings live in a perceptual environment. It consists of the images and words, concrete experiences and impressions, from which we assemble our understandings of life, of human society, how it works, what institutions it needs, to do what. The quality of the perceptual environment is determined by the quality of education of citizens; the accuracy of the information they obtain about their institutions, their leaders, their economy; and the substance and honesty of the public discourse on these crucial factors in democratic society.

The quality of the perceptual environment in this part of the world steadily improved over centuries until about twenty years ago. Then a great paradox began to show; the paradox that the quantum multiplication and acceleration of our information by modern technology has not been enhancing the quality of political debate and representation, but seems to have had the reverse effect. Please do not misunderstand me over this: Internet may now be marvellously

linking NGOs and networking information, but this has not to date prevented the deterioration.

There has been a significant lowering of the intellectual level of public discourse in the North. There has been gross falsification and distortion of much of the real world, and all of this without remotely adequate challenge from citizens, including many Northern academics who do know better. People who would once have been the first to challenge the use of meaningless "buzz words", outright historical fallacies and blatantly cooked statistics in analyses of economic, social and political trends, now stay silent over them, or even parrot them, almost as if invisible high priests of a cult were engaged in a sort of surveillance of the collective public mind and will.

Let me give some specific examples. Over the last fifteen years it has repeatedly been asserted - including by the World Bank - that the achievements of the East Asian "tiger" countries are decisive evidence of the effectiveness of free-market enterprise systems without state planning. The actual history of the growth of these tigers is the very reverse --carefully planned state initiative. But this rewriting of economic history has done great damage. Among the effects has been a powerful reinforcement of the classic right-wing ideological line that the United Nations, as a "statist" organisation, is redundant in face of such alleged free-enterprise successes.

The public perception of the very function of economics has been gravely debased: this was epitomised all of twenty years ago when George H. Will confidently declared to the readers of Newsweek magazine that (and I quote him) "Economics is about the cost of our appetites". This debasement has since been greatly reinforced by propagandistic distortion of the meaning of the collapse of Soviet command economics. Today no major political figure in the Western democracies dares to suggest that economics is supposed to be about the democratic and equitable stewardship of the public well-being.

The consequences of this veritable McCarthyism in economic policy were evident in an ironic event at the Copenhagen Social Summit. Northern leaders arrived at the Summit having just been terrified by the dangers to the entire international economy in the collapse of the much-touted "Mexican miracle" of globalisation. Suddenly at Copenhagen a small stream of Northern presidents and prime and finance ministers endorsed the idea of an international tax on financial movements. They had discovered a possible way of restoring some regulation - a word not itself politically safe for them even to whisper - under the guise of alternative additional financing for international development. It would have been merely pathetic if it were not a symptom of the relentless attack on social democracy.

The Northern leadership group and its media outlets has for years kept Northern citizens opiated about the real dangers in the world economy. Meeting in their G-7 club they have perennially claimed that they watch over "the global economy". This neatly diminishes any idea that the United Nations is needed as steward of the real world economy of nearly 6 billion people. Yet anyone who reads the details of their pronouncements can find that the "global economy" they have been discussing has been the economy of not even a quarter of humankind, in and between Japan, North America, and Europe. The Southern 80 per cent of humanity has less than 20 per cent of world gross product and only 5 per cent of all commercial lending in the world; but does not figure in G-7 discussions unless to provide cheap, sweated labour for Northern investments.

The word "Globalization" itself is part of this massive perceptual distortion. It is used to connote a process that extends throughout the world. It does not. It extends only where people with available money have arranged for their governments to force open other countries' economies - with the help of the IMF - so that they can make profits in them and repatriate the profits. The relentlessly positive use of this one word "Globalization" in the North by politicians, too many academicians, and almost all media commentators also conveys that there is a new, a substitute "system" at work across and for the world's peoples - and so again the perception is of less need for the United Nations.

People have also talked and written in the last twenty years in such glowing terms about "Free Trade" that those two words have also acquired positive connotations in public perception. In the first place, such trade is not "free" but powerfully subsidised and by increasingly devious means; and secondly, it inexorably reduces the freedom of trade of the impoverished majority of humankind. Between 1978 and 1990 the share of 80 per cent of humankind in world trade decreased, from 28 to only 19 per cent. And again we can see the effect of such perceptions on the UN System. For "free trade" is also conveyed to mean that the institutional promotion of trading opportunities for weak and impoverished countries - a basic United Nations principle - is not needed. And once again, induced perception neatly reinforces intended Northern policy.

Violating the Charter requirements of Article 57, Northern governments insist that the new World Trade Organisation should not become a part of the allegedly out-dated UN System, but should be linked with the Northern-controlled IMF and World Bank. The more representative UNCTAD is written off as unnecessary. Yet Western media did not report that, while the IMF and World Bank were praising "the Mexican miracle", UNCTAD and the regional commissions of the UN were warning against precisely the short-term investments that blew that miracle apart.

The erosion of public alertness to these daily doses of mendacity mixed with economic incompetence is very subtle. If a word or a phrase can be given a positive "aura", who will question how prominent people use it? "Globalization" is the wave of the future, only old-fashioned people would oppose it. "Free trade" is good, only the evil UN opposes it. More and more euphemisms have been injected into our language of public policy-discourse, euphemisms designed to make the brutal seem benign. No one is thrown out of work any longer by corporate heads who promptly increase their own salaries; work forces are only "downsized". It sounds so much nicer.

Above all, "market forces" have been given the connotative power of religious tenets. To question whether these forces are beneficial, leave alone to suggest that they impoverish, create homelessness, destroy health protection, and kill, has been made tantamount to religious heresy. And as if to complete the turning of truth on its head, as if to consolidate this pervasive sapping of the quality of public discourse, a President of the United States repeatedly mouths another phrase - "market democracy".

If I may ask in an Irish way, what in the name of God is "market democracy"? Thirty years ago the phrase would have been strongly challenged as the intellectual rubbish that it is, or the insidiously undemocratic trickery that it also is. Yet today most minds simply nod; it sounds all right because the word "market" has become a biblical sound-bite.

But what of the "democratic process" itself? Those who would get rid of the UN claim that its General Assembly cannot be respected as the forum of the world because too many of its

member-governments are not democratically elected. Indeed some are not, yet. They are countries in which the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies implanted venal dictators during the Cold War, financed and armed them, trained their secret police and torture squads - or other countries in which a siege authoritarianism was induced by unending efforts to subvert them too. But as a grim example of how Northern policy deserves treatment in a Kafka novel, all are now supposed to become models of Westminster and Washington overnight, and not only without any reparations for these crimes committed against their peoples; they are not to get any aid at all unless they recover quickly enough from those crimes.

But even this is not all; for we are witness to an endless erosion of the meaning of terms that are precious, fundamental to the public discourse in national and international democracy. It was asked in a workshop whether the current Iranian election is a democratic process. In the US 1994 Congressional elections that brought in a Republican majority, more than half of the electorate did not even bother to vote. The Republicans were elected by about 19.5 per cent of the American electorate. Yet that same electorate was uniformly told the next day in media headlines that there had been "a tidal wave of change demanded by the American people". That was a "democratic process"?

The degradation of our perceptual environment and public debate involves far more blunt instruments of deliberate demagoguery about the United Nations. Here is one example. In 1994 there was an airborne raid into Mogadishu by the United States Rangers, intending to capture General Aidid. The raid was not part of or even co-ordinated with the United Nations peace force in Somalia; neither the UN Commander nor even his American deputy even learned of it until after the Rangers had landed, had managed to capture some UN staff instead of General Aidid, and had then got themselves into a bloody firefight. UN troops were then despatched, but before they could reach them one dead Ranger was dragged through the streets by enraged Mogadishans, filmed by US television. In no time at all this was converted by Washington spin doctors into (and I quote) "another United Nations fiasco"; Mr. Clinton reversed his support for UN peace-keeping; and the right wing has used the incident ever since as part of its attack on the UN. Yet the fact that it was an entirely American fiasco was not any secret; American NGOs, academics, other members of the foreign policy elite could have shouted protest at this flagrant lying to American citizens. But the silence has been deafening.

Finally there is the immensely powerful use of the word "reform" by those who would in fact weaken, if not outright destroy the United Nations. The UN does most certainly need overhauling, because it has been picked at and ignorantly micro-managed or illegally pressured by governments, and for the most part indifferently led, by leaders irresponsibly chosen by the veto-wielding Permanent Members. But the real enemies of the UN have managed to conjure in the public perception a wholly different picture of what needs reform; a picture of, and I quote the standard set of epithets, "a vast, swollen and extravagant bureaucracy". This makes it easy to demand a 10 per cent or larger cut in a Secretariat that has not yet recovered from being slashed by 13 per cent only six years ago, while the Bretton Woods agencies were doubled. But few know this, or that the entire staff of the UN System, world-wide of all grades, to serve nearly 6 billion people in 185 countries in every field of human endeavour and need, numbers less than the civil servants in the State of Wyoming, population half a million. Again, these are publicly available facts. Why have Americans who do care not obtained and used them?

The campaign of distortion has had so powerful an effect in public perception that many NGOs have been induced to accept the untruths and epithets. In turn, they have been induced to accept the outrageous proposition that the UN must be "reformed" in order to persuade their government to meet its treaty obligations to pay its membership dues. This has resulted in the American NGO community expending enormous amounts of dedicated energy on proposals to reform a United Nations which may very well not be there - or not in New York and no longer with American membership - to reform. This is perhaps the ultimate trick in the insidious process of warping a perceptual environment in what purports to be a democracy.

There are grave implications in all this, both for democracy in the USA and for all American citizens who care about the world organisation which they have been hosting (hosting?) for the last fifty years. All the most respected opinion polls show that their representatives are following policies towards the United Nations that would be decisively rejected if American citizens could vote on them. But it is American citizens who have allowed this state of affairs to continue for so long that it may be too late to reverse. The particularly noxious American diplomat at the UN who a few years ago said that he would happily be on the banks of the East River to wave the UN good-bye and good riddance may very well have his opportunity - either by the government's decision to throw us out, or by the decision of the other 95 per cent of humankind that they have had enough. Certain it is that American citizens - and the American scholarly community so much of which long ago abdicated from the caring that I witnessed in the UN's early years - are running out of time to take remedial action.

This remedial action can now only be a massive, well-orchestrated campaign to demand that their government stop shaming the American people before the world and dishonouring the memory of all those Americans who so greatly contributed to the building of the UN. The European corollary, of course, is that European citizens demand that their governments cease behaving like colonies and shoulder their share of responsibility for the survival and future of the UN.

I remain optimistic. I like to hope that American citizens could still make this difference. But if not, the UN can survive in the care of the other 95 per cent of humankind. It would probably be removed to Geneva, to more gracious hosting, and to a decent chance for the strengthening that it does very badly need, with the essentials of which I conclude these remarks.

As the founders intended and the first General Assembly adopted as a principle, the UN's agencies' headquarters should be assembled at one common Seat with the UN itself; a move that would at once transform our problems of achieving synergy, coherence of strategy, and inter-disciplinary programming.

To address the root causes of so much conflict and upheaval we must campaign for a very carefully negotiated UN world conference on trade, money, finance, sustainable development, and for the restructuring of the UN System including the Bretton Woods institutions to equip the System to implement the all-win and truly global policies that such a conference should adopt.

The Security Council is not worth trying to save if the price is the neat trickery of breaking solidarity in the South by seducing a few of its largest countries to join Germany and Japan in an expansion of the present reliquary cabal of so-called "Permanent Members". Let the present little club of emperors without clothes or competence wither away. The General Assembly has the full power in international treaty law to deny funds for any peace mission

they may concoct that is not according to the Purposes and Principles of the Charter. The Assembly can also close down the Council simply by refusing to elect any more non-permanent members. Such a strategy would, however, require the protection of the economically weak majority of members; but this can be done if the NGO community mounts a continuous Blackmail Watch at the UN, to expose any threat of economic extortion against member-governments such as is now practised with total impunity by the Permanent Three. As well, legal specialists should examine the implications at international law of such extortion being a criminal felony in the laws of the countries that practise it at the UN. Those who want more democracy in the UN might also make a start with opposing these un-democratic acts of state terrorism.

The most important moves needed towards democratisation are first, to bring to life the opening words of the Charter, "We, the Peoples of the United Nations". We need a world-wide campaign to get our governments to establish, alongside the General Assembly of executive branches, a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly elected by the peoples. This is not sheer utopianism: it is the equivalent of running some seven Indian parliamentary elections.

The second vital step towards democratisation concerns the Secretary-General. It is disgraceful that any small college in the world employs more orderly procedure and expends more energy in choosing a new president or chancellor than do the governments of the world in choosing its chief public servant. The Secretary-General should be appointed from a year-long search based on suggestions from all governments, the NGO community, and individual citizens. It is time to find an outstanding woman.

These are only the key, among many measures I hope we can discuss to release the United Nations from the grip of an archaic little club of essentially 3 out of 185 member countries, and bring it under the healthy scrutiny of its member citizens. Many more concrete steps can be realised if we all begin to resist the relentless programming of our minds and debasement of our public discourse that I have tried to outline.

We need to unite our popular forces to resist and overcome the sordid mess we have allowed tired and cynical elites to make of a world whose human spirit yet holds so much promise, on a planet of breath-taking beauty. We could usefully heed the message of a mantra conceived unknown centuries ago yet so apt that it could have been written for us and our United Nations. It is called, quite simply, "Unification".

The sons and daughters of men and women
are one, and I am one with them.
I seek to love, not hate.
I seek to serve and not exact due service;
I seek to heal, not hurt.

Let pain bring due reward of light and love.
Let the soul control the outer form
and life and all events,
And bring to light the love which underlies
the happenings of the time.

Let vision come, and insight.
Let the future stand revealed.

Let inner union demonstrate and
outer cleavages be gone.
Let love prevail.
Let all people love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erskine Childers was Secretary-General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA). He died unexpectedly in the summer of 1996.

Source:
Global Vision Corporation, Ireland
<http://www.global-vision.org/>