

WHAT THE UN MEANS FOR AUSTRALIANS

Opening Address by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the United Nations Youth Association Convention, Canberra, 5 July 1995

The entry into force of the UN Charter on 24 October 1945, was a momentous event. It brought with it the promise of a new way of managing relations between governments, and of a new international order in the place of the failures and broken dreams of the 1920s and 1930s which had produced war and destruction on a catastrophic scale. To people everywhere, emerging from the cynicism and despair of a shattered world, the newly established United Nations gave cause for new hope for a better future.

Fifty years later, the UN finds itself almost under siege, with a series of unhappy experiences in Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia wiping away a lot of the optimism and excited expectations that had come with the end of the Cold War, with the successful resistance to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and with the success of peace plans in Cambodia, Namibia, Mozambique and El Salvador. The newspapers give prominence to articles with titles like "Three Jeers for the UN", and slow news days can always be brightened with tales of incompetence and waste.

It's time, I think, to get debate about the UN and its future back into perspective. Let's get a better understanding of what it is that the UN and its agencies can do to make the world a safer and better place, and what it can't. Let's recognise the significant political and resource constraints under which the organisation must operate, the reality that the UN can do no more than its member states allow it to do or give it resources to do. But let's recognise at the same time the success the UN has had, and can continue to have, in securing peace. Let's acknowledge its fine record in the process of decolonisation, and its vital work in the so-called "silent emergencies" of poverty and deprivation - all its extensive programs of economic and social development in over 170 countries. Let's try and get a better understanding of the extraordinary impact the UN system - and all the different individual agencies that make it up - has on our ordinary everyday lives.

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And while recognising and understanding all that, let's try to state a vision for the UN for the next fifty years which goes to the heart of what it can and should be doing. I don't think it's too hard to spell out such a vision. We want the UN to be an active and effective agent for the peaceful settlement of disputes, one which strengthens international law, controls and reverses arms races and promotes confidence and dialogue. We want it to be a more effective agent for promoting equitable and sustainable development and for responding to humanitarian crises. And we want it to be an even stronger promoter and defender of universal standards of human rights. We want it, in short, to fulfil the bright promise with which it started out in those thrilling days of fifty years ago.

The important thing to recognise about the UN is that it's not all about high level diplomacy, and conflicts and crises, and heads of state and foreign ministers rushing around looking important. It is more than anything else about people - meeting people's needs for security, their needs for economic well-being, and their needs for personal dignity and liberty. And understood that way, it ought to be easier to get ordinary people around the world to think a little more clearly, a little more positively and a little more affectionately about the UN than they tend to do.

II

Let's begin at the beginning, by understanding the kind of impact the UN system has on our ordinary everyday lives. We never give it a moment's thought, of course, but the truth is that we rely on the UN's work when we do such simple things as send a letter overseas or make an international phone call, when we eat imported food or listen to a weather forecast, when we travel by sea or air, or see a television broadcast live from foreign shores, or when we marvel at the beauty of the Barrier Reef.

This is because the rules and standards and systems that make the world go round are very largely developed through a whole range of specialised bodies in the UN system - in the cases I've mentioned they are the International Postal Union, International Telecommunications Union, the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organisation, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the International Meteorological Organisation, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, better known as WIPO, and UNESCO, whose World Heritage arrangements protect the Barrier Reef and many other natural assets in Australia and

elsewhere.

Much of the UN's work that helps protect the security of Australians and others involves not Blue Helmeted soldiers, but armies of diplomats and lawyers. A number of UN related agreements and organisations, for example, are geared directly towards arms control and disarmament; towards preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and preventing the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons. Much of this effort is carried forward in the Conference on Disarmament, the UN's arms control negotiating body, which is working on a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty by the end of next year that will finally put an end not only to French tests in the Pacific, but to any other tests by any other country anywhere and for all time. Other forums and agreements, including the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and the Conventional Arms Register, which measures the arms trade between governments, also contribute directly to the security of all Australians.

The Australian community has always strongly supported universal human rights. One of the UN's great achievements has been the establishment of a comprehensive set of international human rights standards and arrangements to monitor their implementation. Most often, we think of human rights in terms of abuses which occur elsewhere. But the UN's success in the promotion and protection of human rights is of very real direct benefit to Australians. Australian law and practice has improved in keeping with our international obligations pursuant to human rights treaties we have ratified. This translates into better guarantees of basic human rights for Australian citizens, particularly in the outlawing of discrimination in areas such as race, religion, gender and sexual preference.

Most Australians are deeply concerned by environmental issues, and problems such as the depletion of the ozone layer, climate change and global warming, deforestation, land degradation and biological diversity are at the heart of Australia's economic, social and cultural interests. Similarly, new issues such as the linkage between trade and the environment and the effects of existing patterns of consumption and development will have a direct impact on the lives of all Australians. The United Nations is the only body capable of addressing these issues on the scale they need to be addressed, namely globally. It is doing so through international agreements such as the Montreal Convention dealing with the ozone layer, through the Climate Change Convention and through many others. Australia has actively participated in this important area of UN activity, working in its main forums, the UN Environment Program and the Commission on Sustainable Development which was established following the UN Conference on Environment and

Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1993.

III

So much for some of the UN's specific roles and activities which impact directly upon us. Let me now try and set Australia's interest in, and commitment to, the UN in a broader context.

For small and medium sized powers like Australia, the existence of international law, of international treaties, of international institutions, guarantees our sovereign existence and a fair and reasonable part in the deliberations of our globe. It provides a framework where power is not centralised, in which nations have the freedom to remain 'individuals', to remain 'different'. A UN that is well-ordered, and is based on the consent of those who make it up, helps us to remain distinctively Australian.

The post Cold War world has given the international community new possibilities and new challenges. Will we be able to think of new answers to the old problems of peace, of development and of human rights. That depends a lot on the historical context in which we now live. The first thing to say about that is that the rules and relationship between states are no longer clear or sharply delineated. The threat of global nuclear war has receded. The Soviet Union and the United States relationship is no longer the determining factor of global life or of our allegiances. Moreover, the forces of globalisation have thrown up a whole series of powerful non-governmental players such as multinational business and global communications networks.

Small and medium states have to learn how to deal with these new circumstances, how to survive, how to build a proper role in international affairs, how to retain the sense of particularity and singularity that is so important to the sense of self worth of each individual. The answers clearly do not lie solely in the UN. Many of them are in our own internal decisions, our bilateral relationships and in regional institutions of the kind we are building in the APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum. But the rules, the standards and the decisions of the UN and its associated bodies and the broader international institutions, do provide the broad international framework in which we can operate as an individual nation, in which we can operate bilaterally and regionally. Without that broader framework of rules, each of those other areas of activity would be less certain, less clear and less effective. So while the UN is not by any means the be all and end all, it is an indispensable part of an independent future for Australia.

And as the challenges press harder upon us, the UN becomes ever more important not only as an idealistic goal but to Australia's vital national interests.

Our interests are directly bound up in the three clearly stated objectives set out in the UN Charter - peace and security, economic and social development and human rights respectively. But what happened over the Cold War years was that the UN's security role, its economic role and its human rights role ran off in three different, compartmentalised directions. This cannot continue if the UN is to operate effectively.

After all, there is not going to be much peace in the world if poverty, economic injustice and deprivation continue around the globe. Nor will there be much peace while human rights are regularly abused on a grand scale - experience shows us that in the end people will rebel. And of course the contrary is the case. War is the easiest way to destroy any economic prosperity, and the worst abuses of human rights occur in the midst of conflict and war.

With the end of the Cold War five years ago, there has been the opportunity to help a new UN evolve - one which can turn again, in a systematic, integrated way to address people's needs. I made a number of proposals for improving the UN's approach and performance in the vital area of **peace and security** in my 1993 "blue book", *Cooperating for Peace*. The fundamental approach I adopted was one of "cooperative security", covering three separate ideas which have been talked about for some time - collective security (the notion of member states agreeing to renounce the use of force among themselves and collectively coming to the aid of any member attacked by an outside state or renegade member) common security (the notion of states finding security by working **with** others rather than **against** them) and comprehensive security (the notion that security is multi dimensional, covering political, economic, social and other non-military issues as well as military capability).

"Cooperative security" is a useful term because it brings these three familiar approaches together, in a way that emphasises prevention but at the same time covers the whole range of responses to security concerns, both before and after armed conflict has begun. At one extreme, this would involve long term programs to improve economic and social conditions which are likely to give rise to future tensions; at the other it includes the enforcement of peace by full scale military means. In *Cooperating for Peace* I described a whole spectrum of responses, from the peace building, preventive diplomacy and preventive deployment strategies needed to build and maintain peace; through the

peacemaking and peacekeeping strategies that are needed to restore it; and finally to the sanctions and military enforcement strategies that may be necessary in extreme cases.

There is not enough time to explain all these responses in detail, but two points should be born in mind. The first is that we simply have to focus much more on prevention. In a world where commitment and resources are always likely to fall short of aspirations, it makes far more sense to concentrate efforts on peace building and other preventive strategies than after-the-event peace restoration. That holds as much for internal as for international conflicts; violent conflicts are always far more difficult and costly to manage and resolve than non-violent disputes and failed nations are extremely difficult to put back together again.

Second, UN security actions must fulfil certain criteria if they are to be effective. They must be timely; they must be graduated, they must be affordable and there must be a certain degree of consistency. Above all they must have a clear objective. Those UN operations which are effective are those which have clearly defined goals which are given appropriate support and which have clear-cut exit strategies. The UN operation in bringing Namibia to independence and the extraordinary UN achievement in Cambodia are good examples of this.

The UN's *development agenda* has in the past not had the same prominence as security issues. Part of this is because the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the GATT, and now the World Trade Organisation, which are outside the UN family, have had a much greater role. The UN Economic and Social Council was supposed to have shared with the UN General Assembly responsibility for the UN's promotion of international, economic and social cooperation. Indeed, one of the goals specified in the Charter was "high standards of living, full employment, conditions of economic and social progress and development" - the undertaking by UN Member States to work individually and jointly to achieve this became known at San Francisco as the Australian Pledge because it was included due to the persistence of Dr H V Evatt, Australia's Foreign Minister at the time.

The UN, however, and ECOSOC in particular has not had the influence and the direction in the economic and development agenda that it should have. Some of this is now changing. In part due to the efforts of our current Ambassador to the UN, Richard Butler, and those of his predecessor, the late Peter Wilenski, the ECOSOC is a much more focused and directed body with a clearer idea of its task. Already we are starting to see

some changes for the better in the revitalised ECOSOC. And there is no lack of issues for such a body: the alleviation of extreme poverty, stabilisation of population growth, the situation of women and children which is a grievous one around the world, and the economic problems of Africa are only the beginning of the list. These are issues of great concern to the majority of UN members, and the UN must raise the quality of its work in dealing with them.

In the *human rights* area, the UN has adopted six major UN human rights agreements over the years. It made great progress at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. That Conference finally settled, once and for all, that human rights are not simply some Western invention imposed on the rest of the world but are universal, and are indivisible and that governments have a legitimate interest in violations of human rights wherever they occur, which transcends any claim of interference in the internal affairs of other states.

But, for all the commitment reflected in the agreements, much remains to be done. One only has to look around the world to see how human rights continue to be abused on a massive scale. In the human rights area, the UN needs to tackle new issues as well as improving its performance on the old. The UN Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September this year, for example, must set out new ideas for the UN role in promoting gender equality. Over the course of this decade, we want to see due attention to the needs and aspirations of the indigenous communities by the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the development of more substantial programs to assist the exercise of those rights. And finally we must understand the significance that developing states give to the right to development and poverty alleviation, because failure by the developed world to recognise such a right would risk increased division between governments of the North and of the South. The crucial question will be whether sufficient resources and administrative competence are devoted to this area of the UN's activities.

Which brings me to an area where the UN is so often criticised - namely *its administration and its management and finances*. One of the most popular misconceptions about the UN is that it has created an over-bloated bureaucracy. This is not true either in absolute terms or in terms of recent trends. UN and agency budgets have stuck to zero real growth since the mid-1980s, and the UN headquarters implemented a fourteen per cent cut in overall staff numbers in the late 1980s following pressure from the Reagan Administration. Few, if any, member states could produce such efficiency. The

total number of staff, from the Secretary-General to the office cleaners in the entire UN system including the specialised agencies is 51,000. The staff, professional and administrative, in the core of the UN in New York, Geneva and Vienna and its five regional commissions - its policy and program areas across the full range of functions which needs to be integrated in the UN - only numbers 13,000. Compare this to the ACT Government bureaucracy, some 20,000 in all, or to the Jeffed-down Victorian state public sector which is over 240,000 people.

But numbers are not the only issue or indeed perhaps the crucial issue for the UN's future. What really matters is the quality, impartiality and capacity for independent analysis by the Secretariat and the allocation of resources to existing and emerging priorities. What matters is that the UN simply has to have a more modern and efficient administrative system. This will need a basic change to the senior decision making structure of UN Headquarters in New York to ensure the Secretary-General has an effective change of command to exercise authority over the whole range of major UN operations, not just in the peace and security area.

But there is not much point in talking about reshaping the administration and management of the UN if there is simply not enough money to meet member states demands. You will have gathered from what I have said about the size of the UN that indeed it has quite a modest budget contrary to popular misconceptions. If the UN is to do even a small part of what people want it to do, it needs a more regular and larger revenue base. In the past I have suggested that the UN should look at some new approaches to raising funds. To illustrate, one possibility is to place a levy on certain kinds of international transactions, like air travel or international currency dealings, both of which can only take place when a minimum degree of international peace and stability is maintained, conditions to which the UN makes a major contribution.

IV

Turning the UN into a body truly capable of working in our interests and in the global interest is indeed a daunting task. The UN has not been able in the last five years to meet the many new expectations people have had of it. But this is not the time to lose faith in what it is capable of delivering. It is time to renew that faith, to stimulate a new generation to share it, and to get on with the task of making the UN able to do all these tasks that are beyond the capacity of any other country or organisation in the world to achieve. The UN has directly served our interests over the last fifty years and it will be increasingly

important for us in the next fifty years.

I would like to finish by recalling the words of Dr H V Evatt, who played such an important role in the development of the organisation and, in 1948, was President of the United Nations General Assembly. He pleaded for governments to keep faith with their peoples. They wanted, he said, "not very much; just peace and justice and decent standards of living for themselves perhaps, but mainly for their children."

Those are simple and modest words. They remind us that the UN does not belong to the powerful or the wealthy, but to the ordinary men, women and children of the world. It was founded on a promise that never again would their leaders bring upon them war, injustice and poverty. That promise has not to date been honoured but we have a second chance as we enter into the next fifty years of the UN to fulfil that promise by bringing to the people of the world "peace, justice and a decent standard of living". It is an opportunity we must not miss, as a nation and as individual Australians.

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