

WHY THE UN MATTERS TO AUSTRALIA

Address by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the Melbourne Junior Chamber of Commerce Employers' Luncheon, 24 November 1995

Knocking the UN has a long and distinguished pedigree. The *Economist* magazine recently published a letter from the daughter of an Italian diplomat who served at the United Nations in the 1950s and 1960s. She wrote that her father used to tell the story about the naive member of the public who asks: "What is the UN and what does it do?" "Well" answers the experienced diplomat, "let me put it this way. If a dispute arises between two small countries, the dispute tends to disappear. If a dispute arises between a small country and a big one, the small country tends to disappear. But if a dispute arises between two big countries, then the United Nations tends to disappear."

As the daughter commented in her letter: *Plus ça change*. Knocking the UN is still fashionable today. Just look at the media coverage over the UN's role in Bosnia and Rwanda, and before that in Somalia. The almost unanimous tone has been: when the going gets tough, the United Nations does indeed tend to "disappear".

I think this is deeply unfortunate. Nineteen ninety-five is the 50th Anniversary year of the formation of the United Nations. It has been a year for celebrating the UN's achievements over the last half century, and for renewing the international community's commitment to the principles of the United Nations for years to come. But I would be the first to admit that the celebrations have had a little hollowness at their heart, and that the international community's deliberations this year have fallen well short of providing anything like a clear blueprint for action for the future.

Indeed, it is true, sadly, that 1995 will probably be remembered less for the UN's birthday than for its blemishes - particularly in Bosnia and in Rwanda -and for the financial crisis which is now beginning to affect its operations everywhere.

For all that, I still hold high hopes, and expectations, for the organisation. For all its flaws, I believe the United Nations is one of the truly remarkable institutions created by mankind. And in saying this, my basic assumption is that the United Nations does

continue to deliver tangible, important benefits to Australia and to Australians.

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So I believe the task is to reform the United Nations, in order to ensure those benefits which it delivers to the world community and to Australia can be secured and expanded. Today, I'd like to talk to you about how we can work to reform the United Nations and to reignite some of the enthusiasm and constructive creativity that led to the formation of the United Nations in 1945.

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In thinking about future directions for the UN, we really don't need to look much further than where we started in 1945. The basic challenge as I see it is essentially to *reintegrate* the core functions of the United Nations - peace, development and human rights - in the way the founders intended.

One of those founders, of course, was my distinguished predecessor as Foreign Minister, Doc Evatt, who once summed up the ambition of the UN for the peoples of the world as being "not very much; just peace and justice and decent standards of living for themselves perhaps, but mainly for their children". A laconic statement - but a moving one, and one that for me captures the spirit of what UN is ultimately all about.

Recall that in 1945 the world was exhausted by war and social upheaval, and was still scarred by the massive hardship of the Great Depression. The allies had defeated fascism - but the wartime alliance was about to disintegrate as its Western members entered into a new struggle against Soviet totalitarianism. At the same time the European democracies were on the verge of seeing their colonial empires dissolve in that great post-war surge towards self-determination and independence.

And as a backdrop to all this, the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki provided the most horrifying reminder about the pace and the scale of scientific and technological progress - not just with weapons of mass destruction but also with new forms of communication, transport and information processing that would transform the world.

For all these uncertainties that the future held, the founders of the UN were determined to

avoid the mistakes of the past. They were determined to avoid a recurrence of war - perhaps because they suspected that any future global war might be mankind's last. They certainly understood that preventing war required more than just a rhetorical commitment to the virtues of peace. Building peace - lasting, sustainable peace - required addressing the root causes of war.

That is why the founders of the United Nations set three basic objectives for the new world body: not just *peace* (meeting the need for security), but also *development* (meeting economic needs) and *human rights and justice* (meeting the needs for individual and group dignity and liberty).

Those men and women of 1945 knew that these simply stated goals were inextricably bound up with each other: you can't have sustainable peace, among nations and within nations, unless you ultimately address the economic needs of the people; and you can't address those economic needs without recognising the fundamental human rights that underpin them. On the other hand, the easiest way to destroy economic prosperity and to abuse human rights is to destroy peace.

They recognised that they lived in an *interdependent* world in which nations could best create the conditions for their *own* peace, prosperity and justice by helping to create *global* conditions of peace, prosperity and justice - a world in which the well-being and security of individuals is the foundation of the well being and security of nations. It's an old lesson but it's a good one. It still holds true today.

As we ourselves saw in the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in Eastern Europe, regimes which systematically disregard human rights, ignore the rule of law and fail to strive for equitable development and distributive justice, cannot ultimately survive in peace and concord.

But I think Doc Evatt and the others of the generation of 1945 would have been rather unhappy at the way in which their insights into the interdependence of the world came to be so severely compartmentalised by the United Nations throughout the Cold War years. Peace and security issues, development issues, and human rights and justice issues came to be treated as if they belonged in completely different conceptual boxes. The distinction between 'peace and security' on the one hand and 'development' on the other too often became a matter for sterile debate, with attempts to trade off one for the other as priorities for the UN. Different institutions were created to deal separately, with separate

bureaucracies, with what are really parts of the same problem.

I want to see a UN in which all these objectives - peace, development and human rights - march comfortably together in step as reintegrated, complementary, elements of a truly global vision. This requires a real commitment to organisational reform of the UN and a political will to tackle some of the problems which up to now have been put in the too-hard basket.

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Where does this leave Australia?

At a purely utilitarian level, the United Nations exercises a very immediate and positive impact on our everyday lives. 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 watch "World Business Today" on CNN.

This is because the rules and standards and systems that govern the airwaves and the airways and generally make the world go round can only be validly developed on a global basis. They cannot be subject to the dictates of any one nation; they must be rules that all nations can accept and accede to. That is why the United Nations has created a whole range of specialised bodies in the UN system - in the cases I've mentioned they are the Universal Postal Union, the International Telecommunications Union, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organisation, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the World Meteorological Organisation and the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

I might add that business benefits as much as individuals from this stable environment of global regulation. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund - and they too are part of the UN system, though most people don't think of them that way - have contributed powerfully to world economic growth and stability. And a more open global trading regime is gradually evolving under the auspices of the GATT and the new World Trade Organisation. This has offered greater opportunities for export of efficiently produced Australian goods and services. As I am sure you are aware, the Government worked very hard in the Uruguay Round to secure a favourable outcome for Australian farmers, manufacturers and service providers.

At a broader level, the UN remains an essential part of Australia's future. In the uncertainties of this post-Cold War world, new answers are needed to the old problems of peace, development and human rights. For medium sized countries like us, it is only the UN which can provide a system of international law, of international treaties, of international institutions which guarantees our sovereignty and gives us a voice and a forum with which to influence the affairs of the world. The UN is not by any means the be all and end all, but it is an indispensable part of an independent future for Australia.

One of the things of which I am very proud as Foreign Minister is that over recent years the Australian Government has worked hard and effectively to use those forums to advance the interests of Australians and to help create a safer and more secure world. We have punched well above our weight as a nation in providing leadership in these forums.

Let me give you a couple of specific examples of areas where the UN can make the world a safer, saner and better place.

I spoke before about an interdependent world. If the world seemed interdependent in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, how much more so does it now, in the global village of the 1990s, with instant communications networks, real time currency trading, and increasingly transnational investment and corporate structures. In this world two particular issues have loomed up on a scale unforeseen in 1945; on a literally planetary scale. These are the challenges of protecting the global environment and eliminating the threat of nuclear weapons. The United Nations remains the only body capable of addressing these issues at a global level.

Global warming, threats to biodiversity and depletion of the ozone layer are problems for the global community, not simply for individual nations. They require global solutions achieved through global cooperation. The UN is providing those solutions through, for example, the Montreal Protocol on reducing substances that damage the ozone layer, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the summit's follow-on work on Climate Change and on Biological Diversity.

Australia has been an active contributor to this work. But let's also remember that Australia is very much a beneficiary as well. We rightly proclaim our pride in World Heritage sites such as the Great Barrier Reef or the Kakadu National park - and we generate tourist dollars because of the marvellous attraction that these sites have for foreign visitors. When we do this we are benefiting in the most direct way from the fact

that it is only the UN, through its agency UNESCO, that could formulate and manage such a system.

In regard to nuclear weapons, it should be remembered that in the 1960s most experts predicted that 20 to 25 countries would have developed or acquired nuclear weapons by the 1980s. That did not happen - thanks overwhelmingly to the existence of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, negotiated through the UN. In May this year - after a great deal of hard work by Australia and other like minded countries - we saw the unanimous decision to extend the life of the NPT indefinitely. Next year - despite the continuing indulgence by France and China in the dangerous and unsavoury business of nuclear testing - we are likely to see conclusion of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. In our immediate neighbourhood, the nations of the South Pacific, including Australia, banded together in 1985 to create the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone treaty; we recently welcomed the decisions of the United States, France and Britain to sign the protocols of the treaty and to contribute in this way to keeping our part of the world nuclear-free.

Just last month I had the honour of addressing the International Court of Justice - the World Court - in The Hague to present Australia's case on the illegality of nuclear weapons. I told the Court that the point had now been reached at which it could be said that the use, and threatened use, and even possession of nuclear weapons must be considered illegal under customary international law. I put in the Court that the answer demanded not only by law, but by rationality, by morality and by humanity is verifiable and effective nuclear disarmament, initiated without delay and resulting within a reasonable timeframe in the complete elimination of all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.

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A key theme in all this as far as Australia is concerned is that, in assessing the role and utility of the UN, we should look beyond the high profile work that is done by the 'Blue Helmets' - United Nations peace keepers, whether less successfully in Bosnia or more successfully in Cambodia. Much of the UN's work that helps protect the security of Australians is not done by armies of Blue Helmets, but by armies of diplomats and lawyers.

That statement of course conjures up dreadful images, with which we are all familiar, of bloated United Nations bureaucracy. There is perhaps no area in which the United Nations

receives greater criticisms than in its own housekeeping - its administration and its management and finances.

There is a lot to be done, and Australia has been one of the main movers in the current reform push. But we should not exaggerate the problem. One of the most popular myths about the UN is that its bureaucracy is bloated, and that it never stops expanding. This is not true on either count. UN and agency budgets have stuck to zero real growth since the mid-1980s, and the UN headquarters implemented a fourteen per cent staff cut in the late 1980s. Few, if any, member states can match that.

When it comes to the size of the UN bureaucracy, few commentators have a grasp of the relative magnitudes of the numbers we are talking about. The core functions of the UN - that is, the Headquarters in New York, the Offices in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and the five Regional Commissions involve a total of only 10,700 personnel and cost \$1.2 billion US per year between them. Compare that with the New York Police Department - just one government department in one city among 185 member states - costs half as much again - \$1.8 billion.

The cost of the UN's 16 separate peace operations last year was 3.2 billion US dollars: that's less than what it takes to run three New York departments - Police, Fire and Corrections.

Add in the entire UN family - WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO, UNHCR, the Bretton Woods institutions, the lot - and you are still talking about total UN personnel of 61,400. More people than that are employed by the three Disneylands. Three times as many people sell McDonalds hamburgers around the world. And almost four times as many staff our public sector here in Victoria, even after Mrs Thatcher's favourite Premier has Jeffed his way through our public service.

But there is not much point talking about reshaping the UN if there is simply not enough money to meet the demands we make on it. 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. Its member governments should look at some new approaches to raising funds. One possibility is to place a levy on certain kinds of international transactions, like air travel or international currency dealings. I recognise that there are some practical hurdles to get over, but I believe it is not at all unreasonable in principle: after all, the UN has helped create the peace and stability that allows airlines and the international economy to flourish.

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Let me close on a very practical note. I wouldn't be doing my job if I addressed such a distinguished gathering of the Melbourne business community without saying something explicit about your own bottom lines. There is a further reason why the UN matters which is of particular relevance to business. The UN and its related agencies manage expenditure, including loans, of \$US 30 billion a year on goods and services. This represents a potentially massive market for Australian business - but it is an opportunity that is being sadly neglected at present. The Australian business community is getting less than one per cent of this procurement.

There are major opportunities going begging. My Department, Austrade and AusAID have now set up a program to help Australian business compete more effectively in the UN market. The essence of winning UN business, like anywhere else, is information and contacts. So we have designated Australian staff in 65 Embassies to act as multilateral procurement officers. Their role is to spot and report opportunities, and to help Australian businesses make effective contacts with UN agencies.

Here in Australia, we are running a team program which brings together Federal and State agencies involved in procurement and exports. The program is managed out of Austrade in Sydney and my Department in Canberra. And there is a multilateral procurement contact person in every Foreign Affairs and Trade regional office, including the Melbourne office in the World Trade Centre. I hope you will help spread the word about this work.

Turning the UN into a body truly capable of working in our interests and in the global interest is indeed a daunting task. But this is not the time to lose faith in what it is capable of delivering. It is time to renew that faith and to get the UN fit to do all these tasks that no other organisation or country can achieve. We have a second chance as we enter into the next fifty years of the UN to fulfil that promise. It is an opportunity we must not miss, whether as part of the international community or simply as Australians.