

Building a world community

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Charting the UN's Future John E Trent

Government of Stephen Harper either denigrated or ignored the United Nations. The Liberals under Justin Trudeau have said they would regain Canada's place at the UN. This raises two questions: what is the current status of the UN and what should be Canada's policies toward it? The UN is no longer the object of everyone's admiration. For instance, one of the world's experts on the UN, Thomas Weiss, recently published "What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It" in which he underlined four major problems. The first is that the UN Charter, and hence the whole Organization, is based on the outdated principle of national sovereignty so that national interests rather than world community dominate the UN. The second, is the division of countries along North-South lines in which the author calls "rigid and counterproductive groups according to artificial division" based on the opposition of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 developing countries to the powerful industrialized North. Third, are the structural problems in the Organization arising from overlapping jurisdictions and the lack of coordinated leadership and financing among the UN organs and agencies. Finally, there is the ineffective UN bureaucracy where the national competition for positions and power circumvents the need for dedication and merit. So, what can be done about it and how can the UN be changed? The answers to the first question are right at hand. The UN's problems have been known for decades. We are awash with studies and proposals for UN reform from 'high level' panels, global commissions, academic analysis and nongovernmental organization reports. If anything, there are too many and they are contradictory and controversial.

In the last year alone there have been nine sets of proposals for global governance reform. Thus, we know that sovereignty must be controlled by the Responsibility to Protect policy. The Security Council must be restructured so that it will be more representative and legitimate; and the veto should be limited, if not abolished. All the organs require weighted voting to take into account differences in population, economic contributions and power between member states so as to bring back the rich and powerful from the G-20. The agenda of the General Assembly must be streamlined and democratized so that only resolutions with clear direction and limited objectives will be debated and recognized. The UN and the Secretary-General need to be given more autonomous financing, police forces and administrative authority. We must work to make the UN decision-making as legitimate and responsible as possible so that its authority to lead the world efforts to deal with common challenges will be recognized. All this we know.

The problem is we do not know how to go about getting all these fine reform proposals on the international agenda. In some cases they have sat on dusty shelves for ages. And there are [good](#)

reasons. Many states and politicians simply do not want the UN to have more authority. Many citizens fear it. Many of the reform proposals are rational but require political will and trade-offs. Often the proponents of reform do not know how to market their wares. In the end, there is simply no movement behind the reform agenda. The 2015 Report of the Commission on Global Security, Justice, & Governance called for “a transitional strategy that includes building coalitions to initiate and nurture reforms...to martial, monitor and sustain support for the reform agenda”. What can Canada and Canadians do to move the reform agenda along? The short answer is that the Department of Global Affairs must join its forces with those of civil society to initiate the creation of a UN reform movement. To start with, we must recognize our strengths and weaknesses. Canada had an excellent reputation in the past as an international leader and world citizen. The Department of Foreign (now Global) Affairs was good at both informed leadership and cooperation. Canada had a myriad of skillful UN specialists and NGOs, as was demonstrated by the 2013-14-15 publications of the World Federalists entitled the United Nations and Canada: What Canada has done and should be doing at the United Nations. These booklets demonstrated that Canada still has lots of expertise and ideas about transforming the UN.

However, after 10 years under Harper, the Department of Global Affairs lost much of its savoir faire. And Canadian think tanks like the North-South Institute, the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development and the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre all disappeared. Rejuvenation calls for more than ad hoc, seat-of-the-pants policy development.

For instance, the Department could set up a ‘Research Centre on the Future of Global Institutions’. It could bring in civil society representatives and UN experts to sit on the Centre’s Board of Governors, to advise on research direction and outreach to other countries. there could be joint research projects, conferences and communication with the public.

Canada must become again a world centre of knowledge and expertise on future directions for global institutions.

John Trent is chairperson of WFM – Canada’s board of directors.