

Building a world community



## Practical Ideas for UN Reform by John Trent

*On May 10, 2018 Canadian federalists John Trent and Laura Schnurr introduced their book, "A United Nations Renaissance: What the UN Is and What it Could Be" at an event hosted by the United Nations Bookstore. The following are excerpts from Prof. Trent's remarks.*

Let me propose three actions that are necessary for UN reform. First, we must tell the world what the UN does for them. Second, we need ideas of how to make the UN "built for purpose" and able to implement decisions on major global issues. Third, we must mobilize the political will to bring this transformation to fruition. In this article, I will concentrate on UN reform

An effective UN is humanity's best hope. But the viability of the United Nations is in question. Hobbled by retrograde post-World War II era sovereignty norms and inter-state relations, the UN is increasingly out of sync with the globalized world.

Now is the time for UN renewal. The following outlines some of the more necessary and workable transformations.

### **Changes in financing**

Member countries should pay their fair portion of fees. The UN should never have become so dependent on US contributions, which currently constitute 22 per cent of the budget.

This could be reduced to 10 or 15 per cent. As well, the complex system of fees and voluntary contributions could be replaced by a small, affordable, and equal national assessment based on a percentage (e.g. 0.1 percent) of each country's gross national income (GNI), as Joseph Schwartzberg suggests in his book *Transforming the United Nations System*.

Based on 2010 figures, this would amount to 58.65 billion dollars, or twice the spending of the entire UN system. There are also proposals for pursuing additional financial resources, including levies on air and sea travel, and transnational movements of currencies. These could be implemented by groups of states without waiting for general agreement. Many governments, however, are unwilling to endorse proposals

that would give the UN greater independence. And that is why diversifying funding should be the first objective of the mobilization towards reform.

### **The Responsibility to Protect**

The effective application of the Responsibility to Protect is an important step toward controlling abuses of sovereignty. The “International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty” proposed six principles to be considered before military intervention to protect civilians: a just cause threshold, right intention, last resort, proportional means, reasonable prospects, and right authority. In addition, the Commission also proposed operational principles, including clear objectives, unity of command, force limitations, international law, and coordination with humanitarian organizations. Disastrously, these proposed principles have only occasionally been observed. It is time they were resuscitated.

### **Security Council**

Many experts conclude that the UN Security Council can regain legitimacy and effectiveness through being more representative and placing limitations on the veto. An expansion in membership (around 22 is often proposed) would reflect the large increase in overall UN membership. Working methods of the Council could also be improved.

### **Decision-making**

Decision-making within the UN could be re-aligned to reflect the real power of member states. For instance, the General Assembly has been skewed to favour relatively minor states. 40 members have less than a million inhabitants and 128 states collectively pay less than 1.3 per cent of the total UN budget (2010 figures). Weighted voting, that takes into account differences in power, population, and economic contribution would benefit all organs of the UN. The democratic principle would make population the determining factor. Economic capacity would be represented by contributions to the UN budget. To heed the sovereign equality principle, each state would be treated equally.

In the case of the Security Council, a weighted vote could be based on representation of 12 world regions rather than individual states. Each region would nominate a slate of candidates from which one would be elected by the General Assembly. A new Economic, Social and Environmental Council with adequate capacity could fulfill the original intention of ECOSOC as a coordinating body for the economic and social work of the UN system.

### **UNEPS**

The UN requires its own autonomous emergency services so it can intervene in conflicts in a more timely manner. The United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) proposal would provide a standing, professional, highly trained peace service of soldiers, police, and civil servants ready for quick deployment (Peter Langille 2015).

Other transformations are required for a full-fledged renaissance of the UN. There is a need to strengthen the Human Rights Council and generally improved staffing and

management across the UN system. The central question is how do we mobilize the political will to enable the UN to answer its critics?

In my work, and in the report of the Commission on Global Security, Justice and Governance, there are detailed proposals of how to prepare the path for UN renewal. Activists must create a movement to gain the public support needed to oblige politicians to respond. Public opinion and political pressure can and do lead to political action.

Already, the UN2020 Initiative is working to make the 2020 75th anniversary of the United Nations an opportunity not only for commemoration, but also for stocktaking, renewal and reform. It is calling for a General Assembly-led preparatory process leading to intergovernmental negotiations and a Leaders Summit in 2020.