



UN at 75: Slow Death or a New Direction

By Lord Mark Malloch-Brown

"You cannot change the wind; but you can bend the sail"

- a favourite African proverb of Kofi Annan

Headwinds

Let me begin with an appeal to our venerable friend, the UN: get down on the ground with the grandchildren. Just having celebrated its 75th birthday, we can hear your knees creak! The UN, for as long as I have known it up close- since its thirties- has often seemed prematurely old.

Today a Youth Challenge is being mounted to the way we live, organise and govern ourselves that is much bigger than the UN alone. The social restrictions of COVID may disguise the scale of the gathering social protest but COVID has also accelerated it. I would wager that my generation will have the keys seized from us. A digital revolution on the one hand and rising social and economic inequality on the other will unseat a ruling Establishment that has failed to navigate these tides. The UN has to be part of that future or pushed aside by it.

For the UN a second older vector blows with equal force. The UN has been in the grip of a transition from its founding Anglo-Saxon and Western DNA to a more globally distributed state influence almost from its beginnings. From 48 founding members 1945 to 193 today the expansion reflects the big twentieth century shifts- decolonisation, the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the pursuit of self-determination by those overlooked by history's cartographers. And adaptation to new members and their aspirations has been vital to the UN's legitimacy and universality. Most notably it has allowed it to build a staff that for the most part is a proud mirror of the world it serves.

There is a price, however, for this changing agenda: The UN Charter, imbued with the wisdom and sacrifice of the survivors of a World War, is one of the world's most eloquent and uplifting constitutional documents. It is also thoroughly Western, borrowing from America's founding fathers and assuming a world order managed by the Allied victors of 1945. This is reflected in a western rights-based agenda that to this day has stressed Human Rights, in terms of individual civil and political rights, refugee protection, gender and reproductive health over collective economic rights.

There was an early opposition to western dominance notably in the General Assembly centred on the championing of the New International Economic order. Through the Non-Aligned movement and the G77, new member states sought to correct the historical and structural imbalances in the global political economy.

At the time despite the passion brought to the debate by its champions it seemed likely to remain a permanent backbench cause.

Now, however, it is not a simple division of East and West or North and South. Many of us have added collective social and economic rights to our own agendas – climate change, structural inequality and exclusion, injustices in the global economic system. A western human rights NGO or a former High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson is as likely to be heard championing Climate Justice as the cause of political prisoners.

China with President Xi's remarkable pledge at September's General Assembly to reach carbon neutrality by 2060 has put himself in a leadership role on the latter. But this is the same regime that has employed mass incarceration and extensive discrimination to suppress the political rights of its 12 million Uighur minority. The Economist editorialised earlier this month on the desperate plight of the Uighurs observing:

“China's ruling party has no truck with this concept of individual rights. It claims legitimacy from its record of providing stability and economic growth to the many”.

China has flexed its muscles in the UN, where it is now at 12% the second largest contributor to the assessed budget; strengthening its representation across the secretariat, agencies, funds and programs. It has become a more active voice in critical policy debates from regulation of the internet to peacekeeping.

And in the wider world, a more authoritarian model of government is the new majority. It embraces leaders who come to power by the ballot box and those who didn't but who all share a preference for a nationalist foreign policy, weakening of domestic institutions and the rule of law including the political rights of its citizens, and a casual disregard for minority and in some cases majority rights.

That's the world today. For now at least they are the new majority in global share of population terms. Between them China, India, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, Hungary and the United States represent a demographic majority. And many others are borrowing from their playbook.

The widespread rejection of middle-class liberalism reflects very real shifts in global public opinion that are likely to dissolve any time soon. The uneven impact of economic change, now accelerated by COVID, has produced across much of the world's politics similar divisions of city versus town and country; young versus old; university educated versus high school or less, those employed in new services sectors versus those in failing industrial sectors. From Trump to Brexit or Bolsonaro to Modi we have seen the rise of economic security, cultural identity and anti-immigration as the flagship issues of a new populist politics that reaches those who feel they are being left behind by unsettling change.

Freedom House in its 2020 Democracy report notes that last year was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Sixty-four countries experienced deterioration in their political rights from the pressure in India on Muslims to a steady less noticed restrictions of freedoms elsewhere. Its lead author observed: “The unchecked brutality of autocratic regimes and the ethical decay of democratic powers are combining to make the world increasingly hostile to fresh demands for better governance”.

The closing space for open inclusive debate does not stop at the borders of these countries rather it seeps into the UN itself. This month's elections for membership of the UN Human Rights council gave seats to China, Cuba and Russia although Saudi Arabia another candidate fell short. Each has served before but it marks the steady capture of this institution by those opposed to that founding western individual rights based agenda.

Inevitably perhaps as a consequence this is an age of UN caution. My colleague at the International Crisis Group, Richard Gowan, asked in a recent paper: “What is the purpose of the Security Council in an era of worsening great power tensions? Division among its five permanent members (or P5) have repeatedly undermined the United Nations in recent years”

In a way it was ever thus. I remember in my first UN year, 1976, an older generation – indeed in a few cases the original generation, the self-named last of the Mohicans founded by those who has joined the UN Secretariat before 15 August 1946, when the original secretariat camped out in temporary space on Lake Mohawk, complaining in not dissimilar terms. The place already seemed stiff, cautiously bureaucratic and a bit rundown.

Then as now the UN has sought to make up for that black hole at the centre of its political authority then because of Cold War stand off by swarming the humanitarian and development space with compensating activity.

It was in the 1960s to 80s that its direct operational capacities to address the refugee flows of the Cold War and Post-Colonialization grew rapidly. For UNHCR it saw the transition from a small staff of lawyers to a large staff of logisticians; it was the years of early growth for this year's Nobel Prize Winner WFP which was spun out of FAO in 1961. It was when the technical assistance activities of the specialised Agencies marshalled by UNDP were a critical prop to newly independent governments.

In 1980 the then UN Secretary-General visited a huge UNHCR supported refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border where I was the Field officer in charge. He turned to me in bewilderment as we toured the huge encampment with its heavy UN and NGO presence and asked how this huge UN operation could have been set up without him knowing almost anything about it.

I tell this story to illustrate a simple truth. The political and security UN in New York was gridlocked but there was ample space for activism and innovation as long as you stayed well away from that graveyard, the Security Council. Operations like mine were run in the Field and from Geneva, based on a mandate derived from international law not the permission of the Security Council.

A few remarkable hold outs such as Sir Brian Urquhart ingeniously shoehorned the UN into political and peacekeeping roles in the Middle East despite Big Power dead lock but this was the exception.

As I crisscrossed the world for UNHCR from refugee hotspots in South East Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Central America and the Horn of Africa I saw that an extraordinarily committed and creative group of UNHCR leaders had managed to prise apart the Cold War gridlock and make sufficient space for an imaginative operational activism that saved countless lives and relieved huge suffering. The politics of getting into these situations was never easy; the compromises often disappointing; and the motives of major interested powers and donors only rarely altruistic but the space was carved out and generally held.

When I arrived at UNDP as Administrator I found a similar legacy of programs established by my independent-minded American predecessors against the prevailing political grain of the time – the first UN assistance program in “Red China”; PAPP a program begun in 1980 to support the Palestinians ; or an office in North Korea whose establishment was still being contested by the US State Department years later when I was Administrator.

And indeed the UN of today has similarly found space – notably around the sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) which play to the UN's convening and standard-setting roles; Climate change where three Secretary-Generals in turn have driven this as a priority; and a tragically expanded humanitarian function as grim conflicts in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere stubbornly run on.

A UN, having to find space where it won't be bullied by its stronger members and ignored at key moments by many others, is not new. In fact, it's been the condition to which it has been condemned for most of its 75 years on earth. There was a brief glorious period of conception and birth from the San Francisco conference in 1945 to Churchill's Iron Curtain speech delivered in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946 when he warned of the coming conflict between the US and the Soviet Union.

Kofi Annan's Secretary-Generalship was a second honeymoon for the UN, coming six years after the fall of the Berlin Wall it was a moment of hope and alignment between the major powers of which he took ample advantage.

He saw a moment of opportunity that was largely denied to those who came before and after him to get the UN's way on political, security and human rights matters. Yet in the aftermath of a Security Council broken on the anvil of the US-UK invasion of Iraq a gale turned on him, too. So, for at most

10%, of the UN's 75 years, has the wind blown strongly in the right direction. For the rest success has come despite- not because of- member state unanimity.

Bending the Sail

I want to suggest a manifesto for a re-purposed UN that is both true to its Charter; but recognises the direction the winds are blowing; does not cling to the mast of a failing western liberalism alone; but understands and responds to the dynamics that have left that liberalism, and it seems multilateralism, on the rocks. This is a comeback strategy for the world as it is; in order to allow us later to make the world as we want it to be.

It is no surprise that I don't imagine the vehicle for it being our grandparents' UN.

The world needs to believe the UN matters. That it is relevant. The UN still enjoys high levels of support in Pew and other surveys. Yet that support seems heavily aspirational – around what it ought to do; not what it does. Support falls when pollsters ask about its specific performance. Churchill would see this, in a term he used in Fulton, as “Foundations built on sand”.

Without a more passionate public embrace it is hard to overcome the inter-state fault lines. Annan was possibly unique among Secretary-Generals in being able to appeal directly to people, citing the opening word of the Charter in justification: “We, the Peoples of the United Nations.....” Those before and since have been largely captives of Governments and their disagreements.

I often wish the UN's supporters would accept a more pragmatic UN rather than the aspirational Save the World one that lights up the top line poll findings. It will always disappoint such hopes. It is of the World not above it. Dag Hammarskjöld's words still capture it best: “The UN wasn't created to take mankind into paradise, but rather, to save humanity from hell.”

For its 75th, as you will hear shortly from Natalie, the UN undertook a survey of a million respondents supplemented by independent polling by Pew and Edelman Intelligence as well the latter's analysis of social and traditional media coverage in 70 countries. What comes through clearly is that across very different national economies and circumstances there is a demand for the better delivery of basic services, notably at the moment health; protection of the environment and containing climate change; honest accountable government that delivers and protects its citizens. This is already the UN's agenda.

The UN is not going to replace government as an agent of service delivery. It does not command the resources or the authority. But the UN must deploy its convening, campaigning and normative roles to double down on its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. COVID has attacked that agenda as Bill and Melinda Gates have said setting back 25 years of progress in 25 weeks; driving 115 million people back into extreme poverty this year and raising fears for economic security in almost every family elsewhere.

The current Secretary-General Antonio Guterres dedicated most of his early period in office in trying to pick off some early wins in conflict resolution – including Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Cyprus. His efforts were not blessed with any major breakthroughs. He then embraced the SDGs and Climate. He was photographed for Time with his trousers rolled up standing in shallow water up on a beach in Fiji to illustrate a consequence of climate change – rising ocean levels. It illustrates his pivot from conflict to climate. Probably his most noticed speech as Secretary-General was his powerful Mandela lecture delivered in July. He called for “A New Social Contract for a New Era” and spoke eloquently of how:

“The Pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of our world. It has laid bare risks we have ignored for decades: inadequate health systems; gaps in social protection; structural inequalities; environmental degradation; the climate crisis”.

He went on “Inequality defines our time. More than 70% of the World’s people are living with rising...inequality”.

Secretary-Generals have been elected to be the world’s chief diplomat; today, successful ones quickly learn they have to be the world’s chief campaigner. The UN has a unique platform to measure a country’s progress, league table it, and name and shame those whose social and economic indicators fall behind. This began with the legendary Jim Grant at UNICEF; moved through the UNDP Human Development agenda to being picked up by Kofi Annan and those of us around him in how we established and campaigned for the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs.

Like any Campaign start by understanding your base constituency, “We, the Peoples”. The Bennett Institute at Cambridge University has just released a study of the state of global democracy that draws on more than 3,500 country surveys. It finds support for democracy is at a low ebb; since the data series was established in 1995 a 10% swing across all countries in the set (developed and developing) has produced a clear majority who are dissatisfied with democracy. The deficit was worst in almost all regions among 18-34 year olds, the millennials. Dr Robert Foa, the study leader said: “This is the first generation in living memory to have a global majority who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works while in their twenties and thirties”.

But what the report is anxious to stress is there is little evidence that it is a rejection of the theory of democracy rather it demonstrates disappointment with its results. And indeed, where governments do deliver results, notably in some Asian countries, the researchers found that the disenchantment is much less.

This is not a protest against democracy so much as against poorly performing incumbents. That was democrats but now it will be populists with even fewer answers to the structural insecurity that is blowing up politics. People don’t feel protected; particularly in the developed world (there is more optimism remaining in developing countries); too often don’t see a better future rather they see wave after wave of threatening change driven not just by pandemics but technology, trade, environmental degradation and consequent steepening inequality. Youth protests in Nigeria have caught our attention in recent days. Perhaps one Nigerian statistic speaks volumes: 35% youth unemployment. COVID has reinforced economic exclusion.

The protests of a generation cannot be brushed under the COVID carpet much longer. The world is an unhappy place; and made more so by COVID- at the core is a growing crisis of youth structural unemployment and exclusion and the skewed inter-generational distribution of wealth and government benefits. There is worse to come. To pluck just one random headline from the week’s news: McKinsey released a survey of more than 2000 SMEs in Europe. More than half don’t expect to be in business this time next year. SMEs have been estimated by ILO to account for up to 70% of global employment.

Here is the UN’s great cause. Throw caution to the winds and lay out Guterres’ new social contract for the world to see. Deploy campaigning and convening to build a new global bargain. And put governments on the spot by indexing and spotlighting performance to expose which are delivering and which aren’t.

For the MDGs I set up UN project offices outside the normal UN intergovernmental constraints to measure and create league tables and score cards of national performance that allowed citizens to hold their government to account; then under Jeff Sachs to cost out what it would take to achieve the goals; and finally a team to liaise and communicate with civil society activists that was more jeans and tee shirts than the typical UN Brooks Brothers uniform.

Build on that precedent. Push bravely on the door. If I have a mild complaint about the SDGs it is that they have lost something of the edgy outsider status of the early MDGs. The UN is too much the incumbent and not enough the insurgent and it shows in the difficulty the current UN has in breaking through in communications terms.

On such a Campaign's coattails remake the argument for multilateralism. Argue too many of these problems cannot be fixed at the country level alone. Local results on say climate require global collaboration and action. Once the UN is reconnected to grassroots concerns it is not a hard argument to make.

If a campaign that mobilises younger citizens around this global economic and personal security agenda is to have legs it must find allies where it can and not be constrained by the foot dragging back end of the General Assembly. When the UN has touched the stars, the lift has come from civil society not government. Civil society was active in San Francisco in 1945 pushing the level of ambition of the official conference as it was later when Eleanor Roosevelt led the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today around each SDG clusters a network of champions. In many, corporates show greater ambition than governments; in all, the most innovative thinking comes from the many corners of the civil society mosaic - local and international NGO's, mayors and their cities, governors and CEOs; activists and academics that harness the energy. The UN Foundation which I co-chair interfaces with many of these groups. Their commitment is bracing.

Building variegated coalition of states and non-state actors willing to be first movers on different parts of this agenda is a not a new path to action in the UN. Now it needs to be turbo-charged. The world won't wait for the most plodding and resistant nations to sign up to action.

This same variegated approach needs to be applied to the more difficult area of human rights. The official intergovernmental body, the Human Rights Council is not fit for purpose but as one of the authors of the reform that raised it from Commission to Council, I doubt there is an institutional fix. The UN in the person of the High Commissioner for Human Rights needs to choose her ground and pick her fights – determine a mix of individual and collective Rights on which she wishes to particularly stand and marshal the UN's allies, a variegated coalition if ever there was one of states and NGOs, to champion Rights for which it can build support.

And where the High Commissioner cannot- and the Council won't- raise its voice her office must still let its reporting speak for itself. Abuses of Rights must be universally reported and documented and allies in civil society and government partners must raise their voices instead. The UN needs to be part of a Rights ecosystem where different partners can each step up where their comparative advantage lies. The current High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet has the stature to thread this difficult needle.

UN Resident Co-ordinators that I have spoken to in recent months, and indeed the UN's 75th research, suggests closing space around debating or criticising the performance of government service delivery, corruption and accountability. RC's and the UN system must be critical protectors and promoters of local civil society voices. This may seem a more unsung aspect of human rights work but it is a vital front in the UN's wider comeback. Too many Governments see the current political climate as a license to step on their home critics. The UN needs to step in and protect its civil society partners. A Global Social Contract will be stillborn without them.

And the final step to restored effectiveness is of course in time to recover authority in the political and security space.

If there is a silver lining it is that the character of conflict continues to change opening grim new opportunity. Not only is peacekeeping less than ever the thin blue line between states it is not even in many cases policing full blown internal conflicts in a Democratic Republic of the Congo or Syria as in the past.

The more likely future of conflict, at least where the UN will have a role, is low level but persistent political violence around exclusion, suppression of minority rights and inter-generational conflict in a context of deteriorating state institutions such as policing, justice and social service delivery.

The way into these situations that may not be via the Security Council but rather via Humanitarian, Development and the Human Rights arms of the system. These will be Development and Rights breakdowns where the UN is already present. The UN will not have to wait for the permission of the Security Council it is there already. The World Bank has estimated that by 2030 two thirds of the world extreme poor could be living in areas of conflict and violence.

What I have laid out today is not a manifesto to change the world overnight. Rather it is a call for the UN to seize the moment and take advantage of the opportunities it has at this moment of global crisis to recover relevance and to drive a new global consensus on tackling our collective weaknesses that COVID has so cruelly exposed. There is a majority out there for a better governed and prepared, more caring and inclusive world but that same majority has grown terminally impatient with existing institutions. The UN can be part of that failed past or attach itself to an emerging future.

Let the Campaign begin.