

The real spirit of the United Nations

Peter Sullivan

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Mary Robinson, more than most people, has reflected on the state of the United Nations. The august body, set up in the aftermath of World War II, is now in its fifty-first year of existence. Despite its resources and budget, it is widely accepted that it is in a state of crisis, if not in terminal decline.

Last year, on the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation, Robinson listed some of the main problems being faced by the UN. She noted the worsening problem of weapons proliferation; the increasing division of the world's population into the very wealthy and the very poor; and the continued destruction of the environment. On all of these problems, Robinson accepted, the situation was deteriorating. Despite major initiatives organised by the UN – the Rio Conference on the Environment (1992) and the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993) – little impact has been made.

Mary Robinson may well become the next head of the UN. She is favoured by the current kingmaker – the United States – as well as having other fashionable attributes: she is a woman, she is Irish and she is well grounded in law and the politics of human rights. As the UN becomes more and more irrelevant in practice, such a public face for the institution is being seen as timely and important. She is a new face with a passion for the job – what more could a moribund organisation need?

THE BIG FIVE

The UN's *raison d'être* has always been to prevent wars and mass destruction. But from the very outset this purpose was qualified by the constitution and structures that it adopted. The United States, the former Soviet Union, France, Britain and China were each given a veto over its operations – thereby legitimising any spheres of influence enjoyed by these countries. As a result, certain wars could occur quite legitimately (and did), while others became the subject of UN intervention. The UN's fifty-one years of existence is littered with examples of this type of hypocrisy.

For instance, the UN intervened in the Biafra war in Nigeria in the mid- sixties but did nothing when Indonesia annexed East Timor in 1975 (Indonesia being within the US sphere of interest). Other examples to name but a few include: China's annexation of Tibet; the US bombing of neutral Cambodia and Laos during the Vietnam war; and the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Despite massive slaughter in many of these wars, no action was ever taken by the UN. So much for the prevention of war and destruction.

The UN has always been organised from the top down. The five veto countries hold the central reins of power. Then comes the General Council, and the Security Council. But the UN's top-down attitude is also obvious in its day-to-day operations. The UN tends to channel its efforts along traditional lines and to use official channels. This has often been counter-productive and in some cases scandalous.

During the Rwandan crisis in 1994, it was noted that much of the UN aid was channelled through former Rwandan government officials who controlled the refugee camps in Zaire. Many of these camp leaders were implicated in the campaigns of genocide that had been waged in Rwanda during the civil war. A consequence of this UN performance was that it strengthened the power of many of these corrupt individuals.

CAMBODIA

Another and perhaps better known example, was the UN's involvement in the campaign for democracy in Cambodia in 1993. Here the UN was widely criticised for rehabilitating the forces of the Khmer Rouge, even going so far as to provide them with funds for the election.

In this case, the underlying agenda was to shore up any opposition against the influence of the Vietnamese government in the region (a particular policy of both the US and Chinese governments).

Mary Robinson, along with many others, hearkens back to a golden age in the UN's history – a period commonly accepted to be the immediate aftermath of W.W.II. This was the era of the UN's Human Rights Charter (1948), and also the era in which the memory of war and mass destruction was still present in the minds of many people.

According to Robinson, the UN had a sense of purpose then, as well as having had a mandate to act. She often asks what has happened to this sense of purpose and idealism? Why have things got worse?

Good questions. But if we're to go by Robinson's analysis, then some basic human frailties have been at play during the last fifty-one years: there has been a lack of tolerance in the world, a lack of participation, and there has even been poor communications. People have not been listening to one another, she says.

Her own solutions for the future, and about how we can save the planet, revolve around such novel ideas as sharing, being inclusive, and accepting difference. In other words there's no mention of capitalism, or the profit motive. The main problems that we face can be put down to 'human nature' – how convenient.

As anarchists we are opposed to the violence and brutality of war. But unlike Mary Robinson we are not naive about how we can abolish it. Nor can we afford to be naive about the future role of the UN. War springs from concentration of power in society, and from authoritarianism.

The hierarchy of present day society suits those who have gained from inequality in the past and who want to perpetuate it in the future – the privileged and the rich. To ever make any serious indentation against the broader problem of war in this world, we must make inroads against the huge divisions in our own societies right now – class divisions that are centred on exploitation.

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