

A Political Platform for Potential World Leaders – A Review Essay **

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The point of departure of the Commission on Global Governance, chaired by Ingvar Carlsson, currently Prime Minister of Sweden and Shridath Ramphal, who served from 1975 to 1990 as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth is clear: “The international system that the UN Charter put in the place needs to be renewed. The flaws and inadequacies of existing institutions have to be overcome. There is a need to weave a tighter fabric of international norms, expanding the rule of law world wide and enabling citizens to exert their democratic influence on global processes.”

In order to expand the rule of law and democratic institutions to the world level, strong leadership is required. A neighbourhood without leadership is a neighbourhood in danger. Yet the avenues for leadership in setting the world agenda of issues are difficult to trace.

Leadership at the national level is usually clearly structured in a pyramid with the office of the Prime Minister or President at the top, with Cabinet Minister, the higher ranks of the military just below etc. There may be a vast informal network of influential advisors, business leaders, the press – all with leadership roles but the formal structure of governance is hierarchical and clearly defined. People generally expect the Prime Minister or the President to lead. In fact, he is judged on whether or not he provides such leadership.

At the world level, there is no world government, and a strong national leader may play little role on the world level. There are few dictators with a following outside his own country unless he has money to buy the support of small groups. Although the President of a powerful but democratic country such as the United States has ways to impose his views on other national leaders, this power is not the same thing as leadership based on the mobilisation of will and consent. As the Report points out, “At the moment, political caution, national concerns, short-term problems, and a certain fatigue with international causes have combined to produce a dearth of leadership on major international issues. The very magnitude of global problems such as poverty, population, or consumerism seems to have daunted potential international leaders. And yet without courageous, long-term leadership at every level- international and national- it is impossible to create and sustain constituencies powerful and reliable enough to make an impact on problems that will determine, one way or another, the future of the human race on this planet.”

The Secretary-General of the United Nations can on a few issues help set the “world agenda”- those issues, which require attention of all the governments and as much of the non-governmental forces that the UN can reach. Such “agenda setting” is currently going on with large UN-organised conferences on environment, populations, social development, women, and cities. But such

meetings are usually held only every twenty years. Some have had little follow up, such as the earlier conferences on land reform or food.

There is a need for constant leadership and direction, a need to maintain and rebuild enthusiasm, to reset the course when policies do not work out as expected. To keep up a momentum and an enthusiasm, the leaders within the UN system must be able to reach beyond the governments- at times over the heads of current governmental office holders – to the people of the world. As the Report notes, “To be an effective instrument of global governance in the modern world, the United Nations must also take the greater account of the emergence of global civil society. The crucial role that the new actors play in the management of global affairs requires a reassessment of the relationship between the UN and its family of organisations and the growing world-wide array of organised non-state activity.”

World leadership requires tapping into the growing strength of the world’s “organised non-state activity” to stress positive mutual interests and the ways to place such interests at the center of the world agenda. The Report goes on to stress, “The desire of people to be involved in the management of their affairs, the need to be active in areas where government is unable or unwilling to act, and the development of new communication technologies that convey information broadly and help people interact across national borders are encouraging what some have called a global associational revolution. This is fuelled by the realisation that so many of the issues requiring attention are global in scope.”

The Secretary-General of the UN has been able to play some role as leader in setting the world security agenda. As the servant of the UN Security Council, the Secretary-General has been able to play a mobilising role in times of conflict and political crisis in those moments when the Security Council has been united behind a decision. Since the chairman of the Security Council is a national diplomat and serves on a rotating basis only for a month, he cannot play a real mobilising role nor is he perceived as a world leader. At one time, it was hoped that the President of the UN General Assembly, who is in post for a year, could play a leadership role, but such hopes have not been realised in practice. It would be difficult to find many people who could name the last five presidents of the General Assembly or to cite much of what they have done other than presiding over meetings. However the role of President of the General Assembly has some potential and could be developed.

It is in the social and economic area that world leadership is the weakest. Most UN Secretary-Generals have not wished to be “overshadowed” by the strong and personal leadership of an Under-Secretary in charge of economic and social questions. Only the President of the World Bank – and to a lesser extent the head of the International Monetary Fund- has a post, which allows him to speak forcefully on world issues – and who has some money to back up his views. Only Robert McNamara has been such a World Bank President and his authority and image was undermined by his role as US Secretary of Defense during much of the war in Vietnam.

The Report suggests the creation of an Economic Security Council as a distinct body within the UN family, structured like the Security Council, though not with identical membership and independent of it. Its tasks would be to:

- Assess continuously the overall state of the world economy and the interaction between major policy areas;
- Provide a long-term strategic policy framework in order to promote stable, balanced, and sustainable development;
- Secure consistency between the policy goals of the major international organisations, particularly the Bretton Woods bodies and the World Trade Organisation;
- Give political leadership and promote consensus on international economic issues.

It is not clear, however, how such an Economic Security Council would mobilise economic and social consent. Would its leadership be as faceless as that of the chairman of the Security Council?

The chairman of the current UN Economic and Social Council, whose tasks are largely the same as those proposed for the Economic Security Council, are largely unknown outside the halls of the UN—hardly household names in the some 37,000 transnational corporations which set the pace for economic and social practices.

The Report hopes that New World leadership will arise from what, for lack of a more precise term, is called, the people, “Governments can be made to initiate change if people demand it. That has been the story of major change in our time; the liberation of women and the environment movement provide examples. If people are to live in global neighbourhood and live by neighbourhood values, they have to prepare the ground.”

Certainly preparing the ground for such world-level leadership is among the most important tasks we face. However, leadership rarely arises spontaneously. An analysis of the avenue of leadership, world agenda setting, and the mobilisation of consent is a task to be explored in the pages of the *Journal of Peace Studies*.

** *The Commission on Global Governance. Our Global Neighbourhood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 410 pp.)*