

**What Canada has done  
and should be doing  
at the United Nations**

**edited by John E. Trent**

**THE  
UNITED NATIONS  
AND CANADA**

## **Reforming The Un, One Step at a Time**

**Louise Frechette**

Any discussion of the United Nations invariably concludes with a call for its reform. What reform and to what end is never entirely clear, other than the hope of a more effective organization to stop conflicts, uphold human rights and help lift people out of poverty.

Would-be reformers would be well advised to start from the UN as it is today rather than as they imagine it to be. Far from being the sclerotic organization depicted by its critics, the world organization is constantly evolving. The post-cold war period has been particularly fertile in this regard.

Peacekeeping is the prime example of a vastly transformed role for the UN. Missions used to be limited to observing ceasefires. Nowadays they oversee every aspect of a country's life after a conflict, including the protection of civilian populations through military means if necessary. Modern peacekeeping missions employ police officers, election specialists, justice experts and many others. Needless to say, doctrine, rules of engagement, administrative systems, everything had to be overhauled in order for the UN to be able to deploy, sustain and command the almost 100,000 people who currently serve in these multi-faceted peacekeeping missions.

The early 1990s also saw a major expansion of the UN's role in the area of human rights. The creation, in 1993, of the High Commissioner for Human Rights post gave the UN a powerful new voice. The institutional architecture was further enhanced in 2006 with the transformation of the Human Rights Commission into a full-fledged Council with reinforced powers. Significant financial resources have been injected in the system, allowing the High Commissioner to deploy human rights missions in hot spots around the world.

The issue of criminal justice also received a dramatic boost with the formation, in 1993 of the ad hoc tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, soon to be followed by a similar arrangement for Rwanda. The way was thus paved for the establishment of the permanent International Criminal Court in 2002. It is early days yet but the Court could become a powerful tool to hold leaders accountable for their actions.

Despite years of debate, the Security Council's composition remains unchanged but its policies have evolved very significantly over time. It now routinely deals with conflicts taking place within countries. Human rights and humanitarian considerations influence decisions much more than in the past. The Council has innovated in the use of targeted sanctions and set goals and standards on issues such as protection of civilians and child soldiers. It even occasionally travels to conflict zones to receive first hand information.

The humanitarian side of the UN system has also been strengthened thanks to better coordination, stand-by arrangements and a \$450 million revolving fund for immediate responses to humanitarian disasters. UN agencies, funds and programmes involved in development now operate under a single country program, under the leadership of a common country coordinator.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which the UN has evolved and adapted in the last couple of decades. Some of these changes were achieved as a result of comprehensive reform proposals, often initiated by the Secretary General. Others were the results of day-to-day responses to evolving circumstances.

None of this means the UN is serving the world as well as it should. It clearly is not and there is plenty of room for more reform and more innovation. Indeed, it is tempting to argue that the UN should be re-built from the ground up. But people who dream of a new Bretton Woods moment will find little support. Short of a historical cataclysm on the scale of World War II, it is hard to imagine the international community agreeing to such an ambitious overhaul of the international system. More will be achieved by proceeding one step at a time.

A readiness to invest time and energy in promoting and explaining proposed reforms to Member States is essential to achieve success. Browbeating does not work. Good old diplomacy does. Timing is also important. Experience shows that consensus can be found around reform proposals when taking advantage of favourable political conditions.

Finally, we should not expect from institutional reform more than it can deliver. A 'world government' freed from national interests is not in the cards. The UN will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be a tool in the hands of its Member States. And like all tools, it will not do the job if its owners do not want to use it.

*Madame Louise Fréchette is the chair the Board of CARE Canada and is a member of the Board of CARE International. From 1998 to 2006, Madame Fréchette was Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. Prior to this, she pursued a career in the Public Service of Canada, serving notably as Ambassador to Argentina and Uruguay (1985-1988), Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1992-1994), Associate Deputy Minister of Finance (1995) and Deputy Minister of National Defence (1995-1998). Madame Fréchette studied at the University of Montreal and the College of Europe in Bruges, and has been awarded many honorary degrees. She is an Officer of the Order of Canada.*

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