**The Relevance of the United Nations Today**

Address to a meeting of the UNAA in the ACT Legislative Assembly

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Recently I watched the start of a Zoom meeting on ‘saving humanity’. The keynote speaker was an eminent international lawyer whose first substantial words were that the world lacks a strong impediment to violence. He asserted that the UN is irrelevant except for issuing rhetoric from time to time. He, like some others, was blaming the UN because it couldn’t stop the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This judgement was superficial. It is possible that there was too little UN diplomatic vitality when the Russian forces were gathering on the Ukraine border. But we can’t know for sure, because dialogue or preventative diplomacy efforts, if attempted, are often behind closed doors and are rarely reported on in the media. Other factors were influential. Putin’s ambitions to restore the Russian empire are obsessive and are likely to dominate Russian policy until he is replaced. And the US, NATO and Ukraine didn’t demonstrate much willingness to compromise.

It is true that further institutional reform of the UN would be valuable, so let’s think about that for a moment. There have in fact been many reforms of organisational structure, procedures and policies during the UN’s seventy-eight year history. Is there a possibility for further reform now?

1. **Security Council Reform**

Multi-national interest in Security Council reform, for example, is currently growing. The United Nations Charter, which every Member State has accepted, gives the Security Council ‘primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security’. This awesome global task is extraordinarily complex and difficult.

The Charter also gives the Council formidable powers, one of which is to make decisions that are legally binding on all UN Member States. This revolutionary innovation resulted from failures of the League of Nations and the consequent catastrophe of World War II.

This means that when nine SC members agree, and there is no dissent by any of the veto-wielding permanent five members, there are few limits to what the Council can do. **There has been no other body in history with such potential power. When peaceful means have failed, Chapter VII of the Charter gives the Council the capacity to authorise coercive measures including sanctions and the use of force to enforce its decisions**.

The principal difficulty at present is that the five countries which are permanent Security Council members, and which therefore hold a veto, have greater power than the rest. The whole world chose to avoid a world war when Russia flagrantly violated international law by invading Ukraine, just as the rest of the world chose not to violently reprimand the United States, Britain, and Australia when they illegally invaded Iraq in 2003.

There are many impediments to Security Council reform, but some can be overcome. The number of Security Council elected members could be increased, so widening national representation, and the length of elected members terms expanded from two years to three. This would strengthen the democratically elected membership, broaden the debate, and reduce the relative power of the permanent five.

Australia could contribute by discussing and identifying organisational changes which would increase the Council’s effectiveness, and which we could then advocate. This would be an appropriate task while we prepare for Security Council elections for the 2029-30.

1. **The United Nations**

Now a **second theme,** for these remarks relate to the breadth of the UN organization itself. Critics of the UN generally forget the extraordinary range of global services the Organisation delivers. As well as the forums for political debate and decision, and the Secretariat which serves the Security Council and the General Assembly, there are forty or so funds, programs and agencies.

You all must know many, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO and ILO but could you name 40? I taught graduate students about the UN for fifteen years, and in the final year one of them wrote her final essay on one of which I had not been aware – the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. It administers recovery processes and funds for emergency relief. There must have been great calls for its support during the last year.

The world is facing a confluence of climate, debt, energy, and security crises, and in fact the UN is active on all of them. Because the UN hasn’t been able to wave a magic wand over Ukraine and prevent or end the war is not a reason for abandoning common sense let alone hope.

Astonishingly at the beginning of March the UN demonstrated its political and legal value yet again, this time through the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity in areas beyond national borders which has just successfully agreed on a comprehensive treaty.

The principal problems of multilateralism are not with the structure of the UN: they are with the failures of most countries to implement commitments which the Charter requires of Member States, and policies which they have contributed to making.

**Australia**

For example, Australia’s commitment to the UN and implementation of agreed UN policies has been severely eroded by the cuts to DFAT’s share of Commonwealth funding. **The share of Australian Government expenditure on diplomacy has been halved since the Howard Government was elected in 1995-96.**

In 1995-96 diplomacy received minute funding - 0.38 per cent of Commonwealth spending. By last year diplomacy was receiving only 0.21 per cent of total spending. The forward estimates in the last Morrison budget were to reduce the allocation for diplomacy to 0.18 percent in 2025-26. **Australian governments normally neglect the role which diplomats can play in generating dialogue and other forms of preventative diplomacy and constructive approaches to addressing conflict.**

Aid – which is often vital in reducing conflict - was also reduced from 1.7 per cent of total outlays a quarter century ago to 0.6 percent now. **Australian governments have been destructively undermining capacity for generating good neighbourly foreign policy.**

Australian foreign policy has also been securitised. When Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard set up a task force in 2011 to write the White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century*, the Chair, Ken Henry, wrote to DFAT asking for a background paper on the East Asian current and future geopolitics. DFAT replied that that was the task of the Defence Department! Australian foreign affairs had been militarized to the extent that DFAT could no longer produce a major geopolitical analysis.

This decimation of DFAT’s capacity to offer well thought-out policy advice is the result of both slashed funding and Coalition disregard for diplomacy. But Labor didn’t begin to correct the situation under Rudd or Gillard either. Senator Wong however is reported to have said during her address to the whole department that in future she wanted all foreign policy issues to pass through DFAT.

The stagnation of diplomatic spending severely constrains international representation and empathy in understanding other countries. The cuts to aid reduce what Australia can do to relieve poverty, malnutrition, and disease elsewhere or contribute to enabling other countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and improve their productivity, average incomes, and wellbeing. It is vital that Albanese’s promise to increase funding for diplomacy be steadily implemented to facilitate revitalising diplomacy.

1. **Australia and the UN**

This is the background to Australia’s relations with the UN. The effectiveness of the UN depends principally on the willingness of Member States to implement organisational decisions. UN structure and rules sometimes retard action, but Member State failure to implement agreed positions is more commonly the principal problem.

The Secretary-General and the Secretariat have significant scope for proposing strategies and policies to the various decision-making bodies, but Member States have the power to decide what to do and then whether to implement their own agreements.

The actions of every Member State matter. The central question is: how can Member State engagement be strengthened? That depends most centrally on the degree of Member State commitment. Let’s quickly review a few major aspects of Australia’s highly uneven multilateral engagement.

The foundational question is what is the aim of foreign policy? Most Australians would agree that the aim of foreign policy should be to achieve national interests such as peace, physical and economic security, and environmental sustainability. Those goals are expressions of what Minister Wong calls ‘constructive internationalism’. These goals are consistent with those of the UN.

On one membership requirement Australia has an unblemished record: all Commonwealth Governments, as distinct from America and Russia, have always paid their annual dues in full and on time. However, it is not nearly as generous as many other countries which voluntarily contribute substantial funds for work on issues they regard as important.

For example, when I was Director of the Secretariat Division for Social Policy and Development Mexico used to donate several millions of dollars each year for work supporting policies for people with disabilities. Norway is the most widely generous country, not only allocating a total of over one percent of national income to aid but providing substantial support for peacebuilding for example.

According to DFAT, Australia works with multilateral organisations because it brings clear benefits including influence with other countries, going beyond bilateral contacts and advantages of reach and scale in places where Australia does not have sufficient presence. Other advantages include access to the expertise of specialist organisations, better coordinated multi-country programs and the leveraging of technical support and financing for the Australian region.

DFAT also acknowledges the significance of multilateral efforts for global standard setting, the value of the international rules-based order, of encouragement to sustainable development and emergency humanitarian assistance.

However, Australian neglect of diplomacy means that little funding is available for imaginative or creative international peacebuilding, social justice policies, or developmental or other multilateral humanitarian spending.

**In practice the central fact about Australia’s international relations is that foreign engagement has principally focused on bilateralism**. Political rhetoric has supported multilateralism but funding for UN agencies during the last decade has declined. Australia has treated its multilateral relations as principally a self-serving tool for work on a narrow set of its own national interests rather than to being a good international citizen – to quote Gareth Evan’s attractive term.

For example, the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN General Assembly were an amazing diplomatic achievement. They identified 17 goals and 169 targets adopted as guidelines by all UN Member States. They are a valuable guide to countries as they decide which of these goals and targets to prioritise as they prepare a national multiyear plan or an annual budget.

Australian governments have endorsed the SDGs and reported on progress as required, but their degree of commitment is questionable: for while the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet had early responsibility for introducing the SDGs, DFAT was given the task of overseeing implementation, management, evaluating and reporting on progress.

Since the SDGs were adopted, Australian governments have given little attention to ranking priorities for implementation. **Yet the SDGs are goals for all countries, not just the impoverished.** Coalition governments rejected them as guides to domestic policy. Will Labor be better?

Australia has been slow to adopt a strong, comprehensive strategy for counteracting climate change. Before the election we were clearly rightly perceived internationally as recalcitrant in refusing to adopt carbon emission targets. The Albanese Government has acted quickly to establish these and to adopt implementing policies, but the lost decade of inaction leaves huge and difficult requirements for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Australia also has an appalling record of destroying biodiversity. We have driven more mammals into extinction than any other country. The UN does vital work in publicising this and will be a valuable agency assisting Tanya Plibersek in policy development and sustaining motivation for effective action.

In relation to asylum seekers. deterrence, including indefinite detention regimes, has been at the centre of an asylum policy which rests on laws from which reference to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees has been deleted. Intake of refugees through resettlement programs has decreased and the settlement programs for regular arrivals have been cut back.

Australia is one of the few wealthy countries which has failed to adopt a charter of human rights., as all UN Member States are encouraged to do. The UN led the way with the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Australia is in breach of good government because of its failure to set clear and humane human rights and to enact and enforce them in many areas. A clear example is the continuing record of imprisonment of First Nation peoples and the continuing number of First Nation deaths in prison.

If Australia wants to be a good international citizen it must apply the SDGs to itself; continue with the process of toughening climate change policies, apply humanitarian criteria to migration issues and other human rights.

1. **Revitalisation of the UN**

If Australia is serious, we will also participate actively in multilateral revitalisation. There are immeasurable needs. Pandemics, historically high refugee and displacement numbers, resurging conflict tensions, widening wealth disparities, climate change, loss of biodiversity, degraded oceans and an increasingly poorly regulated and threatening cyberspace are amongst those needing attention.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has made it the mission of his second term to spearhead efforts to revitalise multilateral cooperation under the UN umbrella. What is needed, he has said, is ‘multilateralism with teeth.

During the 75th anniversary of the UN on 28 September 2020 the Member States unanimously agreed in the General Assembly to ask Guterres to develop recommendations to advance UN strategy and respond to current and future challenges. He undertook widespread consultations which resulted in sweeping proposals in an uncharacteristically hard-hitting report entitled *Our Common Agenda.* Thisreflects a significant body of international thinking framed in uncharacteristically direct language and was adopted by consensus in the UN General Assembly, in November 2021.

The *Agenda* persuasively argues that:

States have at their disposal an organisation whose very purpose is to solve international problems through cooperation. The United Nations presence is global, its membership is universal, and its activities span the breadth of human need. Its fundamental values are … found in every culture and religion around the world: peace, justice, human dignity, equity, tolerance and of course, solidarity (p18).

These values alone inspire a serious examination of the policies proposed. The outstanding report rests on a recognition of the absolute criticality, now, of improving the way countries cooperate to manage the world’s common resources (oceans, land masses and space) and public goods like global health and peaceful security to safeguard the planet and its resources for future generations. *Our Common Agenda* aims to spur a renewed multilateral system built on a ‘UN 2.0’ able to offer ‘system-wide solutions to 21st century challenges’.

It is vital that the Australian Government systematically review how to implement the Global Agenda strategy and share in that implementation. Much that Minister Wong aims to do as described in her splendid national statement at the start of the General Assembly session in September fits well with the global *Common Agenda*. However, adoption of AUCUS cuts across parts of the multilateral *Agenda.*

**AUKUS**

The Common *Agenda* is quite direct about national steps to achieving peace sustainably. It requires working ‘with Member States to update our vision for disarmament to guarantee human, national, and collective security’. This includes ratifying the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), effective control of conventional weapons, and regulation of new technological weapons. Prime Minister Albanese said several times before the election that a government he led would ratify the nuclear treaty. Making that ratification would reassure UN Member States and clarify does not plan to use nuclear powered submarines to carry nuclear weapons.

The *Common Agenda* also requires contributing to UN peacekeeping. Yet the most recent figures show that Australia was contributing only 27 personnel to peacekeeping, which placed us 85th on the table of listing national participation. Fulfilling this obligation would demonstrate support for multilateral peacekeeping.

Without such initiatives the fine Albanese Government risks being classified as a distorting and divisive country because of adopting hastily and uncritically a tactic which is based on existential threats to Australian, regional, and even global survival.

AUKUS is misguided and dangerous for too many reasons to be adequately discussed tonight, but just to mention a few illustrates the depth of reasons for review. One of the most serious is that AUKUS dramatically intensifies the arms race in East Asia; and intensifying arms races increases the risk of violent conflict.

The assumption underlying AUKUS, that Chinese assertiveness will automatically lead to military aggression is shallow. Many of the most professionally accomplished of Chinese scholars reject this simplification. It depends in part on whether a serious attempt will be made to restrain a regional arms race. The media narrative is shaped with established security actors, not experts on China in the region.

A central question for Australia should be what military strategy should we adopt? Many wise military planners support national protection rather than forward assertiveness. There is no doubt at all that purchase of the submarines as announced two weeks ago will put Australian defence under American control. Many people who seek peace regard this abandonment of sovereignty as misguided because it increases the risks of being drawn into an unwanted war.

Many critics question whether the fiscal consequences of the proposed package through the innumerable cuts and constraints to human services could possibly be justified. Is Australian wellbeing improved more by owning nuclear powered submarines or by housing the homeless and contributing to peaceful development of the Australian population and of other countries in the region. .

In any case it is absurd to make plans for thirty years ahead. Will the technology of Virginian subs still be credible by the fifties? Technology for locating nuclear submarines will certainly have dramatically improved by then. These questions are only a selection of those which are important. AUKUS requires rigorous review.

The wellbeing of all Australians will be permanently strengthened if we recognise that our national interests must focus on peace, justice, economic and strategic security, and committed cooperation with the countries in our region and with the global community through the United Nations.

Australia would participate in UN renewal by adopting and implementing the new global strategy *Our Common Agenda.* We could also contribute by engaging with the preparation of the *Agenda for Peace* which is currently underway.

This would suggest many ways in which Australia could strengthen its contribution to addressing major global issues such as preventing nuclear war, controlling climate change, reducing disease, and increasing equitable human and environmental wellbeing in all their dimensions.

Yet ‘’… diplomacy and mediation at the UN are chronically under- funded, with 20 per cent of the UN’s Department of Political Affairs budget, including all of its Mediation Support Unit’s funds, acquired through voluntary contributions.” (Bellamy) That is one reason why DFAT’s funding must be substantially increased, so that as well as strengthening its own peacebuilding capacity it can support peacebuilding at the UN.

This would also allow DFAT to financially support an Australian NGO like the Initiative for Peacebuilding at the University of Melbourne, which mobilises additional intellectual and empathetic peacebuilding capacity to complement and support DFAT. The Initiative does research on conflict and peace processes, engages in seeking conflict transitions, and plans to teach about peace.

War is not inevitable. It is a human creation; wars happen because people want them to happen. So does peace. If we want to flourish, we must seek positive peace. Alex Bellamy writes in his splendid book *World Peace* that “the ideas and social forces that give rise to war now seem to be in the ascendency. Unless they are met with countervailing activism for peace, our future may become more violent than our immediate past.” (p22)

A central question for the Government is therefore will it take seriously its responsibility to share with the other UN Member States in implementing the *Common Agenda?* The Australian government and all of us must continue to work for, and advocate renewal of foreign policy by placing peacebuilding amongst our central goals and processes. How can we nudge Australian culture towards that transformation?

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