INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

The UN is not a world government. It is a club of nations (with a membership now of 166) which can only move as fast as its slowest members. Governments talk about the need for international co-operation, but rarely do actions match words. Few elections have been won by appealing for national self-sacrifice in the interests of helping the rest of humankind. Foreigners don’t get a vote.

UN finances are a good illustration of the difference between rhetoric and reality. The total UN central budget is less than that of the New York City fire brigade. But about 20% of the UN’s members have been slow in paying their minute subscriptions.

The main offender has been the United States. Since the start of the Reagan Administration (in 1981), Washington has been far more anti-UN than at any time in the past. It has been slow to pay its subscriptions and resigned from UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation).

The USSR used to be the main offender on that score and, at one point, came closer to leaving the UN entirely over the non-payment of subscriptions. Mr Gorbachev reversed that policy and paid all the back debts. The states which used to be the USSR now occupy the moral high ground in being critical of the United States’ record.

Governments have no agreed vision for the UN. At the end of World War I, the victors agreed to experiment with the League of Nations as a way of maintaining international peace and security. The two superpowers of the day, Britain and France, did not make good use of it. Winston Churchill (a belated supporter of the League) later called World War II “the unnecessary war”, since it could have been avoided if the mechanisms of the League had been used fully. The US never joined; the USSR joined in the 1920s and was expelled for its invasion of Finland. Germany, Italy and Japan all joined but later resigned.

In World War II, the US, USSR and UK all agreed on the need to replace the League with a continuation of their own Grand Alliance. It was also agreed that the new organisation should address the underlying causes of war: the need for economic and social co-operation.

The Cold War curtailed the UN’s role in the peaceful settlement of international disputes. The UN became a location where the Cold War was fought rather than resolved. Additionally, governments are still reluctant to use the UN fully in international economic and social cooperation. For example, many governments talk about the need to protect the environment—but the total budget of the UN Environment Program is less than A$50 million.

Dr Boutros Ghali has, then, acquired a very difficult job. It is important not to overestimate what one individual can achieve. His time will be taken up by the competing demands of public appearances (photograph sessions and the like), operating behind the scenes in private negotiations, and managing the UN bureaucracy. An initial task is to ensure that his organisation has enough money to pay salaries (as this is being written there is some doubt if the UN can, in fact, do so).

In other words, it is necessary to be cautious about all the recent euphoria surrounding Dr Boutros Ghali’s accession. The basic structural problems of the UN remain unresolved. The first UN Secretary-General, Trygve Lie of Norway (1946-52) said he had the “most impossible job in the world”. Forty years on, it will be interesting to see if Dr Boutros Ghali endorses that assessment.

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