

Global governance: dream big, and then persist

Symposium on "Is Democratic Global Governance Possible?", University of Sydney

Michael Cornish, 15 June 2012 (check delivery against text)

I

Madame chair, fellow speakers, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to today's symposium to discuss such a big idea; namely, 'Is democratic global governance possible?'

When I was living in Papua New Guinea, I remember reading an article in one of the two national newspapers, and it was entitled "Do 900 year old Methuselahs live in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea?", to which the columnist had enthusiastically and very succinctly responded, 'yes'!

The same temptation exists with a question like 'Is democratic global governance possible?'. Of course it is, let's just say 'yes' and move on. But how do I *know* this? Well of course, I don't know this at all, I *believe*.

This is the case with all great social movements that have changed the world for the better. They have started with a group of people, sometimes even one person, who believes that ideas that can change the world for the better not only exist, but can be made real.

William Wilberforce, the suffragette movement, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela; all these people had dreams for their societies which seemly insurmountably unrealistic and impossible - and were told so all the time - until they eventually succeeded.

II

So with the question of 'is it possible' now put to rest, we can move on to the infinitely more exciting question, 'what should a global government look like?'. If anything, *this* is the biggest barrier making a global parliament into a reality. Even in our own *national* parliament, consensus seems ever elusive, so how much optimism must we accumulate to think we can overcome the Goliath task of forging an international consensus, when, as a group, the world appears to agree on so little?

It is true that competing models for global governance create uncertainty, and uncertainty undermines commitment to the core idea. You can see how this problem unfolded when Paul Keating launched the referendum on the possibility of Australia becoming a Republic; despite strong support from the public for the *idea*, reaching it was frustrated by the uncertainty of what exactly the idea would look like in its final form.

Understanding the possible models for global governance is the first step in attempting to bridge this uncertainty, and so it is that I will share with you one such possible future, the one advocated by the Campaign for the Establishment of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly.

Launched in April 2007, the Campaign for the Establishment of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly is a global network of parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations advocating representation of the world's citizens at the United Nations.

A United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, or UNPA, is a proposal for global governance that seeks to democratise global governance through the *gradual* implementation of democratic participation and representation, using the existing United Nations system as its vehicle for implementation.

The United Nations is seen to be - and here I borrow words from the Campaign's declaration in Buenos Aires in 2012 - 'the essential core institution for international cooperation and thus the most viable framework for effective international governance'. Furthermore, a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly 'would advocate and facilitate more comprehensive reform of the present system of international institutions and global governance'.

The 'gradual' part is critical here - there is a recognition within the Campaign movement that attempting to displace the existing international power structures is unlikely to win it much support. Initially with little power such a global Parliamentary Assembly would need to prove its worth as a consultative body and a 'safe of hands' before any powers of significance are delegated to it by national assemblies, or the UN itself. We would also be foolish to think that these powers would then be handed over without great resistance; so inevitably this would be a process of slow accumulation and expansion, similar to the way that the British parliament gradually supplanted the role of the King or Queen.

To establish its bona fides from a legalistic perspective, there are two possible options on how to integrate a Parliamentary Assembly into the existing UN system. Either the General Assembly could vote to create the body directly by using its powers under Article 22 of the UN Charter, or it could be established outside the UN system by an intergovernmental treaty and then be incorporated into the UN system through a review of the UN Charter, under Article 109.

There are still many competing views on how representation would be decided, but at this stage, degressive proportionality is the most favoured approach. Degressive proportionality means that nations with bigger populations would receive more parliamentary seats, but at a decreasing rate compared to smaller nations. For example, although China has 1.35 billion people - almost 60 times Australia's population - they would not receive 60 times the number of seats that Australia would receive, although it would still be a greater number. Ultimately, it could be hoped that national boundaries become so meaningless as to remove this degressive component - and the *desire* for it - but realistically this dream would be a long way off.

If you want to get involved, or simply find out more, the website to look at is <http://www.unpacampaign.org>.

III

The advocacy journey of the United Nations Parliamentary Assembly model has been a slow but accelerating one. Many existing and former parliamentarians have endorsed the Campaign, as have many international NGOs and institutions. Former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, is

another. The greatest win to date has been the endorsement of the parliament of the European Union, the European Parliament. I must of course give an honourable mention to the Australian Greens Party as well.

As much as I am a wholehearted supporter of the UN Parliamentary Assembly approach to global governance, it must be admitted that there is still a lot of detail to be worked out. However, until sufficient support coalesces for the *general* idea of a global parliament, there simply aren't enough of the most crucial parties at the table to begin negotiations over these finer details, and to overcome the formidable obstacles in the way.

However, whatever form a global parliament would eventually take, there are some guiding principles to which I believe any *good* model for global governance must adhere to.

Firstly, democracy.

The title of this symposium implies that democracy is the preferred system of governance, and perhaps due to an inherent cultural bias, I suspect democracy sounds vastly more appealing to those of us in the room than any of the alternatives - the Winston Churchill quotation: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried" springs to mind.

There are other systems that could work - we could hold out for the next stage in the evolution of democracy, for example - but any *good* system will still have its roots in the fundamental tenets of democracy. This means a genuine competition of ideas and candidates in the political process, and - to quote Abraham Lincoln now - be 'of the people, by the people, for the people'.

Secondly, it needs to be a pragmatic system of governance. This means democracy by representation, at least to begin with. There are even practical limitations on the number of representatives - one could only imagine a political communication gridlock if there were literally thousands of representatives. Again, being pragmatic, any global parliament would need to keep powerful and vested interests happy enough to ensure their support whilst yet still retaining a meaningful and workable democratic system.

Thirdly, it needs to be a system of governance that is adaptable to change, but not prone to subversion. This means it needs to have a structure flexible enough to allow it to cast aside relics of ages past - for example, the World War II-era permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council - but rigid enough to prevent any group being able to dominate by undermining or subverting the system for their own selfish cause - for an example of this danger, you can think of Hitler's use of emergency powers to wrest complete control over the government of the Weimar Republic of Germany.

Lastly, if it wants to be an institution able to actually enforce its decisions, it will *eventually* need to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, as per Max Weber's conception. This must be accompanied with appropriate checks and balances including, but not limited to, the doctrine of the separation of powers, in order to prevent this monopoly force being turned upon its own international citizenry.

To my mind, any system of global governance that can adhere to at least these basic principles has a good chance of being both successful and a force for good in the world.

IV

Many of you may have noticed that I have avoided the most important question until last - which is 'do we actually want it?'

The most common argument I hear against the idea of global governance is that the United Nations is a toothless tiger, and who would ever want to place the world's future into the hands of ineffective international bureaucrats.

Firstly, I would contest the notion that the United Nations is an ineffective organisation. Toothless at times, absolutely - Rwanda and the Srebrenica massacre immediately spring to mind - but the fundamental objective of the UN *has* been achieved, namely, we haven't seen World War III. Or at least, so far, so good! And to argue that the United Nations, as the world's premier international political forum, would not have at least contributed to this massive achievement is simply an absurd proposition. To those that argue it is merely a talk-fest, I completely and utterly agree, of course, *that's the whole point!* It is much better that they be talking, rather than shooting!

However, the United Nations is a community of *nations*, not a community of people, and thus is not quite the real deal in terms of democratic global governance. Whilst it is true that Australia's interests are pursued through the United Nations and elsewhere internationally, at any one time, it is a *singular* conception of what the interests of Australian is or will be. Do you feel that your views are given a hearing on the international stage by the Australian representative at the UN? Do you even know the representative's name?

A global and democratic government, on the other hand, can provide a much broader representation of the wide range of views held by ordinary Australian people, and those of people of the rest of the world. If this Australian-centric example doesn't convince you, just think about the worst of the autocratic regimes in the world, and how much more representative direct global democracy would be for their people.

So the idea is not to hand power to faceless international bureaucrats at all, but to hand it to people elected to represent our views directly on the global stage. We have seen the inevitable and marked acceleration of globalisation of trade since the 1990s, and with it the rise of problems which don't adhere to the imaginary boundaries we draw on maps. Problems that affect us all, even in our relatively safe corner of the world that we call Australia. Problems like climate change; terrorism; regional wars and conflicts that threaten international stability; the international movement of people and refugees fleeing these wars and persecution; the silent horror of nuclear weapons, of which even a medium-sized exchange is liable to ensure nuclear winter, plummeting agricultural production, and global famine.

But it is not just the internationalisation of problems, but also hopes and dreams. Imagine a forum through which we can steer this world of ours through the rocks, to not only manage but also resolve conflicts and wars. Imagine a world free from fear, and free from suffering. Imagine this brighter world where we can work together on lifting people out of the abject despair of poverty, into a world of opportunity.

Perhaps it *is* too much to hope that global democracy can bring these things. Perhaps the world will forever be plagued by problems and suffering. And perhaps I am merely young enough, and thus hopeful enough, to think otherwise.

But to resign ourselves to this alternative of despair, is to actively seek it, it's an admission of defeat.

Imagine instead this *brighter* future, and then believe - it *is* possible. And then persist, and persist, and persist, to make it into a reality.

Thank you very much.