

Flawed UN is Better than None

On Friday the world's leaders gathered together in the United Nations General Assembly Hall, and agreed to a document on UN reform that falls disappointingly short of the hopes and expectations of the Secretary General and all of those who worked so diligently on intensively critiquing and reviewing the Organization and its strengths and weaknesses with hopes of significant change.

For most Canadians the glass of the UN will remain at least half full. Canada has a long history of supporting countries working together to find global solutions to intractable challenges: widely supporting the League of Nations before its collapse, and being an early and fervent supporter of the United Nations – through some very difficult challenges. Nothing that happened over a few days of show will change that.

While Canadians are visceral supporters of the UN – who wouldn't support the pledge to 'save successive generations from the scourge of war' or entrenching principles of fairness, democracy, human rights and the rule of law – they are not naïve. Attempting to attain these grand principles carries inherent risk of failure. And the UN will fail again.

But to whom to attribute the failures of the UN? And to whom its successes? Alas, the answer to both is the same: “we the peoples of the United Nations...” For those of us privileged to travel, we can see the UN building in New York with the 191 flags flying proudly, Tuvalu as proudly as China, and we swallow hard at the willingness of leaders to come together for the common good. And the common good is often uncommonly difficult to find. My common good is not necessarily yours. My looking after my family or tribe with jobs is being a good upstanding person. Or, my looking after my family or tribe with jobs is nepotism or cronyism or even corrupt. Reiterating even the grand principles of the UN is not without negotiation.

Canada should be rightly proud of its tireless work in entrenching the Responsibility to Protect into the document signed yesterday. Isn't it wonderful to say: Canada should be proud. In fact, Canadians should be proud of those leaders, champions, yes, bureaucrats and politicians who worked for years to get this obligation of the UN to intervene – with force if necessary – when countries cannot or will not protect their peoples, accepted.

Our support of the United Nations should never be blind. We should remain vigilant critics of the institution. But we should remind ourselves too, when we mistake the 90% of the UN's work which involves delivering food, water, basic health and sanitation, inoculating against disease, giving hope, succour, aid in disasters and shelter in war, for the sometimes ugly exposure of self-interest in the Security Council.

There are disappointments of course, but for those too young to remember the founding of the United Nations in 1945 after losing millions in a bloody war, peace, even imperfect peace is better than the alternative.