



World Chronicle

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GUESTS: Jean-Marc Coicaud
UN University

Andrew Cooper
Centre for International Governance Innovation

Paul Heinbecker
Former Ambassador of Canada to the UN

MODERATOR: Tony Jenkins

The Power of Ideas in International Reforms

Reform, reform, reform - this is the refrain most often heard about the United Nations on its 60th anniversary year. But can international institutions reform themselves? Can change come from within – or does it come from external bodies, such as International Commissions? What ideas and practices of the UN have in fact worked to make the world a better place?

These are some of the questions addressed in this special edition of World Chronicle, featuring a round-table discussion with Jean-Marc Coicaud of the UN University, Andrew Cooper of Canada's Centre for International Governance Innovation, and Paul Heinbecker, Former Ambassador of Canada to the UN.

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Executive Producer: Michele Zaccheo
Director: Dave Woodie
Production Assistant: Sheila Poinsette

ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an interview programme on major global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

JENKINS: Hello, and welcome to this special UN 60th anniversary edition of World Chronicle. I'm Tony Jenkins. If the mantra of realtors is location, location, location – then here's one for the United Nations on its 60th anniversary year: reform, reform, reform. But can international institutions reform themselves? Does change come from within – or from the outside? Does it come from the bottom, from the grassroots – or from the top - from political leaders? And what is the role of ideas and research in shaping the debate over UN reform? These are some of the ideas we'll be discussing today in the company of Jean-Marc Coicaud, Director of the United Nations University office in New York... we're also joined by Andrew Cooper, of the Centre for International Governance Innovation...and Paul Heinbecker, Former Ambassador of Canada to the UN. Gentlemen, welcome to the programme. I was just reading this anthology that you were instrumental in editing, Andrew... "The International Commissions and the Power of Ideas", which neatly encapsulates part of what we're trying to get to grips with today. And I have to say that in some ways it made depressing reading, because each of the authors of each of the chapters ended up by saying...well, maybe the commission didn't achieve that much, but it was worth having the debate – or words to that effect. Am I right in thinking that's their conclusion?

COOPER: Maybe power is overstated. But I think in terms of ideas as a catalyst I don't think it is an exaggeration – both in terms of setting norms - you can think about the debate... about the Pearson Commission, about the 0.7 – still with us in niches...

JENKINS: Excuse me...in that case, what on earth is the point of having all of these commissions? Are they just comfortable *sinecures* for out-of-work politicians and diplomats, or for...

HEINBECKER: I'm not out of work [all laugh]...

JENKINS: Or for would be politicians who are hoping to find the springboard further up the ladder. What's the point of spending all the money on reform?

COOPER: I think there has been a problem in the past in terms of diffuseness, but I think what is fascinating is that it is becoming much more specialized... you can think about commissions, about migration, commissions about health, commissions that really focus on the one that...As Canadians, we've been very fascinated with responsibility to protect. I mean this is a living commission, this is breathing in terms of both ideas into – into action.

HEINBECKER: And its influences are evident right now. The UN is deeply engaged in trying to reform itself as you were saying and the responsibility to protect an idea is at the

centerpiece of the High-Level Panel Report that people will be familiar with. The Secretary-General's own proposals for reform, the president of the General Assembly has picked up on that idea - it's still on the table for adoption. This is an idea that recognizes that the world can't stand by and let people be slaughtered now. Should we be doing better in Darfur? Absolutely. Should we be doing better in the Congo? No question about that. But when you establish norms, that's the way people start to be held accountable for behaviour.

JENKINS: Do you agree with him?

COICAUD: I think that commissions have a triple effect, we have a crystallizing effect, we have an awareness effect and then they push the debate in such a way that ideas become part of the political agenda. So...

JENKINS: ...Give me an example...

COICAUD: ...I would say that we have a real utility.

JENKINS: Give me an example, because if you want I'm going to start pulling out examples from this book of where people say...well, we did actually manage to push the agenda. For example, the Canberra Commission – the conclusion was "...the real value of commissions is not what they achieve in terms of immediate implementation but rather an extent of their contribution to the evolving normative context of global politics". I mean, it is basically saying – well we contributed to the debate but other than that, we're not really expecting to achieve anything solid. And you're saying – yes, you are going to get something concrete out of them...

COICAUD: I would say so...I mean....

COOPER: We started off with location, location, location but you can also talk about timing, timing, timing. Probably Canberra was the worst possible timing but there's other commissions that have wonderful timing – the Brundtland Commission... that sort of gets on the [crasston??] and runs with a slogan that digs in.

JENKINS: The conclusion of the chapter in your book on the Brundtland Commission was... "The legacy of the Brundtland Commission lies not with the concept of sustainable development but rather in its contribution to the debate about what constitutes environmental well-being." And it basically says, the phrase 'sustainable development' was popularized but in practice it has not amounted to nothing more than shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic.

HEINBECKER: I don't agree with that. I think the Bruntland Commission took two irreconcilable ideas - so we thought at the time, which was economic growth and environmental protection - and these were two different worlds - one was big business and one was people in the street. And it came up with a way of thinking of it which was not a zero sum game anymore. And I think that has had an enormous impact on the way we've handled environmental issues ever since. We haven't solved them all but there has been plenty of progress. If you think of the Persistent Organic Pollutants Commission or Convention...even climate change, there's one major outlier - the United States - but nonetheless most of the countries are signing up to these kinds of things and that is the quintessential sustainable development.

COOPER: And the sense of balance.

JENKINS: Except that...far from having found some form of sustainable development, the world is continuing to develop in a way that is decimating the environment. Am I right?

COICAUD: Yes,

JENKINS: So in practical terms not much has change.

COICAUD: Well things take time - you know...

JENKINS: You work in the UN University, I was asking for concrete examples, maybe it's tough but...is there an area where we can say...look here is a powerful idea that has actually changed and reformed one of these major institutions including the UN itself?

COOPER: Now that is a different question.

COICAUD: Well in a way you see, the UN and global debates in general are facing a bit of paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the UN for instance, is politically important; on the other hand it is very weak. When you're politically important and politically weak you have to be strategic and to be strategic you have to have a road map, in order to have a road map... you have to really identify these good ideas linked up with important questions, important problems. Unless you do so, political debates are not going to progress. And in a way, one of the functions of these commissions as well as one of the functions of the UNU, is to think about these ideas and bridge ideas with political debates and what can be done politically.

HEINBECKER: Just to say that nothing is happening is really pretty facile. If you look at acid rain in North America, the acid rain situation is much better than what it used to be. Look

at water purity in the Great Lakes – much better than what it used to be. These things are not....just to say that well, we have not solved every problem perfectly, we haven't reached nirvana...therefore, this is not worth doing....

JENKINS: That's not the point I'm trying to make. I guess what I'm trying to say is that there is a perception out there - as you can understand, I'm playing devil's advocate to a degree - there's a perception out there that is a level on international organizations where it's just talk, talk, talk. And they can say what they like and they can come up with the ideas that they like but at the end of the day, it doesn't really mean anything. Things only start to change where the rubber hits the road. So that acid rain...something started to be done about it when people living in the North East and in Canada, started to see their forests disappearing and they said enough! You've got to do something about acid rain, and that's when it started to happen. Not because a bunch of scientists or a bunch of well meaning diplomats got together and said....

HEINBECKER: No but there's a context. These things start happening in a context and academics get interested in things in context. Political action takes place in a context, when you see something for example, a responsibility to protect, when you've had a genocide in Rwanda, when you've had ten years of Milosevic brutalizing people in Bosnia. That creates a context in which people say we have to change the way we're doing things. Sometimes that comes from an outside impetus or impulse like the responsibility to protect commissions, sometimes it comes from somewhere else. Sometimes it's a combination – it's usually is combination of these things.

COOPER: And it creates new coalitions, I mean the acid rain is a good example. Coalition across borders, we see coalitions in a variety of focal points. That is the beauty of much of these ideas – there not just state, they're non state, they're academics, they're think tanks, a variety of actors.

COICAUD: But of course you see, compared to the tragedies unfolding all over the world, one has to think that the impact is very little. But still, there is an impact.

JENKINS: I guess it is easy to be cynical especially in these times – after all we're living in a time when there is a war going on – and it was a war that was justified. Right here in the building in which we're sitting, in the Security Council on the basis of a series of facts that we were presented – which turned out to be totally untrue. You talk about the responsibility to intervene...

HEINBECKER: ...To protect...

JENKINS: ...To protect, I'm sorry yes. You referred to... specifically to Rwanda... sorry, Canada... was of course particularly concerned about what happened in Rwanda because it was one of your officers who was in charge.

HEINBECKER: That's correct.

JENKINS: And he's still living with the effects emotionally.

HEINBECKER: Indeed.

JENKINS: There are a lot of people who would say that the sense of responsibility to protect comes not from any high ideal but from what has often been called the CNN effect. In other words, if you got a TV camera there that is showing people the massacre, showing them just how bad things are...then there will be people who will....

HEINBECKER: ...I agree completely in that sense because we live in a different world. In the old...a hundred years ago, nobody knew what was going on in the next town let alone the next country or on the other side of the earth. We live in a media age, we know what's going on in Nepal, we know what's going on in Myanmar...

COICAUD: To a certain extent.

HEINBECKER: To a certain extent, to a large enough extent. We know what's been happening in Darfur and so we do know and it's important - you know - and there's no question in my mind - that the fact of the media reporting heightens sensitivity. But I don't think it follows from that that's all that matters I think that - you know - in this particular case, as they're struggling in this building on UN reform over the issue of national sovereignty - which is a very good idea...which was part of the structure put together in a non-interference, internal affairs and states; part of the structure put together after the Second World War to try and avoid a Third World War. The First World War killed 10 million people, the Second World War killed nearly 60 million people and who knows how many people a nuclear war would kill. So we've had some success at that.

JENKINS: Jean-Marc.

COICAUD: Ambassador Heinbecker mentioned - that we know. I'm not sure that we know. And that we do want to know, when we think about Congo, you know - between the late 90's and the early 2000 - it is estimated that more than 2 million people were killed. Nothing was really in the news about this...

JENKINS: ...Some people call it Africa's world war...

COICAUD: ...Yes, do we know and do we want to know, especially regarding Africa?
I'm not sure...

HEINBECKER: I think we know - I don't know whether people want to do anything it about it. I think that is the lesson of Darfur. When the Security Council allows itself to become lost in complexities about ethnicities and neighbours and economic interests and other problems - comparisons with Iraq and all the other stuff that's going on, and allows itself not to act – what hope do ordinary people have?

JENKINS: Andrew...

COOPER: And in some cases there is speed in terms of the CNN effect. Ambassador Heinbecker was involved with the Canadian initiative in late 1996 on the border of Zaire – lots of NGOs active, lots of media. Canada tried to put a coalition together and did a pretty good job against all sorts of obstacles. But each case is very different I think - it's part of the contradiction. Sometimes we are very slow, sometimes we rush into things...

JENKINS: ...It's also the Africa effect. In other words the rich powerful countries by and large would prefer to ignore Africa if they could...

HEINBECKER: ...Well in the past they didn't ignore Africa which was a bigger problem for the Africans, so I'm not sure which way the Africans are worst off.

COOPER: ...Exactly and in other institutions they are focused on Africa. I mean we've seen the G8 again with mixed results focusing on Africa now for three or four years. Certainly in terms of initiatives there is I think an attempt to have...sort of Africans pushing the initiative in the first place. Again...on Darfur with again.... with mixed results.

HEINBECKER: Darfur, I would argue would have catastrophic results because the idea I think... The Africans should be very careful of a notion that says...we'll let you look after peacekeeping in Africa because we recognize fully in the West that the African countries don't have the capacity to do that. They don't have the training, they don't have the equipment and when a rich country starts to respect your prerogatives, I think you need to be a little bit careful of why they're doing it.

JENKINS: We're talking about the power of ideas on international reforms on this special edition of World Chronicle. Now the UN has been around for six decades and it would be a shame to give the impression that this institution has remained static all this time. So, let's take a couple of minutes to look at this impressionistic portrait of the UNs journey.

VIDEO Montage Begins:

VIDEO Montage ENDS:

JENKINS: Well that certainly gives us a sense of just how complex the issues are that the UN has had to deal with over the past sixty years. I guess that frames a question that I'd like to put to you all. Are the international institutions working effectively at the moment? Do you they need reforming or do we actually need new institutions? Who'd like to take that first?
Jean-Marc.

COICAUD: I don't think that we need a new institution that would be my first answer. And secondly, I don't think that international organizations are working very well.

JENKINS: They're not?

COICAUD: I don't think so...

COOPER: There's tension, that's true. WTO, IFI's (International Financial Institutions) you can go down the list...

COICAUD: ...And for reason that have to do with inside reasons... and reasons having to do with the environment in which they work.

HEINBECKER: I think... I want to say they don't work and they do work at the same time. I'm thinking of UNICEF which has inoculated 575 million children, I'm thinking of the UN in a newer institution - UN Mine Action Service which is overseeing the destruction of 37 million landmines. I think of the World Health Organization, I'm thinking of the World Food Programme, which fed last year 100 million people, I'm thinking of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees which looked after another 120 million people. So on the social side, UNDP... these things are working.

JENKINS: Earlier you mentioned how the international commission seemed to work better when they focused on very narrow areas. Now you're talking about UN successes where they focus on very narrow areas. It's interesting that you referred to specifically to UNICEF and Mine Action area which both – correct me if I'm wrong – but I think they have discretionary funding, they don't get their funding through the general mall of the UN's system.

HEINBECKER: Some of these institutions have their own assemblies and have their own executive counsels and so on, but they are part of the system. I think what people are talking about when they are worrying about whether the UN works or not is really the security vocation of the UN. There it is certainly a mixed record, but there are a couple of things that has to be said. In the first forty-five years of the UNs history there was 17 peacekeeping missions. Since 1990 there has been God knows how many....there are 75 – 80 thousand troops abroad right

now. These missions have become enormously complex. In the old days it was just simply sitting down between two armies like in Cyprus. Now, you go into a place and there are three or four different combatants and their trying to make you one of them. So it's.... I think the situation is in fact... needs a lot of improvement. I think the UN needs a lot of reform but the UN is coping with much more difficult problems than it did in the past.

COOPER: I think it is the age of specialization here, but leadership still matters. It gets back to the commissions. Sometimes an individual - some of whom are on the cover of the commission books – it makes a difference. I think if you went through some of the specialized agencies, you would find the same thing.

JENKINS: You mentioned leadership... one can't ignore the fact that the most powerful nation in the world is the United States and the leadership of the most powerful nation in the world at this stage of world history - if you like – is an administration which is skeptical to say the least of the usefulness of the United Nations, and presumably that has its effect on everything that...

COOPER: And skeptical of some other institutions as well. It's not an administration that most probably covets multilateralism.

JENKINS: So the UN has to respond to that. Is its way of responding to say o.k. let's focus specifically on areas such as the ambassador mentioned, where we can prove that we can have a very useful pragmatic affect. Or is it to continue to push the agenda, the philosophical arguments about why the world needs a United Nations?

HEINBECKER: The important part here I think, is to remember what the heart of international law is. The heart of international law is the UN Charter. That's where you have the prescription against aggression against the use of force. There is laid out in there the circumstances in which force can be used. If you get rid of that, which is one of the things that we hear people talking about – well we'll just get rid of that and we'll keep UNICEF or whatever. You get rid of that and you're back in a situation that we used to live in in the 19th and the early part of the 20th century, and we saw what happened. You start to get alliances, the alliances start to break down, people start to combat with each other and then when you have an industrialized, a democratized forms of warfare. You kill a very great number of people. So let's go back to the first principle and remember why we did this in the first place, why we created the UN? The UNs aspirations have exceeded its grasp but it has done a very good job in establishing a norm against aggression.

JENKINS: Jean-Marc... is the UN doing enough to articulate those aspirations in a way that is comprehensible to the population of the United States; which is the most influential member of the UN at the moment? What is the failure? Why is it not touching people in this country?

COICAUD: If you look at the polls, the polls are not telling us that the U.S., the American people are really against the UN, that's not the case. The polls again and again are telling us that the UN is viewed quite favorably in America. So you have to distinguish between the political level and the society level, if you will.

HEINBECKER: And if you want to look at it, if the job approval rating of the president and the approval of the UN – I think probably if you compare those two statistics - the UN ranks higher right now than the president.

COICAUD: And very often you see the criticisms addressed to the UN are the other side of the romanticism which is still attached to the UN message. We wouldn't criticize the UN so much if all the inspiration and the inspiration were not really...

HEINBECKER: And finally, although the U.S. is an extremely powerful country and the most important country, it isn't the only country and it doesn't own this institution. And there are a lot of other people who have an interest in seeing it go forward and it will go forward because it has to...

JENKINS: Andrew, the UN does still have a number of problems, it does need to reform itself... we don't need another commission. But...

COOPER: No, no I mean even though you will see lots of commissions, I think Paul's point is accurate. The UN is far from irrelevant. It is an organization that everybody wants to move forward with and upwards; I mean you can see the debate about Security Council reform – you know. I mean it's not for lack of candidates, I mean the question is, is dealing with the complexity about which model you are going to use... if any of those models.

COICAUD: Or lack of candor. Because what I think... in a way is shocking...is how the idea of reform tends to be a bit of a charade. Nobody really takes seriously the idea of reforming the UN....

JENKINS: ...Well they talk about it a lot...

COICAUD: ...They talk about it but do we take the idea seriously and do we make sure there is follow-up and so on and so on.

HEINBECKER: The fact is... reform is not going to come in my estimation by leaving it up to the Permanent Representatives in this building who are aware of every slight and every insult that has been directed their way in the last twenty-five years and react accordingly...

JENKINS: But who's saying it's going to be left to the Perm Reps?

HEINBECKER: It is Perm Reps who will have to turn this over very shortly to their capitals and when the presidents and prime ministers... and there are going to be a hundred of them when they come here... these are people who have executive authority, these are people who care about their legacies...

JENKINS: Do you see any impulse amongst the leaders?

HEINBECKER: ...Absolutely...

JENKINS: You do?

HEINBECKER: I do see that, absolutely. I mean it's a little early yet...

JENKINS: Who's legally in charge?

HEINBECKER: ...It's a little early yet...well, Tony Blair in some ways is, Paul Martin is making his proposing changes, lots of people are. But the point I'm trying to make is that there is going to be a gathering here and this is going to be an action forcing event. This is going to happen in September, and there's going to be a document on the table and those hundred heads of government are not going to come here like the European Union did last – a little while ago – and fail. There's going to be some kind of an outcome.

COOPER: ...And this type of meeting concentrates...

JENKINS: The outcome at the end of the day will be words; it won't be action necessarily...

HEINBECKER: ... No, but frankly that's the thesis which I am having the most difficulty here - is that somehow ideas don't matter, words don't matter - what matters? Do guns matter? Is it guns and bullets and bombs... is that how you define progress? Or do you define progress in people getting together and discussing things and figuring out a cooperative way forward? I think that's what matters. It doesn't matter that 575 million children have been vaccinated? It doesn't matter that HIV/AIDS is being addressed in Africa? I think it matters a lot, I think a lot more should be done.

JENKINS: I guess at the end of the day what one can say is that the United Nations itself is an idea and it's a beautiful idea and we all have to hope that this year the leaders, when they all get together are able to bring the reforms and help them move forward.

HEINBECKER: This is an idea brought to us by realists who had fought two world wars and a recession and depression, not a bunch of poets who had never had any sort of experience...

JENKINS: We're all out of time. Thank you all for joining us on this special edition of World Chronicle devoted to the power of ideas in international reforms. Our guests have been Jean-Marc Coicaud, Director of the United Nations University office in New York, Andrew Cooper, of the Centre of International Governance Innovations and Paul Heinbecker, former ambassador of Canada to the UN. I'm Tony Jenkins inviting you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

World Chronicle
United Nations, Room S-827
New York, N.Y., 10017.
Or by email at: poinessette@un.org

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