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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

**COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO
THE BUILDING THE EDUCATION
REVOLUTION PROGRAM BILL 2010**

United Nations Day

SPEECH

Monday, 25 October 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP

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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (9.20 pm)—I thank the member for Hinkler for his contribution and interest. I also thank the member for Fremantle for helping to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the formation of the United Nations and to celebrate its work, its agencies and of course, most importantly, those people that work in the UN and dedicate themselves to making the world a better place.

Opponents have labelled the UN irrelevant, a geriatric 65-year-old overdue for retirement and ready for a pension. Indeed, critics have called it a dire threat to civilisation and individual national sovereignties and, indeed, a global plot to usurp the nation-state. We have all read it. We all hear it. At every public meeting you go to someone will bring that up. For supporters, on the other hand, it is the continued hope for the future and its best years lie ahead. I am sure we are all aware in this House that extremes never demonstrate the real truth, for to write up the UN too much regarding its success or to write it off too soon after its failures is to do little but exaggerate.

If one goes by the letter and spirit of the UN Charter, which came into force on ratification by a majority of signatory nations on 24 October 1945, multilateralism under the United Nations has been, and will remain, the most effective international organisation to lead the international system from anarchy to order based on international law and from dominance by hegemony to international democratic governance. Multilateralism *a la carte* has been a feature of some major- and middle-power nations—particularly paralleling the neoconservative regime of the former Bush years and during the Howard regime in Australia between 1996 and 2007—whereby they would resort to multilateralism when it suited their interests and spurn it when it did not. Other choices have been unilateralism, bilateralism, regionalism or a device such as the coalition of the willing—sound familiar?

The true nature of the crisis or major challenges facing the UN, I suspect, are not so much the so-called new threats to international security, for example, those posed by genocide, ethnic cleansing and other large-scale violations of human rights—we have heard some of these highlighted tonight by the member for Fremantle—as well as terrorism, transnational crime, climate change, environmental threats, poverty, rogue

nuclear arms activity, pandemics and others. Nor, I would argue, is there an international consensus on the nature of threats to security, most notably collective security, or on the methods to meet these threats. Nor is it about the failure of the UN to adjust to the existing global power structure. However, it should be that the global powers adjust to the body of international law and commonly shared human values underpinning the UN and embodied in the UN Charter.

As I have said before in this place, I believe the real crisis is, according to Muchkund Dubey, the former Foreign Secretary of India, who said:

... that the more powerful among the Member States now want to go back on this body of international law and on these common values, and are bent upon continuing to turn a blind eye to the obvious inequities and imbalances in rules and regimes which govern international relations. The crisis lies in these countries having put themselves beyond the pale of some of the key instruments and frameworks of multilateral control, surveillance and constraints. The crisis lies in their preference for 'exceptionalism' or 'exemptionism' or for 'multilateralism *a la carte*'. The crisis does not so much lie in occasional paralysis in decision-making, but in the built-in system of unequal decision-making and decision under pressure based on the exploitation of the vulnerability of the weaker Member States.

The Australian government, I suggest, has an obligation to our people, our region and our planet to strengthen the multilateral rules based system. It does not have the right, as was evidenced during the Howard years, to tear it down along with others. Nor does it have the right to stand idly by in the name of some brave new unilateral world whose central organising principle is an ill-defined unilateralism with a non-descript moral purpose. Multilateralism is the best of a more positive evolving system, not unilateralism and not multilateralism *a la carte*.

Finally, I note that the United Nations has three noble aims worthy of pursuing no matter what the faults and foibles of the organisation. These are to end the scourge of war, to affirm faith in fundamental human rights and to promote social progress and better standards of life. I thank those people who deliver those aims.