

# *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations*

by Paul Kennedy, Random House, 2006, 384 pp.

## Rob Jenkins

Paul Kennedy does not shy away from large subjects. He is the author of, among many other works, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* [1], which charted Europe's extraordinary ascendancy to global pre-eminence over the course of nearly half a millennium. An assessment of the merely sixty-year-old United Nations would seem to offer a much less demanding assignment for someone of Kennedy's demonstrated talent for large-canvas storytelling. As a subject for macro-reflection, however, the United Nations is a kind of intellectual quicksand – soft and inviting, but ultimately deadly. Thanks to Kennedy's buoyant prose, his latest book, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations*, succumbs more slowly than most to the quagmire on which he has chosen to tread. But by the final chapter, all that is visible above the smooth surface is an outstretched hand clutching a deadly dull list of proposals for UN reform.

The problem with *The Parliament of Man*, the title of which is drawn from Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall,' [2] is neither excessive length nor the short attention span of readers. Kennedy's *Rise and Fall* was more than twice as long, but was, all kidding aside, a gripping read. Though the phenomenal rise of Europe was a matter of historical record, Kennedy managed to frame the story in such a way as to make the outcome appear doubtful. That a backwater like medieval Europe would outmanoeuvre the formidable Chinese and Ottomans in the race for worldwide hegemony became, in the hands of Kennedy, a genuine mystery. His epic narrative, spread over hundreds of years and thousands of miles, and populated by a cast of characters that could put Dostoyevsky to shame, was held together by Kennedy's probing voice, which assumed the sceptical tone of the historical detective. For all the thematic variety and sheer historical coverage contained within its pages, *Rise and Fall* doggedly yet sensitively advanced a coherent line of argument: that Europe's seeming weakness, its pronounced lack of unity, was in fact its most potent weapon in the Darwinian battle for civilisational survival. Through various mechanisms, competition between Europe's kingdoms, principalities, and fledgling states ended up spurring innovation – political, economic, technological, social, and military.

One could take issue with certain elements of Kennedy's complex jigsaw of a thesis, but the overall effect was sufficiently powerful to make readers want to consider Kennedy's arguments about the future course of the world's current hegemonic civilisation.

*The Parliament of Man*, by contrast, feels interminable, even though the core of the text – an assessment of the UN's first sixty years in existence – runs to just under 190 pages. This is bracketed by a fifty-page introductory essay on the events and debates that preceded the UN's creation ('The Troubled Advance to a New World Order, 1815-1945'), and another fifty or so pages on the prospects for UN reform and the relevance of this quintessentially mid-twentieth-century institution to the emerging challenges of a new millennium. In between are six thematic chapters, each addressing a different facet of the UN's work: the Security Council, war and peace, economic development, the 'softer face' of the UN (social, environmental, and cultural policies), human rights, and efforts by non-state actors to make the inter-governmental body a more representative and democratic civic space.

This is, in theory, not a bad way of slicing the thematic cake. Only pedants would complain that the choice of chapter subjects does not conform to a rigid organising principle. Some topics, like the Security Council, are themselves institutions; economic development and human rights, on the other hand, are areas of functional competence; NGOs seeking a greater role are actors engaged in a process. But to worry about consistency in such matters is to get hung up on trivia. The thematic overlap between 'The Conundrum of the Security Council' (Chapter 2) and 'Peacekeeping and Warmaking' (Chapter 3) is the kind of thing over which only textbook publishers get exercised. This is most definitely not a textbook, and thank heavens for that: had it been, we would surely have been treated to separate chapters on the Economic and Social Council, the General Assembly, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat, the other 'principal organs' of the UN, not to mention detailed consideration of every known UN agency as well as some that are more or less invisible, such as the Vienna-based United Nations Industrial Development Organization, whose obscurity is richly deserved.

Instead, Kennedy turns our gaze to what has actually taken place in the UN – or in, as he puts it, 'the many UNs' that have existed alongside one another in the years since 1945. Depending on who and where you are, Kennedy argues, one or another aspect of the UN will tend to dominate your thinking about this multifaceted

## JENKINS | The Future of the United Nations

institution. Its humanitarian agencies, understandably, loom large for people in countries ravaged by war, natural disasters, and misgovernance, whereas for, say, environmental activists, the UN bodies responsible for convening international conferences and hosting the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements will have much greater salience.

Moreover, the UN has changed in important ways in the past six decades. Though structurally resistant to formal institutional renovation – not least because of the veto power accorded to the five permanent members of the Security Council – the 192-member organisation of today is a different beast from the one created by the 50 governments that in 1945 hammered out the UN Charter in San Francisco. How could it not be? The creation of specialised ‘agencies’ (e.g. the World Health Organization), ‘programs’ (e.g. the UN Environment Program), and ‘funds’ (e.g. the UN Democracy Fund, which came into being earlier this year) has not only drawn the UN into new areas of work; their existence has also created new constituencies – inside the bureaucracy and among social and political actors outside the institution – which seek to shape both the UN’s mission and the way it carries out its work.

Kennedy is at his best when describing the changes that have, by various means, been introduced into the working of the UN. The UN Charter, after all, was but a framework. Member-states and the UN bureaucracy have had to flesh it out and interpret its meaning, in effect inventing global governance as they went along, all the while cognizant of the fact that, unlike national governments, the UN lacked powers of enforcement. In some cases, entirely new functions were conjured from scratch. Kennedy points out that the word peacekeeping is not found in the UN Charter, though for many people a soldier in a blue beret is the first image that springs to mind when they think of the UN. He provides a solid account of the evolution of peacekeeping doctrine – particularly how the fine line between ‘keeping’ and ‘enforcing’ the peace has been continuously renegotiated. Trial and error, not necessarily in that order, have driven the evolution of UN doctrine on humanitarian intervention. The otherwise rather dry procession of doctrinal shifts is enlivened with mini-case studies of UN operations in various parts of the world. These help to illustrate essential turning points. For instance, it is through the discussion of the Sierra Leone case, where the UN’s peace-mediation efforts (and the actual peacekeepers themselves) were rescued only thanks to the timely arrival of UK commandos, that it becomes possible to grasp the blurring of the line between the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ aspects of peacekeeping interventions.

Even so, there are important gaps in Kennedy's treatment of issues of international security, particularly how they link to concerns traditionally regarded as peripheral to the UN's core mission of maintaining peace. This may have something to do with the book's organisational schema. As it happens, perhaps the most important development in the UN's work since the end of the Cold War has been the blurring of the lines between the thematic areas around which Kennedy has structured his text. This is not to say that the UN's work has become seamlessly integrated, or even coordinated to a basic standard of operational functionality. But in a number of ways the UN has found itself faced with the task – in any given conflict-affected country – of simultaneously enforcing peace, restructuring the security services, promoting economic development, establishing institutions capable of enforcing (and promoting respect for) the rule of law, reforming service-delivery bureaucracies, and addressing the concerns of non-governmental organisations.

The increasing tendency for these enormously complicated tasks to bump up against one another is the result of many hard-to-pin-down trends. But perhaps the most important reason for the growing salience of such bureaucratic locutions as 'functional integration,' 'inter-agency coordination,' and 'system-wide coherence' on the UN's agenda is that, in places like Bosnia, East Timor, and Kosovo, the UN has been forced to exercise the functions of government – everything from institution-building to economic policymaking to the provision of basic physical security. It is not that these cases evade Kennedy's finely honed radar. How could they? But their significance for the UN as an institution – particularly in terms of how the challenges of international governance are framed – is not adequately addressed. These are cases not merely of sovereignty being abridged through external intervention – an issue that Kennedy does treat with a good deal of conceptual and historical nuance – but of sovereign power being assumed by the UN itself.

Not surprisingly, once the UN began exercising the equivalent of governmental power in these 'transitional administrations' [3] – a phenomenon that admirers call 'neo-trusteeship' and critics liken to 'neo-imperialism' – a raft of complaints about accountability ensued. These were predictable enough, but less obvious were questions about whether the UN knew enough about state-building to ensure that the various actions it undertook in conflict-affected and 'post-conflict' countries were compatible with one another, sufficiently prioritised (given severely limited resources), or sequenced in ways likely to achieve the objective of sustainable peace. Such questions preoccupy those who fear that the UN's markedly improved ability to respond to humanitarian crises has not been matched by an increase in

its capacity to coordinate the various elements of external assistance required to prevent societies that have made the perilous transition from peace to war from slipping back into violence. Quantitative studies indicate that more than half of countries that manage to emerge from civil war are engulfed by armed conflict within five years. [4]

Indeed, it was precisely in order to strengthen the UN's ability to play this bridging role that world leaders agreed, at the 2005 UN Summit, to create a new body dedicated to consolidating the hard-won gains of peace in post-conflict countries. The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission is an intergovernmental body – not a bureaucratic agency – composed of member-states from several key constituencies. In the Peacebuilding Commission, the five permanent members of the Security Council sit alongside the top financial contributors to the UN and the countries that provide the largest contingents of peacekeepers to UN operations around the globe. Whether the Peacebuilding Commission will be able to fulfil its mission – to marshal resources and develop strategies to ensure that the UN's activities within post-conflict countries are effectively coordinated – remains to be seen. But as an example of a hybrid institution that breaks free of the rigid classification of UN activities, the Peacebuilding Commission is significant. Its existence highlights the importance attached to those areas of functional spillover to which Kennedy's conventional approach to classifying issues gives short shrift.

In fairness, Kennedy does not remain completely confined within the functional silo to which each of his thematic chapters is primarily devoted. In discussing the shortcomings of the UN's addiction to showy summits, for example, he is alert to the ways in which both the form and content of each of these jamborees (the 1992 Earth Summit, the 1993 Human Rights Summit, the 1994 Population Summit, the 1995 Women's Summit, and so on) affected those that followed. Still, Kennedy's approach obscures the sense in which the UN – as a forum combining political debate, operational capacity, and informed reflection on the results of practice in the field – has contributed to new understandings of how once-isolated fields of endeavour are integrally related.

The notion of 'human development' is perhaps the best example of what Kennedy misses out by analysing functional areas one at a time. The concept of human development is founded on the premise that economic progress is better assessed by examining aspects of human well-being – such as life expectancy, literacy, and child nutrition – than by charting macro-economic indicators such as aggregate rates of

economic growth, export performance, or fiscal stability. Human development was an idea nurtured within the UN system (during the late 1980s and early 1990s) by economists and others working in its economic agencies who also had the political savvy to enlist the support of UN entities, member-state development ministries, and non-governmental actors behind the notion of redefining the international community's agenda around the promotion of human well-being.

The point of raising this matter here is not simply to say that human development is an important conceptual innovation that Kennedy failed to discuss. That kind of complaint could easily be parried with the response that a short book, especially one for a general audience, cannot be comprehensive. And indeed it cannot be. The more serious charge is that Kennedy's analytical template all but guaranteed that something like human development – the process by which the idea emerged, and its implications for how the UN system addresses the linkages between various facets of its work – would be sidelined.

The notion of human development achieved institutional expression in 1990 with the creation of the Human Development Report Office (located within the United Nations Development Program). The HDRO produces the *Human Development Report*, a very high-profile annual scorecard on the performance of the world's governments in promoting various aspects of human well-being. For all the methodological quibbles over the indicators of which the Human Development Index is composed, as well as the logic behind various other subsidiary measures the HDRO has championed and the thematic issues it has highlighted, there is no doubting the impact of this UN-led initiative. It has changed the way that key actors in the international community think about development – an accomplishment that would not have been possible had not the economists and agency heads responsible for pioneering this idea built alliances with the civil society actors that Kennedy discusses in his separate, and rather thin, chapter on the non-governmental face of the UN. But the idea of human development did not fit within any of the three successive chapters – on economic policy, on social and cultural policy, and on human rights – around which Kennedy built his analysis of the UN's approach to development. As a result, he forgoes a chance to demonstrate the importance of 'issue convergence' as a crucial dimension of how the UN has continuously, if subtly, reinvented its mission over the past several decades, and the extent to which this has involved a complex interplay between theory and practice, and between official and non-official actors.

## JENKINS | The Future of the United Nations

For a book that seeks not to provide comprehensive coverage of the UN's myriad activities, but to analyse how the institution has evolved over time, this is a major shortcoming. The still-evolving idea of human development has not only drawn on various conceptions of human rights – Nobel Laureate (and UN consultant) Amartya Sen's idea of 'development as freedom' [5] being a key source of theorising in this area – it has also increasingly edged its way into discussions of security issues. It is, in other words, a prime example of the increasing permeability of the boundary between the UN's 'hard' and 'soft' faces. Over the past several years the idea of 'human security' – once confined to peace-studies departments in liberal universities – has emerged with unexpected vigour within UN discourse. As a concept, human security is less precise than human development, but at its core is the idea that issues of war and peace must be examined not just in terms of national security, but in terms of the experiences of individual human beings, for whom national aggregates are not necessarily the most relevant yardsticks of security. Indeed human security and human development have of late begun to bleed into one another, to the point where the terms are frequently used interchangeably by actors within and beyond the UN system. There are any number of reasons to bemoan the consequences of this trend: the sheer erosion of conceptual precision, most obviously, but also the tendency for UN agencies to lose sight of the importance of old-fashioned but important things such as economic growth (without which reducing poverty is pretty much impossible) and ensuring that models of deterrence are updated to account for changing configurations of global military power (without which steps to improve individual-level security may be rather beside the point).

The notion of human development was not simply an intellectual innovation, and its organisational manifestation went beyond the creation of a bureaucratic entity charged with producing an annual report capable of challenging the neoliberal orthodoxy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – not that this was by any means a negligible accomplishment. (It is worth noting, in passing, that the Bank and the Fund are specialised agencies of the United Nations, but with distinct governance structures and funding mechanisms that place them beyond the reach of either the General Assembly or the UN Secretariat.) The apotheosis of human development and human security as operational concepts was the enunciation and adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, targets for improving human well-being on a global scale that were agreed by world leaders at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. There is every reason to believe that most of these goals – such as progress on 'women's empowerment' – will not be met by the target date of 2015. But as an uncommonly specific statement of

collective aspiration, the components of which are in theory achievable, and more importantly as an organising principle for much of the international community's approach to improving governance, promoting human rights, disbursing development assistance, and indeed ensuring peace and security, the mere articulation of the MDGs is an unmistakable signal of the extent to which issues of poverty, inequality, and sheer human suffering have risen on the global agenda. The explicit commitment to specific goals also makes both UN agencies and the world's most powerful states vulnerable to public shaming by activist groups working for greater social justice. It is a pity that in Kennedy's account of the UN's growing penchant for international summitry, this highest, most visible peak of all is left substantially unexplored.

To the extent that the UN has evolved as an institution since its founding, the emergence of human development and human security into the discursive mainstream is paradigmatic of the nature of what has changed and the means by which change has unfolded. And there are ample grounds to believe that this and other stories of subterranean organisational change could be told in ways that would appeal to the general readership that Kennedy and his publisher seek – not least through the personal narratives of larger-than-life personalities such as Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, who pioneered the notion of human development, and the shifting coalition of often eccentric policy wonks and political operators with whom he joined forces to make the concept an institutional reality. Ironically, a far more academic enterprise, the United Nations Intellectual History Project,[6] has provided an account of this and other transformative ideas and processes – and the people that propelled them – that makes for much livelier reading than Kennedy's often perfunctory tour d'horizon, despite the fact that the volumes produced by that project are published by a university press with (almost) none of the commercial imperatives facing Kennedy's publisher.

Finally, let us consider one other curious oversight in Kennedy's book, the identification of which cannot reasonably be dismissed as reflecting either a minority interest or a preoccupation with very recent history. It is in fact the opposite of neo-trusteeship: the UN's role in promoting decolonisation during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The UN was in fact a crucial actor in the process by which imperial possessions (and territories placed under the temporary trusteehip of UN member-states) were ushered into the international community as independent states. Again, it is not as though Kennedy fails to note the existence of this world-historical process. He is, after all, a student of the rise and demise of empires. But given Kennedy's

declared intention of showing how the UN has evolved over the years to take on new and unexpected responsibilities, he makes little attempt to get to the bottom of how the UN came to play such a central role in decolonisation. While steering trusteeship territories toward self-government was part of the UN's mission, as enunciated in its Charter, the dismantling of Europe's far-flung empires had not been specifically entrusted to the new organisation (indeed, had been specifically not entrusted to it). But as more and more former colonies joined the UN as full-fledged members, and as the cold war rivalry led the superpowers to grandstand (however inconsistently) on the need for the curtain to fall on the imperial age, the UN emerged as a key site in the process of hastening the end of empire.

Minor committees, operating far from the limelight of the Security Council, gradually (almost unnoticeably) extended their *de facto* power in ways that increased the pressure on European states to demonstrate their commitment to granting self-determination to their overseas possessions.[7] This process culminated in the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. Of course, events within colonial territories – the growing strength of nationalist movements, and the increasing costs to colonial powers of maintaining their empires – were far more influential than what took place in committee rooms at UN headquarters in New York. But the ability of member-states and Secretariat personnel to retrofit the UN's machinery so as to pursue with greater vigour the cause of decolonisation is yet another example of how UN bodies managed to invent a new role for themselves that exceeded the explicit mandate of the San Francisco Charter. How this happened, and why it mattered, is the kind of analytical narrative that arguably would provide Kennedy's readers a more revealing glimpse into the workings of the UN than some of the subjects – for instance, his pedestrian account of UN efforts on behalf of women and children – that made the final cut.

Many readers will learn a lot from *The Parliament of Man*. The analysis of current UN reform proposals is admirably lucid, in terms of both their substance and political feasibility. Gripes with the way Kennedy approached his vast canvas, or the choices he made to illustrate how the UN has evolved, are inevitably shaped by the high expectations raised by his earlier, much-praised, work. Yet it is hard to avoid the impression that the history-for-a-popular-audience genre has also exacted its toll. Kennedy had almost none of the advantages of the scholarly author. Writers of books aimed mainly at an academic or policy audience can safely assume that their readers possess more than a passing familiarity with the events, institutions,

and concepts that form the basis for their analysis. They can also, when all else fails, revert to the device of copious footnotes and bibliographic references for topics or alternative explanations they consider beyond the scope of their analytical remit. Only very rarely do editors – real or imagined – lurk over their shoulders warning of bored readers. Kennedy, on the other hand, could assume very little knowledge on the part of the general readership his publishers clearly hoped to attract. He had to interest his audience in a subject that many, no doubt, considered worthy but tedious beyond words, while simultaneously educating them about its historical origins, its legal basis, its organisational forms, its curious operational practices, and above all its penchant for change over time. That Kennedy felt the need to reassure his readers was evident in his preface, where he stated categorically, and correctly, that the book was, ‘most certainly, not a handbook to the “alphabet soup” of the acronymic UN offices or a bureaucratic history of how this hydra-headed organism grew over time’ (p. xv).

In exchange for shouldering the burden of accessibility, Kennedy was spared the need to engage with the conceptual vocabulary bequeathed by the academic disciplines – political science, development economics, and the sociology of organisations – in whose literatures can be found a sustained intellectual engagement with the United Nations. Indeed, one of the most refreshing things about *The Parliament of Man* is that Kennedy clearly could not give a hoot about doctrinal differences among, for instance, schools of international relations theory. Realists, liberals, constructivists, neofunctional institutionalists – all are dismissed by a deafening silence. And they are not missed.

But even as he casts off these burdensome accessories of academic convention, and tries to get beyond the stereotypes that have long prevented non-specialist observers from appreciating the malleability of the UN as an institution, Kennedy appears to have been unable to resist structuring his inquiry around a very standard – almost boilerplate – set of topics. The result is a flawed work, perched uneasily between surface formality and an underlying urge to defy convention – not unlike the UN itself.

---

Rob Jenkins is Professor of Political Science at Birkbeck College, University of London. During 2006-07 he is Visiting Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the City University of New York, where he is researching the formative stages in the development of the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

# JENKINS | The Future of the United Nations

## References

- Chesterman, Simon 2004, *You, The People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collier, Paul and V.L Elliott, *Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis 2003, Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, Washington, DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press.
- Kennedy, Paul 1987, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House.
- Luard, Evan 1989, *A History of the United Nations – Volume 2: The Age of Decolonization, 1955-1965*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Sen, Amartya 1999, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weiss, Thomas G and Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly 2005, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

## Notes

- [1] Kennedy 1987.
- [2] ‘Till the war-drum throb’d no longer, and the battle-flags were fur’d / In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.’
- [3] A term popularized by, and a phenomenon judiciously examined in, Chesterman 2004.
- [4] Collier et al 2003, p. 7.
- [5] Sen 1999.
- [6] Information on this project can be found at [www.unihp.org](http://www.unihp.org). Especially illuminating about the role of particularly forceful individuals in promoting change is the volume built around oral histories. See Weiss et al 2005.
- [7] This process is documented in Luard, 1989.

# DISSENT

a journal of politics and ideas

islam in the west

the end of history and its discontents

labor's agenda

debt education

political theory in beijing

is socialism liberal?

high stakes in iran

feminism and the family

after genocide

exporting democracy

colson whitehead's new york

michnik on the iraq war

zagajewski's anti-utopianism

is the left vanishing?

french crisis, left crisis

rethinking the vital center

houellebecq, stranger and stranger

nyc calling

the politics of soccer

execution in an age of despotism

isaac babel's secrets

seeing evil, doing nothing



[www.dissentmagazine.org](http://www.dissentmagazine.org)