15 United Nations Reform

The question of reforming the United Nations moved close to the top of the UN agenda during the 1990s and the reforms discussed and required fall into two broad categories: the first category concerns the role of the United Nations as such, and what its members expect of it, and these reforms have been touched upon, at least in part, by considerations relating to the Security Council (see above, Chapter 14); the second category concerns the mechanics of running the United Nations and includes such subjects as the position of the Secretary-General, the finances, the recruitment of personnel and ways of dealing with the pervasive corruption which seems to become a part of any international organization.

Corruption takes many forms: in the United Nations system its effects can be seen in relation to power, to money, to job security and to national pride. Four of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the United States, Britain, France and post-Cold War Russia) are political democracies but though the three Western powers have been quick enough to extol the superior merits of democracy, especially when dealing with Third World countries seeking their aid, they are not democratic at all in relation to the world body and clearly (as of the mid-1990s) had no intention of surrendering their vetoes in order to abide by the democratic majority decisions of the United Nations.

There is a good deal of venal corruption in the United Nations, principally in the form of fiddling the books in, for example, regional offices or fiddling expense accounts and this can be done in two ways. The first is by making up expenses that were not in fact incurred, and a number of senior ranking UN personnel have been found guilty of this practice. The second is by deliberately incurring expenses, for example, by unnecessary travel in order to earn per diem allowances. What are needed in relation to these practices are much firmer guidelines and some form of watchdog to ensure that the guidelines are kept with far tougher sanctions including dismissal for those who are discovered corruptly to enhance their incomes.

Another corrupt practice which is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down, and really depends upon the calibre of person recruited, is that of ‘playing safe’: the official who never takes any decision that risks upsetting his or her superiors, whose only concern is to hold on to a safe job indefinitely rather than take on responsibility for difficult decisions. Such people are to be found in all organizations; the surest way to root them out is to have regular career performance checks and not allow indefinite security of tenure.
Perhaps most pervasive of all throughout the United Nations is the quota system which allows countries to nominate a prescribed number of their nationals to jobs at different levels – the principle of 'buggins' turn'. There are several different problems involved here. First, the nominating country may send indifferent personnel to the United Nations – because the government wants to keep its best people at home, or because it wishes to send abroad political troublemakers whose only claim to a job is some connection with a powerful (and corrupt) minister, or simply in order to take up its quota to have as full a representation as possible for nationalist reasons. There is a further complication, and this concerns the pride of governments which are at least as likely to defend one of their nationals who is accused of corruption than agree to his being disciplined or sacked, since this is thought to reflect as much upon the country as upon the individual.

Such malpractices are to be found worldwide and it is easy to dismiss them along familiar lines – that human nature being what it is they are to be expected and too much should not be made of them. The United Nations, however, is the world’s political ‘shopfront’ and as such should insist upon the highest possible standards at all times and from all its members. It is clear that it has not done this for many years.

The heads of the specialized agencies have near autocratic authority over very extensive fiefdoms and in recent years corruption charges of one kind or another have been levelled at a High Commissioner for Refugees, a Director-General of the World Health Organization, and the Kenya UNICEF office. Why, it should be asked, are international institutions so prone to such scandals? In case after case corruption is passed over, inefficiency is ignored or, indeed, accepted as the norm while UN jobs are seen as vehicles for personal aggrandisement that has very little to do with the task in hand. In part the problem results from a selection process that has nothing to do with merit or skills and everything to do with political bargaining between member nations. Members squabble as to which nominee should be given a post and, too often, it goes to a particular candidate because it is his or her country’s turn or because another plum job has just been awarded to a rival country. There is, moreover, no system whereby talent can be found and nurtured for top UN posts; instead, with luck, some good people will be discovered amongst those that countries post to the United Nations, often with a view to getting them away from their home political scenes – a form of ‘kicking upstairs’. A further great weakness, and one that is not easy to remedy, is the lack of any organized global public opinion. At least in countries like Britain or the United States, a poor performer, in the end, can be forced from office because of adverse public opinion and criticism. There is no such equivalent at work in the United Nations or its agencies. Further, both the