

## OPINION



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# Bob Rae is feeling the UN's pain

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Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—The United Nations is having a very unhappy 80<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, and Canada's ambassador to the UN, the estimable Bob Rae, is feeling the pain.

Severe cuts to the budgets of UN humanitarian agencies, including those dealing with refugees and children, have set off panic through the organization. Though both the United States and China are late with payments and many states are stingy, it is U.S. President Donald Trump who's wielding the biggest axe.

The \$25-billion shortfall in UN funds already this year has forced UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to start laying off 20 per cent of staff, and reducing food and health services for the poorest.

I interviewed Rae about what the Canadian government is trying to do about this unprecedented diminishment of the UN, and found the idealist who has always been a happy-go-lucky warrior in politics depressed, but stoic. He described how Canada, using diplomatic channels, has expressed "deep concern" about how Washington's cuts are further damaging the most vulnerable people of the world. Canada, he pointed out, always pays its UN bills on time.

Rae is not one of those diplomats who is just going through the motions of a job while awaiting a better posting. He cares deeply about the sick and oppressed. When he took up the ambassador's role at the UN five years ago, he was fresh off a Canadian government assignment examining the crisis of the Rohingya people in Myanmar and Bangladesh. He passionately described the "crimes against humanity" that had been committed. When COVID hit, he told a world audience that he wanted "bold, imaginative, creative and adequate" solutions to the pandemic crisis. Richard

Gowan, the International Crisis Group's representative at the UN, told me that Rae "has grasped the importance" of the UN financial crisis.

Rae has just stepped down from his one-year presidency of the UN's Economic and Social Council (known as ECOSOC), a central forum for formulating policy recommendations on economic and social issues. He used the prestigious post—Canada has only held it twice in 80 years—to conduct studies on the protection of refugees and harnessing AI to support the Sustainable Development Goals. Prime Minister Mark Carney has asked him to stay on, at least for a while, as Canada's ambassador.

In our conversation, I found Rae frustrated that in a global economy of \$100-trillion annual GDP, so little money is devoted to humanitarian and development assistance. He said, "Wealth creation, better cash flows for low income people and governments, reducing conflict and restoring governance are all needed. Strong global leadership is needed. These are difficult and dangerous times."

"The retreat from solidarity has to stop," Rae added, "and the willingness to do more has to be re-ignited."

The dysfunction of the UN extends to a deadlocked Security Council, stalled reform,

and rock-bottom staff morale. Russia's invasion and aggressive war against Ukraine and Israel's ceaseless assaults on the suffering people of Gaza have severely undermined the UN's call for the rule of law to prevail today.

The weaknesses of the UN are exacerbated by its biggest problem—Trump—whose arrogance in viewing every situation through an "America First" lens is not only causing consternation through the world, but threatening the organization's survival. Trump has proposed a stunning 87-per cent slash in overall American funding to the UN as part of his campaign to de-fund international organizations. Congress has yet to approve Trump's goal, but ongoing piecemeal cuts are taking place. The U.S. pays 22 per cent of UN bills, so a permanent cut of Trump's magnitude would be devastating.

Trump is at the centre of the issue of the UN's future—just as he was at the centre of the future of NATO when he forced members to accept a five per cent of GDP level of defence spending. Trump's outrageous military demands are destructive of the UN's processes for obtaining peace. In short, rampaging militarism—not the deficiencies of the UN—is at the heart of the world security problem today.

Canada, which has always been a big booster of the UN,

is in a difficult position. If the government openly criticizes the mercurial Trump, it risks derailing the vital Canada-U.S. tariff negotiations. As a very prominent Canadian diplomat, Rae has to be careful in what he says, and I understand this. Besides, the Carney government has bought into the fallacy that more arms will produce peace. Rae is a good soldier, and will not contradict his political masters in Ottawa.

Rae is much more comfortable discussing what Canada is doing to advance diplomacy, defence, and development and takes pride in his country's \$2.2-billion contribution to UN efforts this year. He is a highly respected and effective ambassador, and constantly tries to educate the public on the value of the organization.

He labours on in hope that overdue reforms in the UN machinery will be galvanized by all the activity around the UN's observance of its 80th birthday. He certainly has the stature to help in the enlargement of the Security Council, a long-sought goal of Canada.

Rae seems to have taken comfort in the wisdom reflected in a personal memoir he wrote in 2023 in which he describes his journey to the UN. Modern diplomacy, he writes, "is messy, confusing, often loud, and never reaches conclusions that everyone can wholeheartedly accept." And then the undaunted Rae leaps off the pages: "Canadian diplomacy has not irrevocably declined, but it sometimes loses its way, its sense of its own context and history, its awareness of both its strengths and weaknesses."

Former Senator Douglas Roche's latest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World* (Amazon).

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