

Rotary and the United Nations

Address by Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

Sherwood Park Rotary Club

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I want to give a salute to the ongoing work of the Rotary Club with the United Nations and encourage you to strengthen these ties.

Rotary has a distinguished record of accomplishment in working on UN issues. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative, literacy development, water and sanitation projects, child and maternal health – these are just some of Rotary’s achievements. Rotary is linked to many UN specialized agencies, and other international organizations like the League of Arab States and the European Union. The annual Rotary Day at the UN is a highlight of each year.

How come this work is not better known in the public generally? Why has the Government of Canada lowered its involvement in UN affairs? Why is the UN not getting more support from the public in Western countries? Most importantly, is the United Nations effective in building human security?

These are some of the questions I set out to answer in my new book, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*.

One view of the world today sees chaos everywhere. Not since the end of the World War II have there been so many refugees, displaced people, and asylum seekers. Extremism and nationalism are on the rise. Terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State and

Boko Haram, have seized large territories, committed gross human rights violations, and triggered humanitarian crises. Atrocities, the deliberate starvation of civilians, and assaults on hospitals and shelters have become common. The suffering of women and children in failed states is unendurable. Diplomacy among different regions and cultures is on the defensive, undermined by spates of violence in the Middle East and Africa.

Another view is that, despite the problems highlighted in the news every day, the world as a whole is moving to a higher stage of civilization. All the big indicators of modern life — health, education, commerce, science, energy, shipping, communications, transportation, law, women’s rights — are expanding. Two billion people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have been lifted out of dire poverty in the past two decades. A new global middle class is emerging. More people can claim their human rights than ever before. The major powers are not fighting one another as they did in the twentieth century.

Which is the real world? Both these views reflect reality. So how are we to make sense of such divergence and how can we build hope for an enduring peace?

In four decades in public life as a parliamentarian, ambassador, and civil society activist, I have been preoccupied with these questions. I find myself repeatedly coming back to the United Nations, the only place where 193 nations come together to work out, in six languages, their global problems. The UN was started seventy years ago “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” How successful is it?

At one level, the UN's record of accomplishments is astonishing. It delivers food to 90 million people in eighty countries, assists 38 million refugees, protects human rights through eighty treaties and declarations, deploys 120,000 personnel in sixteen peacekeeping missions, in addition to thirteen political and peacebuilding missions which are averting future genocides. The UN is responsible for aviation safety, detecting global warming, and rising literacy rates among the world's poorest. It is charting the seas and space as the common property of humanity.

At another level, the UN is criticized for its failures — it hasn't stopped the slaughter of innocent people in Syria and Iraq, and there are still millions of destitute people. Speeches without end are made at the green marble podium in the General Assembly and float off into the atmosphere. When international tensions mount, the big powers frequently bypass the very body they built to guarantee security.

The pillars of human security are arms control and disarmament, sustainable economic and social development, environmental protection, and the advancement of human rights. That is the agenda of peace. But to advance that agenda, we have to make sense of the conflicting trends on the world scene today. Can the twenty-first century be a time of peace, or are we mired in the muck of hatred?

The United Nations is trying to lift up humanity, to show that over the horizon clearer waters are ahead. At its seventieth anniversary, it is time for the UN's human security work to be fairly presented, not with a cheerleading hurrah, but with a level-headed assessment of how the organization affects the life of every person on the planet

From the immediacy of coping with today's critical issues to the long-range betterment of the world for our grandchildren, the United Nations contributes to the well-being of humanity in ways that were hardly dreamed about a hundred years ago. That it has been able to uplift the whole of humanity in so many ways in its first seventy years is astounding. That it is still deprived of full political support and adequate funding is shameful.

The United Nations is by far the best instrument we have to cope with the common threats the world faces in the twenty-first century. When the Security Council acts in unity, it gets results: measures to curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons, elimination of Syria's chemical weapons, effective peacekeeping in the Central African Republic and other war-torn places. Global poverty, child mortality, and maternal deaths have been cut in half in the past twenty years by UN agencies.

Despite these accomplishments, the UN is too often dismissed by those in a hurry for instant solutions to problems that lie deep within the psyches of peoples and nations across the globe. The new instruments for peace the UN is trying to build are in the hands of fallible people, but that does not mean the essential ideas of justice the UN is promoting are deficient. On the contrary, it is the very largeness of the UN agenda that requires more time for fulfillment than those wedded to the daily news seem willing to allow. Those who do see the value of the UN ideal need to exercise courage and patience.

The UN should be regarded as a central dynamic organization helping populations everywhere to move forward. It is saving

the peace in diverse regions and lifting millions out of destitution. It is trying to prevent nuclear warfare and environmental catastrophe. It is developing everyone's human rights. Its core message insists seven billion people can live together in a culture of peace and emphasizes non-violence as a starting point. It is the base of our hopes for lasting peace.

With all its limitations, the United Nations is the most successful world political body humanity has ever known. No other peace effort in history — including the Thirty Years' Peace between Athens and Sparta in 446 BC, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which set up the nation-state system, or the ill-fated League of Nations, established after World War I — has had such a penetrating effect on the human journey.

Now, unfolding the Sustainable Development Goals, a plan to take the world to 2030, the UN is advancing a universal agenda for sustainable development applying to all countries. These are also Rotary's goals. This is the UN at its best. It has learned a lot about itself and the world in its first seventy years. Now it's time for the Government of Canada and the world to give the UN the support it needs for the next seventy.

