Introduction

The Secretary-General of the United Nations announced the launch of a Global Compact with a group of multinational corporations during the northern summer of 2000 - a period traditionally reserved for the release of controversial information which would otherwise attract unwelcome attention. Former senior diplomatic officials associated with the United Nations were taken by surprise. But, given the parties to the Compact, the surprise was perhaps greatest amongst international nongovernmental organizations.

This paper explores aspects of this arrangement in the light of the reactions it has aroused and what it implies as a strategic shift on the part of the United Nations.

It is important to stress that this paper does not focus on the many aspects of multinational corporations that are widely criticized. Modern society is now too complex to sustain simplistic arguments labeling them as 'evil' and implying that most people are not in some way implicated in their continued existence (whether as customers, employees, shareholders or suppliers). Nor is the focus on the need for the UN to establish some kind of relationship with such corporations as actors on the world scene - a point made by the author decades ago (Judge, 1969). Nor is it on the possibility of fruitful partnership between the UN and multinationals on specific projects.

The focus here is on the totally non-transparent manner in which this Global Compact has emerged - a process that justifies every manner of suspicion as to its merits and future implications for the UN as a trustworthy institution. In particular it is concerned with the ways in which this initiative is experienced as a betrayal by the United Nations of its own long-promulgated values - whether in the eyes of individuals or of the many nongovernmental organizations that have actively or passively supported the UN over many decades. It is concerned with the surreptitious manner in which partnership arrangements with multinationals are being agreed or foreseen, possibly to the detriment of other possible partnership arrangements with the UN.

1. Background to emergence of the Global Compact

2. The Global Compact of the United Nations
   - Launch
   - Status of the Global Compact
   - Rationale of the Global Compact: the 'only hope'
   - Support for the Global Compact
   - Variety of forms of globalization and global compact

3. UN Public relations and 'NGOs'
   - Core 'universal values' -- excluding honesty?
   - Image management and spin
   - Reform of the United Nations: sustaining the 'People of the Lie'?
   - Secrecy, betrayal and loss of integrity: the 'silent revolution'
   - Conceptual mafia
   - Definitional game-playing and dubious inferences
   - Sustaining a New World Order through a conceptual 'candy floss' strategy
   - Promoting globalization as a new world religion

4. Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and the Global Compact
   - Legal problem for the UN: are multinational corporations 'NGOs'?
   - UN's Legal problems of receiving funds from 'NGOs'
• Treatment of NGOs during the emergence of the Global Compact
• Attitude of NGOs to the Global Compact

5. Challenges arising from the UN’s Global Compact
• Personal challenge for the UN Secretary-general
• Challenge for international NGOs
• Challenge for multinational corporations
• Challenge for the United Nations
• Challenge for the planet: Lo-Cal Compact

• Globalization: the UN’s ‘safe haven’ for the world’s poor?
• Corporatizing the United Nations
• Preserving the United Nations

7. Conclusion

Whilst the nature of the Global Compact may continue to be reframed and redefined in response to criticism and aided by plausible deniability, the ongoing strategy from which it derives signals the beginning of the end for the United Nations. The UN has been ‘white-anted’ -- an Australian term for the destruction of any structure from within whilst maintaining an appearance of its solid normality to those who continue to dedicate their efforts to its values and projects. As a truly silent revolution, this is being achieved by the faceless conceptual henchmen of a variety of forces essentially antagonistic to the UN -- who seemingly hold the Secretary-general hostage, or who have successfully duped him into support of what amounts to a Ponzi scheme.

But from an NGO perspective, the Global Compact initiative could also be said to be part of the process of ‘white-anting’ the relationship between the UN and NGOs. It still exists in appearance and to enthusiasts but it has been subverted from within in ways that have radically changed its nature -- and the value to be attached to it by the more discerning. NGOs now depend on UN trustworthiness at their peril. This parallels the attitude of ‘we the peoples’ in relation to governments -- even in democratic societies.

Curiously, the annual World Economic Forum in Davos now gathers people of greater import to the media than the General Assembly of the United Nations -- whether delegates from intergovernmental bodies, government leaders, multinational CEOs, representatives of civil society NGOs, academics, or journalists. It receives better media coverage. More curious still is that the World Economic Forum is itself an ‘NGO’ acting effectively as the annual conference of the International Chamber of Commerce -- itself an ‘NGO’ also. Both happen to be ‘recognized’ by the UN. With the emergence of the World Social Forum, the locus of debate and decision-making may be moving rapidly out of the UN system.

Just as the League of Nations ceased to exist and was reborn in the UN, presumably the UN will in its turn cease to exist and be reborn in some more appropriate form. But rather than commemorate the UN as is done with the League (in traditional museum style in the Palais des Nations in Geneva), there is a case for the transformation of the UN into a living memorial to past hopes, complete with conferences and a functioning secretariat. This approach has been partially explored in various living ‘historical villages’ in different countries (eg Williamsburg in the USA). The Secretariat in New York could then be declared a World Heritage Site.

As a historical theme park of the future, lessons could be learnt from the current status of the English aristocracy and their stately homes. Civil servants and diplomats from various countries could take up honorary roles to enliven the experience for visitors.

Within such a context the Global Compact should be preserved and developed as a living memorial to shiftiness within the international community - namely how people and institutions seek to repaint and reposition themselves in the light of values of which they exhibit only limited understanding. Whilst the value of the Global Compact as a concept may be unquestionable, detecting its value in reality is rather like the classical con-game of ‘Find the Lady’. In practice it is always somewhere else, and never where one would have hoped it to be.

With respect to ‘globalization’ itself, the comment by Joseph Nye (Take Globalization Protests Seriously) is perhaps the most helpful, even though it offers no useful pointers:

‘We need to think harder about the norms and procedures for the governance of globalization. Denial of the problem, misleading domestic political analogies, and unexamined claims of democratic deficits will not do. We need changes in processes that allow politics more play and take advantage of the multiple forms of accountability found in modern democracies.’ (IHT, December 2000)

It could be argued that various sophisticated experiments in deregulation, notably the UK rail system and the Californian power system, suggest that there are major learnings to be absorbed by policy-makers and others who ignore the vulnerabilities of globalization. As presented, globalization is essentially a ‘fair-weather’ belief system reliant on economic growth. Like a balloon it can carry a load when there is positive pressure to sustain the envelope. When this is absent, the balloon has a tendency to collapse and sink to the ground. Globalization enthusiasts go into whisper mode following the bursting of the internet bubble and when there are rumours of American recession. But otherwise they pay no attention to the livelihoods and lifestyles that may be damaged by systems dependent on continuing growth.

In pursuing the globalization strategy of multinationals, the UN Secretary-general might be usefully reminded of the lessons to be learnt
from the ambitions of Pericles for ancient Athens in seeking to acquire dominion over its traditional enemy Sparta. His complex strategy, which promised so much in pursuit of the hegemony of the Athenian way of life, was dependent on a web of transportation (as with globalization). It brought Athens to ruin, through the unforeseen importation of plague to the overcrowded city -- leading to its totally surrender to Sparta. By what unforeseen factor might the Secretary-General's globalization strategy bring to ruin the United Nations?

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