

Why replace the UN with a directly-elected parliament?

The United Nations was founded a little more than 60 years ago. It was the good faith effort of a generation scarred by an unimaginably traumatic conflict to secure peace in perpetuity, to finally and forever replace war with consensus, discussion and law.

The results have been mixed. Since its inception in 1945, more than 40 million human beings have lost their lives in wars, and while the UN has almost certainly facilitated the avoidance of hundreds of conflicts (including THE BIG ONE ... so far) and mitigated the effects of many others, we have not progressed significantly from where we found ourselves at the close of WWII.

In fact Gulf War II and the “Bush doctrine,” by rehabilitating “pre-emptive” self-defence, have arguably left the human race a good bit worse off than we were in 1945. At least then, the raw memory of Nazi outrages prompted the signatories to endorse robust wording in the UN Charter, with the clear goal of taking war off the table as a “solution” to disagreement.

It is depressingly indicative of how far we have regressed that the clarity and strength of Article 2 of the Charter still has the power to surprise the 21st-century reader and outrage the occasional nationalist who stumbles across it.

Article 2

Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.

Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.

Wow! If only! So what went wrong? Basically, the UN founders completely undermined Article 2 by leaving the wiggle room, the great vaulting chasm, that is Article 51.

Article 51

Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.

Then, they made matters that much worse by immediately *petrifying* the Charter, rendering it hopelessly inflexible and impervious to change.

Article 109

Any alteration of the present Charter recommended by a two-thirds vote of the conference shall take effect when ratified in accordance with their respective constitutional processes by two thirds of the Members of the United Nations *including all the permanent members of the Security Council*. [Emphasis mine.]

Thus, like an insect trapped in amber, the UN became frozen forever, a political time capsule, a mere fossilized curiosity, reflecting the concerns, realities and geopolitics of a world long gone.

The global referendum initiative, as outlined in Jim Stark's recently published book, *Rescue Plan for Planet Earth*, has the grim reality of a politically dysfunctional, moribund world order as its wellspring. The initiative poses a simple, profound question to the global electorate: Do you support the creation of a directly-elected, representative and democratic world government?

There is of course a mountain of devil in the details, but the global referendum makes no attempt to address any of these issues, and this is its strength when compared to the myriad of complex efforts that have gone before. This simple question should prime the pump of public opinion and spur a frustrated and frequently angry global civil society to collective, peaceful action.

The need for global governance, so long back burnered, has finally become acute. We now have a global economy complete with supporting (but undemocratic) institutions, a global labour force, and technology, all facilitating unprecedented interconnectedness. Yet arguably the most critical structure of all, the political machinery of the planet, remains in a chronic state of disrepair. The clockwork mechanism put in place with so much hope and optimism in the middle of the 20th century has finally, and perhaps irretrievably, wound down.

Thus our embryonic planetary society finds itself at a dangerous, busy, crossroads. Not all of the choices open to us are good, some we may feel compelled to choose are obviously bad, but all of them are terrifying.

Option 1: Leave things as they are.

Option 2: Reform the UN.

Option 3: Replace the UN with an elected global parliament.

Option 4: Eventually blunder into yet another global war that may kill billions, lays waste to the planet, and if anyone survives, do Option 3 *anyway*.

The first option, leaving things as they are, is not a viable, practical or responsible choice. Things should not be left as they are, because frankly, things are very, very, very bad. The world is currently scarred with multiple simultaneous conflicts. It is in deep denial about climate change and suffering a massive democratic deficit politically, even as globalisation drives and deepens economic integration. Leaving things as they are is arguably the worst possible choice the human race could make.

Tinkering around the edges of the UN isn't much better than Option 1, but major surgery could have some utility. For instance, a widening of the security council to include India, Brazil, Japan, Germany or South Africa (to name but a few worthy entrants), votes weighted by population, and the elimination of vetoes would all represent real, tangible reform.

There is a snag though. The UN is fundamentally undemocratic, because all UN representatives are simply appointed; moreover, their interests are aligned with the

agenda of the *nation-state* that appointed them, not with the general global populace. All of the above applies squared to the G7, G8 and G20. In fact pretty much all the international machinery currently in place, or even under consideration, is fatally flawed in much the same way.

It seems self evident that Balkanising a world into arbitrary, artificial units armed to the teeth against each other is a “bad thing.” Imagine the same absurdly lethal arrangements at a municipal, provincial or state level? Yet nationalism is a hardy plant, with powerful roots sunk deep into the human psyche. It will not go quietly, and it is this deep-seated tribal instinct, such an integral part of our success as a species, that now threatens to overwhelm our efforts to forge a peaceful planetary civilisation based on agreed laws, fairly applied.

In the broadest possible terms, the global referendum is a simple gambit for legitimacy, aimed at getting a majority of humans to endorse the idea of directly-elected representatives at the global level. It is not an election, it is not even a referendum on a global constitution, but merely a thumbs up (or down!) to the active exploration of those ideas. Please bear this in mind as I discuss Option 3, the notion of a directly-elected chamber at the global level, and flesh out the detail of how such a system would work. I am not discussing the referendum itself here; rather, possible *outcomes* of a successful referendum. For a much more in-depth exploration of these waters, Jim Stark’s *Rescue Plan* is an indispensable aid to navigation.

Global governance should not be about absolute power, and nation-states would in any event refuse to accept such restrictive, centralised arrangements. It’s about extending, to the global tier, the pre-existing legal framework that operates within our cities, provinces and nation-states; the near-invisible societal scaffolding that allows us to go about our business unmolested—provided we respect the right of others to do the same.

Global governance is not about armies, weapons or firepower; it’s about harnessing the political voice of global civil society to say no to all war, or at the very least to insist on the right of global society to endorse or veto the option of war, whoever tables it. Global governance is about bringing the era of unilateralism to an end by making the potential political, economic and personal costs for the *individuals* responsible too great. It’s about making global law personal, applying it directly to individuals and eliminating the inherently unjust collective punishment of war.

A democratic world government will need to make maximum use of softpower; diplomacy, economics and legitimacy. In this triad, legitimacy will be by far its most powerful tool. There has never been a political entity elected by billions of people, and while the technical achievement will differ only in scale from much that has gone before, the political achievement will be unprecedented. Global society handed President Bush (and the Republican Party) a bloody political nose, in part because he gave the UN the metaphorical finger. A politician extending that finger to the directly-elected representatives of a global parliament, a body legitimised by the choices of *billions*, will likely have it bitten off. Metaphorically.

Option 4 may seem a peculiar one to include, but it illustrates an important point; a pattern that has begun to emerge of crisis, followed by closer integration.

At the end of WWI, the League of Nations was created as a response to that conflict. Modern war with its enormous death tolls, the industrialisation of murder, was considered too horrifying an option to keep on the table any longer.

Unfortunately, a generation of Germans raised under the shadow of a bitter and oppressive peace was convinced by a charismatic and successful Fuehrer that new weapons, tactics and leadership would restore the utility of war. Hitler was of course correct, at least in the short term, racking up a number of spectacular military successes before the allies caught up, overwhelmed the Wehrmacht, and the 1000-year Reich imploded.

At the close of WWII, some 55 million human beings had been shot, gassed, blown to pieces or incinerated in the firestorms of Coventry, Dresden and Hiroshima. Out of this maelstrom emerged the UN, an institution that despite the genetic flaws that would render it irrelevant by the turn of the 21st century, was orders of magnitude more robust, responsive and representative than the League. This conflict also produced an embryonic EU, as well as a cluster of related global organs and institutions.

It seems our species needs a crisis before it will make the hard decisions, and accepting global governance and the unprecedented pooling of sovereignty it represents will be one of the hardest decisions we will ever have to make. Yet we must be ruthlessly honest with ourselves and ask, "Are we likely to dodge the bullets of fate forever?" Accepting a world *eternally* separated into jealously sovereign, heavily armed camps seems fairly poor stewardship, a desperate, barren gamble on a status quo that has, hitherto, given us little cause for confidence.

We must make the hard choices, and soon. We cannot wait for the next crisis to overwhelm us; the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons idling in silos from Siberia to Nebraska, underscore how impoverished an alternative that really is.

While the opportunity for reasoned and careful deliberation still exists, we need to take the next logical step of integration now, to secure peace, prosperity and freedom for all the people of our world. A global referendum on a directly-elected, representative and democratic world government is a feasible, constructive and above all *comprehensible* first step, which would likely pass with a substantial majority. Until someone comes up with a better idea, we should all be promoting this one.