Does the UN Do Any Good?

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Is the United Nations still a force for good in the world? It’s a question doesn’t come up much in Canada, owing to this country’s weird habit of investing blue helmets with the totemic power of fetish objects. But as we head into 2016, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau having given every impression that Canada’s foreign policy exertions will be substantially redirected through the UN, it’s a question well worth asking.

Looking at just a few of the UN’s most recent “achievements,” it’s hard to answer in the affirmative. The Syrian catastrophe is just one of the UN’s most spectacular ongoing failures, and not just in terms of the scale of the horror. It’s in the UN’s abysmal dereliction of every responsibility the creaking institution’s many Liberal champions rely upon to justify the placement of junior Canadian diplomats throughout the UN’s comfortable salons and nearly innumerable talking shops.

In Syria alone, mass atrocity, genocide, war crimes, the indiscriminate slaughter of civilian populations, the bombing of hospitals and schools, the resort to chemical warfare, the arbitrary deployment of armed force by UN member states — each of these are savageries the UN is specifically mandated to prevent. The outrages have proceeded without let or cease in Syria for five long years now, and the UN has even managed to make a mockery of its mandates in the provision of emergency humanitarian aid and the protection of refugees.

The UN’s strenuous production of commemorative propaganda this year, to mark the 70th anniversary of its founding proceedings in San Francisco, have not helped matters. There were roving photo exhibitions, high-minded addresses to conferences and performances of the United Nations Symphony Orchestra (there really is such a thing), and the Egyptian pyramids, the Empire State Building in New York, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lampur were all lit up in blue light. Lovely.

But none of it, not the performances of Chinese concert pianist Lang Lang, not the Sept. 21 celebrations of the International Day of Peace, nor the grand United Nations Day concerts on Oct. 24, could conceal that the UN is looking more and more like its predecessor, the League of Nations, in its twilight years. The League was sustained by delusions right up until 1939, putting the cause of global peace and security into hiatus until the Axis Powers were finally crushed in 1945.

To imagine that the happy Canadian enthusiasm for the UN is universal is to ignore not only the grievances of Israel, which is routinely and ritually traduced by the UN’s absurdly named Human Rights Council, which is itself is little more than an arrangement of cushions for the big backsides of some of the world’s most notorious torturers. It is also to ignore the UN’s squandering of its credibility, noticed most loudly and acutely among the world’s 350-million Arabs, more than a billion South Asians and another billion Africans.

This is not to argue for multilateral abstentionism or to make the case that the UN’s institutions are all equally useless. Even as an elaborately structured conventioneering agency, the UN can serve constructive purposes, as it did during the recent Conference of the Parties gathering in Paris, where delegates hammered down a voluntary formula to keep the rise in global temperatures below two degrees of pre-industrial levels. If the accord fails, the UN certainly cannot be blamed for that.

There is also the necessary and often overlooked work carried out by more than a dozen UN agencies and UN-related organizations. Canada could make much use of itself by stepping up its contributions to several of them, perhaps especially the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

But for all the commendable idealism in the Liberal party’s campaign pledges, there is a great deal of humbug as well, and Trudeau’s rare unscripted comments on foreign affairs don’t exactly entrench confidence in his gravitas on the state of the world. More darkly, at the edges of Trudeau’s circle of confidantes are quite a few relics from the Liberal party’s Upper Mesozoic era, whose lurid “world stage” ideas (a free trade deal with the dictatorship in Beijing is just one of the worst) have taken on renewed currency.

And if Trudeau can so quickly jettison the pledges he made about the resettlement of Syrian refugees — the campaign promise of direct federal sponsorship of 25,000 Syrians before the year’s end has withered into the post-election reality of perhaps a 10th of that — then he should at least have the decency to climb down from the nonsense he and his ministers have persisted in circulating about their Conservative predecessors.

Like this bit from the Liberal party’s spiffy 88-page “Real Change” campaign platform: “We will take immediate steps to reopen Canada’s doors,” as if Canada’s doors were closed during former prime minister Stephen Harper’s term in office. They sure weren’t closed to the 1.6-million people granted Canadian citizenship during the Harper decade. It is humbug of the same degree for the Liberals to assert that the Conservatives “turned their backs” on the UN, notwithstanding the contempt you could pick up in the tone Harper and his long-serving Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird would take whenever the subject of the UN came up.

There’s a heap of humbug too in the Liberal claim that the Harper government’s lack of enthusiasm for UN peacekeeping operations could not have come at a worse time because the demand for blue helmets had “never been greater.” You don’t have to be an avid student of history to be aware that what the UN wanted most from Canada during the Harper decade was hard-headed fighting troops in Afghanistan, where blue helmets had no purpose to serve.

According to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, the UN’s “number one” problem with peacekeeping at the moment involves the impunity demanded by Congolese, Pakistani and Nigerian generals when their blue-helmeted heroes are found to be raping and murdering the people they’re supposed to be protecting in the Central African Republic, Haiti, Mali and other such hellholes.

What threatens the United Nations more than anything else, as has been most obscenely evident in the Syrian tragedy, is that the UN Charter assigns responsibility for international peace and security to the 15-member UN Security Council. Five Security Council members — the primary victors from the death heaps of the Second World War — hold veto power over its decisions. Britain, the United States and France are democracies, but Russia and China are not. They are police states.

Even though Russia has approved Security Council resolutions prohibiting the mass murder of civilians in Syria, for instance, President Vladimir Putin has only turned around to join in the slaughter. Russian warplanes have killed at least 600 Syrian civilians since Putin’s bombs started falling in September.

Efforts to reform the Security Council — to break the minority veto power and to make the council more effectively representative of the world’s peoples, among other things — have been ongoing since the early 1990s. If Prime Minister Trudeau would want Canada to make a genuine contribution to the UN, then whining about the absence of the Maple Leaf as a Security Council table ornament won’t do.

Canada should set its sights on reform, working with other democracies, most obviously India, on that agenda. If we really want to “punch above our weight,” we should start there, at the top.