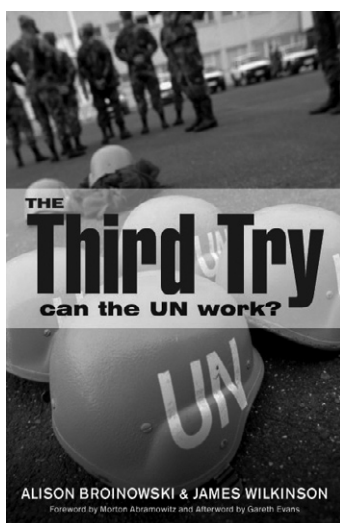


A miserable trilogy

Andrew McIntyre reviews
*The Third Try: Can the UN
work?*

By Alison Broinowski & James
Wilkinson
(Scribe, Melbourne
2005, 208 pages)



No prize for guessing the answer. In time for the sixtieth anniversary celebrations of the United Nations, two former diplomats—one Australian, the other American—have produced an autopsy of this organisation and somehow declared that it still has life. Much ink has flowed on the ills of the UN and most commentators have called for urgent reform. This book, however, must be seen as one of the most extraordinary triumphs of optimism over reality in recent book publishing history.

Broinowski and Wilkinson give the appearance of doing an even-handed and thorough analysis of the organisation's shortcomings. They tackle it under the three key planks from the Preamble to the UN Charter:

- Ending the scourge of war;
- Reaffirming faith in fundamental human rights; and
- Promoting social progress and better standards of life 'in larger freedom'.

The sentimental and idealistic vagueness of these three statements infects the whole book, as indeed it already does the UN.

In an attempt at ruggedness, they enquire 'Cynics ask whether any of the successes of the last six decades were really due to the UN, or just to the

fact of cooperation among the liberal democracies that have given the money and called the shots'. Of course, very quickly the reader discovers that the UN's shortcomings are all the *fault* of liberal democracies or, more especially, the United States.

While it is absolutely true that one can point to successes in peace-keeping, supervision of elections, emergency aid, health and education projects, etc., one has to make the obvious observation that some good must come from so much effort and spent treasury. But what of the cynical *Economist* which observed that, in the 680 international conflicts between 1945 and 1989, the UN sat by and watched? On the Volker Report and the oil-for-food scandal? This book endorses the view that the oil-for-food scandal was the fault of an intellectually dishonest campaign by UN congressional conservatives and a right-wing commentariat aimed at destroying the UN as an institution.

Nowhere to be seen are the essential criticisms of the UN. No discussion of the UN's democratic deficit due to the structural effect of an unaccountable body. No awareness of the nature and functioning of the activist

transnational progressives and the ways in which they use the UN to threaten sovereignty and democratic traditions within nation states. Instead, there is a bland attack on the neo-cons, George Bush and John Howard, as central factors for why the United Nations is failing. The USA and Australia don't support Kyoto or the ICC, and they went into Iraq.

Moreover, nowhere do the authors ask the most important questions of political science: Who governs? Where does authority reside? How are rulers chosen? Tackling the obvious faults and shortcomings, avoiding the main game, and then pleading for urgent reform that never comes is not an incisive critique.

The corruption and moral vacuum in the peak council of the UN is only complimented by the authors' hypocritical insistence on the moral and legal authority that they believe the UN deserves. Forget about the role of China and Russia in the UN's repeated failure to do anything about its own resolutions on Saddam. Just remember Kofi Annan's response: 'Serious nations could not be bought or sold!' Tell that to President Chirac.

Gareth Evans graces the pages of the book in an *Afterword*. All the promised and needed reforms rehearsed in the book and endorsed by 'Gareth Gareth' have now fallen to water. On the eve of the sixtieth anniversary in October, the former Australian Foreign Minister declared the botched attempt at wholesale reform 'a depressing disaster'. The last words should be left to him: 'It is still the piranha pool of diplomats enjoying tearing flesh off each other, to the total exclusion of any enthusiasm for high principle or effectiveness of the organisation'.

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