

The Blair Files

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Let's Talk

There's your founding principle of the United Nations. Of course, in its own version, the UN uses rather more words: 'To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples' etc, etc, and so on, until sleep or death intervene. But talking about problems as a means of solving them is central. Sounds sweet, doesn't it?

Except that talking about problems doesn't always solve them, especially in cases where the person you're talking to is the problem—as in the Middle East, where years of talking to Yasser Arafat has led not to peace, but to families being blown to pieces.

Or where the discussion is framed in such a way as to create more problems—as at last year's UN Conference Against Racism, which provoked the worst outpouring of racism since lynch mobs prowled the Deep South.

Or when someone from the UN is doing the talking.

Oh, they do so love to talk. It saves them the trouble of actually doing anything. See if you can identify UN human rights worrier Mary Robinson's post-September 11 feelings from the following edited transcript, taken from a BBC interview she gave last December:

I am concerned ... I am concerned that in the way in which events have developed, the long-suffering people of Afghanistan, are paying a very high price ... the concern that I have ... Our joint concern is that any measures taken to combat terrorism must be within very strict limits and must

uphold the values of human rights and mustn't erode them ...

I am concerned ... it's hard to analyse everything and I am concerned ... I am concerned about that prison revolt. I am concerned about the reports we've had ... the United Nations is very concerned about human rights problems ... governments have to be concerned about violations of human rights by governments elsewhere ... I am and continue to be very concerned ... I am concerned that the United States and other countries may ease up on addressing the human rights violations.

At a glance, I'd say Mary was concerned.

She'd do better to be concerned about her own organization, which lately has been exposed as a hive of sex-for-rations gangsters (in places like Guinea and Liberia), a haven for murderous liars (Robert Mugabe brazenly told the UN's hunger conference this year that starvation in Zimbabwe was caused by a famine, instead of his policy of 'removing' white farmers) and an active hazard in the cause for peace in the Middle East.

In the wake of Israel's counter-attack in Jenin, following the terrorist deaths of dozens of Israelis, and with soon-disproved claims that hundreds of Palestinian civilians had died in that attack being floated by Palestinian propagandists, here's how the UN's special co-ordinator for the Middle East, Terje Roed-Larsen, summed up events: 'Israel has lost all moral ground in the conflict'.

Hey, Terje; I thought you were there to make friends, not point

fingers. Especially before the evidence was in—which showed you and the Palestinians to be exactly wrong.

Australia pays a disproportionate amount of attention to UN talk. In 2000, the broadsheet newspapers and the ABC ran hot on the UN's condemnation of mandatory sentencing in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The shouting didn't abate even when it was revealed that the author of the negative UN report, American activist Ms Gay McDougall, had never bothered to visit Australia. She'd just listened, in the UN's way, to a whole bunch of talk.

So why have anything to do with the UN? Why should it exist? Why do nations need a level of foreign representation above diplomats and consulates? I asked this of Keith Suter, former president of the United Nations Association of Australia, a few weeks ago when we discussed the UN on ABC radio. He looked astonished. I had to repeat the question.

His answer went along these lines: We need the UN to provide safety and stability in this dangerous world. In fact, we need the UN now more than ever, because the world is now so much more dangerous.

That would be the world the UN has overseen for the past five decades. And he continued: If the UN didn't exist, small countries like Australia would never get a chance to have their say on world events.

In other words, let's talk.

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