

## COMMISSION DIPLOMACY

Gareth Evans

---

High level panels and commissions of the global great and good, delivering themselves of weighty reports on matters of international policy moment, were almost unknown until the later Cold War years but have become in recent decades a very busy second track diplomatic industry. Lester Pearson's *Partners in Development* report in 1969 was an early foretaste of what was to come, but the pace was really set by Willy Brandt's Independent Commission on International Development Issues report, *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, in 1980, followed shortly thereafter by major reports from Olaf Palme's Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues in 1982 and Gro Harlem Brundtland's World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

Since then more than another thirty such commissions have come and gone, harnessing the collective talents of over five hundred individual commissioners and panelists to report on issues across the security, development and general governance spectrum (see accompanying Table).<sup>1</sup> And three more have been announced while this chapter was in preparation – on the death penalty, drug policy and elections, chaired respectively by Frederico Mayor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Kofi Annan.<sup>2</sup>

The distinctive characteristics of these commissions and panels are that they are convened to address particular international policy problems (albeit often extremely broadly defined); the problems they address are global rather than country-specific or regional in scope;<sup>3</sup> their advice, though formally sought by a particular international organization, government or combination of sponsors, is directed to the broader international community; their membership is international; they are

---

<sup>1</sup> Citations for each commission report referred to in this chapter appear in the Table. Although there is much writing about major individual commissions and panels, their role and significance generally has not generated a large literature. The most useful reviews are Unto Vesa, ed., *Global Commissions Assessed* (Helsinki: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2005), accessible at [http://www.helsinki.fi/netcomm/ImgLib/24/89/helsinki\\_process\\_publication\\_series\\_4\\_2005.pdf](http://www.helsinki.fi/netcomm/ImgLib/24/89/helsinki_process_publication_series_4_2005.pdf) and Ramesh Thakur, Andrew F. Cooper and John English, eds., *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2005). Many of the more important commissions are discussed in Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerji and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas that Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), and there is a useful compilation of data in Frederic Lapeyre, "The outcome and impact of the main international commissions on development issues", Working Paper No. 20, World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, ILO, 2004, at [http://www.uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/dvlp/documents/lapeyre\\_wp30.pdf](http://www.uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/dvlp/documents/lapeyre_wp30.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> International Commission against the Death Penalty, initiated by Spain October 2010, <http://www.icomdp.org>; Global Commission on Drug Policy, initiated by the International Drug Policy Consortium January 2011, <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org>; Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security, initiated by International IDEA and Kofi Annan Foundation March 2011, [http://www.idea.int/elections/global\\_commission\\_launch.cfm](http://www.idea.int/elections/global_commission_launch.cfm)

<sup>3</sup> Regionally-focused commissions and their reports not treated here include, for example, the Commission for Africa, chaired by Tony Blair (2005, 2010); the Partnership for the Americas Commission, chaired by Ernesto Zedillo and Thomas Pickering (2008), and the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, chaired by Cesar Gavaria, Ernesto Zedillo and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (2009). The Kosovo Commission (2000, 2001) might be thought an exception to the "not country specific" rule, but it is included here as making an important contribution to the global debate on humanitarian intervention and proper guidelines for the use of military force: see Richard J. Goldstone and Nicole Fritz, "Fair Assessment: The Independent International Commission on Kosovo" in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp. 167-179.

independent in character, with their members appointed in their personal capacity rather than as representatives of their states or organizations, even if holding executive office at the time; and they have a finite rather than ongoing life-span (most commonly two to three years).

These elements, in combination, distinguish the commissions whose role and impact is reviewed here from many other bodies with confusingly similar titles, for example standing policy development bodies like the UN's Commission on the Status of Women and its regional Economic Commissions for Africa, Europe and elsewhere; intergovernmental resource management agencies like the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (sometimes irreverently referred to as the International Conspiracy to Catch All Tuna); other ongoing specific purpose intergovernmental organizations like the International Commission on Missing Persons and professional ones like the International Commission on the Biological Effects of Noise; regularly convening discussion forums like the Trilateral Commission; and commissions or panels of enquiry into specific events, like Eli Weisel's International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania.

The impact of the commissions and panels under review has varied enormously. Some have fundamentally changed the terms of international policy debate – the Brundtland Commission's introduction of the concept of “sustainable development” being the clearest and best known example – but a number of others, perhaps too many for comfort given the resources and energy invested in them, have sunk utterly without trace. The discussion which follows will seek to evaluate the utility and significance of “commission diplomacy” overall, and to explain – at least from one insider's perspective<sup>4</sup> – why some commissions are successful and others are not.

### **The Contribution of Commission Diplomacy**

The necessary threshold question is what counts as success. Is it operational: achieving specific policy action - or at least clarifying and setting action agendas which are embraced by the relevant players? Is it normative: changing the terms of the policy debate on some issue in a way which is better likely to produce consensus over time, if not immediately? Is it enough that a commission simply raises the profile of an issue or problem which has been neglected, if nothing else changes? Or that the commission can reasonably claim to have added to the general store of knowledge?

The short answer is that an ideally successful commission would touch every one of these bases: add knowledge, raise the global profile of an issue, find new and more consensual ways of debating it, set a credible policy agenda with measurable milestones, and directly influence specific policy actions which are widely seen as beneficial in terms of helping to reduce deadly conflict, improve the quality of human life, better protect the environment or make for better global or national governance.

---

<sup>4</sup> The author has been directly involved in six of the commissions and panels discussed in this chapter: assembling one for a sponsoring government (the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons), co-chairing two (the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament), and being a member of three others (the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict; the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change; and the International Task Force on Global Public Goods). Most of his experience has been with commissions in the peace and security area, and the examples given in the discussion which follows will for the most part reflect that.

## International Policy Commissions & Panels 1960-2010<sup>5</sup>

### A. Security Focused

Name	Initiating or Major Sponsoring Government/ Organization	Chair	Report	Major Report
<b>Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues</b>	Austria et al	Olof Palme +15 commissioners	Common Security. A Programme for Disarmament (Published Pan Books 1982)	1982
<b>Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues</b>	Switzerland et al	Sadrudin Aga Khan, Prince Hassan bin Talal + 26 commissioners	Winning the Human Race? (Published Zed Books 1998)	1988
<b>Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons</b>	Australia	Richard Butler +16 commissioners	Report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons <a href="http://www.dfat.gov.au/cc/index.html">http://www.dfat.gov.au/cc/index.html</a>	1996
<b>Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict</b>	Carnegie Corporation of New York	David A. Hamburg, Cyrus R. Vance +14 commissioners	Preventing Deadly Conflict <a href="http://www.wilsoncenter.org/subsites/cc/pdc/pubs/rept97/finfr.htm">http://www.wilsoncenter.org/subsites/cc/pdc/pubs/rept97/finfr.htm</a>	1997
<b>Independent International Commission on Kosovo</b>	Sweden et al	Justice Richard Goldstone, Carl Tham +11 commissioners	The Kosovo Report (Published Oxford University Press 2000) Why Conditional Independence? <a href="http://heimat.de/home/illyria/kosovocommission.org_report_english_2001.pdf">http://heimat.de/home/illyria/kosovocommission.org_report_english_2001.pdf</a>	2000 2001
<b>Panel on United Nations Peace Operations</b>	United Nations	Lakhdar Brahimi +9 panelists	Report of the Panel On United Nations Peace Operations <a href="http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/">http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/</a>	2000
<b>International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS)</b>	Canada	Gareth Evans, Mohamed Sahnoun +10 commissioners	The Responsibility to Protect <a href="http://www.iciss.ca/menu-en.asp">http://www.iciss.ca/menu-en.asp</a>	2001
<b>Commission on Human Security</b>	Japan	Sadako Ogata, Amartya Sen +10 commissioners	Human Security Now <a href="http://www.humansecurity-chs.org/finalreport/index.html">http://www.humansecurity-chs.org/finalreport/index.html</a>	2003
<b>High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change</b>	United Nations	Anand Panyarachun +15 panelists	A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility <a href="http://www.un.org/secureworld/">http://www.un.org/secureworld/</a>	2004
<b>Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission</b>	Sweden	Hans Blix +13 commissioners	Weapons of Terror <a href="http://www.wmdcommission.org/files/Weapons_of_Terror.pdf">http://www.wmdcommission.org/files/Weapons_of_Terror.pdf</a>	2006
<b>Independent Commission on the Role of the IAEA to 2020 and Beyond</b>	IAEA	Ernesto Zedillo +17 commissioners	Reinforcing the Global Nuclear Order for Peace and Prosperity: The Role of the IAEA to 2020 and Beyond <a href="http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/PDF/2020report0508.pdf">http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/PDF/2020report0508.pdf</a>	2007
<b>International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND)</b>	Australia, Japan	Gareth Evans, Yoriko Kawaguchi +13 commissioners	Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policymakers <a href="http://www.icnnd.org/reference/reports/ent/index.html">http://www.icnnd.org/reference/reports/ent/index.html</a>	2009

<sup>5</sup> This table seeks to be a comprehensive list of all the commissions and panels reporting during this period that satisfy the criteria in the text, but paucity of accessible data for the earlier years and issues of definition at the margin, are bound to have resulted in both real and perceived omissions. The author is indebted to Gloria Martinez and Ben Parr for research assistance in its compilation.

## B. Development Focused

Name	Initiating or Major Sponsoring Government/ Organization	Chair	Report	Major report
<b>Commission on International Development</b>	World Bank	Lester Pearson + 8 commissioners	Partners in Development (Published Praeger 1969)	1969
<b>Independent Commission on International Development Issues</b>	Netherlands et al	Willy Brandt +17 commissioners	North-South: A Programme for Survival (Published MIT Press 1980)	1980
			Common Crisis: North-South Cooperation for World Recovery (Published MIT Press 1983)	1983
<b>World Commission on Environment and Development</b>	United Nations	Gro Harlem Brundtland +20 commissioners	Our Common Future: The World Commission on Environment and Development (Published Oxford University Press 1987) <a href="http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm">http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm</a>	1987
<b>The South Commission</b>	Malaysia	Julius Nyerere +26 commissioners	The Challenge to the South (Published Oxford University Press 1990)	1990
<b>International Commission on Peace and Food</b>	United Nations	M.S. Swaminathan +24 commissioners	Uncommon Opportunities: An Agenda for Peace and Equitable Development (Published Zed Books 1994) <a href="http://www.icpd.org/UncommonOpp/inde.htm">http://www.icpd.org/UncommonOpp/inde.htm</a>	1994
<b>World Commission on Culture and Development</b>	UNESCO	Javier Peres de Cuellar + 13	Our Creative Diversity <a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001016/101651e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001016/101651e.pdf</a>	1995
<b>Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life</b>	UNESCO et al	Maria de Lourdes Pomtasilgo +18 commissioners	Caring for the Future: Making the Next Decades Provide a Life Worth Living (Published Oxford University Press 1996)	1996
<b>World Commission on Dams</b>	World Bank, IUCN-The World Conservation Union	Kader Asmal +11 commissioners	Dams & Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making <a href="http://hqweb.unep.org/dams/WCD/report/WCD_DAMS%20report.pdf">http://hqweb.unep.org/dams/WCD/report/WCD_DAMS%20report.pdf</a>	2001
<b>High Level Panel on Financing for Development</b>	United Nations	Ernesto Zedillo +10 panelists	Financing for Development <a href="http://www.un.org/reports/financing/">http://www.un.org/reports/financing/</a>	2001
<b>Commission on Macroeconomics and Health</b>	World Health Organization	Jeffrey Sachs +17 commissioners	Macroeconomics and Health: Investing in Health for Economic Development <a href="http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2001/924154550x.pdf">http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2001/924154550x.pdf</a>	2001
<b>Commission on Private Sector and Development</b>	United Nations	Paul Martin, Ernesto Zedillo +15 commissioners	Unleashing Entrepreneurship. Making Business Work for the Poor <a href="http://www.undp.org/cpsd/documents/report/english/fullreport.pdf">http://www.undp.org/cpsd/documents/report/english/fullreport.pdf</a>	2004
<b>World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation</b>	International Labour Organization	Tarja Halonen, Benjamin Mkapa +19 commissioners	A Fair Globalisation: Creating Opportunities for All <a href="http://www.ilo.org/fairglobalization/report/lang-en/index.htm">http://www.ilo.org/fairglobalization/report/lang-en/index.htm</a>	2004
<b>Global Commission on International Migration</b>	United Nations	Jan Karlsson, Mamphela Ramphele +18 commissioners	Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action <a href="http://www.gcim.org/en/">http://www.gcim.org/en/</a>	2005
<b>Global Commission on Social Determinants of Health</b>	World Health Organization	Michael Marmot +18 commissioners	Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health <a href="http://www.who.int/social_determinants/th">http://www.who.int/social_determinants/th</a>	2008

			ecommission/en/	
<b>UN Millennium Project</b>	United Nations	Jeffrey Sachs + 25 task force coordinators	Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals <a href="http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/report/fullreport.htm">http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/report/fullreport.htm</a>	2005
<b>Commission on Growth and Development</b>	Australia, Netherlands, Sweden, UK, Hewlett Foundation, World Bank	Michael Spence +21 commissioners	The Growth Report: Strategies for Sustained Growth and Inclusive Development <a href="http://www.growthcommission.org/index.php?Itemid=169&amp;id=96&amp;option=com_content&amp;task=view">http://www.growthcommission.org/index.php?Itemid=169&amp;id=96&amp;option=com_content&amp;task=view</a>	2008
<b>Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor</b>	United Nations	Madeleine Albright, Hernando de Soto +22 commissioners	Making the Law Work for Everyone <a href="http://www.undp.org/legalempowerment/reports/concept2action.html">http://www.undp.org/legalempowerment/reports/concept2action.html</a>	2008

### C. Governance Focused

Name	Initiating or Major Sponsoring Government/ Organization	Chair	Report	Major report
<b>Independent Advisory Group on UN Financing</b>	Ford Foundation	Shijuro Ogata Paul Volcker + 9 members	Financing an Effective United Nations (Published by Ford Foundation, 1993)	1993
<b>Independent Working Group on the Future of the United Nations</b>	Ford Foundation	Moeen Qureshi Richard von Weizacker +10 members	The United Nations in the Second Half-Century <a href="http://www.library.yale.edu/un/unhome.htm">http://www.library.yale.edu/un/unhome.htm</a>	1995
<b>Commission on Global Governance</b>	Sweden, Netherlands, Norway et al	Ingvar Carlsson, Shridath Ramphal +26 commissioners	Our Global Neighbourhood  (Published by Oxford University Press 2005)	1995
<b>Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations</b>	United Nations	Fernando Henrique Cardoso +11 panelists	Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations  <a href="http://www.un.org/reform/civilsociety/panel.shtml">http://www.un.org/reform/civilsociety/panel.shtml</a>	2004
<b>High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence</b>	United Nations	Shaukat Aziz, Luisa Dias Diogo, Jens Stoltenberg +12 panelists	Delivering as One: Report of the High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment  <a href="http://www.un.org/events/panel/">http://www.un.org/events/panel/</a>	2006
<b>International Taskforce on Global Public Goods</b>	France, Sweden	Ernesto Zedillo, Tidjane Thiam +15 members	Meeting Global Challenges: International Cooperation in the National Interest  (Published ITFG/ Swedish Foreign Ministry 2006)  <a href="http://www.ycsg.yale.edu/activities/collaborations_taskforce.html">http://www.ycsg.yale.edu/activities/collaborations_taskforce.html</a>	2006
<b>High Level Commission on Modernizing the Governance of the World Bank Group</b>	World Bank	Ernesto Zedillo + 10 members	Repowering the World Bank for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century  <a href="http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NEWS/Resources/WBGovernanceCOMMISSIONREPORT.pdf">http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NEWS/Resources/WBGovernanceCOMMISSIONREPORT.pdf</a>	2009

But it is important not to set the bar too high about what is achievable, particularly when it comes to direct policy outputs. Independent advisory bodies by definition have no executive decision-making authority, and even when a government or intergovernmental policy decision is in accordance with a particular commission recommendation, in the absence of any direct acknowledgement (and in a competitive political world those who deserve credit are not always given it), there will often be a question as to whether or to what extent it was caused by it. Few if any commissions could claim success against every one of these criteria, but many can reasonably claim to have justified their existence by making a substantial and lasting contribution in relation to at least one or two.<sup>6</sup>

### *Operational Impact*

There are fewer clear examples than one might expect of commission reports generating directly attributable executive action. While the commissions chaired by Jeffrey Sachs (on Macroeconomics and Health in 2001, and the UN Millennium Project in 2005), for instance, have generated a vast number of specific practical recommendations on the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the take-up rate to date has been quite low. The Pearson Commission (1969) – strongly supported by the Brandt Commission (1980) – can reasonably claim original authorship of the 0.7 per cent of GDP target for Overseas Development Assistance now universally accepted as at least an aspirational goal,<sup>7</sup> The Brandt Commission itself can reasonably claim to have had a catalytic effect on the 1981 North-South Summit in Cancun, which can in turn be viewed as an important precursor to the 2000 UN Millennium Summit which advanced the MDGs.<sup>8</sup> But the most directly influential of all the development-focused reports to date – not only in its normative but its operational impact – has probably been the Brundtland Commission (1987). It directly generated the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the then largest ever meeting of world leaders, which in turn led to the Kyoto Agreements on climate, the Biodiversity Convention and Agenda 21, as well as helping the establishment of the Ozone Layer Protocol and stimulating a multitude of other ongoing international, regional, national and local initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

On the security side, Lakhdar Brahimi's Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (2000) produced a number of important changes to peacekeeping practice in the aftermath of the debacles in the 1990s in Srebrenica and elsewhere, when blue helmeted soldiers found themselves without the mandate or capacity to protect civilians under threat of deadly violence. More recently, the military interventions in Libya and to some extent Cote d'Ivoire in early 2011 were based on direct invocation by the UN Security Council of the "responsibility to protect" concept championed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001 and the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004), and

---

<sup>6</sup> Ed Luck, writing in the specific context of commissions on UN reform, usefully suggests three standards for success, covering most of the substance of the "normative" and "operational" criteria identified here: "Did the report affect how policy makers, opinion leaders, and publics think about an issue, weigh policy options, or prioritize interests and values? Did the report set forth fresh concepts and proposals for change and/or reform, even if they were not achieved in the short run? Did the report spur the process of change, speed the ripening process, help build constituencies for change, or expand the boundaries of what is widely considered to be feasible and reasonable?": Edward C.Luck, "The UN Reform Commissions: Is anyone listening?" in Ramesh Thakur, Andrew F.Cooper and John English, eds., *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2005), pp. 277-287 at p.278.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas G. Weiss and Ramesh Thakur, *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp.170-171.

<sup>8</sup> On the Millennium Development Goals, see Weiss and Thakur, *Global Governance*, pp.184-191.

<sup>9</sup> See Vesa, *Global Commissions*, p.31; Jolly, Emmerji and Weiss, *UN Ideas*, pp.152-154.

subsequently embraced by the UN General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit. No such consensus had been previously possible around the previously argued “right of humanitarian intervention” in the even more conscience-shocking mass atrocity crime situations that erupted in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s, and it is reasonable to directly attribute the change to the work of these commissions.

A number of commissions, in the security as well as development areas, have played a significant role, if not in generating clear-cut specific executive action, at least in clarifying and setting *agendas* for action which have been widely seen as useful by policymakers. The report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (2009) had only a limited direct impact on the language of the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, but its systematic crafting of very detailed action agendas, with identified benchmarks along the way, for the short-term to 2012, the medium-term to 2025 and the longer-term thereafter was seen by many participating states as an important guide to future priorities which would have a lasting impact.

Commissions focusing on governance issues have had varying operational impacts, with the most ambitious generally being the least visibly successful. The Carlsson-Ramphal Commission on Global Governance (1995) produced a hugely wide-ranging set of recommendations, many of which (like reform of the structure of the Security Council) have stimulated debate and remain on the international agenda, but only a handful – for example, that business recognise its responsibility to and contribute more to good global governance, translated by Kofi Annan at the World Economic Forum in 1999 into the “Global Compact” – have borne much fruit. Some commission recommendations which did have almost immediate effect were those of the Cardoso Panel on UN-Civil Society Relations (2004) relating to multi-constituency processes and partnerships, which were implemented shortly thereafter in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of that year.<sup>10</sup>

### *Normative Impact*

Perhaps the greatest of all contributions that global commissions are capable of making – and have made in a number of notable instances – is generating potentially game-changing *ideas*: new ways of thinking about unresolved policy issues with which policymakers have long wrestled. The overwhelming contribution of the Brundtland Commission in 1987 was to establish a new normative point of departure for virtually all environmental policy since, one which changed both the language and substance of international (and often national) discourse, by identifying “sustainable development” as conceptual ground that could be commonly shared between one-dimensional pro-growth supporters and environmental protectionists.<sup>11</sup>

No other development-focused commission can claim the same kind of success, although a reasonable argument can be made that the Brandt Commission (1980) was simply ahead of its time in identifying the interdependence and need for solidarity between the global North and South, ideas which have come more into their own in the Bretton Woods institutions and elsewhere in recent years with the accelerated pace of globalization.<sup>12</sup> On the wider governance front Sonny Ramphal makes the not unreasonable claim that the concept of “governance” itself – as distinct from

---

<sup>10</sup> See on the Global Compact see Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.41-42 and on the application of the Cardoso report Weiss and Thakur, *Global Governance*, pp.44-45.

<sup>11</sup> See Weiss and Thakur, *Global Governance*, pp.208-214.

<sup>12</sup> See Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.41-42.

“government” – only became common parlance with publication of the Commission on Global Governance’s report in 1995.<sup>13</sup>

It is in the security area that the normative impact of commission reports has been most visible, perhaps nowhere more so than in the recent ICISS and High Level Panel-led emergence, as noted already, of the “responsibility to protect”: an evidently game-changing bridge, in the context of mass atrocity crimes within states, between previously irreconcilable defenders of “the right to intervene” on the one hand and staunch defenders of more or less absolute state sovereignty on the other. It remains to be seen whether the Security Council-authorized interventions in Libya and Cote d’Ivoire in early 2011 set a new benchmark for more intense international engagement in these atrocity crime situations in the future, or will prove to be the high water mark from which the tide will recede. But the normative shift which has manifestly occurred at the time of writing will be, if sustained, one of the most substantial and fastest ever to occur.<sup>14</sup> An associated normative development over the last two decades has been an increasingly intense commitment by government policymakers and international organizations – albeit still more evident in their rhetoric than their commitment of resources – to a “culture of conflict prevention”, a commitment strongly encouraged by the very active and resource intensive Carnegie Commission on the Prevention of Deadly Conflict (1997), led by David Hamburg and Cyrus Vance.

The Palme Commission’s embrace in 1982 of the concept of “common security” –that states should seek to find their security with others, rather than against them – was expressly designed to offer an alternative to nuclear deterrence and an endless competitive arms race. The concept did not win much traction among Western policymakers at the time, but unquestionably (with Commission member Georgi Arbatov playing an important linking role) had a major influence on Mikhail Gorbachev’s thinking – in particular his articulation of the notion of a “common European home” – and as such played its part in ending the Cold War. And it has continued to resonate in international strategic debate ever since.<sup>15</sup> So too has the centrepiece of the report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (1996), its simple mantra – that so long as any countries have nuclear weapons others will want them; so long as anyone has them they are bound one day to be used, by accident or design; and any such use would be catastrophic– which has been repeated in the reports of the Blix Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (1986) and the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (2009) and innumerable other contributions to the ongoing debate.<sup>16</sup>

### *Other Impacts*

The role of commissions and panels in raising the profile of previously neglected issues or policy approaches – at least putting them on the radar screens of policymakers and publics – should not be underestimated. The Pearson (1969) and Brandt (1980) Commissions, although less successful than they hoped in changing

---

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, p.90.

<sup>14</sup> See Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008, 2009); Weiss and Thakur, *Global Governance*, Ch. 10.

<sup>15</sup> See David Cortright, “Making the Case for Disarmament: An Analysis of the Palme and Canberra Commissions” in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, pp. 59-78, at p.61; also Geoffrey Wiseman, “The Palme Commission: New thinking about security” in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.46-75.

<sup>16</sup> See on the Canberra Commission Marianne Hanson in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.123-141.

government behaviour, gave development issues until then unprecedented publicity, as did the intensely media-focused commissions chaired by Jeffrey Sachs in 2001 and 2005. The Brundtland Commission (1987) may not have initiated international institutional and public commitment to the environment – the initial big step forward came with the Stockholm Conference of 1972 and the establishment of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) – but it gave those movements dramatic new momentum. Both the Palme (1982) and Canberra (1996) commissions, ahead of their time though they may have been, and achieving much less public prominence than the Brundtland Commission, nonetheless unquestionably focused intellectual, activist and significant policymaker attention on the possibility of a much more optimistic approach to achieving national security in the nuclear age, and their influence has been lasting.

It is also important to acknowledge that, whatever else they may have achieved in terms of operational or normative impact, a number of commissions have added significantly to the store of knowledge on particular global issues. That is particularly true of those which have sponsored the publication of a major series of associated publications accompanying their main report. The Carnegie Commission (1997) was a standout in this respect, generating ten books and over thirty other substantial reports and papers, as were the Sachs commissions (2001, 2005) on development issues, each producing a shelf-full of working papers and associated publications. The ICISS *Responsibility to Protect* report (2001) was accompanied by a 400-page supplementary volume of research essays, bibliography and other background material which has become itself an indispensable scholarly resource on all those working in the field of response to mass atrocities.

A feature of the commission reports reviewed here which may be overlooked in their assignment in the accompanying Table to one or other of three subject areas – security, development or governance – is that a number of them do draw attention to the important cross linkages between these different areas. For example, the Commission on Global Governance (1995) covers the whole range of these issues, drawing them together under the *Our Global Neighbourhood* theme; the Ogata-Sen Commission on Human Security (2003) treated its mandate as exploring the interface between poverty, human rights, violence and security; the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004) similarly embraced a broad view of collective security as embracing responses to poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation as well as more traditional conflict, weapons of mass destruction and terrorism based threats; and the Sachs Commission on Macroeconomics and Health (2001) drew out the connections between investments in health, economic growth and poverty reduction.<sup>17</sup> All of these represent substantial contributions to knowledge in our ever more joined-up world.

### **What Makes for Successful Commissions?**

The most relevant factors in determining whether a commission or panel makes any kind of useful contribution, or is destined to be consigned directly to bookshelves or hard drives and forever thereafter unread and unremembered, fall into three broad categories: task definition, process and context. Defining the commission's objectives with clarity – being clear about its target audiences and what they might be expected to do with the fruits of the commission's labours – is absolutely crucial: without this focus from the very outset a meandering product is almost inevitable. Process is equally critical: the way the commission operates in terms of leadership, size and

---

<sup>17</sup> See Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, p.18.

composition of membership, staffing, available resources, consultative process, the branding and packaging of its report and recommendations, and the quantity and quality of its advocacy and general follow up.

And then there is simply the context in which the commission's report is produced: whether it is permissive or prohibitive. One element here may be its ownership: whether the government or organization sponsoring a particular commission is perceived as a help or hindrance to its wider embrace, or simply a neutral facilitator. But a more obvious one is timing: whether, given whatever else is going on right then, the world is going to be receptive to innovative or challenging thinking on a particular issue.

### *Clarity of Objectives*

The terms of reference for a global commission or panel, which will usually be defined by its sponsoring government or organization rather than the commission itself, are crucially important. If there is not a well crafted set of objectives, based on careful prior thought as to what exactly is the issue or problem to be addressed by the commission's report, who constitutes its target audiences, and whether those audiences are likely to perceive any utility in whatever analysis and recommendations the commission comes up with, the enterprise is destined from the outset to founder.<sup>18</sup>

That fate has afflicted more than one commission with which the present author has been associated. France and Sweden no doubt thought it a good idea at the time to establish the International Task Force on Global Public Goods (2006), given the familiar problems of achieving cooperative, collective action on a variety of global problems ranging from health to the environment, financial stability, weapons of mass destruction and knowledge availability. But the commission struggled from the outset in meeting its assigned tasks of defining "global public goods" in a way which would both satisfy economists and be understandable to anyone else, prioritising them, and recommending future action that did not just cover the familiar ground of more specifically subject-focused reports. It was never entirely clear who would be likely to read the report or what value added would be seen in it, and as academically interesting as the final product may have been, it had little or no discernible impact.

The breadth of a commission's mission is, as often as not, the enemy of its impact. The Carlsson-Ramphal Commission on Global Governance (1994) was conceived of as having something to say on almost everything, and duly delivered, but is not now remembered for much more than its ambition. The Ogata-Sen Human Security Commission (2003) and the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization (2004) fared not much better. The Human Security Report faced the problem that its centrepiece is a concept about which there is both not very much and yet everything to say: once the very important insight has been communicated and accepted that issues must be looked at through the lens of *human* and not just *state* security (a task essentially accomplished before this report, through the advocacy of the Canadian government and many others), it is very hard to maintain a sharp focus thereafter because almost every international problem has such a dimension.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> "This would seem obvious, but it is remarkable how many policy projects are launched on the equivalent of a wish and a prayer. Enthusiasts, in particular, should be encouraged to stop and ask themselves candidly a) whether a market exists for the product they intend to produce and b) whether their commission or study will truly bring added value to the subject", Luck in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, p.279.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Barnett makes an even tougher assessment in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, pp. 52-53.

Similarly with the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997), whose core mission was to raise the profile of *prevention* as compared with after-the-event *reaction*. Crucially important as this mission was and still is – and as much as the commission can claim to have consolidated a previously lacking “culture of prevention” (although even there the really attention-grabbing work was Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *Agenda for Peace* in 1992) – the devil is in detailed implementation across a vast program area, and it is not clear that this commission, even with its very large resources and output, was ever going to be focused enough to make an operational, as distinct from normative, impact.

### *Leadership*

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the role played by committee or panel chairs in both creating and selling reports. It is true that if they have a mandate that is simply too wide, too vapid, or too indifferent to the needs and interests of any known influential target audience, even the most dedicated, knowledgeable, relentlessly focused and tough-minded individuals are going to have difficulty making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, as Ernesto Zedillo found with the Task Force on Global Public Goods discussed above. But in most cases they can make a huge difference in insisting that the commission’s consultative process is credible, its analysis and recommendations taut and sharp, its report as a whole clearly structured and accessible, its language readable – and that during the post-publication advocacy phase, its message is actually heard.

Many of these functions can be performed by a highly competent and professional commission staff, or – in this author’s experience – by two or three members whose energy, commitment and willingness to push debate to the limits can make up for a certain elegant lassitude at the top. But a role that cannot readily be delegated to, or assumed by, anyone else is adjudicating the differences of opinion that are bound to arise if a commission’s membership reflects, as it should, a real-world diversity of views. It is very tempting for chairs to retreat quickly to the kind of lowest common denominator fudge language that is so beloved by multilateral diplomats. But that urge should be resisted as long as humanly possible, on the principle that if a small group of highly experienced individuals committed to a solution cannot reach agreement on meaningful recommendations on a sensitive subject, then no such agreement is ever likely to be reached in the wider international community.

Many of the chairs whose names remain indistinguishable from their commission or panel reports – Pearson, Palme, Brandt, Brundtland and Brahimi, to mention just a few – seem to have played this variety of leadership roles to the full. But, as usual, recognition does not fully reflect reality. There are many examples both of strongly personalised commissions where the chairs have in fact exercised weak, erratic or counterproductively strong leadership, and those which have remained more anonymous where the contrary is the case.

Similarly, while a leader with the credentials of a head of government or major international organization can be a major asset in selling a report at the post-publication advocacy stage, as was for example Hans Blix for the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (2006), this is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for effective impact. Commissions led by technical experts (like the Canberra Commission of 1996 or the Sachs commissions of 2001 and 2005) or less exalted former ministers have often made their mark, while a number led by household-name former presidents and prime ministers have fallen flat. What matters more than the name at the masthead is the quality and timeliness of the product, and the energy and

creativity with which it is marketed by the chair or co-chairs, preferably with the active help of at least one or two other commissioners.

A separate issue is whether there is advantage in having joint or multiple chairs, rather than a single leader, as has been the case with more than a third of the commissions here reviewed. North-South co-chairs – as with the Carlsson-Ramphal (1995), Evans-Sahnoun (2001), Halonen-Mkapa (2004) and Karlsson-Ramphele (2005) – have become common for commissions addressing issues which have generated controversy across this divide. Whether there is more than mere optical advantage in such arrangements will depend on the personal chemistry and complementarity of approach that the individuals in question bring to the enterprise. Joint management of any process or institution can on occasion be testing, but it is both the impression and direct experience of the present author that in this context it has generally worked well.

### *Membership*

The optimal size for a deliberative commission is twelve to fifteen members – beyond that it is difficult to generate and sustain a group dynamic of strong common commitment. But it is also important that a commission's composition be, and be seen to be, sensitively weighted in terms of geography, gender, expertise, experience and – desirably – political outlook. And meeting these criteria while maintaining a manageable size overall can be extraordinarily difficult, although well constructed associated advisory boards and very thorough consultative processes may help to satisfy at least some of the inevitable demand for complete representative inclusiveness.

A major criticism of many past commissions has been their Northern or Western-centric membership and orientation: no global commission, whatever its subject focus, could these days be credible without redressing that imbalance. Gender balance remains, for familiar historical and cultural reasons, much harder to achieve: earlier commissions have largely escaped criticism on this ground, but no present-day commission or panel constructed with less than at least one-third of women members could expect the same easy ride. Past commissions have also neglected representation from civil society organisations to an extent that would neither be sensible nor acceptable today.

The point has been well made that since an ad hoc commission or panel, unlike a think tank or other ongoing institution, cannot build its standing over time but has just one shot at achieving recognition and impact, it is asking a lot for the inherent quality of its report to bear the whole of that burden: “the commission... cannot depend exclusively on that report to secure interest for its activities. In order to be able to carry out its activities it has to be interesting in itself”.<sup>20</sup> Which is why commissions have overwhelmingly been constituted by individuals who have occupied impressively high positions in governments and international organizations, with generally high name-recognition to match.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Jon Pederson, “Ideas, think-tanks, commissions and global politics” in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.266-276, at p.272.

<sup>21</sup> The Sachs commissions (2001, 2005) are probably the most prominent exceptions to this rule, with compositions very largely reflecting technical and ‘technocrat’ expertise: probably appropriate given the focus at the time on specific strategies to implement the already agreed aspirational targets constituted by the Millennium Development Goals: see Helge Hveem in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, p. 20.

But in commission diplomacy, as in show business, all-star casts do not necessarily guarantee long runs. One recurring critique is that the casts in question have too often been too homogeneous – like-minded liberal internationalists marching in unison to tunes they all knew before even commencing their deliberations – and that this has significantly limited their capacity to win attention and affection from more conservative or insular constituencies. There is some truth in this. Surrounding oneself with like-minded colleagues can certainly make for more congenial meetings, and much easier agreement on final text, but may make it harder for the final product to win converts. The former head of the United Nations Association of the USA, Edward Luck, has made this point particularly strongly in describing the reaction of the U.S. Congress to the Carnegie Commission (1997) and a number of reports addressing UN reform.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting contrast in this respect is between the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (1997) which was deliberately constructed to include those who had long been professionally sceptical not only about the possibility but desirability of such elimination – on the principle already mentioned that a commission which cannot itself bridge disagreement is unlikely to persuade anyone else to do so<sup>23</sup> – and the Blix Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (2006). The latter was far more obviously like-minded from the outset but, perhaps at least partially for this reason, has not had a comparable impact.

One recurring characteristic of commissions past and present is the frequency with which many names recur as chairs or members, with Brahimi, Brundtland, Cardoso, Ogata, Ramphal, Zedillo – and the present author – being among the more addicted in this respect. While it is easy to paint this critically as “old boys club” diplomacy – and certainly there is much to be said for leavening commission memberships with at least some individuals whose futures, and capacity for exercising influence, lie ahead of, rather than behind, them<sup>24</sup> – there would seem to be real advantage in the continuity, cross-pollination and application of lessons-learned that this kind of networking-through-overlapping-membership allows. One example involving the present author may make the point: whatever claim to attention on its merits the “responsibility to protect” concept might have had, the ICISS report he co-chaired in 2001 would almost certainly have sunk without trace without his fortuitous appointment to the High Level Panel of 2004, which enabled insider proselytisation of the concept in the crucial lead up to the 2005 World Summit.

The point might also be made, reinforcing that made earlier about the virtue of avoiding lowest-common-denominator conclusions and recommendations, that well socialized commission hands tend also to be better able than newcomers to read the play when it comes to distinguishing between positions of fellow members that are going to be pushed tooth and nail to the point of possible dissent unless accommodated, and those which, having been stated for the record, are not likely to stand in the way of consensus.

---

<sup>22</sup> Edward C.Luck, ‘UN Reform Commissions: Is anyone listening’ in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.277-287.

<sup>23</sup> On the membership of the Canberra Commission - which included former U.S. Strategic Air Command General Lee Butler and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, UK Field Marshall Michael Carver, and French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, and the dynamics which produced consensus recommendations from them, see Cortright in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.280

## *Staffing and Resources*

The Brandt (1980), Palme (1982) and Brundtland (1987) Commissions between them set the pattern for the future not only in their composition and leadership, but in having highly qualified full-time secretariats managing a well-resourced process involving substantial commissioned research, extensive consultative outreach including through multiple country visits, and a substantial program of follow up advocacy.<sup>25</sup>

Money alone cannot buy a good commission product, and even the finest staff cannot do a commission's job for it if its leading members lack a strong and unified view of what it wants to achieve. But, equally, commissions will not get very far without staff of real professional quality, and funding appropriate for the task. What counts as appropriate, or necessary, resourcing will obviously depend on the scale and complexity of the task being attempted. But for all but the most ambitiously sprawling mandates – which are probably best avoided anyway, as unlikely to have an impact even beginning to match their cost – a two year period, with resources to match, should be more than enough time once a commission is established (which itself can take up to three months) to generate the necessary research, conduct the necessary consultations, produce and publish a report, and effectively sell its message.

That at least was the experience of the present author with both the ICISS (2001) and ICNND (2009) commissions, each of which was able to complete a substantial report (100 pages plus 400 page supplementary research volume, and 300 pages, respectively) within not much more than a year, notwithstanding very intensive worldwide outreach programs (involving five full commission meetings and eleven regional roundtables, with both government and non-governmental participants, in the case of ICISS; and four commission meetings, four major regional meetings, and other major industry and civil society consultations in the case of ICNND).

## *Consultation*

Consultation of this extent and intensity has become almost the norm. The Brandt Commission focused primarily on high level talks with government and intergovernmental organization leaders, but the Palme and Brundtland Commissions shortly thereafter set the pattern for very extensive NGO consultations as well, the latter going so far as to collect over 500 submissions – involving more than 10,000 pages of material – in the course of nearly three years of worldwide public hearings.

The most successful consultations with both official and non-government interlocutors, in the present author's experience with both ICISS and ICNND, involve not so much formal submissions as interactive roundtable exchanges – preferably with not more than twenty or thirty non-commission participants – in which those being consulted are given sufficient advance indication of the commission's preliminary thinking on key issues to be able to challenge and respond directly to what is on the table as well as introduce new perspectives of their own. It is crucial that commissions go out of their way not just to seek reinforcing evidence and argument, but to understand the nature and extent of likely opposing views. Sceptics who suggest that this kind of intense focus on interaction with global NGOs is a way of establishing legitimacy and authority for a North government sponsored commission, which might otherwise lack it, miss the point. Non-governmental organizations now play such a crucial policy-influencing and delivery role that any commission who

---

<sup>25</sup> See Vesa, *Global Commissions*, pp.122-127.

ignored or patronised their input would run the risk of producing both an ill-informed and unsaleable product.<sup>26</sup>

### *Recommendations*

In crafting its recommendations, every commission faces the dilemma of how far to push the envelope: should it stay within readily achievable comfort zones, set targets which are beyond the current horizon, or spell out big ideas which are bound to be seen by at least some policymakers as not only over the horizon but out to space? The short answer is that the best-received reports are those perceived to be both adventurous *and* practical. Articulating visions as to what ought to be will often be an important contribution, helping set the direction of longer term debate. But unless accompanied by sharply-focused proposals reflecting a clear understanding of political and institutional realities and capable of implementation within a reasonable time frame, a report is likely to fall flat.

The Commission on Global Governance (1995) generated a mass of recommendations that were both adventurous and specific, but so many of them were beyond what the market was capable of bearing for the foreseeable future that its report became almost a byword for wishful thinking. Even the global NGO community was “passive in responding” to the recommendations – for a UN-based Forum of Civil Society, and a Right of Petition – for which they were the major intended beneficiaries.<sup>27</sup> The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997) was seen as less successful than it might have been for a rather different reason: essentially because its recommendations were seen as taking a long time to state the fairly self-evident – that prevention beats reaction every time – and insufficiently focused on currently controversial issues like how to build consensus for effective protective action in the Balkans.

Also in the security area, the Blix Commission (2006) generated less traction with policymakers than its important analysis of the threats posed by weapons of mass destruction deserved, essentially because its many recommendations were seen more as an anodyne wish-list than an immediately graspable agenda. The ICNND (2009) learned from that experience: all its recommendations (many of them identical with Blix’s) were shaped into prioritised short, medium and long-term action agendas, and found a more receptive international audience as a result.

### *Branding and Packaging*

Commission reports whose major themes can be encapsulated on a bumper sticker – 1982), and “responsibility to protect” (ICISS, 2001) – have some inherent advantage, both in initial take-up and longevity, over those which cannot. But this should not be overstated. Equally plausible encapsulations like “our global neighbourhood” (Carlsson-Ramphal, 1995), “a culture of prevention” (Carnegie Commission, 1997) and “human security” (Ogata-Sen, 2003) failed to generate much or any discernible buzz in the media or among policymakers, while there have been plenty of reports lacking such a badge – the Canberra Commission (1996) just one among them – which are generally seen as successes.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Compare Pedersen in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, p.274

<sup>27</sup> Barry Carin, “An Analysis of the Commission on Global Governance” in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, pp.79-120, at p.96.

<sup>28</sup> See Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, pp.20-21.

The presentation of reports in other ways can make a difference. A report which is written in clear and lively prose, and logically and accessibly constructed – with a good executive summary or synopsis, and comprehensive user-friendly index – has a big head start over competitors for the attention of busy policymakers which are turgid and impenetrable. Media analysts have short deadlines and often even shorter attention spans, and need the most newsworthy and comment-worthy material packaged for them in a way that they will find both attractive and accessible.

And although in this electronic age – with almost everything accessed online – the physical packaging of reports may be less important than it was, close attention should still be paid by commissions to ensuring that design of the product by which they will be known is both elegant and useable. High-gloss, tricked-up, heavily pictorial presentations are irritating to serious policy makers who just want to understand the analysis – and not have their annotations smudged. Taste in this respect is of course subjective, but one suspects that among the reports which have not endeared themselves to readers for purely physical reasons are the Ogata-Sen Human Security Report (2003), with its oppressively lurid blue-yellow colour scheme throughout, nor – for very different reasons – the Carnegie Commission’s final 1997 report, elegant enough and eminently annotatable, but of a size calculated to fit into no known working bookshelf

#### *Advocacy and Follow-Up*

As Gro Harlem Brundtland has put it, “A good report is not the end but the beginning.”<sup>29</sup> Operationally this means, as Ed Luck has expressed it succinctly, “In terms of getting high-level and/or sustained attention, nothing counts like follow up, follow up, and follow up. The release of a ‘final’ report should be around the mid-point of a project, not its culmination”.<sup>30</sup>

Few commissions follow this prescription as completely as they should, but one recent example is the ICNND (2009), one of whose co-chairs visited some forty Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) member countries in the six months between the publication of its report, *Eliminating Nuclear Threats* and the commencement of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, making both public and private pitches to advance its recommendations. A great deal of effort has also gone into trying to build institutional frameworks to help maintain momentum on the commission’s recommended action agendas, including regional networks of political leaders in Europe and the Asia Pacific, and a centre designed to produce a regular “state of play” report on how well, or badly, the world is doing both against official and commission-identified benchmarks.

Not only commission chairs but individual members can and do make hugely important contributions to this kind of follow up advocacy. To take another example from the nuclear security area, no-one was more important in keeping the findings of the Canberra Commission (1996) alive before the international policy community – and in circumstances where a change of government in Australia had led to the effective disowning of the report – than General Lee Butler, former commander-in-chief of the U.S. Strategic Air Command, a sceptic of nuclear abolition for whom his commission membership had been a transformative experience.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Helge Hveem in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, p.30.

<sup>30</sup> Luck in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, p.279.

<sup>31</sup> See Cortright in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, at p.65; Hanson in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, p.138.

## *Ownership*

As will be evident from the Table in this chapter, commissions and panels come with a multitude of different provenances – initiated, sponsored or both by individual governments like Sweden, Australia, Canada and Japan; groups of like-minded governments; the United Nations, through the Secretary-General himself or any one of a dozen agencies, programs or institutions within the broader UN family (from the UNDP and UNESCO to the World Bank, ILO and IAEA); and private foundations like Carnegie and Ford. It is occasionally suggested that this contextual factor must play some part, institutionally, ideologically or nationally, in determining either the nature or quality of the product, or the likelihood of its general acceptance.<sup>32</sup>

Although it is the case that, with the exception of UN-related sponsors, there is a relentlessly Northern cast to this list which has inevitably generated some criticism – and motivated the occasional effort to build primarily developing-country based counterparts, most notably the South Commission (1990), it is not clear that the “ownership” factor has significantly influenced either the way that commissions and panels have gone about their business, or the reception of their reports: they stand or fall on the merits of the tune produced, not who is paying the piper.

In the present author’s experience, having worked in every one of the different sponsorship contexts just described, commissions take very seriously their independence, and for all practical purposes conduct themselves in essentially the same way. Many factors, as already discussed, will contribute to the stylistic and substantive output of a particular commission, and its perceived overall success or failure, but ownership as such is not one of them. All this may not work very well in theory, but it seems to in practice.

It is worth making the point that many commission activities do have a lot in common with middle power diplomacy. But that is not directly a function of so many commissions being actually sponsored by familiar middle powers – Australia, Canada and the Nordics prominent among them – so much as it reflects the reality that commissions are operating within the same set of constraints. A middle power that wants to influence global policy has, by definition, neither the economic clout nor military might that would demand that its voice be heard: it must seek to make its way essentially through the power of persuasion, relying on the creative force of its ideas and the energy and stamina with which it pursues them. And it is effectively confined to “niche” diplomacy, concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field.<sup>33</sup> So too with commissions and panels, whoever “owns” them.

## *Timing*

A much more influential contextual factor in determining success or failure of commissions is the age that gives them birth, and accidents of timing that occur during their life. It has been much remarked that it was during a hopelessly unpropitious period of Cold War tension and neoconservative ideological ascendancy that the Brandt Commission (1980) sought to redefine North-South relations, and the Palme Commission (1982) to redefine approaches to military security: while both, and

---

<sup>32</sup> For a fuller account of the issues here see Cooper and English, “International commissions and the mind of global governance” in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, at pp.12-17.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia’s Foreign Relations* (Melbourne University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed: 1995), pp. 344-348.

particularly Palme, can reasonably claim to have had longer-term influence on global thinking, the effort produced nothing at the time.

By contrast the much more visibly successful Brundtland Commission (1987) was not only able to extract some of the benefit from the loosening of that old straitjacketing order toward the end of its term, but also drew momentum from a series of high-profile crises and disasters that occurred while it was at work, including drought in the Sahel, the Union Carbide Bhopal tragedy, and the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe. Nor did it hurt that Gro Harlem Brundtland again became her country's Prime Minister, with all the additional profile and prestige that comes with that position, in the commission's last year.<sup>34</sup>

The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001) was both the beneficiary and victim of timing: the former because the issue of humanitarian intervention with which it wrestled was about as ripe as it could be after the successive horrors of Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, and the international community's incapacity to respond to them on any kind of consensual basis, had become universally apparent during the 1990s; the latter because of the occurrence of 9/11 just before the report was released comprehensively diverted international attention from the issue. Other dynamics, already described, kept the "responsibility to protect" theme in play up until its endorsement by the 2005 World Summit, but it was a close run thing – not least when this concept was sought to be used, quite inappropriately, in support of the coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003.

### **Commissions in the Future**

There is no sign that the attractiveness of commission diplomacy is palling. New commissions and panels continue to be established, by the same kinds of governments, international institutions and foundations that have been initiating them for the past half-century, and with the same kinds of hopes and expectations that they will come up with new kinds of conceptual and practical solutions to problems that have eluded policymakers. On the evidence of the past decades, only a relatively small handful of those hopes and expectations are likely to be satisfied, but that does not seem to be a disincentive to commission creation so long as there is at least some prospect of value being added to the policy debate.

Occasionally commissions are created simply in response to the familiar political imperative to be seen to be doing something, but this is far more common in domestic than international political contexts, and the primary motivation for establishing commissions and panels of the kind reviewed here is overwhelmingly likely to remain genuine concern for good policy, and institutional effectiveness in making and delivering it. One of the great attractions of the commission format is that it enables systematic attention to be focused on problems which are important but not necessarily urgent, and which in the rush of daily events never get properly addressed by policymakers in national governments or intergovernmental organizations.

The question arises as to whether commissions in the future are in fact likely to add more value than most of those in the past. Much will depend on whether the lessons learned from hard experience about what works and what does not, as sketched in this chapter, will in fact be absorbed and applied. The present author is inclined, from his own experience, to believe that this is occurring, although probably neither as quickly nor as comprehensively as one might prefer. Certainly one area in which it is difficult

---

<sup>34</sup> See Cooper and English in Thakur, Cooper and English, *International Commissions*, at pp.8-10; Hveem in Vesa, *Global Commissions*, at pp.29-30.

to imagine any backward step being taken is consultation with civil society. The burgeoning universe of significant non-governmental actors, and of new ways of communicating with them through social media, will make it impossible for commissions and panels to do most of their work behind closed doors, impervious to these currents of opinion.

Not that commissions ever really *have* worked this way. They do certainly have some “club” characteristics – as the editors of this volume have defined these – not least in the relatively small numbers of players involved, the well established positions in various national and international hierarchies enjoyed by most commission members, and the primacy traditionally given to written communication in researching and settling the text of reports. But their mode of operation has also – by contrast with formal governmental process – always had “network” characteristics, with much wider participation in deliberations than the usual multilateral diplomatic suspects, and relatively fluid internal and external communication patterns.

Commissions of the future are certainly ever more likely to acquire modern network characteristics, with broader-based memberships becoming more common, a greater commitment to consultative outreach becoming ever more evident, and electronic communication ever more dramatically speeding and opening up information and idea sharing. Provided they learn how to harness, and not be overwhelmed by, the general cacophony of the modern electronic universe, and do remain sharply focused on producing useful analysis, deliverable outcomes and compelling advocacy, their future as reasonably prominent features of the diplomatic landscape seems assured.