

A parliament for the planet

It's not a question of removing further powers from nation-states or from their citizens, but of democratizing those powers which are already being wielded supranationally

George Monbiot, *New Internationalist*

When George Bush announced that he was engaged in 'a fight to save the civilized world', he was assuming powers and responsibilities he does not possess. Though his attack on Afghanistan was retrospectively legalized by the United Nations Security Council, it plainly offends the provisions of the UN Charter (which permits states to defend themselves against armed attack but says nothing about subsequent retaliation). But the Security Council, whose five permanent members also happen to be the world's five biggest arms dealers, tends to do precisely as the US requests. 'World leaders', in other words, can define their powers as they please.

This is just the latest manifestation of the permanent crisis of legitimacy which blights every global decision-making body. Those who claim to lead the world were never granted their powers: they grabbed them. The eight middle-aged men whose G8 meetings are the ultimate repository of global power represent just 13 per cent of the world's population. They were all elected to pursue domestic imperatives: their global role is simply an unmandated by-product of their national role.

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), which apportion votes according to the money they receive, are governed by the countries in which they don't operate. The UN General Assembly represents governments rather than people and, while in theory it operates on a one- country-one- vote basis, in practice a poor nation of 900 million swings less weight than a rich nation of 60 million. UN ambassadors, as appointees, are remote from the populations they are supposed to represent, but all too close to their national-security services. While some poor nations can't afford to send delegates to World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings, rich nations are represented by huge parties of business lobbyists. Many of the WTO's key decisions are made in secret.

There is, we are told by almost everyone, no alternative to this rule of finance and fear. We might not like the way the world is run, but even the most radical NGOs and campaigners tend to call at most for the replacement of the World Bank and IMF, while failing to address the political framework which legitimized them. There is, in other words, a

widespread tacit acceptance of a model of benign dictatorship in which rich and powerful nations govern the world on behalf of everyone else.

In 1937 George Orwell observed that: 'every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed.' Bourgeois socialists, he charged, were prepared to demand the death of capitalism and the destruction of the British Empire only because they knew that these things were unlikely to happen. 'For, apart from any other consideration, the high standard of life we enjoy in England depends upon keeping a tight hold on the Empire... in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation – an evil state of affairs, but you acquiesce to it every time you step into a taxi or eat a plate of strawberries and cream.' The middle-class socialist, he insisted, 'is perfectly ready to accept the products of Empire and to save his soul by sneering at the people who hold the Empire together'.

Since then, empires have waxed and waned, but that basic economic formula holds true: we in the rich world live in comparative comfort only because of the inordinate power our governments wield, and the inordinate wealth which flows from that power. We acquiesce in this system every time we buy salad from a supermarket (grown with water stolen from Kenyan nomads) or step into a plane to travel to the latest climate talks. Accepting the need for global democracy means accepting the loss of our own nations' power to ensure that the world is run for our benefit. Are we ready for this, or is there lurking still some residual fear of the Yellow Peril, an age-old, long-imprinted urge towards paternalism?

As far as I can see, there is only one means by which this crisis of legitimacy can be effectively resolved. It's a notion which most people find repugnant, but only, I believe, because they have failed to grasp both its implications and the extent of their own acceptance of the undemocratic fudge by which the world is run. Global democracy is meaningless unless ultimate oversight resides in a directly elected assembly. We need a world parliament.

If, like most people in the developed world, you abhor this idea, I invite you to examine your reaction carefully. Is it because you believe such a body might become remote and excessively powerful? Or is it really because you cannot bear the idea that a resident of Kensington would have no greater say than a resident of Kinshasa? That Sri Lankans would have the same number of representatives as Australians (and more as their population increases)? That the people

of China would, collectively, be 41 times as powerful as the people of Canada? Are you really a new internationalist or are you, secretly, an old paternalist?

The key point here is that power exists at the international level whether we like it or not. The absence of an accountable forum does not prevent global decision-making taking place – merely ensures that it does not take place democratically. It's not a question of removing further powers from nation-states or from their citizens, but of democratizing those powers which are already being wielded supranationally.

I'm often told, in response to this proposal, that democracy at the European level is bad enough: why should we want to extend the principle to the rest of the world? Well, one might, perhaps with good reason, lament the existence of the European Union (which, unlike the world, is a political artefact), but the real question is whether it would be better or worse off without the European Parliament. For all its feebleness and faults, the parliament is surely an essential counterweight to the unelected Commission and the photocopy democracy of the European Council.

A more legitimate concern is that a global parliament might be readily bought or subverted. This is a real danger for any representative body, but there are plenty of lessons to be learnt from systems, like Britain's, which possess insufficient safeguards. The private funding of elections, for example, could be prohibited. Parliament could provide a small, fixed sum for every candidate: anyone who spent more than this on campaigning would be disqualified. It should be forbidden to use party whips to force representatives into line, if parties exist at all. But there's no question that, like any other assembly, we would have to keep holding a world parliament to account, by means of exposure, embarrassment and dissent.

Advocates of a world parliament have been careful so far not to be too prescriptive about the form it might take. If it is to gain popular consent and legitimacy, it's essential that the model be permitted to evolve in response to grassroots concerns, rather than being handed down from on high, like the European Parliament or the United Nations. But two irreducible essentials emerge. The first is that all of its members should be directly elected. The obvious and revolutionary implication is that it thereby bypasses national governments. One could envisage, for example, 600 constituencies, each containing some

ten million people, which would, where necessary, straddle national boundaries.

The second is that the parliament's own powers must be strictly limited: both by the principle of subsidiarity (devolving power to the smallest appropriate political unit), and by restricting its capacity for executive action. We could, perhaps, see it performing like a collection of supercharged select committees, holding the executive agencies to account, producing policy reports, replacing or regenerating defunct institutions. But it would control no army and it would exercise no coercive power over states. If it possessed a presidency, this would be a titular and administrative role, but would carry no power of its own. The parliament would simply become the means of forcing multilateral bodies to operate in the best interests of everyone, rather than those of just the rich and powerful.

But it's not hard to see how this modest function could transform the way the world works. Multilateral institutions like the World Bank and IMF, whose role is to police the debtors on behalf of the creditor nations, would disappear immediately. A democratic assembly would be likely to replace them with something like Keynes's 'International Clearing Union', which would force creditors as well as debtors to eliminate Third World debt and redress imbalances in trade. The WTO, if it survived at all, would be forced to open its decision-making processes to democratic scrutiny. If a global parliament administered a global fund (arising, for example, from the proposed 'Tobin Tax' on international financial transactions), it could ensure that the money did not become the plaything of powerful nation-states. The UN's humanitarian funding gaps would surely be plugged, and weaker nations could be given the money necessary to attend international negotiations.

Interestingly, the parliament could legitimize other internationalist proposals. As Troy Davies of the World Citizen Foundation has pointed out, without representation the legitimacy of global taxation is questionable. The absence of an international legislature undermines the authority of an international judiciary (such as the proposed criminal court). Judges presiding over the war-crimes tribunals at the Hague and in Arusha have been forced, in effect, to make up the law as they go along. The only fair and lasting means of reducing CO₂ (namely 'contraction and convergence', which means working out how much pollution the planet can take, then allocating an equal pollution quota to everyone on earth) would surely be impossible to implement without a world parliament.

So, given that nation-states will be reluctant to surrender their illegitimate control over global governance, how do we persuade them to make way? The answer, I think, is that we don't. We simply start without them. There are signs that this is happening, organically, already.

The 'world social forums' and People's Global Action meetings which have sprung up in response to the World Economic Forum and G8 meetings have brought together campaigners from all over the world to discuss alternative global futures. These are, of course, unelected, unrepresentative bodies. But if these gatherings could transform themselves into representative bodies, whose members are chosen democratically by populations all over the world, we could rapidly find ourselves building a world parliament in exile.

As its moral power grew and the moral power of the existing means of world governance shrank correspondingly, it's not hard to see how a legitimate representative assembly could emerge through consent rather than coercion. If it does, it will have solved the fundamental problem under-pinning the development of any new body: that of public ownership. The European Parliament is perceived as both remote and boring by many of the people it represents, largely because it was imposed from above by national governments. A world parliament would belong to the people from the beginning of the process.

We have been gathering every few months in different parts of the world to search for solutions, unaware, perhaps, that the gathering itself could be the solution. A parliament – in which people parley, or talk – has already been established by the new world order's dissidents. Now we must invite the rest of the world to take part.