



Executive Summary

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Overview

This document is based on a forthcoming book that examines the influence of international commissions, and their character, style and substance. International commissions help to convert ideas about the methods and forms of global governance into policy initiatives and international institutions. The names of many international commissions are well known: Brandt, Palme, Brundtland, Kosovo, the Commission on Global Governance, and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty.

Some of these have had a lasting impact on international governance, yet as an expression of the power of ideas, in the search for a better world, they remain under-analyzed.

Executive Summary written by
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International Commissions and the Power of Ideas

WHAT ARE THE IDEAS, CONCEPTS, AND AMBITIONS underlying global governance? And how have they shaped, and been shaped by, the structure of governing institutions?

Scholars of international relations have often neglected to study the impact of ideas on global governance. Their attention has tended to focus more on international institutions—the “body of global governance”—than on the ideas—or “mind of global governance”—that drive them.

A new book edited by scholars Ramesh Thakur, Andrew F. Cooper and John English (United Nations University Press, 2005), seeks to address this imbalance. *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas* assesses how international commissions have shaped, and even reshaped, our understanding of international affairs and the international discourse on a wide range of global issues.

MAJOR ISSUES

These are no ordinary issues. They include the global economic order and the discrepancies in wealth between economies in the North and the South; international security and the utility of nuclear weapons; and environmentalism and the demands of economic growth. More recently, international commissions have examined whether the international community will ever accept the idea that military intervention is a legitimate option when confronted by the possibility of genocide and mass human rights violations against whole populations.

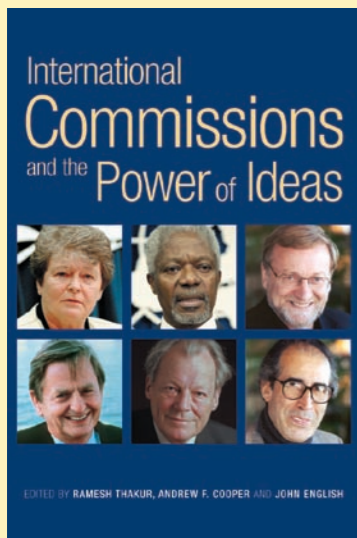
Each chapter of this book explores a different aspect of the nexus between ideas and institutions. The varying experiences and influences of eight separate international commissions are scrutinised: Brandt, Palme, Brundtland, the Commission on Global Governance, Canberra, the World Commission on Dams, the Kosovo Commission and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS).

About the Editors

Ramesh Thakur is the Senior Vice-Rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo and is a United Nations Assistant Secretary General.

Andrew F. Cooper is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo, Canada, and Associate Director of the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

John English is Executive Director, of the Centre for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo, Canada.



The authors investigate the reasons why ideas about gender equity have failed to produce substantive change beyond certain pronouncements at the United Nations. The book examines the contributions that think tanks make to the international system, and it concludes by discussing some of the pitfalls that have plagued many of the blue ribbon commissions on UN reform.

Finally, in an appendix, Under-Secretary-General Jayantha Dhanapala calls on the international community to create an international commission to study the evolving threat that weapons of mass destruction pose to international peace and security, and offers a blueprint of how such a commission might function.

POLICY INSIGHTS

From a practical perspective policy-makers stand to benefit a great deal from the publication of this volume. Contained in it are a number of valuable insights for any national government or multilateral organization that may be inclined to turn to an international commission for answers to one of the many pressing questions facing the world community.

Several of the contributors are not only experts in the field of international relations, but are also past participants of international commissions. Drawing on their firsthand experience, they shed light on some of the structural and operational aspects of international commissions, aspects that ultimately govern whether an idea flourishes or fails.

Strong leadership by the chair,

diverse yet compatible commissioners, reasonable expectations, adequate funding, appropriate deadlines, and widespread and comprehensive campaigning following the release of the report are but a few of the important, yet often neglected, prerequisites to a commission’s success.

BIG CHALLENGES

Big ideas rarely translate well into practice. Virtually all of the contributors acknowledge that international commissions must strive for a balance between idealism and realism if they are to be successful. That said, most commissions have favoured the former at the expense of the latter.

The Canberra Commission challenged the predominant notions about nuclear weapons. But, as Hanson argues, it failed to capture the public’s imagination, in large part because its report seemed out of touch with the international mood at the time. The same can be said of the Brandt Commission. One of Thérien’s main conclusions is that it was too idealistic, its social-democratic vision of development too far removed from the neo-liberalist leanings of the Bretton Woods institutions.

Ambiguity may also prevent a commission’s ideas from capturing the public’s imagination. As Knight notes, the report of the Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, failed to make a big impression because it was not clear whether it favoured the “old” state-centric multilateralism or a “new” multilateralism that drew civil society into the global decision-making arena.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any commission is to bridge normative divides. The results have not been overwhelmingly positive. The Palme Commission advanced the notion of “common security”, the idea that “international secu-

remained “a central concept in international environmental discourse.”

It is too early to tell whether the international community will ever accept ICISS’ assertion of “sovereignty as responsibility.” Thakur is optimistic, although not blind to

The true impact of a commission may not be felt for years, often in unexpected ways. The Brandt commission has a second life as people revisit the links between global insecurity and poverty.

rity should be based not on mutual deterrence, but on mutual interests in avoiding nuclear war”. According to Wiseman, this failed to win favour beyond the peace communities in the West.

PENDING IMPACT

The Brundtland Commission may be the exception, although it too has had its fair share of critics. In the late 1980s, it coined and popularized the phrase “sustainable development,” thereby reconciling the tension between economic development and environmental protection, two norms that at the time appeared to be entirely contradictory, even worlds apart. But many have found the conceptual framework surrounding the notion of “sustainable development” to be overly imprecise and lacking in substance.

Still, Smith believes that its contribution has nonetheless been significant; even to this day, she contends, “sustainable development” has

conceptual hurdles that will need to be overcome if the commission’s report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, is to have any lasting impact.

The obstacles are indeed quite sizeable. Goldstone and Fritz note that the Kosovo Commission’s conclusion that NATO’s intervention in Kosovo was illegal but legitimate has raised considerable doubts about the credibility of arguments favouring humanitarian intervention, especially given the controversies surrounding the recent U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Also, as Heine notes, the history of U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of Latin American nations has led many states in the region to become highly suspicious of the motives behind concepts such as humanitarian affairs.

Latin America is not unique in this respect. Similar reservations can be found in regions of the world where the memories of colonialism are still fresh. Fears of a new wave of



imperialism are very real for many, particularly in Africa and parts of Asia.

Building on this, Welsh, Thielking and MacFarlane believe that ICISS' biggest failing may be that it “underestimates the countervailing political forces that will impede both the achievement of a broad consensus and the realization of its prescriptive agenda.” For them, the report represents “international poli-

tics as the Commissioners think it should be rather than as it is.”

A commission's influence is often subtle. Rarely do commissions produce dramatic shifts in thinking. Often their legacies are more nuanced. Smith argues that, despite its conceptual shortcomings, the Brundtland Commission contributed to the cementing of the environment on the international agenda. Similarly, although major reform of the international economic order did not follow the release of the Brandt Commission's report, Thérien maintains that the commission's work nonetheless remains an acknowledged reference in the development debate.

TIMING IS IMPORTANT

Timing is important, but it is not everything. Much of a commission's immediate success depends on whether the political will exists to act on its recommendations. In Riddell-Dixon's mind, this may help to explain, at least partially, why gender issues so often fail to make the leap from normative ideas to actual practices involving substantive gains for women. But success should not be measured only by short term results. Change may not happen immediately; indeed, chances are that it will not. The true impact of a commission may not be felt for years, and often in ways that the commissioners did not expect.

As Evans explains in the foreword of the book, “a commission's influence and imprint long survives its formal death. Ideas at the wayside can be rediscovered and take

their place at the centre of political debate.” Indeed, as Thérien notes, the Brandt commission has given “an intellectual push to the study of globalization,” and has been given a second life as people are beginning to revisit the interconnectedness between global insecurity and global poverty.

Similarly, Wiseman claims that although the Palme Commission had little impact on the UN and on the Western news media, wider publics, and mainstream academic institutions, the ideas of “common security” and “non-offensive defence” have taken on a new relevance in a post-September 11th world in which the threat of terrorist groups or rogue nations acquiring weapons of mass destruction has risen to the top of the international agenda.

COMPOSITION IS CRUCIAL

The selection of the commissioners is crucial to the success of any commission. Much depends on the

effectiveness of the chair or chairs. As Smith points out, Gro Harlem Brundtland was a highly effective manager for the World Commission on Environment and Development. Thakur feels much the same way about the respective contributions of Gareth Evans and Mohamed Sahnoun to ICISS.

There is general agreement amongst the commissioners contributing to this book, that representation from both the North and South is an important precursor to the overall legitimacy of a commission. Essentially, diversity must not only be done, it must also be seen to be done. There is a caveat. In order to accomplish the task before them, the commissioners must be relatively like-minded. However, there are limits to this: too much consensus may result in their conclusions being out of touch with the realities of the global system. Commissions must strive for agreement, but not if it compromises their relevance. As Luck warns, “geographic” diversity must not come at the expense of “political” diversity.

Pedersen argues that the success of any commission (or think tank, for that matter) depends in large part on its standing with the key actors and institutions who are involved with the issue. More often than not, this

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means having a champion at the state level that is not only prepared to help establish the commission but will also put forward its findings to the rest of the international community. The Canberra commission had the backing of Australia, specifically Prime Minister Paul Keating and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans,

What the critics say....

“This is the first volume that really focuses on the nature and impacts of the international commissions. It addresses the rationales and impacts of a very interesting and important development in international politics, and that is the creation of international commissions of experts and politically notable figures to try to break logjams in thinking with regard to major policy issues. The influence of the commissions has been quite varied, and it is precisely because of these differences that this book is a very valuable volume for government and international organization officials as well as academic scholars. This book is likely to stand as the most significant study of international commissions for some time.”

—Mark W. Zacher, Centre of International Relations,
University of British Columbia Liu Institute, Canada

“This book addresses an interesting question that has not been adequately covered: ideational factors in world politics and the role of international commissions. Its focus on the context and contents of those commissions' work is new. It brings new insights into new concepts and ideas as products of changing times and their impact as agencies of change. It therefore makes a useful contribution to the study of global governance in key issue areas.”

—Professor Tatsuro Kunugi, International Christian University, Tokyo,
and former UN Assistant Secretary General



both of whom put a great deal of stock in the notion of “good international citizenship.”

Sweden produced two international commissions. The first was the Palme Commission of the early 1980s. The second, the Kosovo Commission, came at the initiative of Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson, who, as Judge Goldstone and Nicole Fritz point out, had become distressed at the “absence of clear-sighted, non-partisan analysis” of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

ICISS came about in large part thanks to Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy, and

able, the deadlines realistic yet timely.

- Presentation is important: commissioners must strive for the right balance between a document that is comprehensive and one that its intended audience will read.

ICISS took all of these factors into consideration. One of its many contributions may be that it becomes the model for future commissions. Indeed, Ambassador Dhanapala’s vision of an international commission to examine the growing threat of weapons of mass destruction suggests that this may very well be the case.

striving for agreement they inadvertently reinforce the view that America is outside the global “consensus.”

CONCLUSION

Few scholars and practitioners would suggest that international commissions offer perfect solutions to some of the contemporary problems of their time. Indeed, given the nature of their task, their contributions are often difficult to ascertain, particularly in the short term. Moreover, in the projection of the power of ideas, international commissions must be able to overcome considerable barriers both conceptual and structural. But, notwithstanding these constraints, the book offers strong support for the argument that ideas matter as key agents in the evolution of global governance. Consequently, the role of international commissions must be taken seriously. As Evans notes, “employed constructively, ideas can and do act as beacons for shaping the world and its governance in better ways. And institutions in turn can be both the passage-way and the testing ground for putting ‘the mind of global governance’ into practice.” In other words, international commissions can often act as the mechanism that brings ideas and institutions together. Framed in this fashion, *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas* fills an important void in the study of world affairs.

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“International Commissions and the Power of Ideas”

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The selection of commissioners is crucial and much depends on the effectiveness of the chair. Representation from North and South is important to overall legitimacy, and diversity must be seen to be done.

the Canadian government has continued to promote *The Responsibility to Protect* even after his departure.

SUCCESS FACTORS

No commission can succeed on the weight of its ideas alone. Thought must be given to the operational and structural aspects of any commission.

- Outreach with key stakeholders is crucial.
- Adequate sources of funding must be secured.
- The workload must be manage-

INCLUDE THE USA

The United States must be brought on board. According to Hanson, the Canberra Commission ultimately failed to produce meaningful movement towards the eventual elimination of nuclear arms, in large part, because Washington did not buy into its conclusions. Canberra was not unique in this respect. Luck, who has participated in a number of blue ribbon commissions on UN reform, is highly critical of the commissions that relegate Washington’s concerns to the sidelines. He concludes that commissions serve little purpose if in



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INSIDE:

Executive Summary

*“International
Commissions and
the Power of Ideas”*

A new study with insights for policymakers: how to ensure international commissions work well; and how to harness the power of their ideas to address the world’s pressing problems.