

Our Country: Our Choice. Roger Peren

Our Country: Our Choice
 New Zealand in the World Community
 Roger Peren*
 For the last 20 years or so people have been noting and commenting on two opposing or contradictory trends at work in the world. One is towards globalisation, whether of communications, business, the rules covering trade or the protection of the environment, or security - towards a more accessible, interactive world. The other involves more responsibility being given to local communities and authorities, and greater concern being shown for minority groups, their languages and cultures. Central governments have found themselves conceding control or influence in both directions. In New Zealand we have certainly seen evidence of this. For a country such as ours, does this involve a choice? Our trade interests, our concern for the maintenance of peace and security and the abolition of nuclear weapons, our concerns for health and human rights and the protection of the environment, all oblige us to play a pretty active role on the world scene, where these issues are being debated and decisions taken in one multinational forum after another. We have our own views on all sorts of issues, and generally we want to ensure that as far as possible decisions are sensible, forward-looking, and likely to work to the benefit of the world as a whole. Certainly we wish to retain the chance to object to decisions which might seriously disadvantage us or our closer friends. That all seems straightforward enough. Can we afford to opt out? Could we shut ourselves away at the bottom of the South Pacific and live in splendid isolation? To begin with, it is not in our nature. In fact we rather pride ourselves on being good citizens of the world. And in practical terms of maintaining our livelihood it just wouldn't work. Is this likely to change much in the next 25 years? The short answer must be, in the absence of major disasters (large-scale wars or physical catastrophe) - no. Technological developments and attempts to deal with world problems more and more encourage or oblige us to see the world as one unit - the global village. From one point of view we humans are all still 'tribals' and will remain so, concerned for our own welfare and inclined to be antagonistic towards strangers. But for good and sufficient practical reasons we have to be internationalists too. We are already; and there seems no alternative.

What are some of the implications? When thinking about the future management of relationships between countries or communities, one starting point must be the likelihood that by the year 2020 world population may have about doubled. Estimates differ, of course, and the 1994 U.N. Population & Development Conference hoped it could be held below 8 billion in 2050, which even if it does not put great pressure on resources will make the world a very different place. Spillover from crowded areas. Unprecedented migration across borders, legal and illegal. (People are talking about "borderless communities.") Huge and perhaps barely manageable cities. (Will we need dozens of nuclear-powered desalination plants?) Communications technology will have even further affected information services, business and finance, education, shared values and of course politics. The impact of CNN International and the Internet is already an indication of what is likely. Travel will be easier. All the indications are that countries will increasingly have adopted collective, joint or coordinated approaches to political, security, economic and environmental problems, for the world or for particular regions. When one considers some of the problems that people see looming - competition for energy resources, for example, or water; major food shortages; global warming; or the need to provide support for the people of what are being called 'failed' or 'collapsed' states - it seems clear that solutions, however inadequate, will be found only in a multilateral approach. Just as individuals and families join together to handle their affairs more satisfactorily, to take care of common problems, to achieve a better way of life - or, in biological terms, to increase their chances of survival - in the world of 2020 most sovereign states will have accepted the logic of doing pretty much the same. The indications are plain enough today. Granted that there are likely to be from time to time regimes which refuse to collaborate, which cause trouble, and also areas which for one reason or another are left somewhat apart from the general community, it seems reasonable to foresee that for us as for most countries the next few decades will be characterised by: - Increased participation in international or multilateral political, economic or other organisations and groupings, some new, some old. Willing compliance with a wide range of international conventions and rules adopted for the common good. Globalisation of industry and commerce and 'borderless' economies - though patterns of trade and management structures may change from time to time. - Continuing technological developments, eg in utilisation of energy, food production, or health services. Much stricter approaches to the protection of the environment; and involvement in world-wide environmental issues. - Some obligation to contribute to peacekeeping operations. - Greater acceptance of the concept of comprehensive security. - Continuing challenges to the ideas of democratic governance and human rights as we understand them. - New interests such as for example animal rights, which for New Zealand might prove of particular importance. Already we in the Pacific Basin have a growing sense of community among societies with very different histories and cultures, different problems and interests, aware of the benefits of seeing themselves in a much wider context than was ever conceived by their fathers and mothers. While technology is advancing apace, political arrangements are - understandably enough - rather slower to move. But moving they are. The creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum was a major step towards organising our affairs on a regional basis, the full significance of which is still not generally grasped. The ASEAN Regional Forum is another. They build on the work in earlier years of the Pacific Economic Co-operation Council and Pacific Basin Economic Council, and a host of other multilateral institutions. We recall the efforts of the South Pacific Commission and South Pacific Forum. All in all this will lead to a consensual approach on many issues. It is interesting that in this country already something like a quarter of our legislation is designed to give effect to our international obligations, to programmes, standards and rules agreed among numbers of countries concerned to improve living conditions for all, and which New Zealand too has accepted.

Choices
 Accepting in broad terms that this is the likely situation, are there nevertheless choices for New Zealand? The obvious analogy is, of course, the range of options open to a good, thoughtful, responsible citizen in a law-abiding

society.

One

In one scenario New Zealand sees itself as an active member of this large multinational community, i.e. as an independent nation forming associations with others for an increasingly wide range of purposes. For a state to elect to undertake certain responsibilities or to accept certain limitations on its freedom of action is of course an act of sovereignty. It looks to the benefits to be expected. This involves considered participation, without sacrificing national identity, in a variety of multilateral and bilateral arrangements with the aim of increasing the well-being of New Zealand and its neighbours, and being prepared to make concessions to majority opinion or to accept majority positions. That means recognising and accepting the responsibilities of membership of, for example, the United Nations (including participation in peacekeeping operations) and other such organisations, respecting international law as currently interpreted, participating in international trade on the basis of the World Trade Organisation and other regional agreements which have been entered into, and observing multilateral conventions on the protection of the environment, again on the basis of consent. One consequence is of course some limitation of freedom of decision or action. Today there are many more such limitations than there were 100 years ago. Although this is sometimes objected to as 'erosion' of sovereignty, and there will be areas in which a government can no longer control as it might on occasion like to the actions of its citizens or of visiting foreigners, it can also be seen simply as an enlightened approach to the problems of living on this crowded planet. So what about deregulation, for example? In New Zealand we think we have done rather well with deregulation, have once again been pioneers. The answer appears to be that deregulation of certain but not all aspects of, say, banking and finance within one country can be thoroughly desirable even while new regulations are being imposed in other fields, generally in response to 'popular' (or democratic) demands, for the management of behaviour or international transactions. Not only will New Zealand want to be involved in any discussions or negotiations at intergovernmental level, we will also be concerned to participate in what are being called 'Track Two' discussions: these are informal exchanges between groups of businesspeople, scholars, journalists, politicians and others who debate and explore issues which may or may not yet be the subject of consultation between governments. These have proved valuable as a way of focusing attention on matters or problems which are felt to be of growing importance, clarifying concepts, introducing fresh ideas, and defining decisions which may have to be faced up to. Often enough it may be possible to make useful progress in a relaxed atmosphere where national positions or interests do not dominate. New Zealanders need to be aware of the trend of such discussions, to know other people are thinking about or planning, and to have an opportunity to make some input and, perhaps, express dismay at some of the suggestions that are made. New Zealanders have in the past been able to make useful contributions in the wellknown NGOs and in various seminars or conferences, especially on issues of importance in our part of the world. Examples are the Pacific Economic Co-operation Council, the Council for Security Co-operation in Asia Pacific, or the Williamsburg Conference. But there are others too, in specialised fields. Two

At the other end of the scale, logically enough, would be a decision to limit to the greatest extent possible contacts with the outside world. For a country that earns its living by international trade, whose citizens rely on a great many imported goods and services and who enjoy overseas travel, this is probably a non-starter, however. Though New Zealanders sometimes joke about our ability to feed ourselves, and wear only our own woollen clothes, a moment's reflection will show that this is no longer acceptable - if, indeed, it ever was. Supposing it were to be taken seriously we would presumably need to decide what New Zealanders were prepared to do without, what equipment, conveniences or technology they would forego, how the economy might be re-designed to provide basic necessities (at a significantly lower standard of living) and then to consider a programme of adjustment. A 'desert island' economy? People quite often speak of 'economic nationalism' as though it would be simple enough to put strict limits on foreign investment in New Zealand companies, restrict in some way the activities of multinational companies, ensure the dominance of New Zealand interests in virtually all business enterprises and virtually stop land sales to foreigners. Plainly enough, of course, we are indeed fully entitled to do our best to defend ourselves against any unacceptable aspects of participation in international trade or finance. So long as large-scale investment or new technology are required by our companies, however, and we are trading on world markets, we are likely to need outside sources of capital and working alliances with big overseas operators. All too easily protecting ourselves from perceived encroachments could come to mean actively disadvantaging ourselves by hindering the development our economy. This sort of withdrawal from the international community would reduce the opportunities for New Zealanders to satisfy their aspirations or lead a good life, and their country would not be regarded as a good citizen of the world. It would mean that it was frequently the target of criticism, that it had little or no voice in international councils, and (ultimately) that it might be found to have made no provision for its own security. Once having been judged to have opted out, few other countries or overseas institutions would be much concerned about our fate.

Three As an in-between position there is what might be called selective (or grudging?) participation in the affairs and problems of the region. Such an approach, to be successful, would call for very shrewd judgement, quite a lot of luck, and a readiness to abandon policies to which we attach some importance. (Myanmar and North Korea are current examples of countries which have greatly restricted their outside contacts.) How might this work for New Zealand? In the area of trade and finance, if this country is to continue to produce, to export and to import more or less as now we must accept most international conventions and regulations. (By way of example, currency convertibility is governed by Article VIII of the International Monetary Fund Articles of Agreement; trade practices and intellectual property rights by the World

Trade Organisation; banking supervision by the Bank for International Settlements. Even the placing of communications satellites in orbit is managed by the International Telecommunication Union of the United Nations.) Operation of ships and aircraft, or electronic communications, requires adherence to many international conventions. Failure to observe the growing number of international agreements on the protection of the environment or control of pollutants would be likely to provoke strong criticism and, perhaps, refusal to admit New Zealand agricultural and horticultural produce. Continuing membership of the United Nations would of course entail certain responsibilities: members must honour the terms of the Charter, accept decisions of the General Assembly or the Security Council, and pay their assessed dues. (Whatever their criticisms of the U.N., would New Zealanders seriously contemplate withdrawal?) It would, however, be possible to refuse to acknowledge for example the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. Relying on its geographical situation, New Zealand could decline to become involved in any collective security arrangements, presumably in the expectation that others would be prepared to set up arrangements which would have the effect of preserving peace and security in our part of the world. (It might still be possible to agree from time to time to contribute to certain peacekeeping operations.) It does seem, however, that given the attitudes and interests of New Zealanders generally, their expectations and ambitions, and the nature of the economy, there are as a practical matter few areas of international collaboration from which we could withdraw without some disadvantage. Moreover it can be expected that as the trend towards greater interdependence and further globalisation continues in the rest of the world the attractions of and the pressures for active participation will only increase. Certainly there are today those who appear to favour a 'closed' economy, which they claim would protect the citizens from the assumed depredations of overseas financiers, businessmen or speculators, but this is a rather different issue. Though one can readily enough imagine legislation which would put limitations on overseas investment or the repatriation of profits, such rules would not be likely to interfere with other international arrangements, which were on the whole expected to work to the advantage of New Zealand business. We might nevertheless be depriving ourselves of the potential benefits of foreign investment capital or any associated technologies or skills. So can we maintain our identity? New Zealanders have always been concerned about identity issues, and that is not likely to change. It is a large and very interesting subject. Just as there are today trends both towards globalisation and towards greater sensitivity to local concerns, so it is important that individual participants in multilateral and multinational projects or associations should have their own independent opinions and attitudes, carefully considered in the light of their situations and philosophical approaches, and should be confident to speak up on matters of importance to their own country and to the world. That is one area where we can and do establish our identity. 'Internationalisation' is a rather unsatisfactory term. Its meaning is not at all precise. Nevertheless few would deny that in the last few years New Zealand has become significantly more 'internationalised' in many ways, and more involved with and open to the world. Most of our activities and our people have been affected, and by and large we have benefited.

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