

Erik Jensen: “Alien Aloft: Unravelling identity in pursuit of peace”

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“The UN and Impossible Missions”, a review by David Hannay, Baron Hannay of Chiswick GCMG CH

Mission impossible. That surely is the right epithet for Erik Jensen’s last appointment in his variegated UN career, as the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Western Sahara in 1993. It was certainly the thought that crossed my mind as I sat in the UN Security Council as Britain’s Permanent Representative and authorised the deployment of a peacekeeping force to police a ceasefire line between Moroccan forces and those of the Polisario Front and the holding of a referendum to determine the disputed territory’s fate.

Why so pessimistic? Because it was clear from the outset that neither side would agree to the detailed implementation of the referendum project unless they were absolutely certain that their own side would win; and there could not be two winners. That was the conundrum with which Jensen wrestled for several years; and through no fault of his own, nor lack of determination and imagination, failed to resolve. Even an attempt to break the deadlock by shaping an agreement between the parties that Western Sahara would receive regional autonomy within Morocco collapsed, largely due to Moroccan intransigence. Later on, even the unlikely duo of James Baker III and John Bolton failed to cut the Gordian knot. And Donald Trump’s shamefully opportunistic recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory as the price for Morocco’s diplomatic recognition of Israel is more likely to end in a more fragile ceasefire than in a solution.

Does that lead to the conclusion reached by Lakhdar Brahimi’s high-level panel on peacekeeping in 2000, that the UN should simply refuse to take on the sort of missions impossible which were sometimes thrust on it (cases like Cyprus and the Golan Heights spring to mind)? I would suggest caution before reaching such a conclusion. For one thing, identifying in advance what is an impossible mission is not easy and could even make its impossibility more certain. For another, the UN is an intergovernmental body which is governed by its membership and not its secretariat. And then there are varying degrees of success or failure for peacekeeping missions. Take Cyprus, to which I devoted seven years supporting Kofi Annan’s efforts to negotiate a solution, and during which I was regularly offered unsolicited advice that all that needed to be done was to withdraw the UN force which guarded the Green Line which stretched across the island and the two sides would rapidly conclude that they had to reach a settlement. Possibly, but probably not; and quite a lot of people might end up dead in the process of finding out.

It is perhaps unfair to start this review of Jensen’s memoir at its end. There is so

much else to catch the eye in an eclectic career which began, before he joined the UN, in the jungles of Borneo, helping his much loved Iban tribes in Sarawak (then still a British colony) face up to the challenges of the twentieth century. And then there are fascinating vignettes of Bahrain, Biafra, Bangladesh and East Timor. What is striking is how exiguous were the resources available to the UN missions sent out by a Secretary-General under the pressure of cries that "something must be done", and by a Security Council paralysed by Cold War rivalries. In most cases the UN missions arrived too late to prevent massive human suffering. There are lessons here on how not to handle conflict prevention which, for all Antonio Guterres's attempts to strengthen the UN's performance, have yet to be learned.

Jensen's spell in London as head of the UN's tiny office here was certainly less eventful. He, like many others, comes close to succumbing to Margaret Thatcher's unique blend of power and glamour. But he tends to misread her real attitude towards the UN, which was less supportive than he believed. Like other British Prime Ministers, she valued our permanent membership of the Security Council as a precious piece of family silver to show off to visitors. But when push came to shove, as it did in the autumn of 1990 when Iraq's aggression against Kuwait needed to be reversed, she was ferociously opposed to that being carried out under the authority of the Security Council. Only the wisdom and judgement of President George H.W. Bush ensured that her view did not prevail.

Jensen does not spare the blushes of the UN bureaucracy, its backbiting, its duplication and its timidity. But his final conclusion that "...the Preamble of the Charter is as worthwhile credo and as fine a prayer as any ... and worth campaigning for" is a fitting end to an account of a career devoted to public service and to the common good.