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THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR UNESCO: SOME PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

James Smith Page

Abstract

Unesco (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) was established in 1946 and the Australian government organisation responsible for advising on the implementation and coordination of Unesco policies and programs in Australia is the Australian National Commission for Unesco. Working from a Rawlsian notion of a public institution, a range of reforms are suggested for the commission: 1) development of a charter, 2) publication of an Annual Report, 3) widening the membership of the Commission, 4) funding reforms, 5) training of the membership of the Commission, 6) establishing a right of appeal against Commission decisions, and 7) developing programs for public participation. It is suggested that the above reforms may assist in establishing and strengthening the Australian Commission for Unesco as a significant and independent public institution in Australia, and thus assist in the implementation of Unesco programs and projects in the future.

Article

Unesco (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) was established in 1946 and the Australian Government organisation responsible for advising on the implementation and coordination of Australia's commitment to Unesco is the Australian National Commission for Unesco. The Australian National Commission also has a role in the allocation of public funds to support Unesco policies and programs. Unesco is an intergovernmental organisation and the role the government organisation representing Unesco with the home country is clearly quite a crucial one. In recent years there has been much focus on administrative reform within the Unesco Secretariat, located in Paris. The current Director-General of Unesco, Koichiro Matsuura, was elected substantially on a platform of accountability and transparency. Several countries have left Unesco in recent years, citing concerns over maladministration for leaving. However, there has at yet been little attention given to the task of administrative reform for National Commissions. This brief research essay aims to examine possible options for potential administrative reform within the Australian National Commission for Unesco.

The research method utilised both ethnographic and documentary research. The ethnographic research involved participant-observation research within the Unesco Secretariat during 1999. During this time I was able to speak with individuals from non-government organisations and from Unesco itself regarding how the National Commission system did and did not function. The documentary research involved checking documents relating to exactly how the Australian National Commission

worked. The theoretical foundation for the proposals is very much a Rawlsian one, and in particular the Rawlsian conception of the well-ordered society (Rawls 1972:4-5, 453-454). John Rawls suggests that a well-ordered society is one that is not only designed for the good of the members, but is also regulated by a public conception of justice. Rawls goes further to suggest that within a well-ordered society (1) everyone accepts the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic social institutions satisfy and are generally known to satisfy those principles.

John Rawls is perhaps best known for development of the concept of distributive justice. This is what most commentators know [106/107] as Rawlsianism. However, there are important implications for politics and public administration within the work of Rawls. Justice is thought as a fairness. Democracy is how we arrive at a just and fair society. Moreover the work of Rawls also emphasises that procedural democracy is an essential partner to representative democracy. This is best articulated through the notions of the basic social institution and the well-ordered society. Without basic (democratic) social institutions we cannot claim to have a democracy, and we cannot claim to have a just society.

The key in the Rawlsian understanding of the role of basic social institutions within the well-ordered society is that the basic social institutions are generally known to satisfy the principles of justice. It is not sufficient that basic social institutions do act in accordance with accepted principles of justice. There must be some transparency as to how they are acting. This is what Rawls refers to as the publicity condition for institutions. In a sense, one can turn the argument around, and suggest that transparency is also what establishes an institution as a basic social institution. A possible definition of a basic social institution is that it is an institution that is known to satisfy the accepted principles of justice within a society. Without transparency an institution cannot be regarded as a basic social institution. The reform task for the reorganising of the Australian National Commission is therefore perhaps simply to establish the Commission as a basic social institution (as defined by Rawls) within Australian society.

Why do we need reform for the Australian National Commission for Unesco? After all, there does tend to be a specific rhetoric of reform, wherein specific proposals can be phrased within the category of reform, and the implication is that no reasonable person can oppose such proposals. No reasonable person likes to be positioned in the role of opposing reform. However, in this case, in Australia, there seems to be a problem of profile for the Australian National Commission for Unesco, and subsequently also for Unesco itself and its programs. This is a particularly crucial problem for Unesco, as Unesco is an organisation orientated especially towards changing consciousness. It is suggested within this essay that the problem is not merely one of technique, that is, how the Australian National Commission goes about communicating with the public. The problem is concerned with how the Commission is structured, how it operates and understands itself as a basic social institution within Australian society.

Prior to discussing possibilities for the reform of the Australian National Commission for Unesco, it is perhaps appropriate to look briefly at the discussion of the role of the National Commission within recent critical literature. What soon becomes evident is the silence of the critical literature on the nature and the role of the Australian

National Commission. Within standard texts on public administration in Australia, the Australian National Commission for Unesco generally does not rate a mention. Within critical literature there are frequent references to studies and conferences under the auspices of the National Commission, but no actual analysis of the nature and role of the commission itself. Even in the literature dealing with Australia and the United Nations there is little reference to the National Commission. Alex Castles (1973:56) commits only one paragraph to the Australian National Advisory Committee for Unesco, the predecessor organisation to the Commission. Why such silence? Johan Galtung has suggested (1986:6) that the statocratic nature of Unesco means that matters to do with member states tend not to be questioned or discussed. Perhaps this is one factor why there has been so little attention to the Australian National Commission for Unesco.

Herewith then are the proposals for reforming the Australian National Commission for Unesco.

At the outset, it would seem that the Commission is in urgent need of some form of charter. The enabling legislation (the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation Act, 1947* (Cwlth)) is a recapitulation of the Unesco Constitution, and merely indicates that member states should organise National Commissions. The existence of a charter is left up to the individual member state, although Australia is yet to do this. It is an adage of administration that if one has no goals, then it is unlikely that much will be achieved. The Constitution of Unesco does provide good principles, although (quite rightly) the Constitution does not prescribe how specific [107/108] organisations within member states should operate. Hopefully the charter for the Australian National Commission would commit the National Commission to the implementation of Unesco policies and programs. Hopefully any charter would also confirm that the Australian National Commission operates at arm's length from the elected government of the day. Without such formal clarification, it is very difficult for the National Commission to be able to challenge the elected government, if the elected government is failing in its commitment to specific Unesco policies and programs. Without a formal charter, there is also an unfortunate tendency for the National Commission to become a public relations or even propagandistic mechanism for the government of the day, merely expounding how much the government of day is supposedly supporting Unesco programs and ideals.

The second possible reform is for the Australian National Commission to produce an annual report. This is quite standard procedure in ensuring transparency and accountability within public administration, although, quite extraordinarily, such measures have not been introduced within the Australian National Commission. There is no ready way of determining how and where the National Commission allocates its public funding without such measures of accountability. More seriously, the absence of an annual report also tends to limit the possibility of public involvement in the work of the Commission. Quite simply, without an annual report it is difficult to gain an accurate understanding of exactly what the Commission does. The National Commission from time to time has published a newsletter. However, such a measure tends to become an exercise in public relations, and, as important as this may be, a public relations initiative is no substitute for open accountability and transparency. What is needed is an annual report.

A third possible reform for the National Commission is to widen the membership of the Commission. The Commission is currently composed of 15 members, comprising a chairperson, 10 specialist advisers, two parliamentary observers, representing the government and the Opposition, and two honorary members. For some time the Commission has been chaired by an experienced academic within the field of public administration (Professor Kenneth Wiltshire). However, there is no reason why the current trend within the United Nations system to embrace non-government organisations could not be extended to the nature and operation of the Australian National Commission. There is no reason why representatives of selected non-government organisations could not be invited onto the Commission. Similarly, there is no reason why the Commission could not act to invite expressions of interest from members of the public interested in serving on the Commission. In both instances, it would be desirable to provide meeting and travel allowance to the potential members. Moreover, such a reform would widen the decision-making expertise of the Commission, and, perhaps equally importantly, raise the profile of the Commission (and thus Unesco itself) within Australian society.

A fourth area of reform for the National Commission for Unesco is for the Commission to be funded on a long-term basis, and for the funding of Unesco programs and projects to be placed under the control of the National Commission. One problem with the current funding of Unesco programs within Australia is that such funding remains highly politicised. Governments will allocate funding according to whether there is perceived electoral advantage. Thus the International Year for Older Persons (1999) received over A\$10 million funding from the government. By way of contrast, the International Year for the Culture of Peace (2000) received nothing. It is not too difficult to see why. One program had considerable electoral appeal, especially given the growing older population, and the other program had much less electoral appeal, especially for a government emphasising the importance of military readiness and rearmament, and a government constantly invoking Anzac mythology. One could argue that a democratically elected government has the right to decide upon its own priorities. This is true, but the point is that no government should be using Unesco programs selectively for political purposes. One solution is to make the funding long term and to place the administration of the funding within a strong and independent National Commission.

The fifth area of reform is perhaps the most difficult, and this is to introduce some form of training for members of the Commission. If the task of the Australian National Commission for Unesco is to coordinate the implementation of [108/109] Unesco programs and policies, it follows that members of the Commission should receive training as to the nature of current Unesco policies and programs. It is not sufficient for the Commission to work from the aims, goals and objectives of the organisation as expressed in the Unesco Constitution, promulgated some 50 years ago. The policies and programs of Unesco are in a constant state of redefinition and redevelopment. At the present time the members of the Commission tend to be experts within their specific fields, and are rightfully respected because of this. However, unless there is sufficient training then what the Commission does will not reflect the current direction of Unesco policies and programs. If the expansion of the membership of the Commission itself were to be implemented, then some form of training would become even more desirable.

A sixth area of reform for the Australian National Commission would be to establish a right of appeal to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal against decisions by the Commission. This could be established through the mechanism of having legislation that designates such a right of appeal. Why is such a right of appeal important? The answer goes back to the Rawlsian conception of a basic public institution. The basic social institution is one that accepts and is known to accept the public commitment to justice. One of the important aspects of justice is that there should be a right of independent appeal against decisions by an institution. In Australia the most accessible right of appeal against decisions is through the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. In a sense, establishing an accessible right of appeal from decisions made by the Australian National Commission for Unesco would be a way of underscoring the legitimacy of the Australian National Commission as a basic social institution in Australian society. It would also be one means of underscoring public confidence in the Commission.

The seventh area of potential reform for the Australian National Commission is the establishment by the Commission of more participatory programs within Australia. At the present time the Commission tends to act to make grants. There tends to be a dearth of program development, or at least a dearth of public program development. The advantage of public programs is that such programs raise the profile of Unesco in Australia, not merely among those actually involved and participating in such programs, but also among those who apply to become involved. It is common for National Commissions for Unesco within most developed countries to have well-developed and resourced public participation programs. However, in Australia it seems that such programs have yet to be embraced by the National Commission. Unfortunately such a lack of opportunity for participation tends only to add to the perception that Unesco is a somewhat irrelevant organisation, existing only as an organisation for the social elite. Addressing such a perception should be a major priority for the Australian National Commission, and participatory programs might be one way of doing this.

Undoubtedly one of the underlying problems of the Australian National Commission for Unesco has been the stagnating funding for the organisation. The International Year for the Culture of Peace (2000) was perhaps a salient example. Within that same year the Commonwealth government made a commitment of millions of dollars towards projects commemorating Australia's involvement in war. However, there was no designated funding whatsoever for the International Year for the Culture of Peace. The National Commission was left somehow to support the venture itself, from its own limited funds. Nevertheless at the same time it seems that the stagnating funding for the Australian National Commission (and thus for Unesco programs) is partly the fault of the National Commission itself. Unless the National Commission is properly established as a strong and independent public agency, then government will continue to feel no obligation to fund properly the operations of the National Commission (and thus Unesco programs) in Australia.

How could and should the above reforms be introduced? Possibly one immediate means would be for the National Commission to develop its own instruments. There is precedent for this. In June 1995 the National Commission promulgated its own 'Rules of Procedure'. Therefore there should be no problem with the prospect of the organisation developing its own charter or its own annual report or indeed various

programs involving public participation in the work of Unesco/the Commission. However, it seems that the more desirable alternative would [109/110] be for such reforms to be instituted by way of legislation. The legislative approach would perhaps provide for a more integrative solution to the task of the reform of Unesco, combining in one piece of legislation all of the above reforms, as well as a reformulation of the objectives of the organisation. How the changes are effected is perhaps not of supreme importance. What is important is that the changes are made.

Ultimately it is a challenging time for the United Nations system as a whole. There is much discussion and debate on the aims of the United Nations and the need for reform of the United Nations system. It is difficult to see what shape organisations such as Unesco will fulfil in the future, and such a detailed discussion would be beyond the scope of this particular research paper. What is certain, however, is that in the immediate future the National Commission for Unesco will continue to pay an important role. If we can move to make National Commissions perhaps more democratic and more accountable, more of what John Rawls would call a basic social institution, then perhaps we will be going some way to establishing a more democratic and effective United Nations. The above reform suggestions for the Australian National Commission are perhaps one small beginning.

Notes

1. Within this article I have adopted the recent convention of using referring to Unesco (a proper noun) rather than UNESCO (an acronym).
2. Acknowledgment is made to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs for assistance in gaining access to documents regarding the Australian National Commission for Unesco.

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