

United We Stand, Divided We Fall: The Case for a World Environment Organization

Sanchin Persaud

First Year Paper

MLA Style Citation

"For the first time in the history of mankind ... there is an arising crisis of huge proportions involving developed and developing countries alike ... it is becoming apparent that if current trends continue, the future of life on Earth could be endangered" (Kennan 1970). Such were the words of former United Nations Secretary-General U Thant. The crisis he spoke of was climate change, and its impending effects on the planet. One would assume that such a critical issue would garner widespread attention, not only on the national stage, but on the world stage, and that a problem so pervasive requires communal action. National governments, including Canada, made an initial weak stab at 'global governance' in 1972 with the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Despite two major conferences, multiple agreements, adopted resolutions, and the birth of another environmental body (the Commission on Sustainable Development), not enough has changed since. The year 1997 *did* see the formal international introduction of a radical new idea with far-reaching potential. The governments of Germany, Brazil, South Africa and Singapore submitted a proposal at a General Assembly session in which they called for "the establishment of a global environmental umbrella organization of the UN" (Joint Declaration 1997). Regrettably, the declaration "did not meet with enthusiasm," (Charnovitz 2002) but the concept of a 'World Environment Organization (WEO),' as it came to be known afterward, became a contentious topic amongst political scientists. This essay takes the position that such an organization would come closest to gaining the successful results that have been lacking in recent decades. The absence of a truly centralized unit with a strong mandate to combat environmental degradation has left the movement fragmented and globally ineffective. Trade has gained substantially from organizational centralization, proving that it is not only possible for a worldwide (environmental) organization to develop potency, but

that it is only fair that one be created, given the ever-growing burden trade centralization has had on the natural environment. Finally, a focalized body would be of great assistance to developing countries in implementing environmental initiatives. It is time that Canada band together with other nations and realize that a World Environment Organization will be necessary to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change.

As Canadian journalist Naomi Klein (2011) writes in her article entitled *Capitalism vs. the Climate*, "climate change is a collective problem, and it demands collective action." Of recent times, the United Nations has been looked to for effective, legitimate, collective action on pressing global issues. The UN's answer to the problem of climate change was to create the aforementioned UNEP. It shall be henceforth argued that UNEP, and the later-created CSD, are inadequate solutions, at least in their present forms, for an issue of such wide berth. Frank Biermann is professor of political science and environmental policy sciences at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He writes, "UNEP is not an intergovernmental organization, but a subsidiary body of the General Assembly reporting through the Economic and Social Council. The creation of a UN environment program was a ... modest reform" (Biermann 2011). Right from its inauguration, UNEP was doomed to be a sub-mediocre instrument of change because of its minor status. UNEP's budget is a modest \$60 million USD annually (Kirton 2005), which "is less than most other UN agencies and some of the larger environmental NGOs" (Elliott 2005, 33). It has 530 employees; the German Federal Environment Agency has nearly twice that number, while the US Environmental Protection Agency boasts an employee base 35 times greater (German Advisory Council on Global Change 2001, 176). Since UNEP is not recognized as a UN special agency, its funding is significantly lower than it could be, and, perhaps more importantly, its mandate is not as strong as it should be. The programme's current status "prevents [it] from engaging in project implementation," (Biermann 2011) which is an irrevocably essential component of public policy. On the political and legal front, one of the main problems facing contemporary global environmentalism is that none of the resolutions that have been passed to date are legally binding. To strengthen UNEP's legal mandate will hold nations accountable and incentivize them in ways that empty targets cannot: an upgraded UNEP "could approve by qualified majority vote certain regulations that could be binding, under certain conditions, on all members ... or could adopt drafts of legally binding treaties negotiated by sub-committees under its auspices" (Biermann 2011). Another

solution that a WEO (in the form of a more powerful UNEP) could provide is to "ameliorate ... the coordination deficit in the international governance architecture that results in substantial costs and sub-optimal policy outcomes" (Biermann 2005, 120). Since 1972, numerous multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) have been signed, some overlapping each other and duplicating clauses, while others leave out clauses that are signified in another agreement. The lack of a governing body, and by extension the lack of a global environmental law code that would impose a minimum standard on all MEAs, has allowed these inconsistencies to develop. Currently, the vigorous work of one agreement can become completely unraveled by less ambitious (neighbouring) nations, given the interconnectivity of the natural world we live in. Sebastian Oberthur is a former special policy advisor on international climate policy to the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Protection and Nuclear Safety. The following is his brief description of how a clustering of MEAs should commence: "As a first step, structures for co-ordination between MEAs can be established and/or elaborated and diversified, including joint meetings of convention bodies and secretariats, memoranda of understanding, joint implementation of common activities, communication networks, routines and structures etc." (Oberthur 2002, 336). Integration of MEAs into a uniform environmental law code would happen gradually and through cooperation rather than force. The World Trade Organization (WTO) could be used as a model, for it has "integrated diverse multilateral trade agreements under one umbrella" (Bauer & Biermann 2005). Whether a prospective WEO would be the simple upgrading of UNEP into a special agency or the amalgamation of various MEAs across the globe, or some combination of both, the result would be a much-needed centralized, strengthened mandate.

One area that certainly does not need any mandate strengthening is global trade, and the neoliberal ideology that fueled it. In the introduction to their book *Neoliberal Environments: False Promises and Unnatural Consequences*, Heynen et al. (2007, 3) describe neoliberalism as "an economic and political philosophy that questions, and in some versions entirely rejects, government interventions in the markets and people's relationships to the economy and eschews social and collective controls over the behavior and practice of firms, the movement of capital, and the regulation of socio-economic relationships." The authors go on to write that "many ... link the actual institutionalization of neoliberalism to the period since the early 1970s," (Heynen et al. 2007, 6) therefore seeming to in large part coincide with the UN's (scant) involvement in

dealing with the environment. Indeed, as the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was happening in Brazil, the Uruguay Round of negotiations on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade were sputtering, "the idea that the negotiations would lead to a powerful, rule-based organization with a judicial system that can expound law ... was hardly the consensus scenario at that time" (Charnovitz 2005, 87-88). The organization spoken of by Steve Charnovitz, co-founder and director of the Global Environment and Trade Study, is the now-infamous World Trade Organization (WTO), widely recognized as a neoliberal instrument of change, which came into effect on January 1, 1995. To be fair, UNCED *did* adopt a new initiative, Agenda 21, for which it too created a new body, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The Commission's task is "to monitor and examine progress on the UNCED agenda yet "has no executive, compliance or sanction powers," (Elliott 2005, 34) and would thus seem to suffer from the same ailments as UNEP. Political disputes have featured prominently in CSD sessions, with little of constructive value being accomplished (Elliott 2005, 35). Former British diplomat Tony Brenton (1994) has even gone so far as to describe the CSD as a "UN talking shop with very limited impact on the world outside." Furthermore, the summaries produced by the CSD Secretariat were not based off of a significant breadth of information, and were so generic in scope to the point where they were, in effect, meaningless (Chasek 1997, 12). This deficiency is in turn likely the result of the CSD being poorly resourced, in which, in its first session, "the Secretariat had only a handful of staff, and some of these had been "borrowed" from other departments" (Khor 1994, 103). Given the gross underachievement of the CSD, and the much older UNEP, compared to their trade counterpart, the WTO, Charnovitz (2005, 88) reaches the conclusion that "governance for trade has enjoyed a much better recent run than governance for environment." This is hardly a coincidence. The view endorsed by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (2001) is that while global trade is centred in a strong international organization, the environmental regime is not. More significantly, if a proposed WEO had the same institutional backing that the WTO has, the former could act as a counterweight to the latter. As it stands, WTO law is the law of the land, even to the point where "environmental treaty negotiations have been monitored carefully to make sure that they do not contravene WTO rules" (Charnovitz 2005, 108). The international community can no longer afford to so indiscriminately favour commercial values over ecological ones. A WEO must be endowed with power equivalent to that of the WTO in order to effectively

monitor and check their negotiations, thereby preventing any potential environmental deregulation or harm. To garner more national and civil support than the WTO, a WEO would have two key advantages. The first can be found in the Heinrich Boll Foundation's *Jo'burg Memo*, "the organization should be horizontal in character rather than hierarchical. It will be an institution of cooperative governance, and not an institution of global government" (Acselrad et al. 2002, 66). The WTO, in a paradoxical twist of ideology, has become almost dictatorial in its vertical governance of the world markets, supervising national governments from atop its perch. Developing countries and left-leaning ones have been chastised from implementing the protectionist policies they need to keep their respective job markets stable. These nations, and in fact all nations, must be assured that an international environmental body of strengthened mandate will first and foremost always seek to foster communication and understanding between governments. The WTO has also been criticized for a lack of consultation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and little direct connection with electorates, the 1999 Seattle protests being but one example of civilian alienation. "Environmental NGOs, human rights groups, businesses, scientists, religious leaders, mayors of cities, and many other stakeholders" (Charnovitz 2005, 98) would need to be actively included in WEO sessions and negotiations for the organization to be effective and to gain the approval of the wider public. In short, the current balance between trade and environment has been upset by the overreaching arm of the WTO and only the creation of a parallel WEO can restore equilibrium.

There is a similar equilibrium in need of restoration between the global North and South. Due to their much greater portion of wealth, the developed nations of the North are benefiting immensely from the current disorganized state of global environmental affairs. To begin with, "individual environmental agreements are negotiated in a variety of places, ranging — for example in ozone policy — from Vienna to Montreal, Helsinki, London, Nairobi, Copenhagen, Bangkok, Nairobi, Vienna, San Jose, Montreal, Cairo, Beijing and Ouagadougou" (Biermann 2005, 122). Climate change conferences and most sub-committees of environmental conventions are no different (Biermann 2005). If a country is struggling to pay back an IMF loan, as are many in the developing world, it could almost be considered irresponsible for that country to send a competent delegation of diplomats and policy experts to every meeting. In that case, much of the developing South is left underrepresented. Furthermore, most of the environmental bodies that a nation gains membership into require their members to give detailed reports regarding

implementation of the initiatives that are passed at committee sessions. This allows the secretariat to address the strengths and weaknesses of certain resolutions, the obstacles that were encountered in implementation, the performance of particular members and so on. Yet, this spectrum of individual report requisites is a strain on the administrative resources of developing countries (Biermann 2005, 125). Under a WEO, "all reporting requirements could ... easily be streamlined into one single report" (Biermann 2005, 125). The Kyoto Protocol, adopted by nearly all UN members in 1997, put in place an important climate initiative: the clean development mechanism. The initiative attempts to address the issue of wealth distribution between North and South in relation to climate change. If a developed country invests in an emission-reduction project (such as a rural electrification project using solar panels) in a developing country, the developed country receives a "certified emission reduction" credit, equivalent to one tonne of CO₂¹. Developing countries not only benefit through the project itself, but also through technology, skills and wealth transfer. The plan has clearly met the desired goal, as evidenced by the fact that the annual number of projects submitted for validation "has grown exponentially from 5 in 2003 to 58 in 2004, 491 in 2005, and 676 in the first three quarters of 2006" (Ambrosi & Lecocq 2007, 140). The administrative power of a WEO can only help as it would "reduce bureaucratic overlap, increase efficiency and assist in preventing conflicts with other, non-climate related environmental problems" (Biermann 2005, 126). One reason why developing nations of the South may be apprehensive about a new international agency is that they feel the North will dominate it with their own interests, much as the North has done with the WTO. There must be institutional mechanisms sown into the WEO that recognize and balance the influence of the two hemispheres. Biermann (2005, 135-136) proposes "a double weighted majority system ... [where] decisions require the assent of two thirds of members that must include the simple majority of both developing and developed countries." Following the example and relative success of the Kyoto Protocol, a WEO would account for the North-South parity in wealth and influence, institutionalizing this crucial balance within its framework.

A closer examination of Canada's environmental policy within the world context is needed at this point. In 2012, Canada gained international notoriety for repudiating the Kyoto Protocol. Environment Minister Peter Kent felt the agreement was not "an effective tool in enforcing nations to control their carbon emissions" (Crittenden 2012). Ironically, Canada was

¹ http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/mechanisms/clean_development_mechanism/items/2718.php

one of those nations that could not control its emissions, having emitted 23% more greenhouse gases in 2011 than the Kyoto limit it set for itself (Doucet 2012). Federal funding for Environment Canada was reduced by over \$222 million in the 2011 budget, while in the 2012 budget, the Environmental Assessment Act was replaced so that proposals for oil and gas pipelines could be approved much quicker (Doucet 2012). When environmentally counterproductive countries like Canada appear on the world stage, it is tempting to declare international cooperation an unachievable farce, but there are mechanisms for ensuring positive change. Electoral reform is one. A strong majority of Canadians voted for a non-Conservative party in the last federal election, yet the results do not reflect this fact. External pressure is another. Upon hearing the news of Canada's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, The Glass Factory, a company in the UK, cancelled its contract with Quebec company ThinkGlass in protest (CBC News 2011). President Obama is strongly considering a rebuke of the Conservative-backed Keystone XL pipeline proposal, which would transport Albertan crude oil to refineries in the US. Obama is worried about the environmental implications of the pipeline and is intent on going through with cleaner proposals, such as a \$2 billion diversion of oil and gas royalties over the next decade toward clean energy research (BBC News 2013). These effects, and others, can be substantial in altering the behaviour of even the most close-minded of states. On the topic of the Keystone XL pipeline, it is also interesting to note that "Canada is one of the only jurisdictions in the world that allows private, foreign ownership of public oil resources" (Saxifrage and Stoymenoff 2013). There appears to be a direct correlation between neoliberal policies and a poor record on the environment.

In this essay, it is the force of neoliberalism that has been presented as the main anti-thesis to the idea of a WEO. Neoliberalism, as a model of democracy, is embodied in legal democracy (popularly known as the "New Right" movement), which "sets the contours for a free-market society and a "minimal state"" (Held 2006, 205). David Held is Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He describes in further detail the philosophy of New Right advocates Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. "They insisted that individual freedom had been diminished because of the proliferation of bureaucratic state agencies attempting to meet the demands of those involved in group politics [and] that the collective good ... can be realized properly in most cases only by private individuals acting in competitive isolation and pursuing their sectoral aims with minimal state

interference" (Held 2006, 201). The last thing a legal democrat would support is another 'bureaucratic agency' unnecessarily coercing individuals, businesses, and, in the case of a WEO, states themselves, into respecting the environment. Classic legal democrats do not at all see environmental protection as a worthy cause next to their market principles because they do not appreciate the fact that the ecological interdependency of all nations requires collective action. They instead endorse a "liberal market environmentalism" paradigm, whereby depletion of natural resources "may be prevented if we privatize everything that is presently in the public realm, including air, water, and other species. Their argument is that humans value their own private property more than they value public (common) property" (Adkin 2009, 240). Aside from the massive superiority complex legal democrats seem to suffer from in thinking that humans have the moral right to individually own anything and everything, an obvious problem with this model is that it favours those that have the wealth needed to purchase property. In other words, multinational corporations have a systemic advantage and will do no more than efficiently exploit the property until its full market value was realized, after which point the barren property would be discarded. Even Ronald Reagan eventually recognized the faulty logic behind the legal democratic model, for it was his administration that created the emissions trading scheme, a marriage between free market ideals and state intervention that rewards businesses for polluting less. A WEO that is being advocated for in this essay would not be purely anti-business. It would support the use of free-market initiatives, such as the cap-and-trade system, and other incentive-based ventures, like the clean development mechanism, as means for partially meeting environmental protection goals. However, the organization would incorporate elements of eco-Marxist theory. These elements would include the recognition or belief that "Capitalism is inherently productivist (growth-oriented) and places profit-making above any other social or environmental goals ... The "greening" of capitalism through various reforms ... will not be sufficient to avert serious ecological crises..." (Adkin 2009, 241). It will also recognize that the global North owes an ecological debt to the South as a result of "resource plundering, environmental damages, and the free occupation of environmental space to deposit wastes, such as greenhouse gases, from the industrial countries" (Accion Ecologica 2003). Intertwined in this foundation will be a strong notion of "environmental justice," which further acknowledges the North-South parity by pointing out, for example, that "While populations in the North seek to "green" their model of development, many of the worst forms of environmental degradation are

displaced to the South" (Adkin 2009, 245). Lastly, 'ecological democracy' will make up the remaining ideals of the new body. Deliberative participation in a WEO should not be based on wealth, which would cause the average global citizen to be grossly underrepresented. National governments and the WEO Secretariat would need to have flexible agendas and be open to change based on the results of civic discourse. Perhaps a "green constitution" and a charter outlining the environmental rights and responsibilities of citizens and states could even be incorporated (Adkin 2009, 245). Combining aspects of ecological democracy, environmental justice and eco-Marxism would give the proposed WEO the progressive outlook it needs to combat environmental problems in the twenty-first century.

The effects of anthropogenic pollution and resource depletion will annihilate our species, and countless others, from existence. Earth, on the other hand, will live on as it always has, and over millions of years, our scars will have been eroded from its surface as if they had never been made. To avoid the oncoming global disaster, only global action will suffice. A World Environment Organization would provide the organizational base from which all other causes could stem. Its mandate would be such that it could command respect and authority on the world stage while having the resources required to plan, implement, oversee and then redress. World commerce is proving to be too heavy a load on the planet and its citizens; the time has come for the natural world to get its say in how we organize ourselves. On a basic ethical level, the industrialized North, which has chiefly been the cause of environmental problems thus far, owes it to its neighbour, the South, to take on a more responsible ecological role, as it is the South that will suffer the consequences of climate change the most in the years to come. Canada, in particular, must actualize its vast leadership potential through commitment to its global neighbours. The seeds of human preservation can be sown, but it must be done together, as united individuals and as united nations.

Works Cited List

- Accion Ecologica. 2003. "Ecological Debt: South Tells North 'Time to Pay Up.'" http://www.cosmovisiones.com/DeudaEcologica/a_timetopay.html (March 10, 2013).
- Acsehrad, Henri, et al. 2002. "The Jo'burg Memo. Fairness in a Fragile World." Ed. Wolfgang Sachs. *Heinrich Boll Foundation*. http://www.worldsummit2002.org/publications/memo_en_without.pdf (March 15, 2013).
- Adkin, Laurie E. 2009. *Critical Concepts- An Introduction to Politics Fourth Edition*. Eds. Janine Brodie and Sandra Rein. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada.
- Ambrosi, Philippe and Franck Lecocq. 2007. "The Clean Development Mechanism: History, Status and Prospects." *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy* 1 (Winter): 134-151.
- Bauer, Steffen and Frank Biermann. 2005. Introduction to *A World Environment Organization*, by Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- BBC News. 2013. "Barack Obama pitches \$2bn clean energy research fund." *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-21804509> (March 15, 2013).
- Biermann, Frank. 2005. *A World Environment Organization*. Eds. Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- — —. 2011. "Reforming Global Environmental Governance: The Case for a United Nations Environment Organization." <http://www.stakeholderforum.org/fileadmin/files/WEO%20Biermann%20FINAL.pdf> (March 6, 2013).
- Brenton, Tony. 1994. *The Greening of Machiavelli: The Evolution of International Environmental Politics*. London: Earthscan.
- CBC News. 2011. "Kyoto withdrawal cause Quebec firm to lose client." *CBC News*. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2011/12/20/uk-company-thinkglass-kyoto-the-glass-factory.html> (March 15, 2013).
- Charnovitz, Steve. 2002. "A World Environment Organization." *Colum. J. Envtl. L.* (February): 323-357.
- — —. 2005. *A World Environment Organization*. Eds. Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Chasek, Pamela. 1997. "The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development: The First Five Years." Presented at the United Nations University Conference "The United Nations and the Global Environment in the 21st Century: From Common Challenges to Shared Responsibilities," New York.

- Crittenden, Danielle. 2012. "Sunday Roundup: Who is Peter Kent?" *Huffington Post*, February 26.
- Doucet, Isabeau. 2012. "Canada: the surprise 'pariah' of the Kyoto protocol." *Guardian*, November 26.
- Elliott, Lorraine. 2011. *A World Environment Organization*. Eds. Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- German Advisory Council on Global Change. 2001. *New Structures for Global Environmental Policy*. London: Earthscan.
- Held, David. 2006. *Models of Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Heynen, Nik, et al. 2007. Introduction to *Neoliberal Environments: False Promises and Unnatural Consequences*, by Nik Heynen, et al. New York: Routledge.
- Joint Declaration. 1997. "Joint Declaration for a Global Initiative on Sustainable Development." <http://www.polity.org.za/html/govdocs/pr/1997/pr0623c.html?rebookmark=1> (March 15, 2013).
- Kennan, George F. 1970. "To Prevent a World Wasteland: A Proposal." *Foreign Affairs* 48 (April): 401-413.
- Khor, Martin. 1994. *Green Globe Yearbook of International Co-operation on Environment and Development 1994*. Eds. Helge Ole Bergesen and Georg Parmann. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kirton, John J. 2005. *A World Environment Organization*. Eds. Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Klein, Naomi. 2011. "Capitalism vs. the Climate." *The Nation*. <http://www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate?page=full> (March 6, 2013).
- Oberthur, Sebastian. 2002. "Clustering of Multilateral Environmental Agreements: Potentials and Limitations." *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 2 (February): 317-340.
- Saxifrage, Carrie and Alexis Stoymenoff. 2013. "Good idea for Canada? How Norway captures oil revenues to benefit Norwegians." *Vancouver Observer*. <http://www.vancouverobserver.com/sustainability/good-idea-canada-how-norway-captures-oil-revenues-benefit-norwegians> (March 15, 2013).