

The singular advantage of New Zealand's Helen Clark for UN race

Sunday, May 29, 2016

Weighed in the balance

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Susana Malcorra's nomination for appointment as United Nations Secretary General is a win/win for the Macri Government as it will either put an Argentine in an important world leadership role or otherwise strengthens Malcorra's influence going forward as Argentina's foreign minister according to the Herald's Editor-in-Chief Sebastian Lacunza in his 22 May analysis 'An Argentine's shot at heading the United Nations'.

As Lacunza reported there is a tacit agreement in the UN that the appointment of the secretary general should rotate on a regional basis and that in particular, as there has never been a secretary general from Eastern Europe in the 60 years since the UN was founded, that it is their turn for a bite of the cherry and that this could be an impediment to Malcorra obtaining the appointment.

I am not so sure that this is the case as there is also tacit agreement that the next secretary general should be a woman because up until this point the position has been occupied exclusively by men and in identifying a suitable woman the imperative to appoint someone from Eastern Europe may be less of a priority which is to say achieving gender balance may well, and should in the opinion of this writer, trump geographical balance.

This time around there's a wealth of well-qualified woman candidates, as there has no doubt been in the past except that misogynist times disqualified them from serious consideration, and if I was prone to gamble I would bet the farm that the next UN secretary general will be a woman.

Proceeding then on the assumption it is propitious and equitable that the next secretary general should be a woman then there are as of this writing five women in the race, namely Irina Bokova, former Bulgarian Foreign Minister & UNESCO Director-General; Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand & UNDP Administrator; Natalia Gherman, Moldovan Foreign Minister; Susana Malcorra, former high UN official & Argentine Foreign Minister and Vesna Pusić, Croatian Foreign Minister.

Given the current rancour between the USA and Russia it is unlikely the USA will support an Eastern European candidate if they hail from a former or present Russian client state which would put Gherman out of contention.

Of the remaining four Croatia's Pusić is a minnow in comparison to Bokova, Clark and Malcorra all of whom in addition to their former careers are seasoned UN officials.

Bokova has had a career as a politician, diplomat and is the first woman to lead UNESCO and once enjoyed American support but now carries the baggage of enemies made when she lobbied Washington to accept the accession of the Palestinian Authority as a UNESCO member in 2011 after which America ended its contributions to the organisation, which had covered 22% of its budget, and perhaps most ominously for her prospects she is seen as Russia's preferred candidate which will rule her out of contention as far as the USA & UK are concerned.

Clark governed New Zealand for nine years as prime minister and is Administrator of the UNDP which she has significantly reformed and her candidacy is remarkably baggage-free as New Zealand under her leadership proved itself to be commendably non-aligned (refusing to join Bush's 'Coalition of the Willing' invasion of Iraq), internationally responsible (providing security and policing during the establishment of Timor-Leste, joining the UN International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan) and as an affirmation of worldwide support for New Zealand's present foreign policy direction which was authored by Helen Clark, New Zealand recently won a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council on the first ballot.

Malcorra has extensive experience as a high UN official including serving as Under-Secretary-General for Field Support and as Ban Ki-moon's Chef de Cabinet but as Lacunza rightly pointed she carries the baggage of the unresolved dispute between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the Las Islas Malvinas which makes support from the UK, their number one ally the USA and the fifty-three member states of the Commonwealth unlikely if there is another candidate from a less contentious country and the Macri Government's condemnation of the governance of Venezuela will rule-out support from the dwindling number of blindly leftist regimes in Latin America and their fellow travelling nations in the rest of the world.

The most pressing need at the United Nations is for its processes and structure to be radically reformed or it risks going the same way as its predecessor the League of Nations which whimpered its way into oblivion as the major powers essentially ignored its determinations and direction and the same scenario is now playing-out at the UN.

The new UN Secretary General will not be able to singly overturn the iniquitous veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council and this will remain the UN's Achilles Heel until there is a change to the status quo but a strong secretary general can certainly build a consensus that can ultimately pave the way for a major restructuring in how the UN is governed (don't bet the farm any time soon on this particular outcome).

On administrative and housekeeping levels there is much urgent work to be done as the UN is notoriously inefficient with a lot of duplicated functions caused by its multitudinous overlapping constituent bodies and it wastes billions of dollars all of which could be put to better use with more efficient, productive and transparent organisation.

Bokova, Clark and Malcorra are all well qualified for the secretary general role but Clark has the singular advantage of having been a head of government with a proven ability in building consensus as she governed New Zealand for nine years under three successive coalitions she personally forged from disparate political elements and she has demonstrated, both in New Zealand and as the UNDP Administrator, the steely resolve needed to lead effectively.

If UN member states are serious about achieving a gender balance in the secretary general role and believe the appointee should be non-aligned and possess a razor-sharp intellect, compassion, a proven track-record in governance and the singlemindedness needed to reform the UN infrastructure and its operations then without doubt the perfect choice, notwithstanding Irina Bokova's & Susana Malcorra's impressive credentials, is Helen Clark.

Disclaimer: The writer is a New Zealander who in the course of 30 years doing business with Latin America and in his capacity as Vice President of the Latin America New Zealand Business Council came to know and work with Helen Clark in the deepening of New Zealand's engagement with Latin America for which she is principally responsible having beefed-up resources for and driven the New Zealand Government's Latin American Strategy during the entire time she was prime minister. Helen Clark has a deep affection for Latin America, speaks Spanish and has spent many vacations climbing in the Andes including scaling Aconcagua.