

The WHO Conference

John Hyde

Like most others at the time, I hoped the newly formed United Nations would give us international order in which resort to arms was unnecessary. In 1950, with the help of an excellent history master, it was plain to me that the General Assembly was an idle talkfest which encouraged political thugs to assume equality with elected leaders, and that the Security Council was deadlocked by the (in those days Russian) veto.

Those were the days of exams. For one exam I wrote an essay in which I argued that the United Nations Agencies--- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), and World Health Organisation (WHO)---would save the whole United Nations structure. Through these functional, rather than political bodies, the machinery of world government would be developed.

I remember I got a good mark, but my thesis was romantic nonsense. Without even the discipline of the publicity which attends the General Assembly, the UN Agencies, particularly UNESCO, became slothful and highly political. Although financed largely by the democracies they have done the work of left-wing dictatorships, of which there are a greater number among the agencies' member states. The what-might-have-beens of political power are hard to guess, but by lending legitimacy to murderous dictatorships the agencies may have caused a net increase in premature deaths. Today they demonstrate the dangers and costs of unaccountable bureaucracies. They are lavish international gravy trains.

Nevertheless, I retained a certain respect for WHO. It has kept track of communicable diseases (making it easier for national governments to isolate them), some of its immunisation advice has been successful, and it has encouraged control of such real scourges as the malarial mosquito and smallpox.

My respect for WHO has, however, been further eroded. This week, WHO rode its gravy train to Adelaide to discuss not infectious diseases, but lifestyles. A publication produced jointly by WHO and the Commonwealth Department of Community Services and Health promised, "the conference will consider

ways to facilitate the planning and implementation of healthy public policy to provide the context for health promotion action that enables healthier lifestyles." "Healthy public policy" is not, we are later told, public policy that looks like surviving, but policy "characterised by an explicit concern for health". Fascinating!

The definition is broad. It could mean that WHO debates those public policies which condemn millions of people to short, brutish lives in gulags and re-education camps in the USSR and Vietnam. WHO could resolve to tell the Ethiopian regime that consciously starving Eritreans is bad for their health; or it could tell the more murderous regimes in Africa that shooting their own citizens shortens average national life expectancy. Such highly political debate, in which WHO can claim no special expertise, would serve little useful purpose as it would almost certainly be ignored by the governments most at fault. Worse, the criticism would prevent WHO workers entering some countries to control the spread of disease. WHO is therefore right, so far as it can, to turn a blind eye to Unhealthy Political Atrocities and the governments which conduct them.

Our Department of Community Services and Health credits WHO with "a dramatic reduction in the incidence of epidemic and endemic disease...improved water supplies and sanitation in countless undeveloped countries...mass campaigns against communicable diseases..." All of that may be a bit extravagant, but there is no doubt that WHO has sometimes been successful in checking the spread of disease and reducing its incidence. Its successes required the hard work of professional teams often working in unpleasant and dangerous circumstances. The Australian departmental paper mentions the difficulty WHO has often faced "when entrenched systems or vested interests appeared to be threatened".

In third world countries WHO has been effective because it stayed out of politics. It has now entered first world politics ostensibly to reform its people's lifestyles.

Adelaide is a pleasant place for a conference but it is not noticeably disease ridden. Instead of learned papers on malaria, measles or whooping cough, the conferees are to "explore the unresolved dilemmas that are implicit in asserting health as a major value in public policy". "Levels workshops" will explore comprehensive health promotion policies; "people workshops" will discuss groups---youth, the elderly and women; "product workshops" will discuss experience with food, drugs, and information policy; and "settings workshops" will discuss work, leisure and care.

During the conference Geoffrey Robertson will have taped a "Hypothetical" the main story line of which will be "the impact of chemicals on the domestic food chain and export food stuffs, and the testing and marketing of drugs by multinational pharmaceutical companies."

I cannot imagine a doctor struggling with a suspected cholera outbreak in Dacca being at all impressed by the Adelaide findings, and I cannot equate the suffering caused by the tsetse fly with that caused by a low fibre diet. WHO has fallen into the hands of New Class pseuds.

Dr Neal Blewett, who tells us the Adelaide conference is to combat "preventable lifestyle diseases" has brought an army of his friends to jabber and to chatter and tell him what the matter is with us.

His department prattles on, apparently without shame, about the Ottawa charter (adopted by WHO in 1986). It tells us the Ottawa charter reaffirmed statements made at Alma-Atta, in the USSR in 1978: "health can no longer be viewed as curing illness, it must be seen in positive holistic terms, a resource for everyday life with social, mental and physical dimensions". That may have sounded reasonable in the Soviet Union where the government uses similar language to justify their use of psychiatric hospitals to hold political prisoners, but not in Canada. And I can assure Dr Blewett that there are many Australians who do not trust any government to organise their lives in "positive holistic terms". They want to be left alone with the lifestyles they choose.

And WHO: it is apparently well on the way to becoming a left-wing talk shop---just another UNESCO.

ENDS