

28 SEPTEMBER 2018
New Zealand National Statement to United Nations General Assembly



RT HON JACINDA ARDERN

Prime Minister

E nga mana nui o nga whenua o te ao
Tena koutou katoa
Nei ra te reo mihi maioha o Aotearoa
Tena tatau i nga kaupapa korero
Ka arahina e tatau
Me te ngakau pono
Me te kotahitanga o te tangata

Madam President,
Mr Secretary-General,
Friends in the global community.

My opening remarks were in Te Reo Maori, the language of the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. As is tradition, I acknowledged those who are here, why we are here, and the importance of our work.

It seems a fitting place to start.

I'm struck as a leader attending my first United Nations General Assembly by the power and potential that resides here.

But in New Zealand, we have always been acutely aware of that.

We are a remote nation at the bottom of the South Pacific. Our nearest neighbours take 3 hours to reach by plane, and anywhere that takes less than 12 hours is considered close. I have no doubt though, that our geographic isolation has contributed to our values.

We are a self-deprecating people. We're not ones for status. We'll celebrate the local person who volunteers at their sports club as much as we will the successful entrepreneur. Our empathy and strong sense of justice is matched only by our pragmatism. We are, after all, a country made up of two main islands - one simply named North and the other, South.

For all of that, our isolation has not made us insular.

In fact, our engagement with the world has helped shape who we are.

I am a child of the 80's. A period in New Zealand's history where we didn't just observe international events, we challenged them. Whether it was apartheid in South Africa, or nuclear testing in the Pacific, I grew up learning about my country and who we were, by the way that we reacted to international events. Whether it was taking to the streets or changing our laws, we have seen ourselves as members of a community, and one that we have a duty to use our voice within.

I am an incredibly proud New Zealander, but much of that pride has come from being a strong and active member of our international community, not in spite of it.

And at the heart of that international community, has been this place.

Emerging from a catastrophic war, we have collectively established through convention, charters and rules a set of international norms and human rights. All of these are an acknowledgement that we are not isolated, governments do have obligations to their people and each other, and that our actions have a global effect.

In 1945, New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser said that the UN Charter offered perhaps a last opportunity to work in unison to realise the hope in the hearts of all of us, for a peace that would be real, lasting, and worthy of human dignity.

But none of these founding principles should be consigned to the history books. In fact, given the challenges we face today, and how truly global they are in their nature and impact, the need for collective action and multilateralism has never been clearer.

And yet, for all of that, the debate and dialogue we hear globally is not centred on the relevance and importance of our international institutions. Instead, we find ourselves having to defend their very existence.

That surely leaves us all with the question, how did we get here, and how do we get out?

If anything unites us politically in this place right now it is this – globalisation has had a massive impact on our nations and the people we serve.

While that impact has been positive for many, for others it has not. The transitions our economies have made have often been jarring, and the consequences harsh. And so amongst unprecedented global economic growth, we have still seen a growing sense of isolation, dislocation, and a sense of insecurity and the erosion of hope.

As politicians and governments, we all have choices in how we respond to these challenges.

We can use the environment to blame nameless, faceless ‘other’, to feed the sense of insecurity, to retreat into greater levels of isolationism. Or we can acknowledge the problems we have and seek to fix them.

Generational change

In New Zealand, going it alone is not an option.

Aside from our history, we are also a trading nation. And proudly so. But even without those founding principles, there are not just questions of nationhood to consider. There are generational demands upon us too.

It should hardly come as a surprise that we have seen a global trend of young people showing dissatisfaction with our political systems, and calling on us to do things differently – why wouldn’t they when they themselves have had to adapt so rapidly to a changing world.

Within a few short decades we now have a generation who will grow up more connected than ever before. Digital transformation will determine whether the jobs they are training for will even exist in two decades. In education or the job market, they won’t just compete with their neighbour, but their neighbouring country.

This generation is a borderless one – at least in a virtual sense. One that increasingly see themselves as global citizens. And as their reality changes, they expect ours to as well - that we’ll see and understand our collective impact, and that we’ll change the way we use our power.

And if we’re looking for an example of where the next generation is calling on us to make that change, we need look no further than climate change.

Global challenges

Two weeks ago, Pacific Island leaders gathered together at the Pacific Islands Forum.

It was at this meeting, on the small island nation of Nauru, that climate change was declared the single biggest threat to the security of the Pacific. Please, just think about this for a moment.

Of all of the challenges we debate and discuss, rising sea levels present the single biggest threat to our region. For those who live in the South Pacific, the impacts of climate change are not academic, or even arguable. They are watching the sea levels rise, the extreme weather events increase, and the impact on their water supply and food crops. We can talk all we like about the science and what it means, what temperature rises we need to limit in order to survive, but there is a grinding reality in hearing someone from a Pacific island talk about where the sea was when they were a child, and potential loss of their entire village as an adult.

Our action in the wake of this global challenge remains optional. But the impact of inaction does not. Nations like Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, or Kiribati – small countries who’ve contributed the least to global climate change – are and will suffer the full force of a warming planet.

If my Pacific neighbours do not have the option of opting out of the effects of climate change, why should we be able to opt out of taking action to stop it?

Any disintegration of multilateralism – any undermining of climate related targets and agreements – aren’t interesting footnotes in geopolitical history. They are catastrophic.

In New Zealand we are determined to play our part. We will not issue any further offshore oil and gas exploration permits. We have set a goal of 100% renewable energy generation by 2035, established a green

infrastructure fund to encourage innovation, and rolled out an initiative to plant one billion trees over the next 10 years.

These plans are unashamedly ambitious. The threat climate change poses demands it.

But we only represent less than 0.2% of global emissions.

That's why, as a global community, not since the inception of the United Nations has there been a greater example of the importance of collective action and multilateralism, than climate change. It should be a rallying cry to all of us.

And yet there is a hesitance we can ill afford. A calculation of personal cost, of self-interest. But this is not the only challenge where domestic self-interest is the first response, and where an international or collective approach has been diluted at best, or rejected at worst.

Rebuilding multilateralism

But it would be both unfair and naive to argue that retreating to our own borders and interests has meant turning our backs on a perfect system. The international institutions we have committed ourselves to have not been perfect.

But they can be fixed.

And that is why the challenge I wish to issue today is this – together, we must rebuild and recommit to multilateralism.

We must redouble our efforts to work as a global community.

We must rediscover our shared belief in the value, rather than the harm, of connectedness.

We must demonstrate that collective international action not only works, but that it is in all of our best interests.

We must show the next generation that we are listening, and that we have heard them.

Connectedness

But if we're truly going to take on a reform agenda, we need to acknowledge the failings that led us to this cross road.

International trade for instance, has helped bring millions of people out of poverty around the world. But some have felt their standard of living slide. In New Zealand, we ourselves have seen the hesitancy around trade agreements amongst our own population.

The correct response to this is not to repeat mistakes of the past and be seduced by the false promises of protectionism. Rather, we must all work to ensure that the benefits of trade are distributed fairly across our societies.

We can't rely on international institutions to do this, in the same way as we cannot blame them if they haven't delivered these benefits. It is incumbent on us to build productive, sustainable, inclusive economies, and demonstrate to our peoples that when done right, international economic integration can make us all better off.

And if we want to ensure anyone is better off, surely it should be the most vulnerable.

In New Zealand we have set ourselves an ambitious goal. We want to be the best place in the world to be a child. It's hardly the stuff of hard and fast measures – after all, how do you measure play, a feeling of security, happiness?

But we can measure material deprivation, and we can measure poverty, and so we will. And not only that, we are making it law that we report on those numbers every single year alongside our budgets. What better way to hold ourselves to account, and what better group to do that for than children.

But if we are focused on nurturing that next generation, we have to equally worry about what it is we are handing down to them too – including our environment.

In the Maori language there is a word that captures the importance of that role - Kaitiakitanga. It means guardianship. The idea that we have been entrusted with our environment, and we have a duty of care. For us, that has meant taking action to address degradation, like setting standards to make our rivers swimmable, reducing waste and phasing out single-use plastic bags, right through to eradicating predators and protecting our biodiversity.

The race to grow our economies and increase wealth makes us all the poorer if it comes at the cost of our environment. In New Zealand, we are determined to prove that it doesn't have to be this way.

But these are all actions and initiatives that we can take domestically that ease the blame and pressure on our international institutions. That doesn't mean they don't need fixing.

Reforming the UN

As the heart of the multilateral system, the United Nations must lead the way.

We strongly support the Secretary-General's reform efforts to make the UN more responsive and effective, modernised so that it is capable of dealing with today's challenges. We encourage him to be ambitious. And we stand with him in that ambition.

But ultimately it is up to us – the Member States – to drive change at the UN.

This includes reforming the Security Council. If we want the Council to fulfil its purpose of maintaining international peace and security, its practices need to be updated so it is not hamstrung by the use of the veto. New thinking will also be needed if we are to achieve the vision encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals. In New Zealand, we have sought to embed the principles behind the SDGs in a new living standards framework that is guiding policy making, and the management of our resources. And we remain committed to supporting the roll out of the SDGs alongside international partners through a significant increase in our Official Development Assistance budget.

Universal Values

But revitalising our international rules-based system isn't just about the mechanics of how we work together. It also means renewing our commitment to our values.

The UN Charter recalls that the Organisation was formed to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which through two World Wars had brought untold sorrow to humanity. If we forget this history and the principles which drove the creation of the UN we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

In an increasingly uncertain world it is more important than ever that we remember the core values on which the UN was built.

That all people are equal.

That everyone is entitled to have their dignity and human rights respected.

That we must strive to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

And we must consistently hold ourselves to account on each.

Amongst renewing this commitment though, we have to acknowledge where accountability must continue - and that is especially the case when it comes to equality.

So many gains have been made, each worthy of celebration. In New Zealand we have just marked the 125th year since women were granted the right to vote. We were the first in the world to do so. As a girl I never ever grew up believing that my gender would stand in the way of me achieving whatever I wanted to in life. I am, after all, not the first, but the third female Prime Minister of New Zealand.

But for all of that, we still have a gender pay gap, an over representation of women in low paid work, and domestic violence. And we are not alone.

It seems surprising that in this modern age we have to recommit ourselves to gender equality, but we do. And I for one will never celebrate the gains we have made for women domestically, while internationally other women and girls experience a lack of the most basic of opportunity and dignity.

Me Too must become We Too.

We are all in this together.

Conclusion

I accept that the list of demands on all of us is long. Be it domestic, or international, we are operating in challenging times. We face what we call in New Zealand 'wicked problems'. Ones that are intertwined and interrelated.

Perhaps then it is time to step back from the chaos and ask what we want. It is in that space that we'll find simplicity. The simplicity of peace, of prosperity, of fairness. If I could distil it down into one concept that we are pursuing in New Zealand it is simple and it is this. Kindness.

In the face of isolationism, protectionism, racism – the simple concept of looking outwardly and beyond ourselves, of kindness and collectivism, might just be as good a starting point as any. So let's start here with the institutions that have served us well in times of need, and will do so again.

In the meantime, I can assure all of you, New Zealand remains committed to continue to do our part to building and sustaining international peace and security. To promoting and defending an open, inclusive, and rules-based international order based on universal values.

To being pragmatic, empathetic, strong and kind.

The next generation after all, deserves no less.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa.

<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/new-zealand-national-statement-united-nations-general-assembly>