Bahá'í institutions and global governance

An address given at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand at Auckland Museum on 28 April 2007, by Murray Smith.

We have heard His Excellency the Governor General and Judge Heather Simpson, Chair of the National Spiritual Assembly, tell us of Margaret Stevenson, the New Zealand woman who in 1912 became the first resident Bahá'í in Australasia. That was unquestionably an historic event in the annals of the Bahá'í religion in this area, and the Pacific as a whole. No doubt it will itself be the occasion for a very significant memorial event at its hundredth anniversary in just five years from now.

But tonight we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of a no less significant event, the establishment of the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand. It takes nothing away from the signal act of Margaret Stevenson as we acknowledge the especially high degree of importance that Bahá'ís attach to the formation of this institution.

Why do I say especially high degree of importance?

To answer that question I want to link tonight's event to the condition of our world and the primary goal of the Bahá'í Faith—world peace.

And as I begin to put my thoughts before you I want to start with a quote from that great physicist Albert Einstein, this time wearing his philosopher's hat. He said:

> ***We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.***

In this past century the scientific and technological advances we have seen suggest the possibility of a great surge forward in the social evolution of the planet, and indicate the means by which the practical problems of humanity may be solved. The development of instant communications, the transport revolutions, medical science and other marvels of human discovery provide, it seems, the very means for the administration of the complex life of a united world. Yet barriers persist. Doubts, misconceptions, prejudices, suspicions and narrow self-interest beset nations and peoples in their relations one to another.

Wars, devastation, and the devaluing of human life can still be seen in so many places.

Just this past week at the Anzac commemorations in Turkey, one of the distinguished speakers, abhorring the atrocity and carnage of Gallipoli, said that world peace seems as far away today as it was in 1915, the time of those tragic events.

Indeed, if we look closely we see more signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world than we see signs of increased cohesion and stability. One of the signs of this breakdown is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individuals and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. In the bastions of western democracy we see that in the United Kingdom, in the Parliamentary elections they struggle to get more than 60 per cent of the people voting, and in the United States the proportion voting for the President hovers around 50 per cent or under. In New Zealand at the last election it was under 60 per cent and there are more worrying signs. Research undertaken by Auckland University some years go showed that fewer than 50 per cent of the members of political parties would trust the members of their own parties to deliver promises made.

So we can observe that there is a widening distrust in the vital process of the election of our institutions of governance. Contributing to this distrust are the influences on the outcome from lobbyists and vested interests, the restriction on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by bias and misrepresentations expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the serious problems of society and that the democratic deficit between the

citizens and their representatives can be reconciled. Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.

Just for a minute or so I want to step back in time to the 1870s.

It was at that time, nearly 140 years ago, that Bahá'u'lláh the Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith addressed a number of letters to the kings, religious leaders and peoples of the world outlining the main prerequisites for world peace. He wrote of the imperative need for a world order based on justice, the eradication of all forms of prejudice, the equality of the sexes, a recognition of the essential harmony of science and religion, and the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty. As well as these principles Bahá'u'lláh enunciated concepts and practical ideas for the creation of universal institutions of global governance designed to foster the unity of humankind, and the search for a solution to the world's economic problems.

So 140 years ago the world was given principles and the institutional framework of global governance — the pre-requisites of world peace!

What was my original question — why do Bahá'ís attach a high degree of importance to the event 50 years ago when they elected their first National Spiritual Assembly? The answer is because by electing this institution, the Bahá'ís of New Zealand added one more vital pillar in a system of decentralised global governance that Bahá'ís believe will, in the fullness of time, be the model through which the ills of the planet will be cured and universal peace be fully and finally achieved.

Now it might be said: "Well, what is so special about an organisation that has 'branches' in many countries around the world? There are plenty of such organisations with headquarters in Paris, or Rome, or Geneva, with representation all around the world." The answer to that is the unique and substantially different features in the Bahá'í administrative system that distinguish it compared to anything that we can see in the systems of governance that have evolved over centuries past as designed by humans.

And that is the first point of difference.

This is not a system designed by human minds.

Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances. Therein lies the secret of its strength, its fundamental distinction, and the guarantee against corruption and schism.

In the literature of politics and governance we read of three principal systems devised by humans: plutocracy, autocracy, and democracy. In the modern world we have reached a wide consensus that democracy is the preferred option, but what did that great world statesman Sir Winston Churchill say about democracy?

> ***Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those others that have been tried from time to time.***

People have often asked me: Why do we need this new system delineated in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh?

I think Winston Churchill has given us the answer.

In revealing His system to us Bahá'u'lláh assesses the condition of the world and saw it to be:

> ***…at the mercy of rulers so drunk with pride that they cannot discern clearly their own best advantage.*** [1]

And He declared that:

> ***...the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending***

> ***convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective.*** [2]

But He does not just paint a picture of gloom as we might glean from the words of Churchill when he talks about the "world of sin and woe". Churchill seems to be saying, wherever we look we see this sin, this woe, the trials, tribulations and troubles of the world, but what can we do? We have this system called democracy which actually cannot do the job but it's the best we've got!

On the other hand Bahá'u'lláh does confirm that there are convulsions and chaos, and He does confirm that the present system is "lamentably defective," but He goes on to prescribe the remedy:

He Says:

> ***Soon will the present day order be rolled up and a new one spread out in its stead.*** [3]

And He further writes:

> ***O ye children of men, the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race...*** [4]

And He warns:

> ***The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.***[5]

Might this be the definitive explanation of the true purpose of religion?

> ***…to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race…***

In fact Bahá'u'lláh goes further, in one of His other passages he delivers the strong message that if religion ceases to be the cause of unity, if it be the cause of dissension and discord, hate, and envy, then humanity is better off without religion.

Let's dwell on that for a moment: A messenger of God and Himself the Founder of the most recent of the monotheistic religions saying that no religion is better than a religion of division and enmity.

This is a very powerful message.

Perhaps it is even more powerful if we allow ourselves to see the corollary of Bahá'u'lláhs statement by saying that whatever is **not** unifying, whatever causes hatred and discord is by definition **not** religion, and **not** of God.

In an earlier quotation I cited Bahá'u'lláh's warning of the impending convulsions and chaos. How does the world look today in the light of his predictions?

If we think more broadly about the condition of the world in practical terms: Is there any doubt in our minds about the need for a more workable and effective system of global governance? No matter where we look today there is not a problem that is not global in nature. We are long past the point where the major problems of the planet can be solved within national jurisdictions:

- climate change—what possible effective action can be taken without international cooperation.
- drug trafficking
- the modern form of slavery—the buying and selling of women and babies
- terrorism
- free and fair trade

- international peace and security.

I am sure you can think of many more issues.

In response to this analysis, the Bahá'í Faith puts forward for examination a system of governance that Bahá'ís believe is divine in origin and thus free of the imperfections of those systems devised by the most thoughtful and altruistic of humans.

That is the overview, or if you like the overarching vision, from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. First, the principles which are the foundation for a just and peaceful world, and second, the institutional architecture which will protect and preserve the integrity of those principles and guide the process to its full fruition.

Bahá'ís firmly believe that based on this vision and foundation, world peace is not only possible but inevitable. It is the next stage in the evolution of this planet. But Bahá'ís are not naïve about this. They realize that this is a process and it will be a long and painstaking journey but just like any journey it begins with the first step.

Now I want to look at the structure and operation of the Bahá'í system. First it operates at three levels: local, national and international. Bahá'í communities throughout the world elect their local governing bodies—called Local Spiritual Assemblies—every 12 months. Each Assembly has a high degree of decentralised authority to run the affairs of its own community. Then at the national level each country elects its National Spiritual Assembly—also every 12 months.

At the international level, every five years the world governing body, an institution named the Universal House of Justice, is elected by the members of all the 183 National Assemblies throughout the world, almost the same as the membership of the United Nations.

This three-tiered system is the structure, or the architecture, of the Bahá'í system. So now let us look at the conduct of the elections themselves. The process is essentially democratic but with some crucial differences. There are three key elements to it:

- the conduct of the ballot itself,
- the qualifications for office, and
- the accountability mechanism.

Speaking as a former Member of Parliament I saw two most obvious differences when I first studied the Bahá'í Faith: one, no nominations are permitted in the electoral process, and two, there is no campaigning allowed for elected office. In this twin prohibition of key elements in conventional systems, Bahá'u'lláh has eliminated all possibility for the development of cliques and schisms, the formation of partisan groups, or fractious disunity within the community. This is the first crucial point of difference.

When I have given talks on this subject before, the first question I get is that if there are no nominations and no campaigning how do people get elected? If there is no party manifesto or platform, how do the voters choose?

This is the second point of crucial difference and another of the fascinating features of the Bahá'í electoral process. The Sacred Writings of the Faith give the electors clear guidance regarding the qualifications for those who might hold elected office in the Bahá'í community. They should be only those persons who manifest the essential qualities of:

- Unquestioned loyalty to the principles and tenets of the faith
- Selfless devotion to the work and undertakings of the community
- A well-trained mind

- Recognised ability
- Mature experience.

Thus the office bearers are elected because of their qualities not their promises made in order to woo electoral popularity.

But it doesn't stop there, the third point of crucial difference is that the elected representatives then have imposed on them a series of what could be called accountability standards, as they undertake their duties. Here are some of the directives given to those elected to office:

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are:

- ***purity of motive,***
- ***radiance of spirit,***
- ***detachment from all else save God,***
- ***attraction to His Holy Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones.***[6]
- ***It is incumbent upon them to be vigilant and cautious, discreet and watchful at all times***
- ***They must endeavour to promote amity and concord amongst the believers, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness, and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and wholehearted co-operation for the service of the Cause and humanity.***
- ***They must do their utmost to extend at all times the helping hand to the poor, the sick, the disabled, the orphan, the widow, irrespective of colour, caste, and creed.***
- ***They must promote by every means in their power the material as well as the spiritual enlightenment of youth, the means for the education of children, institute, whenever possible, educational institutions, organize and supervise their work, and provide the best means for their progress and development.*** [7]

Speaking as both a former politician and an elected member of a Bahá'í assembly I can say without doubt this system of accountability to God is a powerful motivator. In the secular world it is natural that people elected to political office evaluate their actions based on the hope that what they do will be popular with electors and result in their return to office at the next election. I want to underscore that Bahá'ís make no criticism of the elected individuals in our parliament and local authorities and other institutions. It is the system that is flawed.

From my own experience I came to the view that the adversarial nature of politics was contrary to the best interests of the public and the nation. Principally this is because adversarial partisan politics is divisive rather than unifying. Only in unity is there strength. Partisan politics means that each of the political groupings must believe that it has a mortgage on the truth of any issue. This of course is nonsense. It was obvious to me when I was in Parliament that most of the people on the other side actually do have some good ideas. Why should I oppose them simply because they were on the other side? And v*ice versa*. In adversary politics I win when the other guy loses. It should not be like that. It should be possible for the best of all opinions and thoughts to be harnessed for the good of all the people. This is essentially what is offered by the Bahá'í electoral system, it has elements of the political about it but it is non adversarial. At the same time it recognises the value of, indeed the necessity for, healthy debate and the articulation of widely different points of view and ideas. In the Bahá'í Writings it says: ***"The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions."*** [8] But the clash of opinions takes place within a consultative system free of the animosity and negativity that is so common in the normal political discourse.

I want to stress that the great majority of people I met in politics were very good people, they wanted to do

good and worked hard at it. But the system is defective and they are captives of it and have no option but to play accordingly. The Bahá'í insights offered are at the level of principle and structure because that is what we believe must change. Remember Einstein?

> ***We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.***

The alternative concept of accountability to God and the shunning of partisanship IS **a new way of thinking.**

A Bahá'í colleague once put it to me this way: he said that as an assembly member he considered God to be the arbiter of whether or not he had conformed to the required accountability standard and would pray that if he had not done so that someone more fitted to the challenge would be elected at the next vote.

It is apparent then that the three key elements this system—when taken together…

- the prohibition on nominations and campaigning,
- the qualities that voters should look for when making their choices at the ballot,
- and the system of accountability, one might say the spiritual accountability

… when all these are taken together, it is apparent that the design of the system is to produce quality decision-making from the elected institutions. This I think is what the world yearns for.

Several times this evening I have used words like unique, and substantially different, and fundamental distinction, and I want to make clear the context in which I use such words and expressions. It is not to assert what is often criticised in religious discourse as exclusive truth claims. On the contrary, Bahá'ís view religion as **one**, and the correct paradigm through which to view religion is the phenomenon of progressive revelation. This is a topic worthy of study on its own but beyond our scope for tonight. What progressive revelation means, though, is best described by the great grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi, when he wrote:

> ***The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, the followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that:***
>
> - ***Religious truth is not absolute but relative,***
> - ***that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process,***
> - ***that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin,***
> - ***that their basic principles are in complete harmony,***
> - ***that their aims and purposes are one and the same,***
> - ***that their teachings are but facets of one truth,***
> - ***that their functions are complementary,***
> - ***that they differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines, and***
> - ***that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.***[9]

This last point is critical:

> ***…that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.***

This means that all the founders of the great religious systems were revealing teachings and principles as a coherent series of essential steps in the unfolding of God's intention for the advancement of human society. These great luminaries not only revealed what was appropriate for their time, but they did so both with a knowledge of what was the ultimate destination as well as a precise understanding of all the intermediate

steps. In fact they predicted each of these steps and in their prophetic words gave us the vision of that ultimate destination.

It is what Jesus Christ meant when he referred to God's Kingdom on Earth. Of course 2000 years ago Christ could not explain the details to his disciples. It would not have made sense to them, so that is why, when they asked him about the wondrous events to come, he replied:

> ***I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. (John: 16:12–13)***

I looked through the Bahá'í Writings to see if I could find what might be a direct correlation to the meaning of these words from Jesus, presaging momentous future events. And I found this:

> ***The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signalizing through its advent the coming of age of the entire human race. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet.***[10]

That is worth repeating I think:

> ***….marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet.***

In Bahá'í terminology this condition is spoken of as Universal Peace, Jesus encapsulated His vision in the expression "Gods Kingdom on earth" – different words but meaning the same thing. I leave this for you to ponder the possibility.

In the simplest terms the proposition put forward by the Bahá'ís for examination is that the peoples of the world can continue to grapple with the global issues faced by humanity through the defective institutional frameworks that exist, "the old order," or consider the Bahá'í model as one of greater potential for producing enduring solutions.

One could argue that the United Nations is slowly plodding blindly towards something of this magnitude, but as yet the effort remains weak. The signs are not good. The blueprint is lacking for achieving the essential unity of nations that would bring all this about. Might the blueprint be the Bahá'í model?

The goal is to foster world-wide understanding and peace among nations by forging a public policy framework of global scope that allows every nation-member and every human individual at every level, and every strata of society, to express their full potential and work collectively for the promotion of education, wealth and happiness for all people, regardless of citizenship or socioeconomic position, and yet without any dilution of the wonderful diversity of nations and unique characteristics of each individual human being.

I say potential because there is no Bahá'í anywhere I know who would claim we have yet achieved that to which we aspire. This quite radically new system is a work in progress that is advancing as the Bahá'í community expands and matures. But it is a model of governance that is in practical operation at the local community level in more than 230 countries and territories world-wide, from the highlands of Papua New Guinea, to remote Siberia, throughout Asia and the Pacific, to the plush suburbs of New York, London, and of course throughout New Zealand! National institutions exist in 183 countries.

This model can be observed, reviewed, and evaluated by anyone interested in examining it. What will become apparent is that the Bahá'í system is ideologically neutral so there is no impediment to its transference to the secular world. Thus Bahá'ís believe that eventually it will be widely adopted as peoples

everywhere become increasingly disillusioned with the current systems.

In the words of the Universal House of Justice:

> ***Whether Peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behaviour, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth. At this critical juncture when the intractable problems confronting nations have been fused into one common concern for the whole world, failure to stem the tide of conflict and disorder would be unconscionably irresponsible.***[11]

Tonight we celebrate that 50 years ago the New Zealand Bahá'í community formed the institution that enabled this country to fully participate in the work of establishing the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand began to play its vital part in perfecting what Bahá'ís believe is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. This Order **IS** without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilisation.

May I echo the kind sentiments expressed earlier by our honoured guest the Governor-General and extend personally and on behalf of all of you here tonight, congratulations to the New Zealand National Spiritual Assembly on its progress to date. And I proffer to the institution the warmest of best wishes and prayers for its future success in guiding the development of the New Zealand Bahá'í community.

May its deliberations be bounteously blessed as it continues its contribution to providing the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of Universal Peace—the Kingdom of God on earth.

End Notes

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 67.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 171.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Proclamation,* p. 119.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Proclamation,* p. 112.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 286.
6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá,* p. 87.
7. Shoghi Effendi, *Principles of Bahá'í Administration,* p. 39.
8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections,* p. 87
9. Shoghi Effendi, "Summary Statement to the Special UN Committee on Palestine, 1947"
10. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 163
11. The Universal House of Justice, "The Promise of World Peace"