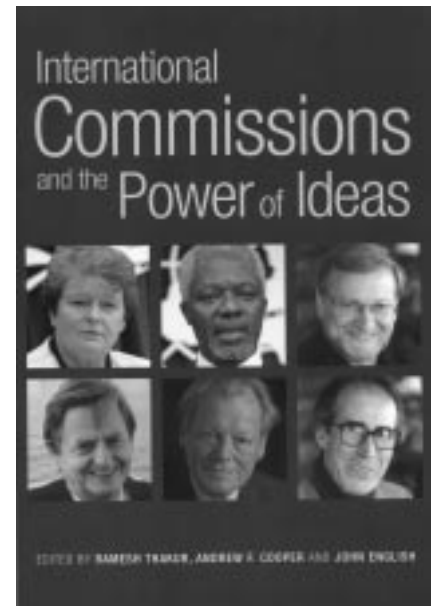


## Influencing the “Mind of Global Governance”

Ramesh Thakur, Andrew F. Cooper and John English, eds., *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas*. New York: United Nations University Press, 2005.

Review by Stephen Brooks



**M**y first reaction to this book was skepticism. A volume on the influence that international commissions have had on what Andrew Cooper and John English call “the mind of global governance,” with several contributions from individuals who either have been directly affiliated to the United Nations or who are well known to be strong advocates of the UN and its works, published by the United Nations University Press.

I expected the narrative to run something like this: International commissions like the Brundtland and Palme commissions have shaped global and national policy conversations in important ways, prodding and pushing states and policy-makers in enlightened directions, but have been limited from having a greater impact by the usual suspects — the United States, defenders of states sovereignty, anti-global governance types and sundry reactionaries — yet despite these limitations they have shown the promise of global governance and the multilateral resolution of problems

whose roots or importance, or both, make them fit subjects to be dealt with by the global community and its agencies.

My initial skepticism was probably deepened by the fact that I was in Washington, DC when I read this book, a town where the UN and the concept of global governance can seem terribly irrelevant. It is, of course, quite easy to imagine that ideas in Geneva, Paris the Hague and elsewhere — basically anywhere but Washington — do not matter very much compared to those that circulate along the couple of miles separating the White House from Capitol Hill. As I listened one morning to a congressional committee chairman hold forth on an issue related to the War on Terror, I couldn’t help but think that the ideas of those who toil in the UN and its agencies can seem very inconsequential alongside those of someone elected to represent a district in Michigan or Missouri.

**B**ut my skepticism about this book was largely misplaced. Most of the chapters in it are pretty fair-minded in

their assessment of the impact of international commissions on how opinion-leaders in various policy domains think and talk about issues. “They have had,” says Edward Luck, “more effect on the way we think about global issues and institutions than on specific policy choices.” Try to imagine a conversation about environmental policy and choices in which the concept of sustainable development, popularized by the Brundtland Commission, did not arise. Heather Smith is doubtless correct when she says that the “popularization of sustainable development has not fundamentally altered the state of the world.” But, she concludes, “there is power in ideas even if it is a case of ‘greenwashing.’”

Well, yes, but how much and what sort of influence vary considerably from case to case. And if the most one can say is that the policy conversation has changed as a result of an international commission’s activities, but that it is business as usual on the ground, then this volume’s measured but generally upbeat tone on the impact of international

commissions would seem to go beyond what is warranted.

As several of the chapters in this book make clear, the substantive impact of international commissions on policies and behaviour is seldom immediate or direct. "More frequently," argue Cooper and English, "commissioners have facilitated and legitimated the extension of soft law or norm creation." This is already a significant form of influence. But it is not one that takes place overnight or without the norms and ideas that emerge from a commission undergoing substantial change in the long process or reaction, debate and negotiation that unfolds once its report and recommendations are issued.

Those who believe that the extension of soft law and international norm creation are exactly what the UN and its commissions should be doing will applaud Ramesh Thakur's statement that, "To the extent that our primary goal is to reposition the normative consensus, the Secretary General is uniquely important to our task. The office is the custodian of the world conscience and the embodiment of the international interest like no other." Custodian of the world conscience? I don't think one has to be Pat Buchanan to choke a bit on these words. But this is one of the few instances of absolutely over-the-top UN-worship in a book that otherwise manages to maintain a pretty level-headed tone.

Appropriately, I think, the book concludes on a note of informed skepticism. Edward Luck asks, "Are we making a difference in terms of influencing policymaking at the United Nations and/or in member state capitals?" Based on his extensive experience on commissions of the sort this book examines, Luck offers several pieces of practical advice that appear no where else in this book.

He suggest that in addition to the other forms of representation and diversity that are routinely considered important and even necessary when putting together a commission, that political diversity be added to the mix. "Sooner or later," Luck says, "our ideas will be challenged and it might well be better to have a few devil's advocates within the process of deliberation than to face them only after the ideas and phrases are fixed."

Luck adds that the reports and recommendations of international commissions too often, if understandably, address themselves to the UN instead of to the member-states who pay the bills and who ultimately are the ones that must take the necessary steps to implement commission recommendations. This tendency, Luck argues, "tends to exacerbate the gap between US politics and global norm-building processes." Although the secretary-general may say that the United States is only one of the roughly 190 members of the UN, this approach is neither realistic nor helpful in terms of getting America onboard in international endeavors.

Moreover, Luck asks whether it is really such a good idea to commission "mega-studies" that cost millions of dollars. He suggests that the trend toward big, expensive blue ribbon panels may have the effect — presumably unintended — of swallowing up most of the resources available for research and advocacy, thus producing a less intellectually competitive and less stimulating environment than if smaller, more numerous studies were financed. (Canadian governments, with their addiction to royal commissions, might take heed.)

The reception that a commission's ideas and recommendations receive may also be compromised, Luck observes, by the perception that the enterprise was cooked from the outset. The line separating inquiry from advocacy, he notes, is often unclear and this can seriously impair the credibility of a commission.

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To which some will say, "Well, whose fault is that?" But Luck is, I think, certainly right when he argues that "global commissions purporting to represent the range of relevant views...[cannot] leave out certain perspectives — including those of US conservatives and legislators." Pretending that such perspectives do not exist, do not matter or are not worthy of serious consideration is surely a recipe for limiting the policy and institutional impact of international commissions.

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