

Who wants to rule the world?



BY
INVITATION

By SIMON CHESTERMAN

HOW should we choose the next secretary-general of the United Nations? Carefully, one might think.

The first of the eight people who have held the office described it to the second as “the most impossible job on this earth”.

Head of an international civil service, nominal commander in chief of 100,000 peacekeepers, and lackey of the Security Council, the secretary-general has few powers, minimal staff and a budget less than that of the Tokyo fire department. But he or she also enjoys a platform that can mobilise public opinion, champion global causes and build alliances to address planet-wide problems from climate change to poverty to terrorism.

Prior to Mr Ban Ki Moon stepping down next year, one might think that a global search is under way, perhaps using an executive search firm. One might assume that a job description has been circulated with prominent placement in the *Economist* magazine and elsewhere. Shortlists would then be drawn up, interview panels convened, a battery of psychometric tests administered to ensure that the best candidate possible can be identified, recruited and hired.

One would be wrong on all counts. Not only is there no formal search process – but there is not even a job description. The UN Charter is vague, merely defining the position as the “chief administrative officer” of the organisation.

The secretary-general is appointed by the General Assembly “upon the recommendation of the Security Council”.

Back in 1946, the General Assembly (where every country has one vote) declared it was “desirable” that the UN Security Council recommend only one candidate, and that public debate be avoided. Since then, the Security Council has only ever put forward one candidate and the assembly has always endorsed him.

As a result, the five permanent members of the council – Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States, known within the UN as the P5 – have a veto over the selection process. That means that any aspiring secretary-general must be acceptable to London, Beijing, Paris, Moscow and Washington.

Considerations for candidacy

THE number of countries, let alone individuals, that the P5 might agree on is small. When regional sensitivities are added to the mix, the pool of candidates

No executive search. No formal candidates list. Instead, the process to select the next United Nations secretary-general is opaque and driven by the rumour mill.



shrinks further.

The Eastern European Group of UN member states has made much of the fact that theirs is the only group never to have had a secretary-general. (There have been three from Western Europe, two from Asia, two from Africa and one from Latin America.)

But the ongoing relevance of Eastern Europe as a geographical or political category is debatable. Fully two-thirds of its 23 members have either joined or are in the process of joining the European Union. It is striking, however, that this was a matter on which even Ukraine and Russia saw eye to eye: Both supported a letter sent to all UN missions by the Georgian chair of the group in November last year.

Another consideration that is gaining some traction is the fact that all eight secretaries-general to date have been men.

In past elections, only three of the 31 candidates nominated by states have been women: India's Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit in 1953, Norway's Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1991, and Latvia's Vaira Vike-Freiberga in 2006.

For an organisation as important as the United Nations, having its leader chosen by the lowest common denominator of what the five permanent Security Council members finds acceptable is not good enough.

That number is certain to increase in this round, which takes place at a time when there are more women in more senior UN posts than in the past.

These include Ms Irina Bokova, the Bulgarian director-general of Unesco, and Ms Helen Clark, the former New Zealand prime minister and current administrator of the UN Development Programme. Both are widely considered serious contenders for the position of secretary-general.

Ms Clark's candidacy would violate another unwritten rule: that candidates should not have served as president or prime minister.

The preference has generally

been for foreign ministers – four of the eight secretaries-general previously served their countries in that capacity, with three more having been professional diplomats. Mr Kofi Annan is the only secretary-general to have been appointed from within the organisation itself, having joined at the lowest professional grade in 1962. The concern is thought to be that member states prefer to have a secretary-general who is accustomed to taking orders rather than giving them – someone who will be more “secretary” than “general”.

New Zealand's relatively small size may render Ms Clark's candi-

dacy uncontroversial.

The same view appears to lie behind Mr Danilo Turk's bid for the position. A former president of Slovenia, he was the first to receive his home government's support in January last year. Prior to his election as president, he had served five years as assistant secretary-general for political affairs under Mr Annan. Like Ms Clark and Ms Bokova, he would also know what he is getting into.

The same cannot be said of wildcard candidates like former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, though past experience in the United Nations Organisation is clearly not a prerequisite for the job.

Selection process

TWO months ago, the General Assembly discussed the selection process, with many diplomats arguing for a more transparent and inclusive approach.

This echoed calls from civil society organisations such as 1 For 7 Billion, and a group of former political leaders, including

Mr Annan and Dr Brundtland, known as The Elders.

In addition to more transparency, it has been argued that candidates should participate in hearings at the UN so that they can be evaluated.

It has also been suggested that the council should recommend more than one candidate to the General Assembly, and that the secretary-general should be appointed for a single seven-year term. In fact, it would be an advance simply to have a proper list of candidates and their credentials prior to the council's deliberations.

As with the last appointment process a decade ago, that function is currently being carried out by blogs and Wikipedia – both relying on gossip more than formal statements. Ten years ago, for example, it was generally agreed that the next secretary-general would be from Asia.

Amid much speculation, Singapore's Chan Heng Chee, S. Jayakumar, Tommy Koh, Kishore Mahbubani and Goh Chok Tong were each the subject of media reports – notwithstanding the lack of any indication that they aspired to the position or that Singapore was considering nominating one of them.

Speculation is entertaining, however, and so if one had to bet on a candidate, one might look for an Eastern European woman who has some experience in foreign affairs or at the UN, and is supported by her government but has not risen far enough to offend any of the P5. She should also speak passable French.

Ms Bokova – who is a former Bulgarian foreign minister, heads Unesco, speaks fluent French and, as a bonus, was educated in both Moscow and Harvard – received her government's support in June last year and is regarded as the most plausible candidate on paper. Yet, Unesco's early support for Palestine's bid to join the UN may cause problems with the US. Little wonder that, last month, her Wikipedia entry was amended to highlight in its opening sentences that she is a “firm opponent of racism and anti-Semitism” and “led Unesco's activities on Holocaust remembrance”.

Other Wikipedia pages have been undergoing similar scrubbing, but the only assessment that matters will probably take place in the second or third quarter of next year. That is when the Security Council will likely start taking “straw polls” on the candidates.

For an organisation as important as the UN, however, having its leader chosen by the lowest common denominator of what the P5 finds acceptable is not good enough. Here's hoping that some candidates are bold enough to articulate a vision for what the UN could achieve – and that member states are bold enough to appoint one of them as the ninth secretary-general.

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