

Stopping Political Corruption

by Michael Curtis



Brigadoon, 1954

What a day that would be, what a rare mood for democratic countries, if not the whole human race, if fact followed fiction and emulated the charming musical, the 1954 Hollywood film *Brigadoon*. That fantasy portrays a small Scottish village that is protected from corruption as it magically disappears into the past and reappears only every hundred years. It needs little imagination to envision a more appealing world if international organizations, particularly those of the United Nations, would be similarly protected from political corruption and either lie dormant for a hundred years or go out of existence.

The Chinese philosophers knew that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one single step. In *Brigadoon* the legend is that if any citizen left the village, he would disappear forever. Perhaps a decision of the Trump administration will echo fiction and lead to a similar conclusion. On June 19, 2018, the United States withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council, UNHRC. The organization is supposed to be the world's most important international body, concerned with human rights. But from the start it has been politically corrupted by improper behavior, bigotry and prejudice. The U.S. action

is unlikely, imitating *Brigadoon*, to send UNHRC to sleep forever, but it is an affirmation of criticism, neglected and needed by so called human rights watchdog organizations that thwart reform, of a body that is unwilling to introduce changes in its behavior and is cynically hypocritical.

U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley who made the announcement for withdrawal called UNHRC a “cesspool of political bias...and with chronic anti-Israel bias.” As if to prove her argument, the opening session in June 2018 was devoted to a criticism of U.S. immigration policy. No reference was made to the countries that are the real abusers of human rights, including Venezuela, China, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Yemen. Membership of UNHRC may not contain a full listing of the world’s oppressive governments, but it does include conspicuous abusers of human rights.

The UNHRC, based in Geneva, was created in 2006 to replace the UN Human Rights Commission set up in 1946, but which was ended because of the poor human rights record of a number of its members, too atrocious to ignore. At that time John Bolton, then U.S. Ambassador to the UN, on December 4, 2006, voted against its creation, sensing that the members of the new body could protect themselves against criticism of their own human rights abuses by being on the Council. A multilateral organization of this kind could not judge behavior of democratic countries. In his own picturesque language, Bolton said, “We want a butterfly... we don’t intend to put lipstick on a caterpillar and call it a success.”

Poor butterfly ‘neath the blossoms waiting for an organization supposed to promote human rights world wide. The UNHRC has 47 members, elected for three years, allotted on a curious basis by region: Africa 13; Asia-Pacific 13; Latin America and Caribbean 8; Western Europe and North America 7; Eastern Europe 6. Its current membership includes 14 countries listed as “not free” by Freedom House: Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, China, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Qatar, Rwanda, Saudi

Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela. Interestingly, some of those countries rank high in the list of journalists killed 2012-16; 46 in Iraq, and 20 in Afghanistan.

The Obama Administration joined UNHRC in June 2009 believing that it would help make the organization a more credible, balanced, and effective forum for advancing human rights, and that it was more likely to do this from inside rather than outside the body. This argument, that it is better to be part of the equation than to be outside, is always questionable, even if well intended. However, the expectation has not been fulfilled as the record since 2009 shows.

The UNHRC of course has discussed various issues but its main preoccupation has been an obsession with one country, the State of Israel. This has meant passing 70 resolutions critical of Israel, the next of which will automatically be on July 2, 2018. Comparative figures for UNHRC critical Resolutions between 2006-2016 are: Israel 68, Syria 20, Burma 11, North Korea 9, Iran 6. The disproportion is unlikely to be changed because the UNHRC has a permanent standing agenda item 7 of a session every year of allegations of violations committed by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory. The UNHRC continues to pass more resolutions against Israel than against any other country or all countries. It remains disproportionate and biased, a discredit to stated objectives and principles of the United Nations.

Corruption in public as in private affairs is a frequent form of deviant behaviour associated with a particular motivation, private gain at public expense. The most recent American case in June 2018 is that of Alain Kaloyeros, physicist, former president of SUNY Polytechnic Institute, accused in Federal District Court of corruption. His alleged offence is manipulating a bidding process so that lucrative contracts worth millions would go to two developers who made large donations to the electoral campaigns of Governor Andrew Cuomo, though the Governor has not been accused of any wrongdoing.

All will agree that corruption of this kind impedes democracy, depletes the national wealth, and results in higher costs of goods and services. Examples of the public objective interest being subverted by and for private interests illustrate the most common form of corruption. But a wider issue, that of political corruption, needs attention. This issue is historic, discussed in Aristotle's *Politics* where he deals with the corruption of political forms, deviations from the "ideal" form, as when kingship descends to tyranny. Machiavelli in his *Discourses, Book 1* argues that corruption is the main threat to a state.

Contemporary politics is full of corruption by public figures as a few recent examples show. Mariano Rajoy, prime minister for seven years in Spain, forced to resign on a vote of no confidence related to the network of "institutionalized corruption," bribery, illegal kickbacks, money laundering, in which his People's Party was involved. Najib Razak, long term leader in Malaysia, involved in corruption of millions siphoned from a state fund into his private bank account. Jacob Zuma forced to resign as president of South Africa in 2018, as a result of benefitting from public expenditure. Dilma Rousseff impeached while president of Brazil in 2016, because of involvement in corruption scandals. Allegation persist that the United Russia party, the party of President Vladimir Putin, is connected to organized crime and the "mafia clan."

Corruption can be defined in various ways. Clearly the example of the disgraced politicians mentioned above shows the improper pursuit of private interest by those holding public office. But even more important for political institutions and international relations is objective and unprejudiced decision making in the public interest. This is not and has never been the conduct of the UNHRC. Even in 2006 Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary-General, held that the declining credibility of the existing UN Human Rights Commission "cast a shadow on the UN

system as a whole." Its successor the UNHRC casts an even deeper shadow.

The US is correct, and other democratic nations should follow its lead, in withdrawing from this organization contaminated by bigotry, prejudice, and antisemitism, and trying to stem political corruption. Then the bell will ring and there will be a smile on the face of the whole human race.