

Canadian Non-Paper on the Process for the Selection of the Next Secretary-General

Introduction

The existing selection process for the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations has produced several distinguished Secretaries-General. But the lack of transparency and inclusiveness of the exercise has become increasingly noticeable, and the UN process compares poorly with the practices of some other international organizations.

The Charter of the United Nations (art.97) specifies that “the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council”. In practice, the Security Council nominates a single candidate who is then endorsed by the General Assembly. No list of qualifications is agreed, no formal screening takes place, and the GA membership is asked to declare itself on the nominated candidate without the benefit of relevant information or even informal consultations. The candidate’s vision for the UN’s future and programme of action for the UN Secretariat remain unexamined, and there is no established way for the member states to develop a sense of the candidate’s skills in key areas like communication and political leadership.

At a time when member states are discussing the reform and renewal of so many aspects of the UN, it seems entirely appropriate that we should critically examine the way in which we choose the person who will serve as the organisation’s leader. This non-paper offers preliminary suggestions for a more transparent and open selection process aimed at ensuring that individuals with the right temperament, talents and judgment are identified and submitted to the General Assembly for consideration.

Efforts to propose a more open and rigorous approach to the selection of the Secretary-General can draw inspiration from similarly evolving processes within the OECD and the WTO. Both organizations have established selection mechanisms that are consultative, transparent and merit-based—aimed at ensuring that the most qualified and suitable person is selected for the job. In both cases, the position is advertised, a series of consultations with member states is held, the results are made public and are then used to narrow the field of candidates.

Given the acute political sensitivities that exist within the UN, it is clear that the changes to the selection process envisioned in this non-paper would need to be phased-in over time. Only modest steps are proposed for the coming months, for the process of selecting Kofi Annan’s successor. The hope would be that such experiences could then be consolidated and broadened, in advance of the next selection process in 5-10 years’ time.

Principles and Objectives

The UN has, in recent years, experienced a period of challenge and of change. The time has come to build on its strengths, address its shortcomings and follow through on the reform agenda to achieve a more effective UN in the interests of its member states. Obviously, the Secretary-General must play a central role in achieving this goal. And so the process of selecting that person must be rigorous, methodical and transparent.

The objective of this proposal is not to reduce the authority of the Security Council, nor to challenge the informal practice of rotating the post among the regional groups, but rather to complement the existing mechanism in such a way that the legitimacy of the process is itself enhanced, and that the successful candidate is assured of the broadest possible support from the membership. Such support is more important than ever, given the increased scope of the Secretary-General's responsibilities and the prevailing political climate within the principal organs of the United Nations.

Matters of Process

A transparent, inclusive and open consultation process should be at the heart of the selection of the Secretary-General. Member states are called upon to support the Secretary-General not only at the time of the election, but daily throughout the term of office. The selection process should therefore provide member states with an opportunity to assess the candidates' experience, competence and leadership ability.

At the outset, a search committee should be asked to identify potential candidates through the broadest possible inquiries. Promising prospects should then be encouraged to come forward. Candidates could be invited to apply—or could be nominated—through the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, and asked to elaborate their vision for the post.

This could then be followed by an opportunity for all member states to meet the candidates and ask questions, perhaps in an informal session of the General Assembly, or in meetings of regional groups. Such a process would provide a mechanism for building the broadest possible support for the successful candidate, giving the new Secretary-General the added credibility needed in order to lead this unique organization.

Qualifications and Criteria

The selection of the Secretary-General should be anchored in agreed criteria/qualifications. Such criteria should be the subject of further discussion among the member states, but at a minimum, would include (i) extensive experience in the conduct of international relations; (ii) demonstrated commitment over time to the objectives and purposes of the United Nations; (iii) proven leadership ability and managerial skill, including experience of modern management methods and a commitment to transparency and ethics; and (iv) strong communications skills.

The Role of the Security Council and the General Assembly

Each of these bodies has a role to play in the selection of the Secretary-General. As noted above, section 97 of the UN Charter provides that “the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council”. It is crucial that the person who is chosen be someone with whom the members of the Security Council – and especially the P5 – feel that they can work effectively. For that reason, Security Council approval must continue to be an essential and eliminatory step in the selection process.

The appointment by the General Assembly is a second and separate step in that process, and should not be regarded as an automatic or merely mechanical event. The General Assembly must surely exercise its judgment in concluding that the person recommended by the Security Council merits appointment. The current practice does not provide for any means—formal or informal—by which the General Assembly can develop knowledge about the candidate(s) sufficient to allow it to exercise that judgment in an informed and responsible way. One of the key objectives of the changes we propose is to enable the General Assembly to make a decision based on relevant and reliable information.

Next Steps

1. We propose that member states should begin a critical examination of the selection process for the Secretary-General. Discussion should focus on
 - a. qualifications we seek in candidates;
 - b. methods by which the broadest field of qualified candidates might be encouraged to come forward;
 - c. ways in which member states could develop a sense of the relative merits of the candidates, their approach to the office and their vision of the UN;
 - d. the role that regional rotation should play in the selection process; and
 - e. ways to ensure that both the Security Council and the General Assembly fulfill their vital but separate roles in the process of selection, in a complementary and appropriate fashion.
2. The broader issues raised in this non-paper will take some time to explore and resolve. It is unrealistic to expect major changes in the process by which the successor to the current Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, will be chosen. But we suggest that it would be desirable to take some steps in the coming months to open the process and enable member states to meet and learn more about possible candidates.
3. Recently, some of the candidates participated in an event at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, which enabled them to speak publicly in front of the WEF audience about their perspectives and approaches. It would be regrettable if the WEF could organize such an event but we found ourselves

unable to do the same here at the UN for the benefit of the very people who will make the selection.

4. We therefore propose that roundtables or public briefings be organized to provide a setting in which current and emerging candidates might introduce themselves to the UN community, discuss their experience and their achievements and explain their viewpoints and vision concerning the office of Secretary-General and the role of the UN in the years ahead.
5. Such informal events might be convened under the joint auspices of the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, under circumstances that will encourage an informative but respectful exploration of the perspectives and positions of the candidates.

**Selection of the UNSG: Charter Provisions and Practice
in the Security Council and General Assembly**

The Charter provides very little detail on the procedure for appointing the Secretary-General (UNSG) simply indicating in Article 97 that “... the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.” However, some further detail is provided by a brief General Assembly (GA) resolution of 1946 (Resolution 11 (I)) and by relevant provisions of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and the Security Council (SC), as well as by practice of these organs.

The appointment of the UNSG has, in practice, been a two-stage procedure, under which the Security Council first votes to recommend one candidate,¹ who is then recommended to the General Assembly for consideration. The GA votes on the recommendation. If a majority of GA members vote in favour of the SC's nominated candidate, the candidate is appointed as UNSG.

The vote in the Security Council to recommend a candidate, and the vote in the General Assembly to appoint the candidate are secret ballots. However, the recommendation in the SC is subject to veto by any of the five Permanent Members (P5) of the Council. The practice has thus been for the P5 hold private consultations before recommendations are brought before the Security Council for decision, in order to reduce the possibility of a veto being exercised.

GA Resolution 11 (I) provides that meetings of both the Security Council and General Assembly to discuss the nomination and appointment of the Secretary-General should be held in private. It also provides that debate on the nomination in the General Assembly should be avoided. These concerns are reflected in the rules of procedure of the Security Council and the General Assembly.

Rule 48 of the Security Council's provisional rules of procedure provides that “any recommendation to the General Assembly regarding the appointment of the Secretary-General shall be discussed and decided at a private meeting.” Practice has been for a communique to be issued at the close of each private meeting, in accordance with Rule 55, that identifies the names of the candidates, which SC members proposed them, and the results of the voting.

Rule 141 of the General Assembly's rules of procedure provides that “when the Security Council has submitted its recommendation on the appointment of the Secretary-General, the General Assembly shall consider the recommendation and vote upon it by secret

¹ Although some delegations in San Francisco had proposed that the Security Council provide a list of three candidates to the General Assembly for its approval, this was not accepted, and Resolution 11(I) provides that “it would be desirable for the Security Council to proffer one candidate only for the consideration of the General Assembly...”.

ballot in private meeting.”² Notwithstanding Rule 141, practice has been for the GA to vote upon the recommendation in a public meeting. In addition, in recent practice (beginning with the appointment of Kurt Waldheim), the GA has accepted the Council’s recommendations by acclamation. The Security Council’s decision to recommend Kofi Annan to the General Assembly for appointment was also reached by acclamation.³

² “Both nomination and appointment should be discussed at private meetings, and a vote in either the Security Council or the General Assembly, if taken, should be by secret ballot.”

³ “It would be desirable ... for debate on the nomination in the General Assembly to be avoided.”