FOREWORD

THE DYNAMIC EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL LAW: RISE OR DECLINE?

Campbell McLachlan

The problem of adjusting the functioning of the law to the perpetual antinomy of change and stability, and of justice and security, is not one peculiar to international law. … there is ultimately no more effective challenge to the maintenance of the law than an immutability impervious to the needs of life and progress.

Hersch Lauterpacht

There is no inevitable march of progress in history or law. Everything that has been achieved can be rescinded, forgotten, tossed away.

Isabel Hull

I TRAJECTORY

When in 1933 Hersch Lauterpacht wrote the chapter on "Stability and Change in International Law" in his seminal The Function of Law in the International Community, he sought to answer one of the objections of the critics as to the capacity of international law to function effectively: that it lacks the provisions for change that are a normal part of a domestic legal system. He argued that achieving the right balance between stability and change is in fact a constant issue for any legal system and that the international legal system, despite the absence of provisions for change, in fact had a much more dynamic capacity than was commonly supposed.

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1 Hersch Lauterpacht The Function of Law in the International Community (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1933, repr 2011) at 256.

Returning to this issue nearly a century later, the student of international law in the early 21st century is presented at once with a paradox. There has never been a time when law has been more widely invoked or deployed as a response to global problems. Yet, considering the enormous complexity and ambition of the international legal system today, its basic structures often seem ill adapted to its mission. Alongside the mass of law-making, the student must also confront its limitations: the extent to which the willingness of states to participate can wane as well as wax; a partial and incomplete normative coverage; the persistence of outmoded norms and decision-making structures; the seeming inability to achieve consensus within a diverse and numerous international community; and the sheer complexity of a legal system that is not necessarily either universal or coherent.

Moreover, the student of today must confront a much more existential threat to the operation of the international legal system in a political discourse that explicitly rejects the concept of international cooperation through and under law in favour of assertions of nativist autonomy. There is an uncomfortable sense that the debate about the role of international law is not business as usual and that, on the contrary as the historian Isabel Hull reminds us: "There is no inevitable march of progress in history or law. Everything that has been achieved can be rescinded, forgotten, tossed away." If the history of engagement with international law in the first half of the 20th century teaches anything it is that the trajectory of the dynamic evolution of international law is not linear. It can experience periods of decline and rejection, as well as periods of growth and adoption.

These are very large themes. Indeed they are themes that go to the very root of the contemporary functioning of the international legal system. This special issue of the Victoria University of Wellington Law Review presents an edited collection of articles from leading voices in the field of public international law – scholars, judges and practitioners – that reflect on the different dimensions of the problem of change in international law.

Opening this debate, Jutta Brunnée and Stephen Toope claim that "the dominant views in international relations and international law scholarship underestimate international law’s capacity to mediate stability and change", by focusing on the surface of law and external factors, such as interests and enforcement, not on the deeper structure of the legal system.

4 Hull, above n 2, at 26.
The structural challenges posed by the need for the international legal system to change over time are in fact as much the product of international law’s relative dynamism as of the limitations in the system. The international community has created, and continues to generate, so much new law, and to do so in different ways that are not fully captured by our existing general analytical structures for the generation of new rules of law. A contemporary conception of the dynamic capacity of international law needs to capture these elements, which are internal to the design and operation of the international legal system, alongside the external geo-political forces that shape the consent of states to engage – a consent that can be withdrawn as well as merely withheld.

In order to frame the debate that follows, this foreword explores four aspects of the nature of contemporary international law, which have implications for the approach to the problem of change over time: (a) the idea of international law as an agent of change; (b) international law’s constitutional function; (c) international law as a layered system; and (d) international law’s institutional framework.

II THE IDEA OF INTERNATIONAL LAW AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

The idea of international law itself, and of the function that it should perform in ordering international affairs is itself a significant motor for change. At critical moments that may not be evolutionary at all, but actually revolutionary. It may involve a deliberate rejection of a previous world order in favour of a new one that is inconsistent with the old: a paradigm shift.

Shirley Scott shows that a particular conception of international law, when championed by a powerful state, may exert a powerful influence over the shape of the system as a whole. She argues that the United States projected its power in the 20th century through espousing the importance of international law as an ideology. She does so in order to ask: what would be the significance from a legal as well as a political perspective, if (as the rhetoric increasingly suggests) that ideology is no longer upheld by the State that propounded it? Running alongside this development is a renewed focus on the extent to which other powerful states may hold different conceptions of the function of international law, conceptions that may gain increasing traction in a multi-polar, if less stable world.

Both Hunter Nottage and Bill Campbell pursue the significance of pivotal moments that operate as a watershed for the paradigm within which international law operates. Nottage reminds us that the blueprint of the post-World War II legal order, the Atlantic Charter 1941, makes explicit the essential connection between peace and security on the one hand and economic cooperation on the other, so as to assure “the enjoyment by all States, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access, on equal terms

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7 Shirley V Scott “The Decline of International Law as a Normative Ideal” (2018) 49 VUWLR 627.
to the trade ... of the world which are needed for their economic prosperity." He argues that, in a contemporary environment in which international trade rules are increasingly questioned and protectionism is on the rise, this fundamental idea should not be forgotten.

Bill Campbell considers more generally the capacity of customary international law itself to respond to rapidly changing circumstances with a new paradigm – a process that has been called "Grotian moments" in development of international law. He explores the potential of this idea in the emergence of new rules concerning the use of force against non-state actors.

III CONSTITUTIONALITY

International law has been an incomplete system for so long that much of the effort of the last 70 years has been devoted to completion of a constitutional project that had been conceived earlier, but which faced political obstacles to its achievement. Salient examples of the coming to fruition of parts of the project conceived many decades before include the creation of the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court and the operationalisation of individual criminal responsibility and the completion of the International Law Commission's Draft Articles on State Responsibility. But no legal system is ever capable of completion, if by this is meant that it can achieve a final settled status from which no further change is needed. This would be to subscribe to a myth of perfectibility. The notion of perfectibility of international law also fails to take account of regression. International law lacks a general theory of withdrawal.

Yet an understanding of the scope for change in the contemporary international legal system has to come to terms with the fact that much of the structure of contemporary international law – especially in the great multilateral conventions of near-universal application – has a constitutional character. These conventions provide a general structure for the organisation and exercise of public

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10 The Atlantic Charter 204 LNTS 382 (14 August 1941), cl 5.
power on the international plane. They were intended by their framers to be virtually immutable, because they establish fundamental principles of the international legal order within which states are to operate.

Early commentators on the Charter of the United Nations explicitly envisaged it as a constitution.¹⁸ The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),¹⁹ discussed in Joanna Mossop’s article,²⁰ was described by its framers as a "Constitution for the Oceans".²¹ Karen Scott points out that many multilateral environmental agreements have a "quasi-constitutional" character, because they are cast as framework agreements and establish their own institutional arrangements.²² The World Trade Organization Covered Agreements have also been characterised as constitutional documents. Core international human rights instruments, including the Refugee Convention (the subject of Susan Glazebrook’s article)²³ also serve a constitutional function.²⁴ They seek to define an irreducible core of rights common to humanity that international law protects.

There may be deeper links between international law and the constitutional functions of law. As Eirik Bjorge argues²⁵ national traditions of public law may be at least as fertile a source of the analogies that inform “general principles of law” as private law, which so much influenced early thought on international law’s capacity to borrow from domestic law sources.²⁶ Ken Keith explores the relevance of general principles of law in the context of the rules of procedure of the International Court of Justice, where the Court has drawn upon such concepts as the good administration of justice.

²⁰ Joanna Mossop “Can We Make the Oceans Greener? The Successes and Failures of UNCLOS as an Environmental Treaty” (2018) 49 VUWLR 573.
²⁵ Eirik Bjorge “Public Law Sources and Analogies of International Law” (2018) 49 VUWLR 533.
and the equality of the parties in developing its approach to procedural issues arising in cases before it.\textsuperscript{27}

In any event, international law and national law are linked by some key concepts. The way in which that linkage is drawn may have radical constitutional implications, as Rayner Thwaites explores in his discussion of the concept of nationality: a status that must do double service in both national and international law.\textsuperscript{28}

Taken too literally the analogy between the structural elements of international law with the constitutions of nations may mislead as much as it enlightens. National constitutions posit vertical structures for law-making that do not easily translate into the horizontal world of relations between states. But the analogy does serve to remind us of the perils of written constitution-making that may also be applicable in the context of multilateral treaties. A written text that is of its nature difficult to amend can serve to inhibit necessary change by shackling a community to outmoded objectives. The same may be true of core constituent documents in international law. Susan Glazebrook explores this problem in her examination of the ability of the Refugee Convention to respond to the challenges of displaced persons and mass migrations of today. UNCLOS, critically examined by Osvaldo Urrutia,\textsuperscript{29} may actually inhibit attempts to control unregulated fishing with its starting premise of freedom to fish on the high seas subject to specified conservation exceptions – a premise that may no longer adequately reflect the parlous state of the world’s fishery. He and Joanna Mossop both discuss the ways in which practice since 1982 has sought to develop more robust protections for the fishery and the environment within the Convention's framework.

IV A LAYERED SYSTEM

An emphasis on constitutionality should not blind us to the essential mutability of much of the corpus of international law – a mutability by design. This includes the ability of states to alter the substance of their treaty obligations by amendment, as well as the scope for reinterpretation through subsequent agreement and practice.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, states often respond to new issues not by amendment but by concluding new treaties that may or may not fit neatly with their prior agreements.

\textsuperscript{27} KJ Keith "The Development of Rules of Procedure by the World Court through its Rule Making, Practice and Decisions" (2018) 49 VUWLR 511.

\textsuperscript{28} Rayner Thwaites "The Life and Times of the Genuine Link" (2018) 49 VUWLR 645.

\textsuperscript{29} Osvaldo Urrutia "Combating Unregulated Fishing through Unilateral Trade Measures: A Time for Change in International Fisheries Law?" (2018) 49 VUWLR 671.

As Gerhard Hafner memorably put it:  

… the system of international law consists of erratic parts and elements which are differently structured so that one can hardly speak of a homogeneous nature of international law. This system is full of universal, regional or even bilateral systems, subsystems and sub-subsystems of different levels of legal integration. This is a feature of the way in which states have developed their treaty obligations in international environmental law, which Karen Scott discusses, and also in international economic law.

Even where the international architecture looks relatively immutable (as for example in the case of the Washington Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID Convention)), recent developments, such as the Mauritius Convention on Transparency and the proposals to use it a model that might insert a standing International Investment Court within the arbitration system of the ICSID Convention show that states can modify quite radically their existing obligations inter se in ways that respond to current needs without necessarily amending prior treaty obligations.

The result is a set of primary obligations that are in a constant state of flux. This makes the operation of secondary rules especially important, yet those secondary rules that we do have for this purpose, notably in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, are of necessity expressed at a high level of abstraction.

V  INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The evolution of international law is now affected not only by the direct actions of states, but also by the dynamics within the framework of international institutions. As James Crawford explains in the context of the disarmament of weapons of mass destruction, one explanation for the different fate of global efforts to outlaw chemical and biological weapons and the efforts to outlaw nuclear weapons may be found in the presence or absence of a multilateral treaty body to oversee compliance.

34 Gabrielle Kaufmann-Kohler and Michele Potestà Can the Mauritius Convention serve as a model for the reform of investor-State arbitration in connection with the introduction of a permanent investment tribunal or an appeal mechanism? (Geneva Center for International Dispute Settlement, 2016).
The existence of an effective supervisory body representing all member states may also be key to maintaining the adherence of states to the jurisdiction of international courts and tribunals. It enables states parties as a whole to represent the long-term community interest in supporting the tribunal over the short-term interest of an individual state reacting to a particular decision.37

International institutions also have an important role in developing international law, whether through the elaboration of delegated legislation under conferences of states parties; or through interpretation and application of their constituent instrument. That system relies for its normative effect on the consent of states. But it is developed through mechanisms that are not sufficiently or completely captured by a traditional model of legal sources or indeed by a conventional conception of international institutional law that concerns itself primarily with the actions of states.

IV Conclusion

Taken together then, the articles published in this issue present an acute picture of the challenges facing international law as a system, as it seeks to address the manifold complex problems that require international cooperation. They also reveal its extraordinary capacity for dynamism despite the apparent structural constraints of the system.

At a time when criticisms of international law are loudly proclaimed, it is important to be clear about the value of international law and its institutions from which, as Isabel Hull puts it, "we have all benefited, but which we have in recent decades neglected to explain or defend".38 She continues:39

… law matters and international co-operation is not a utopia but a functioning reality. Recently, it has been hard to hear that truth above the din produced by bad actors … and by criticism of the neoliberal order from the left and the populist right, which obscures the positive effects of internationalism.

For all their imperfections, the mechanisms of international law are the only tools that we have to provide an ordered basis for international cooperation. As another eminent historian Tony Judt put it in 2011:40

… the way to defend and advance large abstractions [such as democracy or human rights] in the generations to come will be to defend and protect institutions and laws and rules and practices which incarnate our best attempt at those large abstractions.


38 Hull, above n 2, at 26.

39 At 26.

40 Tony Judt Thinking the Twentieth Century (Random House, London, 2013) at 304.
The articles collected here seek to contribute to that goal by analysing international law’s capacity to evolve in response to the challenges of the age.

Before concluding this foreword, I wish to thank some people and institutions not represented within these pages, who contributed significantly to the success of the academic research collaboration that produced this collection. The genesis of the articles was a Symposium convened under the auspices of the New Zealand Centre for Public Law at Victoria University of Wellington in December 2017. I wish to thank the Dean of the Faculty, Professor Mark Hickford, and my colleagues Professor Claudia Geiringer and Dr Dean Knight, Directors of the Centre for their support, together with the Centre’s administrators, Anna Burnett and Rianna Maxwell.

The Symposium benefited greatly from the wisdom of several other distinguished scholars, judges and practitioners, who joined the discussion: Justice Gerard van Bohemen (Judge of the New Zealand High Court and formerly Ambassador and New Zealand Permanent Representative to the United Nations); Professor Freya Baetens (Pluricourts, University of Oslo); Professor Alberto Costi (Victoria University of Wellington Law School); Mr Duncan Currie; Mr William Mansfield; Professor Georg Nolte (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin); Professor Benedict Kingsbury (New York University Law School); Dr Kate Parlett (20 Essex Street Chambers, London); Professor Lucy Reed (Director, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore); Dr Anthea Roberts (School of Regulation and Global Governance, Australian National University); Dr Guy Sinclair (Victoria University of Wellington Law School); and Dr Michael Waibel (Co-Deputy Director, Lauterpacht Centre for International Law, University of Cambridge).

The project has been greatly assisted by four excellent and committed research assistants, who are students or graduates of Victoria. Ms Eve Bain and Ms Rebecca McMenamin served as rapporteurs of the discussion. Ms Alice Coppard, as Student Editor-in-Chief of the Review, together with Ms Bain and Ms Amelia Cina, have with great professionalism coordinated the process of copy editing and bringing the collection to publication.

Finally, I wish to thank the New Zealand Law Foundation and the Australian and New Zealand Society of International Law. Each of these precious institutions saw the potential of this Symposium and graciously supported it with a financial grant, without which neither the Symposium nor this resulting publication could have taken place.