Elisabeth Mann Borgese and the Ocean Governance Mission of IOI

IOI Beginnings, the Present and the Challenging Future
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That till the 1960s there was no international entity devoted to training in maritime affairs in their holistic context sounds incredible. There were, of course, quite a number of national institutions, some of great standing, imparting knowledge on several ocean issues generally. These organizations were well-versed in specific sea-oriented disciplines but lacked an integrated approach to the ocean, and no major non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to global maritime issues was active on the world scene. It was Elisabeth Mann Borgese’s genius not only to embark on the creation of an academic body offering specialized courses on the ocean, but to convey to that body a solid lobbying quality reaching the upper echelons of decision-making at both the national and United Nations levels. Her intuition led her to involve Arvid Pardo, then Malta’s representative to the United Nations, as a major player within the International Ocean Institute, IOI as her creation became known.

Arvid was already an international figure whose 1967 speech to the United Nations proposing seabed resources beyond national jurisdiction as belonging to the common heritage of humankind transformed not only the Law of the Sea but the basic thinking on human solidarity, enunciating a revolutionary doctrine on our global environmental responsibilities towards future generations.\(^1\) IOI was thus in a position to take a major role in the run-up to the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The combined respect that both Elisabeth and Arvid commanded in New York spilled over to many nations and regional institutions (academic and administrative) where their joint verve, determination and, above all, planetary vision ensured that they would not only be listened to, but acted upon.

It was also Elisabeth’s idea to convene a biennial conference to take stock of ocean affairs, particularly within their United Nations context. Pacem in Maribus,

\(^1\) When the first author, in 1977, as director of UNESCO’s division on socio-cultural environment and human settlements, launched the project for a draft UNESCO declaration (adopted 20 years later), Elisabeth Mann Borgese was one of the principal consultants engaged to advise on the pursuit of the project.
echoing the encyclical of John XXIII *Pacem in Terris*, became the flagship of the fledgling International Ocean Institute. The first conference was held in Malta, on whose University campus the Institute was given its home. It was a veritable global gathering with natural and social scientists, decision-makers both in the public and private sectors, diplomats – and mainly dreamers. We dreamt of a new ocean, our only one, uniting us all together to enjoy our common patrimony, ensuring that seabed resources would be exploited for peaceful purposes and accessible to all.

*Pacem in Maribus* galvanized the UN into action, especially through its new department on the Law of the Sea. Elisabeth and Arvid, in particular, fought vociferously to have that department endowed with proper teeth. IOI was soon recognized as the international instrument charged with prodding the UN to move on to implement the relevant resolution of the General Assembly. Active in these pursuits, the Institute had backed Malta’s bid to host the Seabed Authority on our shores, which we lost to Jamaica through our myopic politicians. Similarly, IOI was in the forefront for the creation of the Maritime Tribunal, Hamburg winning the race for its location.

After 1972, the Institute experienced a period of sufferance from official Maltese quarters. More or less thrown out of the University campus, IOI was given, by Father Peter Serracino Inglott and me, temporary shelter in a Valletta house where we had set up the European Research and Documentation Centre. Providence had rewarded the Institute’s initial steps through having, as its first director, Sidney Holt, a world-class scientist who was seconded from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, to organize IOI’s management. Sidney was ably assisted by Caroline Vanderbilt with her fabled energy and unconventional verve, eventually serving as its director. Caroline (Fox to all her friends) gave valuable support also to Dr. Geoffrey Kesteven, Sidney’s successor.

After 1987, the Institute returned to its ‘home base’ at the University. One major accomplishment, dating from those times, was the Ocean Governance Course, which IOI has been running at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia each summer since 1981. Subsequently, mainly due to the endeavours of Awni Behnam, now the Institute’s President, intensive integrated and holistic courses on the Mediterranean, Black, Baltic and Caspian Seas, which have acquired international renown, are being held annually in Malta. These programmes have proven to be so successful that IOI has received requests from governments and NGOs to duplicate the course for other areas, notably in south-east Asia. That the present director, Cherdetak Virapat hails from Thailand attests to the catholicity of IOI’s answer to its world mission and mandate.

2. When in 1972 the first author led the Maltese delegation to the first United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm, Sidney formed part, as did Michael Zammit Cutajar, of the UN Secretariat. Both gave invaluable advice to our delegation. Sidney, with Elisabeth Mann Borgese and Peter Serracino Inglott became my key consultants in the UNESCO Future Generations Project.