



# We, the Peoples ....

Special Edition

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This address by Lord Hannay at Eastern Region Council followed Ban Ki-moon's visit to London in June 2008. It is heartening to hear that the Secretary-General values the support of civil society and UNA-UK, and that Britain's foreign policy objectives closely equate with those of the UN.

## Britain's Role at the UN

Britain really can claim to be one of the founding fathers of the UN. The organisation first began to move from aspiration towards reality, and the title "United Nations" was first coined, with the Atlantic Charter issued by Roosevelt and Churchill at one of the darkest moments of the Second World War.

Subsequently, in the lengthy negotiations over the establishment of the new organisation, first at Dumbarton Oaks and then in San Francisco in 1945, Britain played a prominent role, although always one of less significance than that of the United States, whose decision to cease definitively the isolationist policies of the 1920's and '30's was the real driving force behind the UN Charter which emerged. That Charter is worth reading again and again. It is a remarkable document; and it remains as valid today as it ever was. It could only possibly have been agreed in the traumatic aftermath of two world wars. That it survived intact the vicissitudes of the Cold War was little short of the miraculous. And then the first acting senior official of the new organisation was a Briton, Gladwin Jebb; and the first meetings of the General Assembly and of the Security Council were held in London early in 1946. So Britain was "present at the creation" to borrow a phrase fashioned for a different context.

But all that, you will say, was a very long time ago - more than sixty years ago, three times the life-span of the UN's hapless predecessor, the League of Nations. And you will be right. Britain's role at the UN today cannot simply or principally be defined by reference to the distant past, however glorious, even if some aspects of the pattern then established, for example Britain's position as a Permanent Member of the Security Council, remain intact to this day.

The UN of 2008 is a very different animal from that of 1945. Its membership has more than tripled. The balance within the membership between developed and developing countries has fundamentally shifted, with the latter - necessarily and rightly - playing a far more significant role. The organisation has spawned a whole mass of specialist agencies, dealing with such issues as health, refugees, development policy and nuclear energy, to mention only a few of the most prominent. This massive outreach into so many highly technical (but highly politically sensitive) areas is often overlooked by both commentators and the general public, who have a tendency to equate the phrase "UN" with the murky and sometimes unsatisfactory transactions in the Security Council.

And then, in the most significant change of all, the ending of the Cold War removed many of the taboos and no-go areas which had handicapped the UN during the first forty-five years of its existence in fulfilling the mandate laid down in its Charter. Since then a huge expansion has taken place in the number, scale and nature of the peacekeeping operations which the UN has been asked to undertake. The beginnings of an international criminal justice system have begun to take shape with the establishment of the Yugoslav, Rwandan, Sierra Leone and Cambodian tribunals and the setting up of the International Criminal Court. The international community has assumed a responsibility to protect citizens of countries whose own governments prove unwilling or unable to protect them from serious abuses of their human rights. And, like the UN, Britain itself has changed, no longer an aspirant to the unilateral exercise of power world-wide, no longer exercising hegemony over a huge colonial empire, increasingly working together with its fellow members of the European Union to achieve shared objectives which none of them are capable of achieving separately.

## **Britain's changing role**

So what should this changed role be in today's fundamentally changed United Nations?

Let us begin with one or two general considerations. First as a middle-ranking power, one which still has world-wide interests to promote and to protect but which no longer has the power to do so acting alone nor even in concert with the sole remaining super-power, the United States, Britain has a major vested interest in the development of an international organisation and of multilateral disciplines which can harness the efforts of a global coalition to shared objectives. And as Britain's world ranking both in economic and political terms is bound over years ahead to decline, with countries like China, India and Brazil moving ahead of it, its interest in building up that global coalition will get stronger.

But, secondly, Britain is still, and will remain, a country which can make a difference, with a capacity to project power outside its immediate neighbourhood, with technical skills which equip it to play a part in facing up to the world's problems, with a level of prosperity which imposes a responsibility to help those less fortunate than itself. Small countries will always tend to look to multilateral organisations for help and salvation but will bring few assets to the table; great powers will always be tempted, in today's world probably unwisely tempted, to believe they can go it alone; but middle-ranking states, among which Britain remains prominent, will always be the engine-room of an organisation like the United Nations, the group of countries which can provide significant assets in men and money and whose support is essential if ambitious joint efforts to deal with the challenges the world faces are to be mounted.

And then, thirdly, those challenges which confront the world; poverty, pandemic diseases, environmental degradation and global warming, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, gross breaches of international humanitarian law, the instability born of state failure - every one of these requires a global response and internationally concerted action if it is to be mastered.

Those three broad considerations add up to a compelling case for Britain to be in the vanguard of those working for a stronger, more effective and more equitable United Nations, to be a proponent of the reform and adaptation of an organisation which is still not performing as well as it should the tasks set for it in its Charter. It was these same considerations which persuaded the European Union to establish effective multilateralism as one of the main objectives of the security strategy it adopted in December 2003.

## **The effectiveness of the UN**

But, important though these general considerations are, they are an inadequate basis on their own for policy prescriptions to deal with individual crises, even global ones. Recent, detailed, systems-wide efforts to reform and adapt the United Nations have only had limited success. The reform campaign of 2003-2005, culminating in the summit meeting of September of that year, did make some progress, but it left much undone.

Agreement was reached to establish a Peace-Building Commission designed to provide sustained support for countries emerging from conflict and state failure and a Human Rights Council to replace its discredited and inadequate predecessor the Commission on Human Rights; but neither of those two, new bodies is yet functioning with full effectiveness. A commitment was undertaken by the entire international community to assume a "responsibility to protect" those whose governments were unwilling or unable to do so themselves; but the experience of Darfur is already demonstrating how difficult it is to move from warm words to effective action.

On the debit side, the Security Council was not enlarged to make it more representative of the world in which we live, no agreed definition of terrorism was set as a basis for outlawing that scourge as completely as we have outlawed slavery and piracy, nothing was done to strengthen the

counter-proliferation strategies which are under increasing strain, and proposals for reform of the UN Secretariat were blocked just when they were most needed.

It would not be wise, I suspect, to try now to mount another, system-wide campaign for reform, although the time for that may well come in due course. The risk of generating reform fatigue would be great; and further setbacks will unnecessarily damage the reputation of the organisation as a whole. A better option is likely to be the pursuit of a sectoral approach, pushing ahead with reforms in the sectors where they are most needed and where a reasonably broad consensus for reform can be achieved. There is no lack of such sectors, even if choosing amongst them will be politically sensitive.

Here are some suggestions of where it would be good to see Britain giving a lead.

### **Peacekeeping**

It is best perhaps to start with what could be called bread and butter issues, and none falls more clearly into that category for the United Nations than international peacekeeping. Since the end of the Cold War there has been an exponential increase in the demand for UN peacekeepers. There have been successes - usually quickly forgotten - in Namibia, Cambodia, Mozambique, El Salvador and more recently in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and East Timor. And there have been catastrophic failures, most notably in Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia. The fact that demand, currently running at its highest level ever, with the deployment of some 120,000 military and civilian peacekeepers world-wide having been authorised, has actually increased - even in the face of the setbacks - surely demonstrates the fundamental indispensability of the UN'S peacekeeping capability.

But there are plenty of things wrong with UN peacekeeping which urgently need to be fixed. Initial deployments are still far too slow, opening up opportunities for spoilers to break a ceasefire or undermine a peace agreement. The European Union's system of Battle Groups, ready for deployment at short notice, offers one potential remedy: but a similar readiness by other peacekeeping nations, for example the countries of the Indian Sub-continent, would provide a broader and politically more acceptable basis for UN operations. Then the need to strengthen regional peacekeeping capacity, in Africa in particular, is a high priority. UN peacekeepers and regional peacekeepers are not rivals but mutually supporting allies who are likely in the future to have to mount more and more joint operations as is currently being done in Darfur.

But for that to be successful there will need to be far more solid structures for cooperation than exist now, and the UN will need to provide a firm financial commitment to regions like Africa, which lack the capacity to finance peacekeeping operations themselves.

And human rights abuses by peacekeepers must not be allowed to undermine the credibility of the whole system, as has risked happening on several recent occasions. A tougher line will need to be taken where incidents occur, with troop contributors being black-listed if they fail to take remedial action. It is easy for a country like Britain, heavily engaged currently in Iraq and Afghanistan, to lose sight of the significance of UN peacekeeping as a key factor in ensuring global security and stability and to turn a blind eye to the need for us to pull our weight in the system; but it would be singularly short-sighted if we were to do so.

### **Millennium Development Goals**

Peacekeeping may be a crucial function of the UN for as far ahead as we can reasonably predict, but it is an instrument which only comes into play when things have gone badly wrong. The UN is also at the heart of global efforts to ensure that things go right, particularly in that group of developing countries which have recently been identified by the challenging label of "the bottom billion". The UN's Millennium Development Goals provide the main focus of that effort, targets set for 2015 across the whole range of developmental policies, including in particular, health and education.

Those targets were rescued from virtual irrelevance by the Gleneagles and UN Summit commitments of 2005 when real progress was made on debt relief and on setting a number of major donors including the UK - but not the United States - firmly on the path towards achieving the UN benchmark of 0.7% of GNP devoted to aid. But, as last year's half-way report - half-way between the targets set in 2000 and the end-point of 2015 - has shown they are again drifting away out of reach. Progress towards most of the goals is lagging. More worryingly it is becoming clear that such developing country-wide targets conceal the fact that, while a small number of developing countries are moving faster than expected towards achieving the goals and are by their size pulling along the overall average, a large group of the poorest countries, many of them in Africa, are making barely any progress at all.

And yet it is in Africa too that we see the greatest problems over security - which shows you just how closely security and development issues are linked. Gordon Brown's recent call for a high level conference this year to review progress or the lack of it, towards the MDG's and to take remedial action, and the Secretary-General's summoning of such a meeting in New York in September is therefore timely, and it is good that Britain is giving a lead.

But giving a lead means more than just words. It means finding more resources, and ensuring that those resources are put to better use than in the past. It means getting developing countries to focus more effectively on poverty eradication and backing them when they do so. It means taking a far tougher line on corruption at both ends of the line, in both developed and developing countries. And it will also mean beginning to look beyond 2015, the end-date for the targets set in 2000. One thing is sure. The problems of all developing countries will not have been resolved by then. What we will need, I suggest, is an approach which focuses much more sharply and sustainably on the problems of countries at the bottom of the pile, that bottom billion I referred to; and enlisting also the support as donors of countries such as China, India and Brazil which are now so rapidly climbing out of the poverty trap.



## **Climate change**

And then there is the problem of climate change, which is now at the top of everyone's international agenda, but which is still moving inexorably in the wrong direction. Some progress has been made in the last year or so. The US, driven so far more by grass-root politics than by conviction, has just begun to accept the need for global action, as has Australia, which has now joined the Kyoto Protocol. We can expect the electoral cycle in the US to reinforce that trend. The principal developing countries such as China and India, driven too by grass-roots sentiments and their own domestically-generated environmental problems, are just beginning to recognise that labelling climate change as someone else's problem, for the developed countries to resolve on their own, is not an adequate or defensible response.

The European Union, with Britain very much among the leaders, has set some ambitious targets for reducing carbon emissions. The challenge now is to give effect to those commitments, to take the complex decisions needed to make them realisable. That will be a hard struggle. But we should be under no illusions. If the European Union cannot live up to its commitments, if it loses its leadership role, there will be no adequate global response in the UN. The leadership will not suddenly spring from somewhere else - the pressure to set binding targets will leach away. The agreement reached in Bali last year on a road map for decisions to be taken at Copenhagen at the end of next year was the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end.

The case for establishing a UN agency, to ensure and to support the implementation of whatever commitments are agreed as part of a post-Kyoto package, will be an essential part of it. Britain cannot ensure a good outcome to the negotiations, getting under way since Bali, on its own; it is

simply too small a part of the global equation to be able to do that. But, through its EU membership, it can and should make a real difference in the global negotiations at the UN.

### **Weapons of Mass destruction**

No part of the international agenda has been more neglected in recent years than disarmament and the closely-linked struggle to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. A US administration, resistant to any international disciplines, has been busily deconstructing parts of the multilateral framework established during and immediately after the Cold War, and resisting the development of new disciplines to deal (for example) with biological weapons. The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, the keystone of the arch for all efforts to hold back nuclear proliferation is coming under increasing stress, with actions by North Korea and Iran threatening to undermine it further.

The UN Summit of 2005, following on a totally unproductive review conference of the NPT, failed to take any action to reverse this trend. It will be essential, once a new US-administration is in place, to halt this drift; and it is not too soon to start now preparing the ground for that. Britain as a recognised nuclear weapon state but one committed to multilateral disarmament goals could and should play an important role.



What should we be trying to achieve? Here are a few suggestions:

- Ratification by the US and entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty;
- Negotiation of a fissile material cut-off treaty;
- Establishment of an international IAEA guaranteed system for the supply of enriched uranium and reprocessing services, so that the inevitable expansion of civil nuclear power to meet the challenges of energy security and climate change - does not lead to increased weapons-grade material capabilities
- Signature by the largest number of countries possible of the treaty on banning the production and use of cluster munitions which was agreed in Dublin last month, with Britain giving a welcome lead
- An Arms Trade Treaty as already canvassed by the British government.

All this sounds very complicated and technical. And indeed it is. But beneath the technicalities lies a simple and very political point. If we cannot re-build confidence in multilateral arms control and disarmament measures and if we cannot develop new measures to deal with emerging challenges, then we risk presiding over the steady erosion of what already exists and finding ourselves in a very much more insecure and dangerous world. And confidence will not be re-built if the five recognised nuclear powers, of which Britain is one, do not demonstrate a genuine commitment to their NPT obligation to move towards nuclear disarmament and if the US and Russia in particular do not resume a serious and results-orientated dialogue across the whole field of arms control and disarmament.

I have set out four key sections of UN activity in which I believe Britain could, and in some cases already is, playing an important role. Each one of them is an important part of this country's foreign policy objectives in an increasingly interdependent and inter-linked world. They deal with issues which in one way or another will crucially affect our future security and prosperity. None of them can be effectively handled by Britain acting alone. You may have noted that every one of them involves issues of substance, not just the institutional complexities which do so much to mystify - and often to

alienate - people when they hear the UN being discussed. I hope I have done enough to show why Britain matters to the UN and why the UN matters to Britain.

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