



On the United Nations Association

by Patrick Wright

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THE United Nations is not in good shape. Great hopes were entertained when the Berlin wall came down in 1989, but these have given way to global half-heartedness, evident in the caveats hedging tributes paid this week in San Francisco, where the UN Charter was signed 50 years ago.

The genocide in Rwanda contributed to this disillusionment - as did the impotent UNPROFOR tanks of Sarajevo, already called beached white whales several years before the Bosnian Serbs purloined some, thereby completing the humiliation. From Angola to Chechnia, the news mocks the UN's pastoral symbolism of white doves crowding the sky.

It also plays into the hands of people like Anne Applebaum, who suggested earlier this week in the *Daily Telegraph* that Britain should give up its place on the UN security council and stop paying the price of peace-keeping operations, which bring 'no benefit to itself and only dubious benefits to the people whose peace it is claiming to keep.'

Yet the UN remains one of the better products of 20th century idealism, one with which British people have been closely involved since the beginning. Much of the early planning happened here prior to 1945, when the founding charter was signed in San Francisco. And the UN's far from perfect precursor, the League of Nations, was conceived and vigorously promoted in London immediately after the First World War. In both cases, the British government was urged on by organisations representing a far wider range of public opinion than pacifism.

The present bastion of this activist tradition may stand in Westminster, but is the opposite of the bureaucrats' palace people so often imagine the UN to be. It has the shabby but purposeful ambience typical of campaigning voluntary organisations, where self-exploitation is an unwritten part of the contract of employment and underpaid staff will walk from John o' Groats to Land's End to raise money for their cause.

The UN Association lobbies on UN-related issues and has been working hard to get Britain back into membership of Unesco after Lady Thatcher's ideologically-motivated resignation. It receives a small government grant, but raises the bulk of its funding through membership fees, the sale of Unicef cards and raffles. It had a membership of 90,000 in the late forties; the present count stands at about 7,000 in 200 local branches.



As the director, Malcolm Harper explains, 'we are not all pacifists, but we are pretty anti-war', which we see as 'a failure of civilised ways of sorting out a dispute.'

As 'a people's organisation', the UNA proves ordinary people can contribute to global policy. Remembering how, during the cold war, UN exchanges helped to break down the state-bred animosity between the citizenry of East and West, Harper tells an East German fable about the four millionth flake of snow that finally broke a resistant bough.

The UNA is sometimes said to be old-fashioned; yet nobody can doubt the optimism of its director's insistence that 'over that next hill, there is the potential for a better world.' Harper tours schools, speaking out against fatalism - 'the young should be encouraged to believe that if you work hard and involve yourself the world can be a better place'.

The UNA's activists include people well into their eighties.

Among them is Basil Hembry, a farmer near Saffron Walden, Essex. His letters in defence of the UN sometimes appear in this paper, but he has just penned a vigorous despatch to *Farming News*, challenging a suggestion that the UN's recent Copenhagen summit on poverty was nothing but a jamboree for 20,000 expense account bureaucrats. Having registered as a conscientious objector in 1939, Hembry survived the war but, as he points out, when asked to explain his motivation, many others did not and he has always felt a burning obligation to work for the prevention of future wars. He had been a member of the League of Nations Union in the thirties, but both he and his wife devoted themselves to the UNA from 1945. War is a truly terrible thing, he says passionately, worrying that many younger people may not appreciate its 'sheer horror' or of the arms trade that goes with it.

Hembry has written a 50th anniversary UNA pamphlet to defend the values of the UN against cynicism and disillusionment; *The Flames And The Phoenix* opens with Isaiah's prophesy about the day when swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Alternating between poetry and prose, Hembry traces the evolution of peace and co-operation, and their struggle against the 'unnatural savagery of war'. He emphasises great moments when apparently hopeless acts of individual conscience have made all the difference.

That story is taken up by Colin and Mary Allsebrook, who live in North Oxford. Both in their eighties, they recognise many problems, but remain stout defenders of the UN. 'It is just considered a bureaucratic establishment now,' says Mary, who thinks corruption should be dealt with, but the knockers seem to have little concept of the achievements of the UN agencies - against Aids, smallpox, or for conflict resolution - or of its proper role as an 'association of states' rather than a 'peace enforcer' or a 'do-gooder on the spot'. She thinks polemicists should understand that peace-keeping is not always a farce and the UN has been 'pretty successful' in Namibia, Cambodia, and in securing elections in Mozambique.

She was in Prague at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938, as Central European correspondent for the *Washington Post*, and is horrified to hear the word 'appeasement'



once again bandied around to discredit attempts to resolve conflicts without violence: ‘If you call that appeasement, you don’t know what appeasement was.’

Colin Allsebrook, who was a water engineer, still cherishes the tiny blue-covered booklet containing The League of Nations’ Covenant, which for years he carried in his wallet as a kind of secular Bible. He produces a tattered copy of Gilbert Murray’s *The Covenant Explained*, written just after the First World War in the hope that the League would ‘redeem the world’ as ‘an incorruptible and disinterested watcher to prevent international wrong’.

The Geneva-based League failed to work as the incorruptible Good Shepherd of Murray’s imagination (not least because the Americans refused to join), but its Union achieved a remarkable level of support in Britain. Membership reached a million and even though its famous unofficial referendum or Peace Ballot in 1935 revealed a greater tolerance for war than members hoped, it had the participation of almost 12 million householders.

The main message, as Colin says of both the Union and its successor, the UNA, is that ‘citizens can do it ... it’s not them but us.’ He was on the Union’s national youth committee, and remembers much idealistic activity involving rucksacks, camps in the Isle of Wight and the New Forest, and an international youth conference in Geneva in 1936, where issues like disarmament and conflict resolution were discussed.

There was another upsurge of interest when the UNA took over in 1945. Thanks to what another veteran, the late Lord David Ennals, remembered as the ‘naive enthusiasm’ of those years before the cold war really settled in, the UNA filled the Albert Hall with its inaugural meeting. It mustered 3,000 members in Reading alone and was the largest student body in the country, except for the NUS. In the late fifties, 3,000 of the 9,000 undergraduates at Cambridge University belonged; and it took a terrific stand at the time of the Suez crisis, when there was enormous pressure to support the British troops regardless.

The UNA’s senior members are still holding out against the times. They defend the UN against accusations, often fostered by delinquent national governments, concerning its cost and competence. They keep a worried eye on the increasing newspaper trivia and the shrinking proportion of peak viewing time allocated to serious TV documentaries about international affairs; they declare themselves ‘utterly disgusted’ by last year’s Channel 4 series *UN Blues*; they are distressed by emotional and unanalytical reportage of such conflicts as Bosnia. They are dismayed to hear national governments say that in future their foreign policy will be dictated by self-interest: ‘What about the interests of humanity?’ asks Mary.

Colin concedes that the movement seems to have been waning: the UN was ‘absolutely inspiring’ in his youth - its charter the Holy Grail of his generation. But now the UN is ‘just a bit of stolid history,’ and ‘a lot of us are past our sell-by date.’ There is an ardent desire for more younger members, and some have been found. But director Malcolm



Harper observes that, while the young certainly take up single issues, its members are less impressed by 'structured organisations'.

The UN has universalistic ambitions, but now we 'particularise' issues. Many UNA members have supported more recent campaigns concerned with disarmament, human rights or the arms trade. But the Allsebrooks, who favour an integrated response to global problems, admit to having had their doubts about the narrow focus of, say, CND: 'We used to think they were obsessively tunnel-visioned.'

It is uncertain whether the young will embrace the UN founding ideals, but the elderly campaigners hope sincerely that the future does not belong to the likes of Anne Applebaum, wanting to see the British curled up in their arm chairs, feeling only cosier as distant machetes swing and un-whitened tanks roll unchallenged across the TV screen.

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