

Uniting for Peace

Annual Erskine Childers lecture 2015

A review by Bernie Holland

Under the heading “The United Nations at 70 - What Prospects for Peace?”, the annual Erskine Childers Lecture was held in the Stephenson Room at the Hilton Hotel, Euston on the evening of Wednesday 23rd September. The keynote speaker for the evening was Clare Short, former UK Secretary of State for International Development, who is now Chair of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. Having attended previous UFP meetings, this was again an important forum for peace activists, many of whom had travelled considerable distance to attend this event.

It is unfortunate that even today within the greater movement for world peace, there are many who remain ignorant of the important work undertaken by Erskine Barton Childers, in honour of whom these annual lectures are held. Born in Dublin on 11th March 1929, he was a writer, BBC correspondent and United Nations senior civil servant. By 1960, Childers was in London working for the BBC in both Radio and Television. His broadcasts from the BBC World Service ranged on varying topics from the Suez Crisis and Palestine to the John F. Kennedy assassination in 1963.

As a United Nations civil servant he specialised in UN issues, and in 1967 Childers was hired to lead a United Nations, UNICEF & UNDP programme called Development Support Communication. In 1968 Childers co-authored a paper with United Nations colleague Mallica Vajrathon called "Project Support Communication," which was later published in an important anthology about social change. Bearing in mind that he passed away in 1996, his vision and foresight was considerable, and is particularly evident from an extract taken from “Project Support Communication which reads thus:

"If you want development to be rooted in the human beings who have to become the agent of it as well as the beneficiaries, who will alone decide on the kind of development they can sustain after the foreign aid has gone away, then you have got to communicate with them, you have got to enable them to communicate with each other and back to the planners in the capital city. You have got to communicate the techniques that they need in order that they will decide on their own development. If you do not do that, you will continue to have weak or failing development programs. It's as simple as that. No innovation, however brilliantly designed and set down in a project plan of operations, becomes development until it has been communicated".

(Author's Note: Childers' perceptive observations are ever more relevant some 20 years after his death, as we witness the lawlessness and chaos that has become the scourge of the Middle East. However, improvements regarding means of communication in recent times, offer many opportunities to facilitate the solution of such problems - the principal challenge here being the willingness of the five major world powers to garner a collective commitment to solving them.)

By his retirement in 1989 as Senior Advisor to the UN Director General for Development and International Economic Co-operation, after 22 years of service, Erskine Childers had worked with most of the organisations of the UN system, at all levels and in all regions. After his retirement, Erskine Childers continued to strive relentlessly for the ideals for which he had worked so hard. He co-authored several notable books regarding the reform of the United Nations, the best known of these publications being "A World in Need of Leadership". He continued writing, travelling and lecturing on United Nations matters, such as globalisation and democracy, conflict prevention and peace-keeping, humanitarian assistance, human rights, famine, ageing and development, health, citizen's rights, female participation, design and perceptions, education, the North South divide and the world economy. He became Secretary General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations in March 1996. He served for only five months, and died on 25th August 1996 during the organisation's fiftieth anniversary congress. Therefore, it is entirely fitting that this particular lecture, on the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, should be dedicated to the memory of this remarkable individual.

It is also fitting that another remarkable individual, Clare Short, should deliver a 40 minute lecture on the United Nations, highlighting its shortcomings as well as its achievements. Originally formed in 1945, after the signal failure of its predecessor, the League of Nations, the United Nations was formed "to save future generations from the scourge of war". However, it would be grossly unfair to blame the United Nations per se, in respect of the fact that, seventy years later, we have a death toll from Middle Eastern conflicts that exceeds the sum of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Nevertheless, when one considers that, from the 51 member countries that signed up in 1945, we now have 193 member countries, the United Nations has given voice to an ever increasing body of humanity. Thanks to the work of organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF and UNHCR advances have been made in areas of education and health, international aid relief, and the rights of refugees. By 1980 it had been declared that smallpox had been eradicated across the globe and the International Emergency Childrens' Fund (UNICEF) continues to succeed in addressing similar concerns, one example being the provision of clean water in undeveloped countries which has brought about a 50% reduction of the number of people without clean water. The establishment of the Convention on the Rights of Children recognises the importance of international co-operation for improving the living conditions of children in every country, in particular in the developing countries.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) "promotes of the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity." It has achieved this through the creation of programmes aimed towards the reduction of poverty, particularly by addressing issues concerning the rights of particular minority population groups such as migrants, refugees, the elderly and the handicapped. The organization has also recently been known for its worldwide campaign against obstetric fistula and female genital mutilation.

Having offered due appreciation of the achievements of the United Nations, it has to be said that it has failed, and continues to do so, in respect of many issues. In particular here, the United Nations Security Council has to address the thorny issues regarding the North/South divide particularly with respect of giving voice to those countries of the Southern Hemisphere who continue to suffer the economically laissez faire attitudes of many of the more wealthy and powerful member states of the Northern Divide whose preoccupation with transnational threats, such as international terrorism, have fuelled a phenomenon identified as the military-industrial complex.

This has been dealt with in some considerable detail by the chairman of Uniting for Peace, Vijay Mehta, in his book "The Economics of Killing" in which, by means of painstaking research, he has examined how, despite their seemingly altruistic motivation, the Western Powers have been fuelling war and poverty in the developing world in the interest of upholding their distorted policies of global security. By revealing the fact that military expenditure and the so-called 'aid agenda' are intertwined, Mehta suggests that by unmasking this relationship, greater advances could be effected regarding the adoption of policies for disarmament, demilitarisation thereby paving the way for sustainable development, thus ending the cycle of violence, poverty and environmental degradation.

In relation to this issue, and in particular the role of the United Nations Security Council, Clare Short brought into sharp relief the issue of democratic equity within the general membership of the United Nations. It was mentioned earlier in this essay that, of the 193 member countries of the U.N. there still remain those five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States), who are the sole executors of the "power of veto" which effectively enables them to prevent the adoption of any "substantive" resolution, as well as decide which issues fall under "substantive" title.

Ms Short is amongst many critics who regard this de-facto control over the UN Security Council by these five governments as the most undemocratic character of the United Nations, and further, that this veto power constitutes one of the principal causes for most international inaction on war crimes and crimes against humanity. In light of this, it is hardly surprising, either, that of all the remaining U.N member states who have eschewed the possession of nuclear weapons, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States are the sole five members states who persistently refuse to do so on the pretext that nuclear weapons are an effective deterrent.

Nor is it on the issue of weapons of mass destruction that this criticism rests, for there has been intransigence regarding environmental issues ever since the introduction of the United Nations Environmental Programme in 1972. Some 20 years later, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, there was a failure, again by the most powerful member states, to reach agreement on the initiative and even by 1997 with the Kyoto Summit, the United States, Russia and China refused to cooperate. Fortunately there has been some advance since.

It was impossible for Clare to deal with all the issues here within the time constraint of a 40 minute talk, as further time had been allotted for a question and answer session which was ably moderated by Mr Mehta. For the remaining hour Clare did her level best to deal with a variety of questions all of which cannot be reported here. However, one question was regarding whether the Headquarters of the United Nations should remain situated in New York, in a country which, from an Eastern perspective, is widely regarded as having appointed itself as the 'policeman of the world', and the sole arbiter of a freedom and democracy which be imposed upon the 'undeveloped' world whether or not they like it. I have placed the word 'undeveloped' in parentheses here as this is a debatable point. From a military-industrial perspective it is unlikely that those member states holding power of veto on the Security Council, would have any desire that any 'southern military development' be made here, as it would only serve to weaken the position of self-interest of the north. However, Ms Short made the point that a more suitable response, on the part of the Security Council would be to impose effective sanctions on those dictatorships and tyrannies of the Middle East, in particular those of Saudi Arabia and Israel who have offered more than a generous contribution towards the creation of the hotbed of strife and unrest that continues to plague the area, and that which has now manifested in the greatest humanitarian crisis, in terms of human flight from zones of conflict, since the 2nd World War.

Returning to the questioner's suggestion that the Headquarters of the United Nations could be removed from the U.S.A to Switzerland, or even a Middle Eastern Country, Ms Short intimated that such, if implemented, could be regarded as going from the frying pan into the fire. The United Nations, being an aggregate of its 193 member countries, remains in dire need of democratic reform of its Security Council, which if effected would bring greater credibility and respect upon itself, no matter where its office may be.

In conclusion here, it was clear from many of the questions and comments made during this meeting, in light of the dismal state of the affairs of humanity that is being reported throughout the media globally on a daily basis, that there existed an undercurrent of despair, sometimes expressed in resignation and sometimes expressed in muted anger by some of those present, who felt a sense of profound frustration regarding their perception of an impasse humanity finds itself in at the present time. In spite of this, Clare Short, appeared to take some considerable delight in being able and qualified to offer creative suggestions towards the eventual solution of many of these vexing problems. On a deeper psychological level she was able to do this by encouraging us to look at the range of possibilities available to us at this very moment in time and to challenge any leanings toward pessimism, an indulgence we can least afford.

Bernie Holland - Sunday 27th September 2015