

# CAN WE UNITE FOR PEACE?

Saturday, 10 March, 2018 Wesley's Chapel, 49 City Road, London EC1Y 1AU  
Keith Best Chair Executive Committee WFM-IGP

If you are a peace activist you have to take the long view. It is a study in perseverance with many setbacks along the road and a real test of optimism – is the glass half full or half empty? We can be tempted into thinking that real progress is made *only* in the wake of a disaster or major conflagration – certainly the ill-fated League of Nations emanated from the First World War and the major instruments that we cherish today mostly came out of the ashes of the Second World War – still within living memory of many. Yet there has been progress *without* such a draconian stimulus and we should not forget that. I take the view that there is a ratchet effect – that having established norms for behaviour and human dignity the clock cannot fully be turned back. There will always be aberrations – the use of chemical weapons in Syria and earlier in Iraq, the genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia and whether that is what has happened in Rakhine State in Myanmar – but these events are now judged against the established norms even if the international mechanisms and real-politik frustratingly seem powerless to prevent them. The genie of the universality of human rights is out of the bottle and cannot be forced back.

The danger is not so much in the *erosion* of these norms but in their seeming *irrelevance* to real situations and to people's everyday lives. The unwitting complacency of the peace activist is to assume that they are applicable everywhere and hold equal validity in every situation – they become almost abstract ideals divorced from reality. I was with Michael Ignatieff in London recently and have just finished reading his latest book that he gave me called *The Ordinary Virtues*. He and a small team visited different troubled parts of the world to see how communities coped with difference and living together especially in the aftermath of major upheaval and whether those communities saw their priorities through the prism of international human rights or the practical, local, daily means of living together ie the ordinary virtues. Overwhelmingly, he found that it was the latter. Further, he finds that human rights and the ordinary virtues are in tension just as law is in tension with moral feeling: we are living a genuine crisis of the universal amidst a return of the sovereign. As he states “Everywhere sovereign states are pushing back against universal obligations, whether it be the refugee convention, the laws of war or the human rights covenants. It is not just China and Russia which insist on their sovereignty. Ordinary citizens in democratic states too, faced with the claims of refugees and desperate migrants at their borders, fearful of terror attacks, are telling their leaders: protect us from strangers. In an age of fear the ordinary virtues can't function without security and it is doubtful that human rights can turn back this tide. In a global age of threats, from enraged fanatics, the sovereign returns and the universal loses its grip, not just on rulers but also on those they rule.”

If we are to be successful in promoting peace we must match our own, perhaps sometimes perceptively rather lofty, aspirations of universal human rights to the local condition and to the fears and aspirations of ordinary people who live out the tensions in their everyday lives. Otherwise we shall fail and be seen to be mere dreamers as relevant as flat-earthers.

So when we ask can we unite for peace we need to be sure what it is we are being asked to unite around. There are certain global institutional mechanisms which we could support better if there were greater universality and focus among peace activists – these are issues of global governance with which I have been involved and associated for much of my adult political life through the World Federalist Movement. This year we celebrate – and that is the right word – twenty years of the International Criminal Court which, despite

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all its criticism and boycotting from some powerful nations such as USA, has delivered on prosecutions. I remember when the Rome Statute was signed in 1998 that many felt it would not survive. Well, it has and now, only twenty years later, no-one speaks of its abolition. As mature judgment prevails it will become to be seen as one of the most significant advances in international law – for the first time in history the justiciability of individuals held to account for their deeds and not just states. Of even yet more recent origin the concept of the Responsibility to Protect – adumbrated by Kofi Annan when Secretary-General in 2005: in effect, a reversal of the obligation of the citizen to the state to owe unfettered allegiance including laying down one's life at the state's behest with its origins in feudal times, to the responsibility and obligations of the state towards its own citizens – to safeguard and care for them. This is a new dimension to the social contract. In many ways it may be seen as a further step away from the Westphalian order in which states were entitled to do what they wished within their own territory without external interference to one of accepted intervention by the international community when states fail to protect their citizens or engage in genocide or act contrary to other international norms.

The nations that engaged in conflict in 1914 regarded war, adumbrated by Von Clausewitz, as an extension of foreign policy by other means and a legitimate vehicle by which to seize or to safeguard trading rights or territory – there was nothing inherently immoral about it. It is notable how those sentiments are now so outmoded to the extent that, although not impossible, nearly all modern conflicts are within states and not between them. They are horrendous, as civil wars always are with neighbour and family pitched against each other, and they lead to horrors such as those seen in the Balkans – they are used as proxy wars by other states such as we see played out in Syria and Yemen with the main casualties numerically being women and children rather than armed combatants.

These are all matters worthy of global citizens coming together to support. Yet we should not forget and, indeed, should give especial support to those local initiatives in which the ordinary virtues enable peace and harmony to be maintained and provide mechanisms where disputes or disharmony can be settled amicably. The application without fear or favour of the law is an essential element as is giving a voice to the often voiceless in a majoritarian state, namely the safeguarding of minorities whether in Catalonia or Rakhine State in a way that does not have as a stark alternative either revolution or secession or both. I am a world federalist for a purpose, not just to see accountable and effective global institutions but to see federalist principles applied within states as safeguards for minorities as well as in collectives of states to ensure that none feel excluded and that their voice is drowned out by the majority. A functioning democracy can only work where such safeguards exist, otherwise it becomes the tyranny of the majority as argued by John Stuart Mill in his famous 1859 book *On Liberty*. Such thoughts were not new and had been the subject of discussion in the *Federalist Papers* of the Founding Fathers. Indeed, the first ten amendments to the US Constitution served to mandate individual and minority protections.

The tension between universal values and local situations to which I refer pose an existential threat to peace far greater than many comprehend. Throughout most of my adult life I have lived in what was called the Cold War – a stand-off between the Eastern and Western victors of the Second World War under the threat of Mutually Assured

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Destruction. It was uncomfortable but had certain rules and understanding. The Iron Curtain of which Churchill spoke in his Fulton, Missouri speech came down, quite literally in the case of the Berlin Wall, in 1989 but what has come in its place? Over the last almost thirty years we have seen a descent into a more anarchic situation. Not just the rise of terrorism perpetrated by non-state actors and those who reject all the established norms of rules of war, the Geneva Conventions, genocide, crimes against humanity especially levelled at civilians and who are intent on destroying what have become universal civilised values as well as the physical history of monuments, ancient buildings and manuscripts – truly an attack on centuries of experiment of nations and peoples trying to live together. In such a world the responses of the nation state acting alone are insufficient. There must be joint, preferably internationally agreed, action through credible and accountable collections of states in an institutional framework whether at the UN or through treaty obligations such as NATO for defence or the Paris Agreement on climate change, a deal signed in June 2017 by nearly 200 countries in an effort to curb global carbon emissions. How can, say, Britain act effectively alone without support from other countries? That is why I want to see the UK remain part of the EU with its burgeoning collective foreign policy and its alternative defence potential if, for whatever reason, the lynchpin of NATO, the USA, were to lose interest in Europe. That is why, if the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter is traced to the Kremlin then we must ask what further can Britain do, especially following Alexander Litvinenko's murder by radiation poisoning in November 2006. Meaningful sanctions have all but been exhausted further to the illegal invasion of Crimea by Russia. The only other response, already mooted, is to increase defence spending and then we start to mirror history with an arms build-up which ultimately does not secure peace but creates a more likely climate for war.

There is also what I have described as the retreat into narrow nationalism and reliance on local sovereignty exemplified in so many ways – talk and action of building walls to exclude rather than include people, the far right nationally introverted movements achieving electoral success in democracies in Hungary, Poland, Germany, Italy and the USA. There are the secession movements exploiting these times expressing frustration at their failure to be given what they see as their right to self-determination. These situations are then further exploited by the new Tsar of Russia, smarting under the loss of territory and influence since the liberation of the Stans and Eastern European states from its hegemony. Despite the international criticism and draconian sanctions, the invasion of Crimea and the armed intervention in Ukraine remain unresolved. However one may see the desire to regain a global influence from the Russian point of view this does not make for a safer world. Finally, if you throw into the mix the toxic ingredient of protectionism as mouthed by the American President and the prospect of a retaliatory trade war we now have a situation in which one act of miscalculation or misunderstanding can lead more probably to nuclear, biological and chemical war than at few times during the Cold War such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The analogy with what led to the First World War is chilling. Yet always the mistake of security forces throughout the world is to think that future wars will be fought along the same lines as their predecessors. Terrorism, covert state action in other states and cyber warfare which can cripple a country's means of survival more effectively than any blockade coupled with control of the media and sources of information now pose a far greater threat.

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We in the peace movement, therefore, have our work cut out. International NGOs are finding their funding jeopardised by public sentiment as well as less finance available. Governments are cutting back on their donations for this work. Yet we must persevere. Being a peace activist is often unglamorous work – it is not all speeches and being chained to fences in high profile demonstrations. It is the constant lobbying, organising, influencing, the backroom work which pays off the best. That is our experience in WFM-IGP with the Coalitions for the International Criminal Court and the Responsibility to Protect – getting agreement among different NGO and state actors for a common strategy and then pursuing it over many years before benefits are seen. Another example is our work as the coordinator for the NGO Working Group on the Security Council, an informal network of organizations that meets regularly with Security Council members and others to provide feedback and input on issues related to peace and security at the UN. There is no common agreed solution to reform of the Council as that would divide those organisations but the monitoring provides a valuable backdrop to finding common ground. These are just some of the programmes which we pursue in combination with other NGOs and states. We had input into greater transparency and accountability over the selection of the current Secretary-General of the UN leading to the hustings and greater openness than ever seen previously – part of the 1 for 7 Billion global campaign supported by organisations and individuals from all corners of the globe committed to getting the best UN Secretary-General: over 750 organisations have signed up to the campaign with a combined reach of more than 170 million people worldwide supported by eminent personalities like Kofi Annan and of which WFM-IGP is an informal steering committee member.

If you do not already do so I urge you to support the work of the World Federalist Movement either directly or through its UK member organisation Federal Union.

Perhaps surprisingly from what I have said my conclusion is not pessimistic. The human rights advances that have been and continue to be made cannot be wholly reversed – they are now part of the human story. Likewise with the emphasis on climate change and the environment and the advance of the status of women. What we seek to avoid, therefore, is not the *elimination* of these advances, which are well established, but an *aberration* which could cause a major interruption such as a greater conflict as we saw twice in the last century. We have enough examples of recent history to be fully alive to the dangers and to know the solutions. We can speak not just out of aspiration but of experience. That is why the voice of the peace movement will remain relevant and why, especially working together, we can continue to demonstrate the famous dictum of Margaret Mead “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

**Keith Best**  
**Chair Executive Committee WFM-IGP**  
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