

CAPABILITY OUR COMPASS, MULTILATERALISM OUR LODESTAR



Westminster United Nations Association hosts the first party on the newly named United Nations Green, joined by asylum seekers and refugees temporarily housed in local hotels, and by diplomats from London embassies and high commissions. United Nations Green sits between Westminster Abbey, the QEII Conference Centre and Methodist Central Hall where the UN General Assembly first met in 1946

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Foreword

As we seek to promote multilateralism, we face a paradox. While our common agenda demands ever-increasing degrees of international co-operation, we loyally respect the supremacy of that curious hybrid, the nation-state as the political unit of freedom, cohesion and security, of enterprise, creativity and progress, and of mutual respect, responsibility and accountability.

This tenacious loyalty is well justified on any measure, but it comes with a price. This is that the besetting weakness of the nation-state - or its safeguarding virtue - is that, while it may well recognise any new danger, it is slow in decisive response.

Given no feasible option, we must live with this central paradox as we value the scope it offers to free, open societies for the "pursuit of happiness", as sought in the US Declaration of Independence. But we can diminish if not eliminate its disadvantages by harnessing, in pursuit of the common good, the talents, skills and qualities of citizenship and community which characterise nations, in addition to the mobilised but somewhat remote, impersonal skills we associate with diplomacy and statecraft.

To pursue this theme, let us think of the peoples of the world, along with their governments and the national and international institutions they have created in such abundance and diversity, as comprising three inter-related, inter-connecting and intersecting communities, repeat, communities: a political community to keep the peace among us, to reconcile legitimate differences, and to build up relationships between countries and regions; a community of management, doing together or jointly what we see is best done in that fashion; and a community of reflection, ceaselessly looking ahead, demanding the attention of the world's decision-makers and opinion-formers.

The pathway to this crucial dimension of active citizenship in the oversight of interdependence was first marked out by the adoption of the iconic 200-word Preamble as an integral part of the United Nations Charter. The story warrants endless retelling.

The original draft of the Charter was prepared by the "sponsoring powers" - USA, USSR, UK and (Nationalist) China - in "conversations" often far from cordial, held between August and October 1944, at Dumbarton Oaks, a venerable mansion in Georgetown, the older part of Washington. The intention was to convene an international conference of all peace-loving states when the moment was ripe. The date was eventually set for late April 1945, i.e., before VE-Day, in San Francisco.

The Preamble was put together under the inspiration of Jan Christiaan Smuts, the hero and the champion of the post-Great War League of Nations, at a meeting in London of the Commonwealth delegations - Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK.

The aim of Smuts' proposal was not so much to influence the outcome of the debate in San Francisco, but rather to attract public attention to the magnitude and collective ambition of what was proposed. In the latter regard, it was notably successful, but its achievement was even greater in galvanising the San Francisco Conference to produce a Charter far exceeding in content and “harmonics” the guarded proposals from Dumbarton Oaks. Whereas Versailles had been elitist and at times secretive, San Francisco proved to be the most open, democratic and productive international conference ever held.

The UN75 Commemorative Declaration, adopted at summit level on September 21, 2020, without reservation or amendment, by all 193 Member States, is the most neglected major international text of modern times. It is less remarkable for what it says than for what it does not say because reiteration is deemed unnecessary. Having unequivocally endorsed the handiwork of the UN founders, the bulk of the Declaration is devoted to specific projects, plans and priorities for the future. Surely, the Commemorative Declaration is the Preamble to the UN Charter updated and in detail.

Whereas neither "interdependence" nor "multilateralism" can be found in the Charter, they are defined and illustrated *de facto* and *ex post* in the Declaration. And it goes on to say “multilateralism is not an option: it is a necessity.”

What we understand with the benefit of hindsight serves to re-equip us for tackling the future. Our grasp of what has happened, not only in the 75 years since the signing of the Charter, but also in this past tempestuous year of 2020/2021 combined with alertness to the prospect of future rapid change, capability should be our compass, and multilateralism our lodestar.

For all the efforts and achievements of 2020/2021, we are analytically still at the stage of “work in progress”. I continue to be enormously indebted to David Wardrop, Chairman of Westminster UNA; to David Banks, for ten years the Public Affairs Adviser to the Commonwealth Secretary-General; and to my dear colleague and friend, Professor Nabil Ayad. There have also been numerous three-generation family discussions from which Grandfather Peter is apt to emerge in a minority of one. Responsibility for the content of the essay is, of course, mine alone.

I look forward greatly to the meeting UNA-UK has arranged for January 10, led by Natalie Samarasinghe, its departing Executive Director, marking the inaugural anniversary celebration of the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly, held in Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, on January 10, 1946.

Peter Marshall,
January 2022

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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The signature of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco on June 26, 1945 represented a definitive *paradigm shift* in the conduct of international relations, specifically from unbridled nationalism to conscious multilateralism, as we now call it.

The iconic 200-word Preamble to the UN Charter was put together, under the inspiration of Jan Christiaan Smuts, veteran and champion of the League of Nations, by the Commonwealth delegations at a meeting in London, on the eve of the Conference. It added immeasurably to the success of this great experiment. It established an enduring UN-Commonwealth symbiosis.

There could be no more authoritative endorsement of the *paradigm shift* than that contained in the UN 75 unanimous Commemorative Declaration, adopted on September 21, 2020, by all 193 members without amendment or reservation. 75 years on, there was so much which did not need to be said, since there was and is an immense area of undisputed common ground.

As the Declaration insists, "multilateralism is not an option; it is a necessity". It is significant that the word "multilateralism" does not figure in the Charter. Nor does the word "interdependence". They are defined, *de facto* and *ex post*, in the Declaration.

We might have reasonably expected that all our collective activity in calendar year 2021, beginning with the near-miraculous vaccine roll-out, and culminating in Cop26 in Glasgow, would have enabled the international community to espy light at the end of the tunnel.

Omicron decreed otherwise. We are faced with a fearsome worldwide trio of interrelated on-going challenges: the pandemic; climate change and a spaghetti junction of socio-economic problems, to be tackled simultaneously in rapidly evolving circumstances

Should, then, the developments of the years 2020 and 2021 be regarded as constituting a second paradigm shift? The answer is in the negative. There is a limit to the number of Rubicons you can cross. The present situation demands of us instead a continuous readiness to modify our perceptions. This obligation is as yet not fully recognised, let alone fully accepted. Certain it is that we need to think together more deeply and more quickly than has been our recent practice.

This essay explores some of the issues in three Chapters, successively entitled the *Analytics* of Multilateralism; the *Dynamics* of Multilateralism, and the *Business* of Multilateralism. Its motif is that some questions are worth discussing, even if for the moment no answers appear on the horizon.

Chapter I THE ANALYTICS OF MULTILATERALISM

The phenomenon of multilateralism

When it is sagely averred that the problem with assessing your life - for your own better guidance - is that you can only understand its meaning looking backward, but you nevertheless have to live it looking forward, everyone nods in sage agreement.

But we do not seem to be able to grasp the corollary to that proposition: namely, there is much to be said for studying the past, in order the better to manage the present and to face the future. The word "hindsight" seems to have gathered to itself a marked element of the unworthy or even the disreputable.

We cannot safely leave it at that. Politicians, they say, are so busy making history that they do not allow themselves time to learn from it. Civil servants, diplomats, academics, persons of the law and pundits must do the job on their behalf, and for mutual benefit.

Failure to study the past and learn from it may not matter greatly in an age of feudal, deferential tranquillity, with minimal international interdependence and a very gentle rate of change. But it is quite otherwise in turbulent, rapidly changing times of widening and deepening interdependence, of the sort which we are now experiencing. If it is adequately to serve its purpose, any public body of consequence needs a copious institutional memory. For whatever reason, few such measure up to that requirement, and we are the poorer for it.

The launching of a worldwide experiment: multilateralism

In signing the United Nations Charter, the international community launched a worldwide experiment in international co-operation, drawing on the salutary experience of the League of Nations, after the sudden end of the Great War in 1918, as to what to seek and what to avoid.

The experiment proved to be a colossal overall success, in its three great areas of collective endeavour: peace and security, development and human rights, conferring immense benefit on the generality of humankind.

In the ordinary course of events, the 75th anniversary of the signature of the United Nations Charter would have been an unmissable occasion on its own account for stocktaking. But the fates did not allow us to ponder it on its own. It has come upon us combined on the one hand with Covid, in a seemingly endless succession of variants, identified in turn by the letters of the Greek alphabet; and on the other hand, by the remorseless pressure of ubiquitous climate change. The case for the exercise of unapologetic hindsight becomes unanswerable.

Expectations in 1945

What, then, did they think in 1945? Here we are in luck. There has never been a better UK official report on a major international conference than that rendered by the large, interdepartmental UK delegation to the San Francisco Conference, April-June 1945, at which the United Nations Charter was signed (Cmd 6666, 1945). And there has seldom been a debate in the House of Commons to rival that of August 22-23, 1945, initiated by Clement Attlee, with Anthony Eden leading for the Opposition (they had been the joint leaders of the UK delegation), and a winding-up by Ernest Bevin. That debate in effect ratified the UN Charter.

Yet reading, and re-reading, their report strengthens the impression that the UK Delegation were conscious of not having got the full measure of what they had achieved at San Francisco.

A sense of occasion at San Francisco

That it was something big there was no doubt whatever. The point was dramatically made at the closing plenary session at which delegations were to indicate whether their respective countries would be able to sign the Charter at the ceremony arranged for the following day. Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador to the United States, presided. "The question we are about to solve with our vote," he said, "is the most important thing that can happen in our lives". Therefore, he proposed to conduct the vote not by show of hands, but rather by having those delegates in favour stand. Each of the delegates then stood and remained standing. There was a standing ovation when Halifax announced that the Charter had been adopted unanimously.

Multilateralism deep mined

The first lesson to learn when dealing with public affairs is that everything has a long history. Over the years - over the long years - people have learned the hard way that it is in general a good idea to curb one's aggressive tendencies and jaw-jaw instead of making war. Implicit in the attractive proposition that "democracy is a system for counting heads rather than breaking them" is an acute awareness (a) that the causes of disagreement and dispute are many and varied; and (b) by far the best way of dealing with them is *ex ante* rather than *ex post*.

So it is with international relations, however imperfectly they may have understood the underlying philosophical verities, the delegates at San Francisco were very much aware of the potential of their comprehensively forward-looking and action-oriented handiwork.

The concept of Positive Rights

With the benefit of (unapologetic) hindsight we can see that they were basing themselves on two fundamental concepts, both dating from 1776, and on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

On the west side, there was the notion of "positive" rights, originating enigmatically in the Declaration of Independence. Whereas the prime concern of Magna Carta, and what followed it in the UK, was with "justiciable" rights, *e.g.* with the responsibility of government to *refrain* from threatening life and liberty; the Declaration of

Independence, by including "the pursuit of Happiness" among the unalienable rights proclaiming with which we are endowed by Our Creator, charged the government with an additional *operational responsibility*: namely, that of creating and facilitating conditions in which the people could seek their fulfilment, individually and collectively. The most important of these conditions are enshrined in President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms.

Combine it with Positive Sum trading, instead of destructive Mercantilism

At the same time on this side of the Atlantic, Adam Smith was pointing out in *The Wealth of Nations* that Mercantilism was not the only basis on which international trade can, yet alone should, take place. He showed that it made far more sense and profit to play the positive-sum game.

He was no mere utilitarian bean-counter. On the title page of *The Wealth of Nations*, he is described as "formerly Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow". Seventeen years previously, he had written *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. His message was that all our moral sentiments arise from "sympathy," which he said "leads us to enter into the situations of other men and to partake with them in the passions which those situations have a tendency to excite".

Worthwhile sentiments do not just remain sentiments. They will find expression in behaviour or action in the naive, innocent notion of leaving the world in a better state than you found it. Most particularly, I would like to think, we will all readily have an eye to the needs of those who are at a disadvantage of one sort or another. One of the great slogans of the UN Sustainable Development Goals is "we will leave no-one behind". That says a great deal. A key test of civilisation is how it treats the least fortunate members of the community.

Both of these concepts - positive rights and positive-sum policies and transactions - have within them an element of the limitless, of the exponential, of increasing, rather than diminishing, returns. Both have an enduring moral component, as well as practical advantage. In combination, they are an unbeatable recipe for what Alexander Hamilton called, in the first of the Federalist papers, "establishing good government from reflection and choice," as distinct from "accident and force".

The two Positives come together organically in the UN Charter

The two Positives come together for the first time in the adoption of the United Nations Charter and above all in its iconic 200-word Preamble. They are at the core of a *unique commitment*, taken by all the members of a universal organisation in the wake of the death, destruction and desolation of two world wars scarce twenty years apart:

- (i) to abandon their previous traditional policies of pursuing their supposed individual national interests at the incidental expense of anyone else, the devil taking the hindmost;
- (ii) to replace them with acceptance *of responsibility for what happens*, as expressed the collective sustained pursuit of the common good: "reaffirming our faith in human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small"; and

(iii) "to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples".

You do not add the two positives together. You multiply them, the one by the other. Their product is not just administrative or mechanistic, it is also organic, from which combined state there spring all manner of constructive possibilities.

75 years on, an unprecedented endorsement

On September 21, 2020, Heads of State and Government of all 193 members of the United Nations, "representing the peoples of the world", adopted without reservation or amendment the "Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth anniversary of the United Nations".

True to form, the event passed all but unnoticed by those in the UK, as elsewhere, whose responsibility it is to keep abreast of developments, by virtue either of the posts they hold, or of their desire to shape the opinions of their compatriots.

Yet the significance, and the potential, of the Declaration can scarcely be over-estimated. First, whereas the United Nations Charter *launched the greatest experiment* in the management of international relations ever undertaken, the Declaration *unequivocally endorses* the outcome of that experiment, and sees it as the template for the future.

Never before have the world's statesmen and stateswomen collectively and unanimously paid such a tribute to the inspiration and the aspiration of their predecessors or reached such a fundamental and wide-ranging judgment about how interdependence should be managed.

Secondly, neither the word "multilateral", nor the word "interdependent", occurs in the UN Charter. But the Declaration confidently asserts, without defining the term, that "multilateralism is not an option, but a necessity". It can do so on the basis of the demonstrated validity of the propositions set forth in the Preamble to the UN Charter.

Thirdly, while they were remarkably prescient in emphasising the close inter-relationship between what are now called the "three pillars" of co-operation and endeavour - peace and security, human rights and development - the founders of the United Nations cannot be expected to have foreseen either the near-exponential ramifications of that relationship, as it has developed over the last seventy-five years, or the extent of the benefits which it has conferred on humankind.

Even more noteworthy, perhaps, has been the depth of humanitarian concern, manifested worldwide, not only by governments, but also by non-governmental organisations and agencies of every kind, at every level and in every sphere - the product of civil society at its best. That concern is the greatest feature of governance, as the complement of government, rather than its rival or opponent.

We are all conscious of the needs of those who are most at a disadvantage of one sort or another. One of the great slogans of the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

is "we will leave no-one behind". That says a great deal. A key test of civilisation is how the treatment accorded to the least fortunate members of the community.

Multilateralism in practice: the acceptance of responsibility

What multilateralism is about in practice – repeat, practice - can be summed up in a single prescription: our ready acceptance of responsibility, not only for doing well what may be required of us specifically, but also for having an eye out, an ear ready and a mind open, as to what more needs to be done or explored or imagined.

Edmund Burke famously said - or did not say: the experts are divided on the matter - that all that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good people should do nothing. In the age of interdependence, we have to go further than that: unless we *all* do our bit, we all suffer.

Multilateralism is thus concerned both with every element of the *substance* of international relations, and with every aspect of the multifarious *processes* by which they are conducted, at both macro and micro level, in every sphere and in every time frame. It is *objective* in that it is founded on rigorous analysis of the relevant factors; and on efficient and effective implementation of the policies adopted.

It is simultaneously *subjective* because it is *qualitative* as well as *quantitative*. It is driven by moral principles and priorities held in common. It is a matter of the *heart* as well as of the *head*. It is fuelled by an instinct for what is *fair*. It underlines the truth that a profound understanding, collective and individual, of the past is a prerequisite for wise management of the present and sustainable provision for the future.

Pie in the sky? Opium for the people? Pabulum for the naive? Open house for freeloaders, shirkers, cheats and bullies? Undesirables there will be, under any collective arrangement. But they can be shown up for what they are, by having a prominent code of conduct, which everyone professes to respect, and by publicising situations in which it is obviously being ignored. Bullies, of whatever size, are not totally insensitive to such critical attention, especially when they may be endeavouring to project themselves as paragons of virtue.

And what is the alternative? Hard-bitten, no-nonsense persons speak glibly of a "rules-based international order", an evasive, impersonal obfuscation which does not deserve the acceptance which it has somehow contrived to accumulate. Its imprecision is such that it cannot survive a moment's serious analysis. Whose rules? What order? Which countries? Why should anonymous rules or an unidentified order be heeded if it is inconvenient?

The absence of precision is both meat and drink to those who want to do as they please, and a handy all-purpose let-out for those who know full well what is wrong but are nonetheless reluctant to speak up or out.

The Badge of Multilateralism: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts

The ultimate test of any collective enterprise or arrangement is whether the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The reasons for that happy state of affairs may be

many and varied; leadership, albeit in differing styles, expertise and teamwork cannot but be part of the explanation. The test will certainly be passed if the individuals who compose the whole are outward- and forward-looking, and not inward- and backward-looking. The way Multilateralism thinks and works guarantees it will always wear the Badge with pride.

CHAPTER II THE DYNAMICS OF MULTILATERALISM

The origins of the nation-state system

For practical purposes, the nation-state, as we know it today, could be said to have come into existence with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, at the end of the calamitous Thirty Years' War. But the evolving nation-state "system" - the panoply of relationships and conventions which linked them - had very little to do with the nations as such, and almost everything to do with their respective state or governmental apparatuses.

From the outset until 1914, or even until 1939, diplomacy was an elitist and esoteric affair, conducted far from the madding crowd. It was ideologically neutral. It was ready to resort to war if that was what the national interest was perceived to require. It was not merely within the realm of the Sovereign's Prerogative; it was in many cases within his or her exclusive control.

This did not seem to worry the thinkers unduly. In his essay on Civil Government, the seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke insisted that "the good of society requires that several things should be left to the discretion of him that hath the executive power".

As already noted, the system seemed to work well enough in the case of pre-industrial societies. It developed in stages from the simple despatch by Sovereigns of Ambassadors on specific missions to other Sovereigns into the establishment of permanent Embassies in their courts and capitals with the consequent accretion of standard forms of diplomatic address and convention. Etiquette often concealed darkness of sentiment or emotion. Insincerity flourished. Malicious gossip was at a premium. Hostesses ruled the roost. Under-employed bachelor diplomats knew on which side their bread was buttered. Treaties had secret clauses, to be discovered by liaisons with glamorous spies.

The scope for undemanding employment in diplomacy widened accordingly to the point of becoming known as "out-of-doors relief for the aristocracy".

A series of invasions of the political foreground, circa 1770 - the present day

The Industrial Revolution changed all that for ever. It initiated what can usefully be thought of as a series of invasions of the hitherto almost exclusively political foreground by other factors misleadingly regarded as "non-political" and therefore to be treated as somewhat "below the salt": the Economic Invasion; the Public Concern

and Involvement Invasion; the Self-Determination and Decolonisation Invasion; the Human Rights Invasion; the Social Invasion; the "New Issues" Invasion, especially Environmental Concerns; the Information Technology Invasion; the "Artificial Intelligence" Invasion; and, not least, the ubiquitous and many-faceted "Cyber" Invasion.

The invasions have not come in a tidy, chronological sequence. Their progress has instead been non-linear, but nonetheless cumulative and their force is by no means spent. Should we be talking right now of a digital invasion?

A second Thirty Years' War, 1914-1945

In the perspective of this present essay, it is helpful to regard the period 1914-1945 as a second Thirty Years' War. Europe's leaders blundered into war in 1914 because they neither realised to what extent their individual, or personal, or national rivalries and animosities had been or could be aroused; nor the industrial scale on which they would be able, or would be obliged, to conduct the mutual slaughter which ensued. Sir Victor Wellesley, the economic Deputy Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office from 1925-1936, maintained that the Great War was in reality five wars rolled into one; Germany v Russia; Austro-Hungary v Russia; Germany v France; Germany v Great Britain; and Italy v Austro-Hungary.

Not fully understanding how the Great War had come about, Europe's leaders were similarly incapable, after the sudden Armistice in November 1918, of avoiding repetition of their previous errors. A transatlantic exception to this misfortune was US President Woodrow Wilson, with his vision of the League of Nations and the notion of "open covenants, openly arrived at". But he was abandoned by his compatriots.

To make matters worse, totalitarianism, in varying unpleasant forms, flourished in Europe between the wars. The twenty years following the 1918 Armistice proved to be a crisis-ridden prelude to a resumption of hostilities.

It was very different after 1945: we realised we must all play our part

As discussed in Chapter One, it was all very different after World War II. We had learned the hard way. When war is everybody's tragedy, the maintenance of peace is everybody's concern. And that concern is much more wide-ranging than the mere prevention of actual hostilities. It could not but extend to the *removal* of the *causes of war*, a positive quest to create the conditions where in which there is no temptation to resort to war.

The Role of "the Stupid People"

A stock joke among the superior practitioners of classical diplomacy was that you could not translate "public opinion" into such-and-such a language: the nearest you could get was "the stupid people". The rank and file had no part in the conduct of foreign policy. Their job was to do what they were told by their superiors.

Classical diplomacy, praised to the skies by its blinkered apologists, landed us in two world wars, barely twenty years apart. The adoption of the United Nations Charter put a definitive end to it. Its opening words are "We the Peoples of the United Nations,

determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind".

The adoption of the UN Charter also put an end to the notion that public opinion did not count. The UK Delegation could not have been more specific on the matter. In the concluding paragraph of their far-sighted report, they emphasised that all depended on how the member nations used the machinery now at their disposal "and their actions in turn will largely depend upon the public opinion of their respective countries, as expressed through their legislative and other bodies."

Public participation, as well as public opinion

The Foreign Office was not always so broad-minded. When the illustrious Royal Institution of International Affairs, better known as "Chatham House", was founded in 1920, it is reliably alleged that the word went officially around the Foreign Office that staff were to have no contact with such "meddlesome amateurs". Whoever initiated that unhappy instruction must have quickly recognised the error of his ways, as all trace of it has long since disappeared. And so has the tradition of cold-shouldering public but non-official bodies concerned with international affairs and the role of the UK in them.

We are extraordinarily fortunate in the plethora of outstanding think tanks and the like which are based in the UK. Britain (but not Britons alone) indeed could be said in many ways to remain the EU's principal think tank. Interdependence today is managed by just about every imaginable form of co-operation: governmental, non-governmental, civic, private sector, hybrids, partnerships, "stakeholderdom" networking, and much else. Flexibility and imagination are of the essence.

After the "second Thirty Years War", Nation and State are becoming reunited in the management of interdependence

It is a matter of conjecture how far this coming together of nation and state would have been a noteworthy feature of our lives without the simultaneous onset of the pandemic and climate change. But these two factors have served to reinforce a trend which will undoubtedly impinge more and more on popular consciousness in the years to come.

What do we mean by "soft power"?

In recent times, there has been a good deal of discussion of the notion of "soft power", but it has suffered from imprecision. We are apt to define it negatively. We are satisfied that it is not "hard power" in the sense of the exercise of military might, nor of the "executive power" of which John Locke spoke. Still less is it "smart power" in the cynical sense of "getting what you want without fighting for it". Nor again is it the doubtful art of "letting other people have *your* way".

To define it positively with any measure of satisfaction, it may be better to think in terms of the power to attract. We are influenced, we are stirred, not only by what other people say or do, but also by what they are. Many good things are caught, rather than taught. Example can be very powerful factor.

Does soft power reside in the Nation, rather than in the State?

This suggests in turn that, to the extent that the nation is about "being", while the state is about "doing", soft power is an attribute of the nation, rather than of the state. It is in us individually, and it is in us collectively. It is diffused. It is suffused.

"It's not fair!"

No phrase in the English language unites us with quite the same spontaneity as "it's not fair!" This simple proposition sums up so much of what we are and will always be about. It breathes both a willingness to see the other side of the question, and a respect for whomsoever may embrace it. It takes us back to Adam Smith, the moral philosopher, and his notion of "sympathy" with other people, even as he recognised the necessary element of competition, and looking after one's own legitimate interest in the everyday business of life, as explored with such delightful imagery in *The Wealth of Nations*. Above all, perhaps, it nurtures a sense of proportion, a quality all too often lacking in state activity.

The Notting Hill Carnival

How far is a sense of proportion the other side of the coin of a sense of humour? I lived for a spell in the area given over during the August Bank Holiday to the Notting Hill Carnival. At one time the Carnival, like the area, had gathered a somewhat unsavoury reputation. But my impression was that it mellowed with the passing years. The Sunday of the Carnival became Children's Day, and the procession began with a service in our parish church.

On one Monday, three policemen - two white and one black - felt moved, in the course of their constabulary duties, to join in the dancing. The skill and verve of their impromptu performance in no time attracted the attention of a large and appreciative crowd and was hailed at its conclusion with a thunderous round of applause.

Multilateralism: vector or illusion?

Pragmatic people are apt to become restive during any rigorous discussion of sophisticated, arcane concepts in the management of communal affairs. A vector is "a force having both magnitude and direction". Can Multilateralism be said to come into that category? Does it all really hold up? Or is it a pipe dream?

I offer two answers in the affirmative: the first very particular, the second very general.

The Allegory of United Nations Green

As to the first, we in the UK have experienced, like so many others in the Year of Grace 2021, the combined onslaught of (i) Covid 19; (ii) the symptoms of unrelenting climate change, and (iii) the realisation that the world economy was in irresistible need of radical change in a number of semi-conflicting respects, irrespective of the consequences of Covid 19 and the pressures of climate change.

No-one imagines that things will ever be the same again. No free, open society has yet come up with a comprehensive plan to deal with the unfolding situation, whatever it may prove to be. But everyone knows that it is everyone's concern.

January 10, 2021, marked the 75th anniversary of the opening of the inaugural session of the United Nations General Assembly in Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, a renowned place of worship, facing Westminster Abbey, across Broad Sanctuary Green. On that day, the UK Government authorised the announcement - by David Wardrop, Chairman of the Westminster United Nations Association - that Broad Sanctuary Green had been renamed "United Nations Green".



In years to come, when hopefully our present woes will have been long put behind us, the re-naming will be seen, not only as a symbol of our past collective endeavours, but as an allegory of the long-term way ahead.

The Allegory of Parliament Square

The second affirmative, and very general, answer to the question relates to Westminster Abbey, facing Methodist Central Hall across United Nations Green. We are in the very heart, not only of London, but of the United Kingdom. Westminster Abbey occupies the south side of Parliament Square; Parliament itself is to the East; the Executive - Downing Street and Whitehall - to the North; and the Judiciary, in the shape of the Supreme Court, to the West. The Abbey is everything: our national shrine, our pantheon, our heritage, our parish church, and a Royal Peculiar, answerable directly to The Queen and not to the hierarchy of the Established Church.

The Abbey has been aptly described as "one of the world's great institutions, ideally placed by virtue of its centrality and independence to be a beacon of modern society". That says it all.

Commonwealth-United Nations symbiosis

Commonwealth associations with Westminster Abbey are without number. The annual Commonwealth Day Service in 2020 was the last great occasion in the Abbey before lockdown intervened. I explored in some detail in the previous essay* the symbiosis between the United Nations and the Commonwealth, especially in the Preamble to the Charter, and the way in which it is suffused in the Commemorative Declaration. [[*'All Together Now'](#) Chapter 2, Westminster UNA News Page, 15 December 2020]

Circumstances have denied us since 2018 a normally biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. There will be a great deal to discuss when the time for the next Summit eventually comes.

For the wider Commonwealth, we shall have the occasion of The Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the Commonwealth Games in July 2022, in Birmingham, to bring us, virtually or three-dimensionally, closer together, tempered by the trials and the discipline of the Pandemic.

CHAPTER III THE BUSINESS OF MULTILATERALISM

The tenets of multilateralism can be set forth in theory with relative simplicity. But it is quite another matter when it comes to applying them in practice in today's world. Management of our interdependence, in the face of the central paradox, which is the core of this essay, is far more complex as a result.

I touch briefly in turn on four aspects of this complexity:

- (i) the influence of *process* on *substance* and *vice versa*,
- (ii) taking decisions in common,
- (iii) the machinery of government for the conduct of foreign policy, and
- (iv) diplomatic nomenclature.

Substance and process

Tradition has it that foreign policy is about what to do, and diplomacy is about how to do it. The trouble with this elitist *Upstairs, Downstairs* proposition is that it leaves out the diplomat's essential advisory function. What the Government really needs in *advance* is the best possible advice on the prospects of success of what it has in mind. And that in turn depends on (a) knowing and understanding your foreign interlocutor(s); and (b) knowing and understanding the factors and pressures which interdependence are likely to exert on the said interlocutor(s).

Collective decision-making: intelligence and ability

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead drew an acute distinction between "intelligence" and "ability". "Intelligence" he described as "quickness of apprehension" whereas "ability" was "the capacity to act wisely on the matter apprehended". He judged "ability" to be rarer than "intelligence". This reflected his general thought that *process* was more significant than *substance*, although inextricably linked with it.

Whitehead was concerned with the individual. But his analysis is timely in the case of collective decision-making, especially in the realm of foreign affairs, as distinct from exclusively internal concerns. "Intelligence" is in essence the servant of "ability": its service is the more valuable to the extent that the notion of "quickness" is understood to include "relevance", "comprehensiveness" and "liveliness", as well as mere speed. Capacious institutional memory is vital to the satisfactory discharge of the advisory function.

The machinery of government for the conduct of foreign policy

In current and foreseeable circumstances, a country such as the United Kingdom, with its preponderant service sector, and its vast (Anglophone) outreach, needs an entity within its governmental apparatus which embraces our *international involvement as a whole*.

At the moment we do not have such an entity. The reasons for the deficiency are both complicated and controversial, and no useful purpose would be served by airing them in the present context. But their practical consequences are palpable. Suffice it to say that we do not do ourselves full justice by tinkering with the present apparatus. We need to look around and ahead.

An eminent American golfer, giving expensive lessons to well-heeled aspirants, would reply to the question "what did I do wrong?" when a practice shot went awry, by saying "I don't know, but I know what you did not do right!" That is the constructive spirit in which we need to approach the sensitive yet crucial question of Diplomatic Service reform.

Diplomatic nomenclature: roll on the day of "King Charles Street"

Shakespeare was guilty of misleading us when he rosily suggested that names were of no significance. With a name, an entity acquires identity. Identity is the basis of self-respect and self-confidence, and hence of capability and fulfilment.

When I joined the Foreign Service (as it was then known) seventy years ago, the Foreign Office enjoyed the *cachet* of access *via* Downing Street, a modest thoroughfare, seemingly open to all and sundry, with a single policeman on duty outside No 10. Tourists could have themselves photographed standing next to the worthy pillar of the law.

Today that noble entity is called "Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office", as if it had been reduced to the status of a bureaucratic artefact, rather than a key element in the central nervous system of a dynamic vertebrate.

Last March, the UK Government's "Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" (CP 406, March 16) testified reassuringly to awesome powers of joined-up thinking. While it is doubtless a necessary condition of our scrutiny of our international involvement, it is by no means a sufficient condition.

Let us have done with "FCDO" and introduce in its place the name "King Charles Street" to keep the company of "Quai d'Orsay" and "State Department".

All players are equal, but some are more equal than others

One of the sacred myths of democracy, national or international, is that all members are equal. But just as more is expected from some members than others, so those concerned will become more equal as they are accorded the status which reflects that extra responsibility.

It was one of the great triumphs of the negotiation of the UN Charter at Dumbarton Oaks that the rank and file of the member countries managed to extract a good deal more from a reluctant USSR than its leaders were originally prepared to concede.

A de facto Pax Americana, 1945- 1989

Stalin however broke away almost immediately - Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain" speech was delivered just eight months after VJ Day - and thereafter played a negligible role in the UN management and reflection communities. At the same time, President Truman assumed the role of protector of shattered Western Europe against the threat of Soviet aggression. The seeds of OECD, NATO, WTO and the Council of Europe were sown in the post-1945 "Golden Years of American diplomacy".

This *de facto Pax Americana* could be said to have lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The possibility of a Bright New Order as between East and West in Europe loomed with the adoption of the Charter of Paris in 1990, and when the world came together to eject Iraq from Kuwait.

A new and powerful source of instability manifested itself in 9/11, and the solidarity of the West came under increasing strain as the Americans became increasingly reluctant to continue shouldering the main burden of collective defence and the European Union seemed ever more unwilling to contribute its fair share.

The ghastly Trump Experience

Determinists of the future are likely to tell us that the advent of President Trump was an "historic necessity" in the first instance to remind Americans the hard way that they could not, even on the narrowest definition of their own national interest, afford to turn their backs on the rest of the world; and in the second instance to make it clear to inward-looking Europeans that Uncle Sam was not to be taken for granted.

However, with doubts about the viability of the Biden Administration and the imminent first anniversary of the storming of the Capitol, we can be forgiven for having present reservations about that particular determinist thesis. I suggest, nonetheless, that there are two reasons to feel some reassurance. First, on Tuesday, January 25, President Biden will shortly deliver his first State of the Union Address. This cannot but put the Trump antics into rigorous perspective.

Secondly, in 1976, I was at the UK Mission to the United Nations in New York and was able to see at close quarters the tonic effect of the Bicentenary on Americans weighed down by Vietnam and Watergate. I have every confidence that the 250th anniversary in 2026 will have a similar therapeutic effect.

The China Syndrome

"Let China sleep", Napoleon said, "when she awakes the world will be sorry". Some of us of late seem to have been more than sorry. We seem to have been frightened out of our wits. A perceived ruthless superpower, on a scale never before encountered, has been holding the rest of the world in thrall. Its prestige and its capacity to terrify have taken something of a knock recently, not least over the abuse of human rights and because of Covid19 and Cop26.

When all is said and done, China does not account for more than, say, 17% of world GDP, as against America's 24%. China's evident indifference or hostility to the interests and views of others repels rather than attracts. It should not be beyond the wit of the other 83% of world GDP to maintain relations with China at an acceptable level of mutual advantage.

Putin's nuisance value

Churchill once described Russia as "a riddle, wrapped up in a mystery, inside an enigma". What are we to make of Putin's words and actions? Why did he quit the G7/8 and seize Crimea? What are his intentions as regards Ukraine? Is he testing the mettle of relative newcomer President Biden and of new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz? Is the state of Russia's economy (2% - yes, only 2% - of world GDP) such that he needs constantly to distract attention from it? Putin knows how to create nuisance value: one of the tasks of multilateralism is to neutralise it.

The European Union

"The contribution which an organised and living Europe can bring to civilisation," the Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950, the founding document of the European Project, tells us "is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations". The key point is what Monnet (who drafted almost all of it, with the aid of his few close associates) meant by (i) "organised and living", and (ii) by "civilisation". To the Frenchmen of his generation (1888-1979), "civilisation" meant the political, economic and cultural shared ascendancy of the leading counties of the European mainland in the five hundred years or so before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

The Schuman Declaration was predicated on the assumption that there was indeed a grave danger of a Third World War; but that next time round Germany would not be so much its instigator as in 1914 and 1939, rather as the prize in the persistent dread struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, between East and West. And that was the last thing Europe needed. Europe - *i.e.*, France - had, as Monnet perceived it, to get its act together, both literally and metaphorically. In this he found ready support all round, not least from Churchill's famous speech at the University of Zurich in September 1946.

Things have turned out rather differently. France of the Fifth Republic and de Gaulle, from 1958 onwards, was determined to demonstrate non-subservience to the notion of the Atlantic Western alliance. When de Gaulle departed, Gaullism stayed. It took root in the burgeoning European Economic Community. The latter evolved first into the European Community, and then into the European Union. However much what we see now differs from the original project, the change of emphasis has played a key part in holding together the vastly increased number of member countries from both East and West.

The evolution of the EU has unquestionably served to keep *le vieux continent* out of disastrous fratricidal strife which so disfigured the first half of the twentieth century. However, this has in the main been a matter of conferring additional competences on

the Union's institutions. The EU became much more a matter of relationships between states than between nations. This alienated popular sentiment in this country.

EU-UK

The twin sagas of our joining in the European Project and of our leaving it lend strength to the argument that truth is stranger than fiction. The priority now is to fashion a new relationship, in greatly different circumstances. I am strongly attracted to the notion that the EU's reaction to our departure can be best understood as one of *bereavement*, with its familiar sequence of denial, anger, "bargaining," depression and acceptance.

If the notion of bereavement corresponds to the truth, we should not look for any easing of the tension. But let us remind ourselves that on January 31, 2020, the last day of our EU membership, the Presidents of the European Council, Commission and Parliament had the imagination and the courtesy to gather together at Houjarray, Monnet's home near Paris and now an EU shrine, to wish us well. That is a heart-warming touchstone for the future.

Last, but not least, the UK

Although the UN75 Commemorative Declaration and its stirring multilateralist message may have left the vast majority of the world's cerebrals unmoved, it did not fail to resonate with the UK Government. The latter in its turn did not fail to pass on the message. It was in a unique position to do so. As 2021 dawned, the Prime Minister was (i) host to the UN Secretary-General's virtual visit; (ii) "Chair-in-Office" of the Commonwealth, by virtue of the last meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government having taken place in London in 2018; (iii) president of the G7; and (iv) leader of the government which would host COP26 in Glasgow in November.

It soon showed. At the close of their virtual meeting on February 19, chaired by the Prime Minister, the G7 leaders "resolved to work together to beat Covid19 and to build back better." "Drawing on our strengths and values as democratic, open economies and societies, we will work together and with others to make 2021 a turning point for multilateralism".

Multilateralism could be said to have achieved lift-off during the course of President Biden's visit to Europe in June 2021. We are entitled to draw from the five texts agreed during the course of it - in chronological order, the New Atlantic Charter; the US/UK statement; the G7 Summit communique; the NATO Summit communique, and the US/EU Declaration - the encouraging conclusion that there is near-unanimous agreement throughout the international community as to our multifarious common agenda, and a near-miraculous consensus on the best way of tackling it: namely multilateralism.

Sir Peter Marshall, KCMG, CVO, joined the UK Diplomatic Service in 1949, rising to Economic Under-Secretary in the FCO and then Deputy for Economic and Social Affairs. He then joined the UK Permanent Mission to the UN in New York and later served as UK Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva (1979-83). He also served as Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General (1983-88). He was Chairman of the Commonwealth Trust and Royal Commonwealth Society (1988-92) and Chairman of the Joint Commonwealth Societies Council (1993-2003). His book *Positive Diplomacy* (Macmillan) was published in 1997.