



**A message from Sir Peter Marshall, KCMG, CVO
to Westminster United Nations Association
on the 75th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter**

26 June 2020

Dear members of Westminster United Nations Association,

1945: A Narrative like no other

On January 10, 2016, we gathered in the Methodist Central Hall, opposite Westminster Abbey, to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the inaugural meeting, at that iconic location, of the United Nations General Assembly.

In an [article](#) I prepared for the occasion, I commented that the moment marked the launch of the greatest experiment in international co-operation the world has ever seen.

Four years later, as we celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco and look back across the Coronavirus chasm which separates us from even our very recent past, I plead guilty to understatement.

The experiment of which I wrote was founded on a commitment by all the members of a universal organisation for the very first time to replace their previous traditional policies of pursuing their supposed individual national interests at the incidental expense of anyone else, the devil taking the hindmost, with 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"

Even more remarkable than the launch of the experiment itself, it would seem on reflection, were the Herculean feats of diplomacy at the highest level, of negotiating and drafting, and of hard, expert, graft at every other level, over a period of two months which made it possible.

Generating the necessary momentum in the USA, the Commonwealth, the Americas and with the governments in exile of the occupied countries presented relatively few problems. Getting the Soviet Union on board, and keeping them there, was something else. It required *inter alia* the Moscow Declaration of 1943, a meeting of "the Great Powers" to prepare a draft Charter at Dumbarton Oaks in 1944, and discussion among the Big Three at Yalta in 1945.

The San Francisco *piece de resistance*

Meeting in London on the eve of the San Francisco conference, the Commonwealth delegations - from Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK - all members of the League of Nations - backed an inspirational proposal from Jan Christiaan Smuts, South African Prime Minister, and a veteran champion of the League. He argued that the draft Charter, which had been prepared at Dumbarton Oaks needed a Preamble, to

make its noble provisions more readily understandable and meaningful for the millions of ordinary people who had known "the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind".

With strong support from the Commonwealth, Smuts achieved his objective. As adopted, the Preamble, a mere 200 words in length, is perhaps the greatest text in modern diplomacy. It has of course, been the Pole Star of the United Nations and of international life ever since. (Annex A)

They realised full well what they were voting for

On June 25, 1945, the vast number of delegates to the United Nations Conference on International Organisation (UNCIO) to use its formal title, met for the last time, to vote on the text they had so arduously negotiated. 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 Lord Halifax announced that the Charter had been adopted unanimously.

A signing ceremony to remember



The next day, June 26, the delegates signed the Charter. China signed first, as the first victim of Axis aggression. In his closing speech, President Truman (who had, as Vice-President, been catapulted into the White House in early April, on President Roosevelt's sudden death, a few days only before the opening of the San Francisco Conference) said:

"the Charter which you have just signed is a solid structure on which we can build a better world. History will honour you for it. Between the victory in Europe and the final victory in this most destructive of all wars, you have won a victory against war itself....."

"The buck stops here"

President Truman was a Great War veteran. He knew the score and was not afraid to make big decisions. Five weeks later, he decided to use the atomic bomb. When the Soviet Union started the Cold War in Europe almost on the morrow of the end of World War II, the United States led and funded a vital collective Western response. The immediate US-led reaction to the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, was even more striking. The fledgling UN organisation had decisively passed muster. It was not Utopian; as UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld used to say, "we are not leading people to heaven: we are saving them from hell".

What it meant in the UK

What it meant for war-emaciated, bomb-scarred Britain can be gathered in its full poignancy from the pre-San Francisco debate in the House of Commons on April 17, 1945, initiated by Clement Attlee who, as Lord Privy Seal, was co-leader, with Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, of the UK delegation; and from the [debate](#) to ratify the Charter on August 22, 1945, in the House of Commons, again initiated by Attlee, by now Prime Minister.

Attlee noted that "this declaration does not start by saying 'We, the Governments'. It starts by saying 'We, the peoples'. This, I think, is right, because it expresses the fact that this Charter is an endeavour to put into practical form the deep feelings of all the peoples, including the fighting men who have made it impossible to have a Charter at all"

Verdict on 1945, and the Way Forward in 2020

Seventy-five years on, and beset as we all are by a worldwide pandemic, with a fall-out of the proportions of a top-class volcanic eruption, what are we to make of this saga? And what does it tell us about the way forward now?

The magisterial opening sentence of the [Schuman Declaration](#) of May 9, 1950, the origin of the European Project, provides us with the outline of an answer: "world peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it".

By any standards, securing universal commitment at San Francisco to such a fundamental improvement in international behaviour constituted a creative effort proportionate to the threat to future world peace. What is demanded of us - of all of us - now is the making of creative efforts which match up to our unprecedented situation.

A very good start is provided by the wording of an excellent Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on April 2, 2020 ([74/270: "Global Solidarity to fight the Coronavirus"](#)). While recognising the central role of the UN system, it calls on everyone else to get involved.

These are not just words. The UN is reaching out to engage in dialogue with people the world over - the "we the people of the Preamble to the UN Charter". The theme is "The future we want: the UN we need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism". The results of this enormous dialogue will be presented at the One-Day General Assembly commemorative session on September 21.

There will be a very great need for resources. The G20, to whom we would naturally look in this regard, issued a comprehensive statement on March 26, pledging themselves to do "whatever it takes" on coronavirus. It will be a far bigger job than anything they have tackled so far.

The creative efforts required will certainly include an expansion in depth and width of governance, the complement of government, not its adversary. It is implicit in particular in the flexible formulations of the Preamble and Chapter IX (International Economic and Social Co-operation) of the UN Charter. "Governance" was defined in 1995 by the [Commission on Global Governance](#) as "the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs". It recognises no national boundaries.

We are conditioned to think in terms of national affairs on the one hand, and international affairs on the other. Coronavirus has already done much to hasten the disappearance of the distinction between the two.

The imperative of the wellbeing of succeeding generations

While I have breath, I shall not cease from banging the drum for the Preamble in general. But let me concentrate, dear Friends, for a moment on its very first sentence: "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". Concern for, and with, succeeding generations is paramount and a constant. The scourge from which they are to be saved is obviously, not war itself, as it was perceived in 1945. Much has changed greatly for the better. Much else raises problems which divide society. Much further depends on what young people think about the unfolding of events.

Alongside the 75th anniversary commemoration there will be a Youth Forum which will address the same themes. I applaud the suggestion that, as one part of their discussion, young people should study the text of the Preamble, see how adequately it addresses their priorities, and consider whether there is a case for updating, or annotating, its terms.

"For your Tomorrow we gave our Today"

Six weeks hence we shall observe the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, "a victory", in President Truman's words, "against war itself". What that means for me, to my knowledge the only veteran still in diplomatic circulation, is encapsulated in the evocative epitaph on the Kohima War Cemetery: "when you go home, tell them of us and say, for your Tomorrow we gave our Today".

We can justly feel that that they did not give their Today in vain. I am sure that members of Westminster United Nations Association need no persuasion that this remains our obligation.

With every good wish, dear Friends,

Peter

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 *Public Diplomacy* (Macmillan) was published in 1997.

His article written to mark the 70th anniversary of the inaugural meeting of the UN General Assembly held in Methodist Central Hall Westminster can be read [here](#). Sir Peter participated in the morning service held there on 10 January 2016 (News Item 10 January 2016).

Annex A

Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations

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, and
- to reaffirm faith in fundamental 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
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

- to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and
- to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and
- to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and
- to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/preamble.shtml>

Annex B

Speech by Clement Attlee, British Prime Minister, opening the first UN General Assembly, 10 January 1946 (as reported in *The Canberra Times*, 12 January 1946)

'WE MUST AND WILL SUCCEED'

"It is for us today, bearing in mind the great sacrifices that have been made, to prove ourselves no less courageous in approaching our great task, no less patient and no less self-sacrificing. We must and will succeed" These concluding words of the Prime Minister (Mr Attlee) in his opening speech brought deafening applause.

The coming of the atomic bomb is only the last of a series of warnings to mankind that unless the powers of destruction could be controlled, immense ruin and almost annihilation would be the lot of a very highly civilised portion of mankind ' said Mr Attlee.

"I welcome, therefore the decision to remit the whole problem of control of atomic energy to a commission of the United Nations Organisation. We, perhaps, in these islands which for so long have been immune from attack behind the barrier of the sea, feel more than any others that we are living in a new age. The development of powerful weapons of destruction from distant bases have destroyed the illusion of isolationism. The atomic bomb has set clearly before us in tangible form the question that faces the modern world. It is for the peoples of the world through their representatives, to make the choice between life and death.

'We have always with us sceptics and pessimists who will tell you there always has been war and always will be war, who point to the failure of the League of Nations as a reason for scepticism as to the success of the United Nations Organisation, but the progress of civilisation has been one of continual failure and learning by experience. To take an example, the history of the trade union movement is marked by failure after failure. After every defeat, the sceptics and the timorous said 'You cannot get the workers to combine. The self-interest of the individual is too strong.' I have intense faith that we will make the United Nations Organisation a success.

'We have learnt from past mistakes that the old League of Nations suffered from many disabilities, most of all perhaps because two great nations, the United States and the USSR (who) were not present in formative stages. 'To-day, as never before, the world is united. The Constitution of the new organisation essentially is realist in that it provides for the sanction of force to support the rule of law. Every individual can be brought to realise that things that are to be discussed in this conference are the concern of all and affect the home life of every man, woman and child. Without social justice and security, there is no real foundation for peace for it is among the socially disinherited and those who have nothing to lose, that the gangster and the aggressor recruit their supporters. Important as is the work of the Security Council, no less vital is to make the Economic and Social Council an effective international instrument. A police force is necessary for part of the civilised community, but the greater the social security and the contentment of the population, the less important is the police force.

"Finally, let us be clear as to what is our ultimate fate. It is not just a negation of war but the creation of a world security and freedom, of a world governed by justice and the moral law: We desire to assert the pre-eminence of right over might and the general good against selfish sectional aims".

Published by

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