

UNA Westminster co-hosts seminar ‘A Solemn Duty’: Dag Hammarskjöld and Conflict in the Congo’ held at the School of Advanced Study, University of London

21 March 2016 At the meeting with its title referencing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki moon’s declared commitment following the findings of a UN panel of experts, speakers updated the audience on his continuing efforts to uncover all available information on the fatal crash of the plane carrying his predecessor in 1961.

In opening the meeting, David Wardrop, Chairman of the United Nations Association Westminster Branch, chronicled the collective efforts by individuals worldwide in raising international awareness of the issue. This pressure encouraged the UN General Assembly to unanimously adopt two Resolutions which successfully triggered firstly the appointment of the UN Panel charged to examine existing information and secondly to support the Secretary-General pursue the matter. These efforts are fully reported in the news pages of this website.

Professor Henning Melber, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, and Director Emeritus of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, explained how Hammarskjöld’s commitment to global governance, social justice and international solidarity was guided by strong personal integrity and solid values. “Despite his failures and setbacks, his brand of diplomacy offers important lessons for mediators today”, Professor Melber stated. He reminded the audience that Hammarskjöld had been widely praised for the UN’s role in the Suez crisis of 1956 but that the Congo crisis, resulting in the largest UN peace operation to date and continuing today, presented different challenges. He quoted one observer ‘the Congo was simultaneously a hotbed of inter-African intrigue, a playground for the superpowers and a turning point in the decolonization process.’ Professor Melber explained how Hammarskjöld tackled his mediation task against this background, concluding that as the world’s highest international civil servant to assume global leadership, he set standards that have lost none of their value and relevance. Professor Melber’s paper [Dag Hammarskjöld and Conflict Mediation](#) (February 2016) covers his address more fully.

Dr Roger Lipsey, author of *Hammarskjöld: A Life*, introduced his audience to Dag Hammarskjöld’s ethic, revealed in four key aspects. These were his conscious self-scrutiny (of himself); mobile awareness and empathy (in diplomatic and public life); facing facts, total engagement and selfless service. Dr Lipsey illustrated each of these aspects of Hammarskjöld’s ethic with excerpts from his book *Markings*. These included ‘You can only hope to find a lasting solution to a conflict if you have learned to see the other objectively, but, at the same time, to experience his difficulties subjectively’ written in 1955. In this and other passages, one can follow more clearly the manner of Hammarskjöld’s mission in the Congo.



Dr Lipsey, Professor Melber and David Wardrop

A lively discussion followed in which the speakers and members of the audience congratulated Ban Ki moon on his determination to ‘establish the truth of what happened on that fateful night’ but noted that despite the supportive General Assembly Resolution (19 November

2015), his term of office runs out this year. So what might his successor do? Mr

Wardrop referred to the *1 for 7 Billion Campaign* comprising 750 organisations and 170 million supporters worldwide, committed to getting the best Secretary-General to follow

Ban Ki moon. Through this campaign, the candidates are identified and the UN has made it possible to pose them questions. Mr Wardrop told the audience he hoped that his own question "Ban Ki moon has shown great courage in pursuing the truth on Dag Hammarskjöld's death. Although supported by most Member States, some powerful states are being slow to release relevant information. Will you guarantee to continue his courageous work?" might be among the thirty to be short-listed in April. Audience contributions included those currently researching contemporary papers deposited in the UK national archives and journalists covering Sweden and African issues. In conclusion, the speakers urged the audience to follow news reports on these pages.

The event was jointly organised by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London and the United Nations Association Westminster Branch.