

## **Erskine Childers (1929-1996)**

### ***UN Free-thinker, Critic and Constructive Analyst***

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***Sir Richard Jolly***

Erskine Childers was one of the radical thinkers and activist of the UN. Before joining the UN in 1967, he had a career as an independent writer and broadcaster on international political and development affairs, specialising in UN issues, serving for a while as a periodic consultant, including on a special mission to the Congo for the then UN Secretary General U Thant. In 1967, he joined the UN, working with many of the UN organisations at all levels and in all regions, including nine years in Asia and many positions with UNDP. He had a particular interest in problems of co-ordination, development and humanitarian operations and public communication and constituency-building.

He formally retired from the UN in 1989, after 22 years of service. But his lively interest continued, touring widely and lecturing and writing on UN matters as well as taking on a number of consultancies. In 1996, he became Secretary General of WFUNA, the World Federation of the United Nation Associations, dying suddenly five months later, shortly after giving a speech at its 50th anniversary Congress in Luxembourg.

Erskine Childers was the accomplished scion of one of Ireland's most distinguished families. He bore the same name as his father, who was President from 1974 to 1975, and his grandfather, the author of *Riddle of the Sands* and gun runner for the Volunteers, who served as a British navy flying officer in the first World War before being executed by the Free State forces during the Civil War in 1922.

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As a young man, Erskine had moved rapidly to an international life. He studied modern languages at Trinity College, Dublin and then politics and international relations at Stanford in California. By the age of 21, he was travelling to many countries as Vice-President of the United States National Students Association.

His passionate commitments to the UN and to internationalism embraced both North and South. Combined with his journalistic skills he honed a fine vituperative style. He wanted smaller, independent minded states like Ireland to stand up against the myopic elite of the larger countries. Irish neutrality, he argued, was absolutely essential to establish a special relationship with Third World countries, and he mourned the way this had been somewhat diminished by membership of the European Community.

One can only imagine the vituperation with which he would have opposed the Iraq War of 2003-4. He pulled no punches in 1991, referring to the ‘combination of buying and bullying’ which had intimidated many other countries in the UN into supporting military intervention in the Gulf War, pointing out that the military cost of the war had exceeded 12 years of the UN’s global budget. ‘Never again should our United Nations and our Charter – which are not the property of the major powers – be left so vulnerable to such apocalyptic abuse’. He called for the great majority of the UN members to repair the damage.

In 1994, with Brian Urquhart, Erskine Childers wrote what still stands as one of the most important and broad ranging studies on the actions required for *Renewing the United Nations System*. This study followed and built on an earlier, pioneering report on leadership within the UN, noting major weaknesses in the way governments selected and appointed the UN Secretary-General and other executive heads in the UN system – and how these procedures could be improved.

What makes these two studies impressive and so important is their ability to be hard-headed but not ‘too realistic’, to make proposals which were

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eminently sensible and which, at the same time, recaptured the vision of the early years of the UN. Indeed in the introduction, they referred to this period as ‘an oasis of reason, intellectual analysis and idealism’ which led to the creation, even before the war ended of ‘a blueprint for the post-war world and the institutions which were to ‘save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.’ *Renewing the United Nations System* took a hard look at the UN system as it is and then moved on to analyse the machinery for equity and sustainable development, for operational activities, for human rights and for humanitarian emergency capacities, together with the decision-making machinery, the finance and management and the nature of the international civil service required for its implementation. The report looked to a more democratic United Nations by indicating various ways in which non-governmental organisations could play a bigger part within the UN.

The analysis and the many recommendations of these reports are noteworthy - and still of great relevance - because they look at the whole of the UN system, not merely the secretariat but also UNDP, UNICEF and the other funds, the specialised agencies including ILO, WHO, FAO, UNESCO, the High Commissions for refugees and for human rights, the institutions dealing with emergencies – and the Bretton Woods system, the latter so often forgotten in considering the UN. Though the analysis and recommendations are visionary and challenging, the whole report is infused with the practical insights and examples which could only come from those who had been insiders to the system.

One feature of the report still worth quoting is the way it takes on several of the myths and derisory epithets so often used to dismiss the relevance of the UN; it is a ‘a vast and sprawling bureaucracy’, ‘a gigantic paper-factory’, built on ‘large and extravagant budgets’. In a now much quoted rebuttal, they pointed out that excluding peacekeeping staff, the World Bank and the IMF (and now also the WTO), ‘the entire UN system world-wide, serving the interests of over six million people in 192 countries, employs [about 50,000 persons] no more workers than the civil service in

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the American State of Wyoming, population 501,000. Its staff is actually smaller than the number of public service employees of the city of Stockholm in Sweden, population 760,000’.

The whole report deserves to be read, not summarised. Many of its recommendations, even ten years after they were first put forward, are full of relevance – and even after Kofi Annan, the present Secretary General, has implemented a number of them and made reform a major part of his administration.

But as we approach the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN, it is time to recall again the words with which Erskine Childers and his co-worker, Brian Urquhart, ended the penultimate section of their report, immediately before listing their recommendations. They ended:

The time for warnings is now past. It may well be that the possibility of the extinction of the human species by weapons of mass destruction has receded. There remains, however, the increasing possibility of a slower form of extinction through indifference and by failure to act.

The instruments for such action do not need to be invented. The United Nations system is in place, however much updating and strengthening it may need. The UN system needs the urgent and sustained attention of all governments, They are directly responsible for it, and it is their responsibility to ensure that at long last the warnings are heeded.