

After Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq- What is the future for the UN?

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As a child my father often quoted Samuel Johnson: ‘Patriotism is the last resort of the scoundrel’.¹ Today he would probably say that religion takes pride of place – but he tried to instil in us that nations were like football teams, moving up and down the Premier League in the case of the United Kingdom, or struggling along in the Fourth Division with no backers and no good players in the case of many Third World countries.

Sometimes a really good team, highly respected by other teams, can go through a terrible patch with a bad manager, or, as in poor Beckham’s case, by a captain who makes the fatal mistake of kicking his penalty over the bar.

How Like the United States and the UK Today.

The United States has been slipping in world opinion for some time, but I think the UK until recently has been respected for fair play and the quality of its foreign policy decisions. Some of us may disagree, but on the whole I think this is a fair statement. I well remember Robin Cook’s now famous speech in the Locarno Room of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, spelling out the new government’s foreign policy with an ethical dimension. I was there, a new MP, enthralled by the new dawn, the decency, the honesty and the sheer common sense of it all. ‘Oh, how are the mighty fallen!’

Over the last fifteen years there has been a huge upheaval in world order. What now seem the safe and predictable days of the cold war are over. In a speech at Chatham House in March 2004, Lord Hannay of Chiswick, UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 1990 to 1995,

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

described how everything changed:

For the UN a whole range of things, previously unthinkable or impossible, suddenly became politically possible. An old style aggression by Iraq against Kuwait was halted and reversed under UN authority. A considerable number of third world proxy wars were brought to an end and the wounds gradually healed under the UN's auspices – in Namibia, Cambodia, El Salvador, and Mozambique. The evil of *apartheid* was peacefully transformed into a democratic South Africa. But it soon became clear that this was not 'Paradise Regained'; no new world order emerged, merely the symptoms of a new disorder. The UN itself, as ever the victim of excessive expectations revealed some fundamental weaknesses. At first the weaknesses were those of execution and effectiveness. In Somalia, in Bosnia and in Rwanda, the UN simply failed to muster the resources and the determination, in one case to put a state back on its feet after its comprehensive failure, in another to manage peacefully the break-up of a state and in the third to counter a genocide. In each case the members of the UN willed the ends but they did not will the means. When the going got rough, they stood back and left the UN to take the blame for failure. Then, in more recent years, another, more fundamental, weakness emerged, an inability to agree on the conditions for a collective action and the use of force – first in Kosovo and then in Iraq – even when the UN's own mandatory resolutions were at stake.²

Kosovo

As a novice spokesman on International Development in 1999, and an obedient member of our Foreign Affairs team, I supported the action in Kosovo. We could not stand by and allow the worst ethnic cleansing since World War II to go on in Europe's backyard. We saw it as a European problem and also a NATO problem. There was no UN resolution.

Our then leader insisted that troops should be on the ground, whilst bombing of strategic targets from 15,000 feet was achieved. It did not happen and we all know the consequences. I confess I am unsure now about that action, though Europe and NATO have stayed there, helping to reconstruct the Balkan States rather more successfully than in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Kosovo Liberation Army provoked that war, but the refugee crisis started when we started bombing.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

Afghanistan

The next great world event was the flying of hijacked commercial airliners into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Thousands of civilians were killed and the US began to understand, or some Americans began to understand, the terror and mayhem caused by blanket bombing and modern warfare. To civilians, many of them women and children, it does not matter whether suicide bombers or high level state-sponsored bombers carry out the destruction of their lives – the effect is the same.

Tragically for the world, George Bush and his masters were in charge of the White House and 9/11 gave them just what they wanted – an opportunity to seek out *Al Qaida* and Osama Bin Laden, Islamic fundamentalists generally, and of course Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Many of us held our heads in horror as George W Bush used the word ‘crusade’.³ It was also a way of securing oil supplies for the consumers in the US.

After a few weeks when one dared hope that the US and its allies might reconsider the best way of dealing with terrorism on such a scale, the bombing of Afghanistan commenced ‘targeting’, we were told, the caves and hideouts of *Al Qaida*; a resolution was passed at the UN for action. I got into trouble with my party over this, and also received daily ridicule from Labour and Tory MPs in the House of Commons. I argued that if the US wanted to find a needle in a haystack, it would not bomb the haystack. I also argued that Afghanistan was a failed state, oppressed by the Taliban who had given shelter to Bin Laden when he was expelled from Sudan, a failed state whose people were starving, desperate and would be subject to the cruelty of warlords if the Taliban were to release its grip.

Some of you may remember that I suggested whimsically that we ‘...should bomb Afghanistan with food and aid, and deal with the suffering of the people whilst our intelligence forces sought out Bin Laden’. Sadly, some limited action was taken by the US to bomb with food – in similar packaging to explosive mines.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

Afghanistan, despite international conferences and pledges of aid, has now reverted to near anarchy outside Kabul. The pledges have not been delivered, and President Karzai is struggling to keep even Kabul peaceful. There has been minimal progress for women and more opium poppies are being grown than ever before, despite efforts by the Department for International Development and others to discourage this. As we all know, opium provides money for warlords, who buy arms from illegal arms dealers – another nearly failed policy from the Blair government. Do you remember the Export Control Bill? I do, I was on the committee.

And after all this Bin Laden is still with us. *Al Qaida* grows like a multi-headed hydra. Their ‘successes’, if we can so call the terror and mayhem caused by suicide bombers, are increasingly seen by the Arab and Muslim world as, like Robin Hood and his merry men, fighting for justice for the poor.

Iraq

Let us briefly remind ourselves how Tony Blair and George Bush tried to persuade us, the ‘coalition of the willing’, why we should go to war with Iraq.

- Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.
- Saddam Hussein defied existing UN resolutions.
- Saddam Hussein abused the human rights of his people.
- Saddam Hussein has links with terrorism and *Al Qaida*.

I do not have time to rehearse the arguments – we have all done so. I would only point out that other countries, Israel in particular, do all of those things, with the exception of links with terrorism and *Al Qaida*, which we all know was simply wrong. Iraq has connections now; the terrorists have filled the vacuum and the war continues.

Many European countries, especially France and to his credit, President Chirac, Russia, the Liberal Democrats, and many Labour MPs opposed the action. It fractured our relationship with the European Union; it nearly destroyed the UN.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

‘What must the king do now? must he submit?’⁴ In this case it is the UN. What must happen? Should the UN submit? Must it be disposed of? Must it lose – let go?

The United Nations

The world is under huge threat; the UN itself, as well as international organisations, have been attacked by terrorists. The UN must convince world leaders that we cannot fight a ‘war’ against terrorism; the action against Afghanistan alone showed us this. It must use many more subtle methods, but also address the root causes of terrorism, which have been staring us in the face so long. We must not, above all, allow our free society to be destroyed by the terrorists – that will be their victory indeed.

The UN must encourage information sharing and increase international surveillance and the UN must be involved in these operations. We must address the problem of failed states and poverty, often interchangeable in today’s world. To the old maxim, poverty causes war causes poverty causes war; can be added ‘and leads to terrorism and the support of terrorist causes’. The example nearest to my heart is of course Palestine, where an occupying force has so reduced the people to poverty and despair that terrorism has increased.

But there are other examples all over Africa and Asia. The UN must enforce its millennium development goals and insist that rich governments pay up. The UK has recently found £3.8 billion for the Iraq war. That amount would have doubled our aid budget and allowed us to reach the UN target for the percentage of Gross National Product to be spent on aid.

The UN must also, with the World Trade Organisation, ensure that the rules of fair trade enable poor countries to make progress, a more important factor than aid. The UN must move to stop the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; for this, India, Pakistan and Israel, as well as Iran and Syria, must come into line. The UN must act to stop the spread of the greatest weapon of mass destruction of all – the HIV/AIDS

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

pandemic.

It is not good enough for the US to contribute USD15 billion to the fight against AIDS on its own conditions, excluding UN programmes of prevention on religious grounds. The US contribution is becoming a straight donation to the US pharmaceutical industry. The UN must make the nations of the developed world understand that development and relief of poverty, in this world of globalisation and wide communications, is essential if we are to prevent support for terrorism.

Peace-keeping and post-conflict reconstruction is essential if we are to prevent recurring wars and terrorism, and the rich world must be prepared to contribute to this. In this the UK is paramount; perhaps because of our Northern Ireland experience our soldiers are good at this. Wherever I go in the world I hear about their good works, which makes Iraq all the more distressing.

Adherence to international laws and treaties is vital, but in recent years the US have adopted a policy of 'everyone but us' whether in agreements on trade, the Kyoto agreement on greenhouse gas emissions, the International Criminal Court, landmines, nuclear proliferation - the list is endless. The US sticks two fingers up to the rest of the world. No wonder they are hated, and we, the UK, are now included in that hatred. We should be ashamed. Before leaving my list of what needs to be done I must add 'progress on the Middle East Process'. The Road Map is discredited, Israel once again has been allowed to act unilaterally, and the suffering of the Palestinians continues. I repeat that this problem lies at the very root of the world's problems today. Whatever the history for the rights and wrongs of each side, the road to world peace lies through Jerusalem.

The Way Ahead

But how do we achieve any of this? It is all very well saying that the 'UN must', but the UN is sick and has been sorely wounded by the US and the UK. Kofi Annan has already set up a panel to come up with proposals for reform. The Security Council lies at the centre of the UN and was set up with its present constitution almost sixty years ago. It is ridiculous that this

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

should stay unchanged. Permanent members should include Germany and Japan, and more members from Latin America, Africa and Asia should be added. All members of the Security Council should have a clean bill of health and have complied with UN resolutions. I would like to add that UN funding must be increased and no one should sit on the SC unless they are fully paid up members, and have signed up to major international treaties: is this too much to ask?

In the field of peacekeeping and conflict prevention, the UN member groups should set up regional outposts for these activities based approximately on South American, North American, European, African and Asean blocks. This is already happening, in East Timor and Kosovo, for example. Perhaps we should be encouraging a more formal middle world management in the UN. In addition, these regional outposts should have Human Rights monitors within their reach.

Human Rights abuse is a serious problem for us all. When do we intervene, if ever, when countries' rulers are committing the sorts of human rights abuses perpetrated by Saddam Hussein, the Burmese junta, the Sudanese government in Dafur, and Israel in the occupation of Palestinian territories? The Prime Minister himself said that: 'The most pressing problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get involved in other people's countries'.⁵

Indeed it is. There must be a clear framework for intervention that must be upheld by the UN. We cannot go on ignoring humanitarian crises or acting unilaterally using abuse of human rights as our reason, but really only when it suits our commercial interests. This scenario has been played out by the US and the UK for decades in Iraq.

There is much to do. It has to be done. I will not return to Lord Hannay's reference to Milton in *Paradise Regained*, but quote instead from *Paradise Lost*, a few lines found for me years ago by a brilliant young researcher called Greg Simpson.

As one who in his journey, bates at noon,
Though bent on speed, so here the Archangel paused
Betwixt the world destroyed and world restored.⁶

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

The archangel is waiting, waiting for us to restore International Law and our beloved United Nations Organisation.

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