

## **THE UN AT FIFTY: THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS**

Speech by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to launch the United Nations Fiftieth Anniversary Celebrations, Telopea Park School, Canberra, 21 October 1994.

---

Today marks the beginning of a year of celebrations for the fiftieth birthday of the founding of the United Nations. That event, the entry into force of the UN Charter on 24 October 1945, was a momentous one for the world. It brought with it the promise of a new way of managing relations between governments, and of a new international order in the place of the failures and broken dreams of the 1920s and 1930s which had produced war and destruction on a catastrophic scale. To people everywhere, emerging from the cynicism and despair of a shattered world, the newly established United Nations gave cause for new hope for a better future.

I believe strongly that the fiftieth anniversary must be more than a simple birthday celebration, important though that is. The UN must absorb the energy generated by this moment to start on a process of much needed reform. We believe it can do so - that it can meet the new challenges to its authority and its effectiveness which have emerged since the end of the Cold War.

We have a vision for the United Nations over the next fifty years. We want it to be an active and effective agent for the peaceful settlement of disputes, one which strengthens international law, controls and reverses arms races and promotes confidence and dialogue. We want it to be a more effective agent for promoting equitable and sustainable development and for responding to humanitarian crises. And we want it to be an even stronger promoter and defender of universal standards of human rights. We want it, in short, to fulfil the bright promise with which it started out in those thrilling days of fifty years ago.

The important thing to recognise about the UN is that it's not all about high level diplomacy, and conflicts and crisis, and heads of state and foreign

ministers rushing around looking important. It is more than anything else about people - meeting people's needs for security, their needs for economic well-being, and their needs for personal dignity and liberty.

The UN Charter has three clearly stated objectives - built around security, economic development and human rights respectively - which go to the heart of each of those needs. But what happened over the Cold War years was that the UN's security role, its economic role and its human rights role ran off in three different, highly compartmentalised directions. Quite a lot happened on the economic development front, but not much at all on human rights - which became a victim of both East-West and North-South suspicions and rivalry. And on security issues, the UN - as a result of a veto power being so regularly exercised by one or other of the Cold War powers - became almost totally impotent.

With the end of the Cold War five years ago, we've had the opportunity to see a new UN evolve - one which can turn once again, in a systematic, integrated way to address people's needs.

It is a UN that can and should accept the responsibility for tackling major security problems wherever they arise - not just in conflict between countries, but in conflicts and crisis within them of the kind we have seen erupting in such a horrifying way in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda.

And it is a UN that can and should accept the responsibility to protect and advance human rights whenever and wherever they are at risk - both economic, cultural and social rights, and civil and political rights.

The UN has not been able in the last five years to meet the many new expectations that people have had of it. But this is not the time to lose faith in what it is capable of delivering. It is time to renew that faith, to stimulate a new generation of people around the world to share it, and to get on with the task of making the UN able to do all these tasks that are beyond the capacity of any other country or organisation in the world to achieve.

So the important thing, in planning the 50th Anniversary, is to concentrate not just on the fireworks, but on helping people, particularly the next generation,

understand why we need the UN - and why, if it didn't exist, we'd have to invent it.

Australia is playing a prominent role in developing this approach at UN Headquarters in New York, where the Preparatory Committee is in fact chaired by our own Permanent Representative Richard Butler. But much of the anniversary activity is to be conducted at the national level: at last count, 83 member states have already established, or are in the process of establishing, National Committees to encourage and co-sponsor commemorative activities.

Australia's National Committee, established last December, has brought together a diverse group of people representing young Australians, the business community, academia, unions, NGOs, members of parliament, the media, and senior public servants with direct experience of the UN. We have decided to base our activities over the next 12 months around two basic themes:

- The UN : responding to the challenges of the 21st Century, and
- How does the UN affect Australia and Australians?

The first issue addresses the need for the UN to adapt to a new international environment, in order to maximise its effectiveness and relevance for the next fifty years. The world of the 21st Century will be a very different one from the one we know today, and the UN and its specialised agencies must be able to anticipate and respond to the inevitability of such change. The second issue will highlight some specific themes - especially the practical and beneficial effect on our daily lives of the rules and standards that we member states of the UN set, and the way in which the UN meets our own concerns and hopes.

In tackling its agenda, the Committee has adopted an ambitious program of events. The list is far too long for me to cover in full, but some of the key activities in our national program do deserve to be mentioned:

- the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr Boutros Boutros Ghali, and the Director-General of UNESCO, Dr

Federico Mayor, will be visiting Australia in April, to attend a major international conference on global cultural diversity, to be held in Sydney;

- conferences on the United Nations and other international relations themes are being organised by a range of Universities and local UN associations. These will include two major youth conferences - a national Youth Convention in Canberra and a Model UN General Assembly in Sydney;

- a number of media-related activities are under preparation, including a film produced by Film Australia on Dr Evatt and his role in the creation of the UN;

- a curriculum package is being prepared for schools on the role of the United Nations, and an essay and poster competition will be run for children throughout Australia;

- Australian children will also be able to contribute to a book entitled "50 Wishes for a Better World", being produced with the contributions of children's writings and illustrations;

- state symphony orchestra concerts will commemorate the anniversary;

- an exhibition of artwork by George Gittoes on UN peace keeping will be seen throughout Australia in a tour organised by the Army; and

- a commemorative stamp and coin will be issued by Australia Post and the Mint.

As well as looking forward to what we would like the UN to become in the next fifty years, the anniversary is an occasion to reflect on the UN's last fifty years. Partly because "those who forget the mistakes of the past are condemned to repeat them". But also because Australia has a distinguished history of involvement.

Australia recognised the significance of the United Nations from the very earliest times, and participated actively in bringing it into being as one of its core founder members.

An extraordinary contribution was made, in particular, by Dr H V Evatt, Australia's Foreign Minister at the time: whose voice was raised so effectively and fearlessly as a champion of the rights of smaller member countries against the attempts by the major allied powers to dominate the new body. Evatt spared nobody's feelings in asserting his vision of a more egalitarian structure and it was a fight he did not entirely win: in particular, the full veto power of the five Permanent Members of the Security Council was retained against his strong opposition. But his principled stand earned him, and Australia, the widest respect among his fellow statesmen at the San Francisco Conference.

It was Evatt, too, who argued with great effect that the political activity of the United Nations would not be enough by itself to prevent future conflicts, and that the more fundamental causes of the world's problems would have to be tackled if international peace and stability were to be guaranteed. The modern UN's massive involvement in economic, social and humanitarian issues can be traced back to the influence of Dr Evatt and his Australian colleagues of fifty years ago.

Doc Evatt was not the only outstanding Australian to participate in the establishment of the UN. One of the people we are going to honour in the next 12 months is Jessie Street, the only female member of Australia's delegation to the 1945 San Francisco conference for the founding of the UN. Together with the other four women delegates at that Conference, she succeeded in having women specifically mentioned in the preamble of the UN Charter and establishing the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, thus making a lasting contribution to the advancement of women.

There are many others whose role deserves to be remembered over the next 12 months. It is not as widely remembered as it should be in this country that an Australian, Norman Makin, was the first President of the Security Council, in 1946, Or that Dr Evatt himself was the second President of the General Assembly in 1948 and presided over the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Or that Australia provided the first ever United Nations

peace keeping forces, in Indonesia in 1947.

Australian diplomats were prominent in the early work of UN Security Council commissions and committees in the Balkans, Indonesia, Korea and Palestine. And we have retained that strong commitment over the succeeding five decades, frequently serving on the Security Council and other major UN bodies, including by making regular contributions to UN peace keeping efforts.

I believe the anniversary program which has been developed by the National Committee will help us to focus both on what the UN achieved and what it is capable of achieving if we give it the necessary support. I would like to pay tribute to Roger Shipton and the other members of the Committee, and to the contribution of my own Department, for their efforts and commitment in putting the program together. I would also like to note the significant support given to the program by all political streams in Parliament and acknowledge the presence today of Mr Peter Reith, Senator Vicki Bourne and Senator David Brownhill.

Finally, and just as importantly, I would like to congratulate the staff and students of the Telopea Park School - the only bilingual school in the ACT - for all the enthusiasm and creativity you have put into arranging this event to launch the celebrations so well. I want to thank you most sincerely for your efforts. The future does belong to you, and if we are to have a better and safer world, and a better UN to help achieve it, then it's going to be up to your generation to make it happen.

\*\*\*\*