

SPRING CONFERENCE: The UN, NGOs and DEVELOPMENT



John Johansen-Berg

John Johansen-Berg, UFP Vice-President, opened his talk to the 2011 Spring Conference by recalling his schooldays, and his introduction to international affairs through the Council for World Citizenship, and later at university the UN Students Association, of which he later became national president. In 1959 he went with Philip Noel-Baker to Geneva for a UN Conference and so entered a lifelong commitment to issues related to peace and justice, and to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today the ancient enemies of the human race, poverty, hunger and disease are being tackled through the Millennium Development Goals, and we should be devoting resources to these not wounding and killing other human beings, to sustaining life, not causing death.

Rev Johansen-Berg then went on to give examples of campaigns, with their successes and limitations. In the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Christian Concern for Southern Africa (CCSA) was an alliance of activists from trade unions, churches and community groups. Discrimination against people simply because of the colour of their skin was gross injustice. Black workers could protest, but they could not alone change the system. The international movement against apartheid took many forms. CCSA specialised in challenging British Companies to change their ways. On one occasion they succeeded in having a resolution put to Shell AGM to disinvest. It received more than 4 million votes, although it was still defeated. However, great publicity was achieved, and this was one strand in a movement that

UFP Annual General Meeting 2011:

The 2011 Annual General Meeting of Uniting for Peace was held at Wesley's Chapel, London on 16 April. Vijay Mehta, UFP Chair, opened the meeting by welcoming those present. He announced that UFP President, Lord Peter Archer, could not be present as he was convalescing after an operation. Also he announced the sad news that Professor Theodore Macdonald, human rights activist and writer, who had been scheduled to be the keynote speaker for the afternoon Spring Conference, had died suddenly. A minute's silence was observed in respect.

The officers presented their reports on the first year of the new organisation, which had been very active. The Chair reported that a substantial legacy had been received from the Charlotte Sonnenberg Trust and would enable even more to be done in future. Discussion emphasised the need for careful ethical investment.

Brian Cooper presented a document 'From 2010 to 2011' summarising the decisions and actions taken during the year in relation to the merger: setting up a UFP bank account, two Executive Committees forming a single EC, and preparing a permanent Constitution. The EC recommended this Constitution to the AGM, and it was endorsed after some discussion.

Officers elected included: President, Hon Lord Archer of Sandwell QC; Chair, Vijay Mehta; Vice-Chairs, Rosemary Addington & Prue Wendt; Treasurer, Abdul Muhib; Co-ordinator, Brian Cooper; Publicity Officer, Gill Morris.

Following the business session there was a discussion on Libya, Ivory Coast and the role of the UN.

The Spring Conference in the afternoon comprised presentations by John Johansen-Berg on The UN, NGOs and Development; Vijay Mehta on Reforming the UN for the 21st Century; and Brian Cooper on The UN and Inter-Faith Harmony.

To round off the day, Vijay Mehta introduced the 4Ds campaign: Disarmament, Demilitarisation, Development and Democracy, which is to be the main thrust of UFP activities in 2011-2012.

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eventually brought about fundamental change and a multiracial society. Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa in 1994 and set a gold standard for peaceful change in the liberation of a nation.

The Jubilee Campaign, calling for the cancellation of the debts of the poorest nations, achieved great success in a short time. Its weakness is in the danger that the process begins again; new loans can be made with rising interest rates. The flow of wealth from poorer to richer countries has a nasty habit of reappearing. The variety of words, resolutions and action in these examples show the importance of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), especially in the area of development.

Fundamental change is needed in the system. There has to be reform of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. It needs an international alliance and level of commitment akin to that which liberated the black population of South Africa. Years, perhaps decades of combined efforts are needed but the prize is worth the effort.

This is where NGOs come in. They can be a vital part of the needed pressure for change. There are 3051 NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN. There are some 40,000 international NGOs, while India alone has an estimated 3.3 million NGOs. Globalisation during the 20th century gave rise to the importance of NGOs. The WTO, IMF and World Bank were designed to help the nations recover from the effects of World War 2. But there are mixed opinions about their results. Bangladesh has suffered from one visit and is reluctant to receive such loans again. India is an example of loans made with strings attached. They demanded that farmers changed from self-sustaining agriculture to the production of cash crops. Companies in richer countries benefited while small farmers ended in debt. There can be immense differences within countries. India has many wealthy individuals in the urban centres, while land-owners can be very wealthy too. But small farmers have to work very hard to make a living and are vulnerable in times of drought or flood. The loans undermined self-sufficiency which was built on local production, producing food for the family, the extended family and a small amount for sale to the local community. IMF loans went to the large landowner and were unsuitable for the small farmer who was obliged to buy expensive fertilizer and to grow crops for export. The system led to growing debts and feelings of shame, resulting in suicides on a vast scale. The system of loans is too weighted towards the providers of capital so that the poor end up making the wealthy richer. The emphasis should be on grants rather than loans.

There is an opportunity for NGOs to support and speak out for the poor. Uniting for Peace, bringing together the emphasis of the former World Disarmament Campaign and Action for UN Renewal, has a great opportunity for a creative role in pressing for the reform of international economic agencies and encouraging initiatives in development in areas of great poverty. We can press for a reformed and renewed UNO which will help to alleviate poverty through reformed and renewed economic agencies. This is the hope for the future and we can play our part in fulfilling that hope.

FRANK JACKSON