

UN Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor

Speech to UNA-UK Annual Conference

'The Future of the UN'

Durham Cathedral

22 April 2006

Thank you Lord Hannay, for that kind introduction.

I have had the pleasure of knowing Lord Hannay for many years and of watching him in action as one of the most formidable and effective Ambassadors ever to serve in the Security Council. Kind words from him are especially valued.

I am most grateful.

And thank you to the UNA-UK for providing me with this opportunity to address all of you in this magnificent setting. Your Association, under the able leadership, as Executive Director, of my good friend and former colleague Sam Daws, has been an invaluable partner of the United Nations, since its inception. To see so many of you here is especially gratifying. I know that most of you have been busy at your annual conference, and I am conscious of how much UNA-UK members have done to keep alive the spirit of the UN in the UK.

Britain inevitably has a special place in the heart of any UN official. Your country played a pivotal role in the drafting of the UN Charter, our Magna Carta, and London hosted the very first meetings of both the General Assembly and the Security Council just over 60 years ago. No country, surely, can be a better fount of the spirit of law, justice, fraternity and fair play than the land that invented cricket – and no city more appropriate to speak about the rebirth of an institution than Durham, once a Minor County, recently the holder of many a wooden spoon, which has demonstrated this week how well it can perform in the First Division of the County Championship.

I know that Sam Daws, who combines intellectual depth and organizational skills in equal measure, is doing a great deal to transform and lead the UNA-UK into the First Division of international professional associations. And their efforts have not gone unnoticed across the Pond. When he was here in January, Secretary-General Kofi Annan said publicly that Lord

Hannay and Sam Daws make a “dream team.” I envy Lord Hannay this remark, because once upon a time that used to be said about Sam and myself.

But that was in the past; and we are here to talk about the future. More precisely, the future of the United Nations. No easy task, since we all know that the future is never quite what it used to be.

But I am convinced that the future of the United Nations is indeed a worthy subject for serious thought and passionate discussion in this most worthwhile company, and I will promise you, in this majestic Cathedral, to resist the temptation to offer you a sermon.

Let us instead start with irreverence. Perhaps the first question that I should address is: does the UN have a future? Last year, we celebrated the UN’s 60th birthday. At the UN, 60 is the age at which we, the staff, are supposed to contemplate retirement. Should the UN too, be pensioned off?

My firm view is, of course, that it should not – far from it. Our search must be for a renewed, not a retired, UN.

In 1945, the UN’s far-sighted founders, determined to make the second half of the twentieth century different from the much-troubled first, drew up rules to govern international behaviour, and founded institutions in which different nations could cooperate for the common good.

Their idea – now called “global governance” – was to create an international architecture that could foster international cooperation, elaborate consensual global norms and establish predictable, universally applicable rules, to the benefit of all – as an alternative to the military alliances and balance of power politics that wreaked such havoc in the preceding five decades.

The keystone of the arch, so to speak, was the United Nations itself. The UN was seen by those world leaders as the only possible answer to the disastrous experiences of the first half of the century – 50 years in which the world had suffered two world wars, countless civil wars, brutal dictatorships, mass expulsions of populations, and the horrors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima.

The new United Nations would stand for a world in which people of different nations and cultures would look on each other, not as subjects of fear and suspicion, but as potential partners, able to exchange goods and ideas to their mutual benefit.

And it would provide a means to address what we sometimes like to call 'problems without passports' – problems that cross all frontiers uninvited (climate change, drug trafficking, terrorism, epidemics, refugee movements and so on) – and whose solutions also have no passports because no one country or group of countries, however powerful, can tackle them alone.

It is the resolution of these problems that remains at the very core of the UN's activities.

Indeed, today I think it is fair to say that even those countries that once felt insulated from external dangers – by wealth or strength or distance – now realize that the safety of people everywhere depends not only on local security forces, but also on guarding against terrorism; warding off the global spread of pollution, of diseases, of illegal drugs and of weapons of mass destruction; and on promoting human rights, democracy and development.

Today, whether you live in Durham or Delhi – whether you are English or Eritrean – it is simply not realistic to think only in terms of your own country. Global forces press in from every conceivable direction. People, goods and ideas cross borders and cover vast distances with ever greater frequency, speed and ease. We are increasingly connected through travel, trade, the Internet; what we watch, what we eat and even the games we play. As someone once said about water pollution, we all live downstream.

In such a world, issues that once seemed very far away are very much in our backyards. Jobs anywhere depend not only on local firms and factories, but on faraway markets for the goods they buy and produce, on licenses and access from foreign governments, on international financial trade rules that ensure the free movement of goods and persons, and on international financial institutions that ensure stability – in short, on the international system constructed in 1945.

And so, in 2006, I would argue that the need for a universal means for global governance, a mechanism for international cooperation – indeed, let us call it by its name, for a United Nations – is stronger than ever.

Which leads me to the next question. What kind of United Nations should we build for the future? Part of the answer to that question must lie in the past.

And in this holy place I must not avoid the confessional. The UN has never been, and will never be, a perfect body. It has acted unwisely at times, and failed to act at others: one need only think of the “safe areas” in Bosnia and the genocide in Rwanda for instances of each. It has sometimes been too divided to succeed, as was the case in Iraq. And all too often, Member States have passed resolutions they themselves had no intention of implementing.

But the United Nations, at its best and its worst, is a mirror of the world: it reflects not just our divisions and disagreements but also our hopes and convictions. As our great second Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, put it, the United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell.

And that it has. Imperfect though it certainly is, we must not forget that the UN has achieved an enormous amount in its 60 years. Most important of all, it prevented the Cold War from turning hot – first, by providing a roof under which the two superpower adversaries could meet and engage, and second, by mounting peacekeeping operations that ensured that local and regional conflicts were contained and did not ignite a superpower clash that could have sparked off a global conflagration.

Over the years, more than 170 UN-assisted peace settlements have ended regional conflicts. And in the past 15 years, more civil wars have ended through mediation than in the previous two centuries combined, in large part because the UN provided leadership, opportunities for negotiation, strategic coordination and the resources to implement peace agreements. The UN’s 18 peacekeeping operations around the globe continue to do a brave job of dousing the flames of war.

Over 300 international treaties have been negotiated at the UN, setting an international framework that reduces the prospect for conflict among sovereign States. The UN has built global norms that are universally accepted in areas as diverse as decolonization and disarmament, development and democratization. The UN has provided humanitarian relief to millions around the world, most recently after the South Asian earthquake.

The UN remains second to none in its unquestioned experience, leadership and authority in co-ordinating humanitarian action, from tsunamis to human waves of refugees. When the blue flag flies over a disaster zone, all know that humanity is taking responsibility -- not any one Government -- and that when the UN succeeds, the whole world wins. Our newly-established revolving fund for emergency response to humanitarian disasters reflects and strengthens our ability to make a difference. And these are achievements we can build on.

But since the best crystal ball is often the rear view mirror, I hope you will allow me a personal look into the past as well. For the UN has not just changed enormously in those first 60 years; it has been transformed in the career span of the one UN official standing before you. If I had even suggested to my seniors when I joined the Organization 28 years ago that the UN would one day observe and even run elections in sovereign states, conduct intrusive inspections for weapons of mass destruction, impose comprehensive sanctions on the entire import-export trade of a Member State, create a counter-terrorism committee to monitor national actions against terrorists, or set up international criminal tribunals and coerce governments into handing over their citizens to be tried by foreigners under international law, I am sure they would have told me that I simply did not understand what the United Nations was all about. (And indeed, since that was in the late 1970s, they might well have asked me, "Young man, what have you been smoking?")

And yet the UN has done every one of those things during the last two decades, and more: it has administered territory, conducted huge multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations, set environmental standards and deployed human rights monitors to report on the behaviour of sovereign governments -- none of which the founders could have envisaged. The United Nations, in short, has been a highly adaptable institution that has evolved in response to changing times.

Since it has worked in practice, my UN of the future must be firmly anchored in its own experience, even as it sails onward. Our walls are lined with Nobel prizes, but we are not resting on our laurels. This is a fascinating time at the UN, because major changes are afoot. As Mahatma Gandhi put it, "You must *be* the change you wish to see in the world." The UN is no exception. To change the world, we must change too.

We must embrace reform not because we believe the UN has failed, but because we believe it has succeeded enough to be worth investing in, so that we can find better ways to do even more to fulfil the Organization's purposes.

Indeed, it was at the height of the highly public debates about the Iraq intervention, when scrutiny of the UN was at its peak and its potential and its deficiencies had never been more in the public eye, that the need for change became graphically clear.

The reform imperatives can be traced back to the divisions over the Iraq war. In the summer of 2003, a poll conducted by the Pew Organization in 20 countries around the world revealed that the UN's standing had gone down in all 20. It had gone down in the United States because the UN did not agree to support the US Administration on the war, but it had also gone down in the 19 other countries, because the UN was unable to prevent that same war. So we got hit from both sides of the debate.

We disappointed both sets of expectations, and some famous and rather powerful voices began to speak of the UN's irrelevance.

Add to this, the inquiry into allegations of corruption in the Oil-for-Food programme – although it found very little corruption amongst UN personnel it did bring into harsh relief some serious deficiencies in our management practices.

And the result was a crisis of confidence. But we speak a lot of languages at the UN – indeed, I am the UN's Co-ordinator for Multilingualism. And my Chinese friends tell me that in their language, the Chinese character for "crisis" is made up of two other characters – the character for "danger" and the character for "opportunity". In 2003, the United Nations saw the danger and seized the opportunity.

A series of far reaching proposals were made by the Secretary-General – on the backs of the work of two eminent panels of experts – one that looked at security issues, on which Lord Hannay served, while the other, composed of economists and experts led by Columbia University's Professor Jeffrey Sachs, focused on how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

And in September of last year, some 170 world leaders – the largest ever gathering of heads of State and government in human history – met at the United Nations to discuss those proposals and to agree on a plan to reshape the international architecture for the twenty-first century.

And that they did. It is true that there are several serious and important lacunae in the document the world leaders produced – most notably its failure to redress the international community's stalemate on disarmament and proliferation issues.

But the stage had been set for much-needed change, predicated on what we have learned from our efforts to address global problems, and the changes that the world has undergone.

Let me give you just a few of the headlines, from, and since, the Summit that point the way to the UN's future.

First and foremost, the UN would not be itself if it did not seek to serve the mass of suffering humanity – to wipe the tear from the eye of the hungriest little girl in the poorest country. Despite many late night, last-minute fears that they might not agree, the leaders at the Summit reinforced the commitment by both rich and developing States to work together to promote development.

Those from donor and developing nations alike made a strong and unambiguous commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, and donors repeated their Gleneagles promise of an additional 29 billion pounds a year by 2010 to fight poverty. Will all that money come? Will all of it be put to best use? We live in an imperfect world, and despite some strong efforts by the British government to set the ball rolling, experience teaches us that the answer to both those questions could well be "no". But have no doubt that, if the world's governments even come close to meeting this commitment, the money *will* help to make the world a fairer and a safer place.

There was also agreement, by both the richest and the poorest countries, on mechanisms that should make successful and sustainable development more likely – agreement that developing countries will create "management" plans to enable them to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by the end of this year, 2006, and that international trade will be liberalized – thereby reducing the barriers and inequities that prevent poorer states from selling their goods and services in the markets of the North.

Much was made in some circles of the failure of the document to deliver a formal legal definition of terrorism that is acceptable to all. But what few seem to have noticed is that – for the first time ever – we have a clear and unqualified condemnation – by all governments – of terrorism “in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes.” We now have moral clarity, and legal clarity should follow, if the new-found impetus towards a comprehensive convention against terrorism can be sustained.

Another vitally important development is the acceptance, for the first time, of a collective international responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. As with the development promises, and as we know from the headlines on Darfur, countries still need to put their money where their mouths are – or more accurately, their political will where their political rhetoric has been. But this will, I hope, make it much more difficult for States to hide behind the protective shield of absolute sovereignty while people are slaughtered *en masse*.

A detailed blueprint for a new Peacebuilding Commission was also created. Too often, in the past, countries have slipped back into conflict once the world’s attention has moved on and UN peacekeepers are withdrawn. This body will seek to ensure that there is no glaring gap in international support once the work of peacekeepers is finished, and that there is a continuum, from conflict, through peacekeeping, to development and to democratic institution-building. The Commission is yet to meet, but it is now a reality. Over the next year or two we should have a sense of how well it will function.

Support for democracy is the natural corollary of our support for development. Man cannot live on bread alone – but why live, if it is only to eat more bread? Human beings need to have the right to take control of their own political destinies. Just as the UN fought for decolonization in the past, we must fight for democracy in the future. And the good news here is that the Summit created a fund to support democratization, to which some 23 million pounds has already been pledged by 17 countries – not just from the West: India is a leading donor.

Democracy and development are intertwined, and the twine that binds them is human rights. At the Summit, the world leaders set the timer for the creation of much stronger UN machinery to identify human rights violations and gain international agreement to address them. This, in

turn, led – on 15 March – to the creation of a smaller and more focused Human Rights Council to replace the over politicized Commission of Human Rights.

To be elected to that Council, states will need to garner the support of 96 of their fellows, compared to the 28 votes – and sometimes none at all – needed for election to the old Commission. And all 50 of the States that have, thus far, expressed their intention to stand must also agree to subject their own records to public scrutiny as a condition of membership. Where sometimes in the past States sought election to the Commission to resist examination of their human rights practices, the Human Rights Council of the future will be one whose every member's human rights record will be subject to review.

Equally important, the doubling of the budget of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – will permit us to make a difference in operational terms where it counts – in the field, not just in the conference room in Geneva.

It is too early to say how effective these changes will be – the proof of the pudding is, as every Briton knows, in the eating. But we now have a recipe that should work.

Since the Summit, the Secretary-General has made additional proposals about how the UN should be administered. I know that you would not be here if you were not interested in the United Nations, but I suspect that even the most committed multilateralist among you would be taxed by a detailed account of the changes the Secretary-General has proposed to the UN's budgeting processes.

So I will spare you the minutiae of this new round of proposals, although, of course, I would be happy to respond to your questions on any of these. But it may be enough to say that the report attempts to limit the micromanagement that has rendered UN management often difficult and torpid, and free the next Secretary-General to take decisions about how best to use people and funds to fulfil the Organization's mandates, while, at the same time, proposing new measures that will help States hold us accountable for those decisions. A review of the more than thousand legislative mandates given to the Organization has begun, with a view to identifying possible areas of waste or duplication.

And one final, but very interesting, initiative that has just commenced, with the active involvement of your Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, is an attempt to improve the

coherence of the UN system of organizations in tackling development, humanitarian and environmental challenges, seeking to eliminate areas of confusion and overlap and to promote synergies amongst the different UN agencies.

These changes are profound, and if they can be properly brought to fruition, they will go a long way to setting in place a structure that will allow us to move into the future with renewed confidence. So our next Secretary-General should have, at his or her disposal, a framework that will allow her (or him) to concentrate on implementation.

I have, I hope, painted a picture of the UN of the future as firmly anchored in its achievements, but eagerly engaged in transforming itself in the light of changing circumstances. A refurbished UN, built on the strong foundations laid out in 1945, buttressed by the innovations and achievements of the last 60 years, and renovated to take account of the problems that we have uncovered in the course of dealing with the real challenges of the changing world outside.

Realistically, it will probably be a UN that is more sharply focused on areas where it has a proven and undoubted capacity to make a difference. It will, for example, continue to be the first port of call to coordinate the world's response when major humanitarian disasters strike. It is currently the most successful practitioner, and will likely remain the means of choice, to monitor peace treaties. And when territories must be administered while political solutions evolve and the modus operandi for lasting peace are established, the world will continue to turn to the UN since it transcends any one Government's interests but acts in the name of all.

It will not, I imagine, lead military interventions – peacekeeping excepted – although its legislative bodies will undoubtedly remain the primary source of legitimacy for any such interventions. And it will not hunt down terrorists, and others who commit crimes against humanity, although it will sometimes be charged, particularly where national jurisdictions are weak or unclear, with trying them.

And I can see no other entity that could, with the same efficiency and objectivity, provide the means to address the gaps and the cracks in the façade of state sovereignty, through which many of the twenty-first century's problems – from environmental degradation to global epidemics to human rights abuses to international terrorism – would otherwise prosper.

The UN is, and must continue to be, a forum where the rich and powerful can commit their strength and their wealth to the cause of a better world. And it must continue to provide the stage where great and proud nations, big and small, rich and poor, can meet as equals to iron out their differences and find common cause in their shared humanity.

So much for the architecture. But, as the old saying goes, a house is not a home. Something more – something extremely important, although not quite so tangible -- is needed before we can be happy that our Organization is all it can be in the twenty-first century.

The new UN must encapsulate the twenty-first century's equivalent of the spirit that informed its founding.

It must amplify the voices of those who would otherwise not be heard, and serve as a canopy beneath which all can feel secure.

And my UN – *our* UN – of the future must never lose sight of the problems facing the vast majority of humanity. It must remain true to the “we, the peoples,” in whose name the UN Charter was signed.

The UN of the future must never forget that it is both a child and a source of hopes for a better world – hopes that all human being share.

To achieve this, those of us who work for the new UN must know when to shout, when to speak ... and when to listen.

And that, I think, is an appropriate note on which to turn the floor over to you.

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