

The second John and Elnora Ferguson Memorial Lecture was held on the 5th June 2013 at the University of Birmingham in association with the United Nations Association of the UK. The Lecture was delivered by Sir John Holmes; Sir John held the position of Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator prior to its current office holder, Baroness Amos. The Memorial Lecture was established in order to pay tribute to the longstanding contribution made by the Ferguson couple to the University of Birmingham and UNA-UK both in their lifetime and the generosity of the Trust they established which continues to contribute generously. The title of the lecture was 'Can the UN ever really be neutral?'

Sir John was an excellent choice of speaker, having had a wealth of diplomatic experience over the last thirty years through his involvement with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He worked for in a range of diplomatic and advisory roles both in the UK in the FCO and in Downing Street as well as taking up posts all over the world in places such as Moscow and New Delhi as well as New York. He was also knighted for his involvement with the Northern Ireland Peace Process and Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Sir John's speech focused on the extent to which the UN's involvement in conflicts around the world could be neutral. His consideration of the issue highlighted the extent to which the UN is reliant on the work and co-operation of its members states without which the UN as an organisation becomes ineffective. Sir John defended the record of the UN from its critics arguing that the UN was reliant on member states yet the UN Secretariat were often given the blame for failure to resolve an issue. Moreover, he identified the Security Council and the regular disagreements between the main powers on how to take action or in which manner it should be taken as an illustration of how the eventual decisions of the UN are not necessarily impartial.

Furthermore, peace keeping or humanitarian efforts pursued by the UN are not able to be entirely neutral especially if the mandate of their involvement decided by the Security Council dictates that they should assist one side in a conflict over another. Also, UN peacekeepers or humanitarian workers who work in co-operation with NATO forces become identified as instruments of the west rather than as neutral actors through association. Sir John also made the point that the UN peacekeeping troops etc can't be neutral in instances where there are abuses of the United Nations charter and governing documents.

One question from the audience asked if it would be more effective for the humanitarian aspect of the United Nations to become an autonomous independent body separate from the United Nations. Sir John answered that it would not be effective, pointing out the comparative advantage held by UN humanitarian efforts through the advantageous access for lobbying governments internally within the UN framework for resources or funding for aid efforts which NGOs do not enjoy.

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