

# UNA 1982–2004: some thoughts and activities

by Malcolm Harper, Director of UNA-UK from 1 January 1982 to 17 September 2004

## *UN/UNA anniversaries*

In 1985-86 and in 1995-96 we celebrated (I use the word advisedly) the 40th and 50th anniversaries of both UNA (which was created in June 1945) and of the United Nations.

In 1985, *The Times* published a sponsored (we had to fundraise for it!) report, on the UN on day one and on UNA on day two. Members gave us £10 donations to get their name included in a full-page advertisement in *The Guardian* on 24 October which celebrated the UN and invited membership of UNA. The result was modestly encouraging. On 26 June 1985 we held an interfaith event in Westminster Abbey, with Prime Minister Thatcher reading an extract from the Christian Bible and leading members of other faiths from their sacred writings. On UN Day, Geoffrey Howe, who was Foreign Secretary, planted a special tree in Whitehall Court, as did David Ennals, who was Chair of UNA at the time.

On 10 and 11 January 1986 we held a two-day national schools' Model UN General Assembly at Central Hall Westminster (on the anniversary date of the first plenary session of the UN General Assembly in 1946). We insisted that South Africa should be included and built a debate and resolution on *apartheid* into the agenda. One school, representing Poland, asked – right at the start of the Assembly – why South Africa's credentials had been accepted. The President agreed to debate the issue during the afternoon of the second day. When the question was put at that point in time, the South Africans marched out of the chamber.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali sent a special message to UNA which we were able to use in a variety of ways.

At the regional and branch levels, a wide range of activities were organised. A key feature of UNA has always been membership involvement in policy-making. This is done throughout the year, but especially at annual meetings, at which branch and regional representatives debate their foreign policy resolutions with the policy ideas coming from the executive and the specialist committees. UNA has always prided itself on this grassroots approach to policy formation and in the way this fosters a lively concern with international affairs at all levels of the membership.

In 1995, we set up a national committee which Lord Geoffrey Howe chaired. We held a special ceremony in Westminster Hall where the Queen awarded medals to

a number of British peacekeepers and UN civil servants. Former UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar represented the UN Secretary-General. Prime Minister John Major spoke and leading politicians, diplomats and others were present. It was followed by a reception at Buckingham Palace and a special concert, which the Queen attended, at an open-air venue in north London. On UN Day, there was a special commemoration in St Paul's Cathedral and in January 1996 there was a concert of music and readings in Central Hall Westminster which was attended by Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali who had earlier planted a commemorative tree outside the Hall. The next morning, 10 January, another two-day schools' Model UN General Assembly opened.

In April 1995, the well-known actress Prunella Scales came for half a day to be photographed with as many UNA branch secretaries as could get to London so that they could use the pictures for local publicity in their media. The previous year, UNA member David Clarke and I had walked 1,000 miles from John o'Groats to Land's End in order to publicise the forthcoming anniversaries whilst raising funds.

## *Arms control and disarmament*

Throughout the period, arms control and disarmament remained key issues for UNA. In April 1982 we organised a lobby of Parliament in the build-up to the UN General Assembly's Second Special Session on Disarmament, held in New York in June. A staff member, Bridget Fitzgerald, was at the Special Session and fed back daily reports by telex which UNA sent to a network of activists who took up key issues with their MPs and others.

The following months saw the UNA-led 'Let's Freeze this Winter' campaign which lobbied hard against the deployment of Pershing and Cruise missiles by NATO and SS20 missiles by the USSR on the grounds that they would create a four-minute delivery period and would thus be totally inimical to all that the UN was trying to do to de-escalate the arms race. We set up and ran for some years the Disarmament and Development Network which promoted understanding of the links between massive levels of military and much smaller levels of development expenditure.

During the 1980s we maintained a vigorous approach to UN-centred initiatives, participating in the lobbying at the Third UN Special Session on Disarmament in

1998 and networking with a wide range of other NGOs in this field. When the Cold War ended and many people appeared to believe that disarmament had been achieved, UNA maintained its work (although it was much less popular than it had been) and, in 2000, held its own 'People's Special Session on Disarmament' in Birmingham, at which a draft agenda for a Fourth UN Special Session was drafted, discussed and agreed. This was sent to the UK government, to the UN and to all UNAs via WFUNA. It also led to a grant of £120,000 over three years being allocated to UNA so that this work could be continued. Work on small arms and light weapons became much more of a leading issue and UNA played a creative role in pursuing controls on them. We also strove to promote the widening of the UN arms register and to argue that it should be a mandatory requirement on all UN member states to submit reports to the UN disarmament secretariat.

We played an active role with 'Landmine Action' and others in lobbying for the adoption of the Ottawa Convention outlawing anti-personnel landmines. More recently, at the invitation of UNA-USA, we became the UK partner for the very imaginative Adopt-A-Minefield campaign which they had established. A number of our branches – Stockport and West Oxfordshire among them – held major appeals in support of programmes in Cambodia and Moçambique respectively – and found many valuable spin-offs for their ongoing branch activities.

### **UNESCO**

When, in 1985, the UK followed the United States and withdrew from UNESCO, UNA, which had campaigned vigorously against such a withdrawal, immediately set up an informal all-party working group in the House of Commons which brought together MPs, peers and specialists from all of UNESCO's major areas of activity. It was superbly run on voluntary terms by a UNA activist, Rashid Kareh, and continued to work for British re-entry until this was achieved in 1997, eleven and a half years after the group had been formed! Since the UK's return, UNA has played a valuable role in support of the UK National Commission for UNESCO and currently houses its small temporary secretariat.

### ***Environment and development***

Throughout the period, UNA was deeply involved with promoting awareness of and support for the UN's work for sustainable development and environmental protection. This work really took off in a major way after the Brundtland Commission's report, 'Our Common

Future', was published in 1987. In the build-up to the UN 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and in the follow-up to it, UNA played a major role and finally created a programme, 'UNED-UK' – this became the major British inter-NGO support group for all this side of the UN's work and had a special emphasis on Agenda 21 (which had been adopted at the summit) and the work of the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (which had been created to get agreement on the implementation of Agenda 21). UNED-UK developed into the Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future, which came to assume an ever-greater international focus and, finally, with the agreement of both parties, became independent of UNA.

### ***The UN and conflict issues***

Another central aspect of UNA's programme concerned the work of the UN, both during and after the Cold War, in the realm of conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding, and – more recently – in conflict avoidance. In 1989, Nicholas Gillett, an active UNA member and a descendant of John Bright MP, who had staunchly advocated the resolution of conflicts by arbitration rather than war, launched an appeal on the centenary of John Bright's death. A fund was established to enable UNA to employ a staff member to research aspects of this wide range of issues and to give UNA information and expertise for its educational and lobbying work.

UNA spent much time looking into specific conflicts – either threatened or actual – and making proposals to the UK government (not least in its capacity of permanent membership of the UN Security Council), to the UN Secretary-General, to other governments, to WFUNA, to other UNAs and the like on possible models for making progress towards a just and lasting peace.

The John Bright Programme staff and I, occasionally accompanied by others, made a number of visits to trouble spots in order to gather information and to speak with UN and other personnel on the ground. Such visits included Afghanistan, Cambodia, the Middle East, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, northern Uganda and Yugoslavia. Other countries in crisis were included in UNA's brief, such as Burma, East Timor and Kashmir.

Our biggest disagreement with the UK government was over Iraq and the invasion of 2003 which we held to be illegal. We were able to maintain a dialogue with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the UK Mission to the UN in New York, putting up a range of proposals for consideration at different points in the saga. We had not been so far apart from government policy since the Falklands/Malvinas crisis of 1982.

### *Human Rights*

We maintained a continuing programme in the human rights sector, looking especially at the role the UN was playing in such ongoing issues as *apartheid*, the rights of women, children and minorities (including ‘forgotten’ people like the Twa in central Africa and the Romany community). We had people at the annual meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights, attended Foreign Office briefings, lobbied the government and produced briefings on key issues. We lobbied hard for the adoption of UN human rights conventions and the International Criminal Court.

### *Africa*

With the UN stressing the urgent needs of Africa and the fact that Africa was the poorest region of the world and was making less progress in the struggle against endemic poverty than anywhere else, UNA became increasingly involved in the broad campaign for African development. The struggle against *apartheid* fully engaged us; but a tragic list of countries were embroiled in internal conflicts – Angola, Burundi, Congo Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Moçambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe. We tried to develop links with national UNAs where they existed in order to give them what support we could and played a very active role in securing full refugee status in the United Kingdom for the Secretary-General of the UNA of Zaire, Cissa wa Numbe Gaston, and his family when they were forced to flee as a result of their human rights work in the east of the country.

We carried on a dialogue over many years with the relevant government departments, with key UN personnel and agencies, with academics, other NGOs and the media in an effort to promote awareness and understanding of the UN’s role in Africa.

### *Education*

We played a major role in the development and widening the number of schools and universities participating in model UN exercises. We lobbied hard, with the Council for Education in World Citizenship and others, for the inclusion of the UN and citizenship in the national curriculum, an issue in which Twickenham UNA had initially played a key role. We continued to produce materials for schools and saw our links with primary schools start to develop. One of the most imaginative ways was the running of model General Assemblies, known as MUNGAs, and model Security Councils, up and down the country in universities, colleges and schools, even at primary level. Disarmament and the arms trade, as well as world poverty, were frequently the key issues chosen by the young participants.

For the UN’s 50th anniversary we negotiated with the UN50 Secretariat in New York an international structure for teaching materials about the UN right across the curriculum, in which David Barrs, who chaired our Education Committee for some years, played the key role.

We always saw such education – and more informal adult education initiatives – as an important part of our work. To that end we developed a very positive working relationship with the National Union of Teachers.

### *The World Federation of United Nations Associations*

Throughout the period we were active in the work and programmes of the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), which faced a variety of often demanding challenges over the years. I served on the Executive Committee throughout my term in office as UNA-UK’s Director and chaired the WFUNA Executive Committee from 1995 to 2000. John Ennals had played an enormous role in the creation of WFUNA in 1946 and, until his death in 1988, played a very creative supportive role both to me and to the Federation.