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BRITAIN AT THE UNITED NATIONS: A VALEDICTORY DESPATCH
SUMMARY

Some reflections on Britain's influence and standing in the bizarre world of the United Nations (paragraph 1).

2. The United Nations is primarily a diplomatic arena for the Third World and is obsessed with the problems arising from decolonisation in Africa and Asia. This gives Britain (and France) a special position. On the one hand we are blamed for such disasters as Palestine and Cyprus; on the other our colonial past has created an intimacy and freedom of communication with many Third World countries, which is a priceless asset at the United Nations (paragraphs 2 - 6).

3. As a result, our influence is greater than that of either the Russians, whose pretensions are increasingly seen through by Third World nations in New York, and the Americans, whose diplomatic incompetence, subservience to Israel, obsession with the Cold War and lack of sympathy for Third World aspirations have alienated the Third World in New York. Because of our perceived influence with the United States, more is expected of us than of the French. Britain is thus not isolated and on the defensive at the UN, though we have Achilles heels in our closeness to South Africa and the decline in our voluntary contributions to UN agencies (paragraphs 7 - 10).

4. Although the UN has lost much of its effectiveness, its private diplomacy, its peacekeeping and its aid programmes are valuable. But its principal importance is that it is a universal centre for public diplomacy. Our performance here is important for our relations with our partners and allies and above all with Third World countries. The arts of diplomacy have to be deployed to the full. British interests at the UN are in reasonably good shape. Recent successes include Zimbabwe's independence and SCR 502 on the Falklands (paragraphs 11 - 15).

5. A tribute to the staff of UKMIS and their wives (paragraph 16).

CONFIDENTIAL

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UNITED KINGDOM MISSION
TO THE UNITED NATIONS
845 THIRD AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10022

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The Rt Hon Francis Pym MC MP
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs
London SW1

Sir

On leaving New York, and the Diplomatic Service, I have the honour to set down some reflexions on the influence and standing of Britain in the bizarre world of the United Nations.

2. The paradox of the United Nations is that, although it was established primarily in order to prevent the outbreak of a Third World War, it has never, except through the medium of its ponderous and unproductive disarmament debates, been engaged with the main East/West confrontation in Central Europe. Instead, as none of its founding fathers could have anticipated, it has become a diplomatic arena for an entity which did not exist in 1945, the so-called Third World, the product of the decolonisation of the European empires over the past thirty years. While NATO and the Warsaw Pact have maintained an uneasy balance in Europe, with the two super-powers managing or mismanaging the fate of the nuclear world of today, the United Nations has become obsessed with the problems arising out of de-colonisation and the withdrawal of European spheres of influence in Africa and Asia:- with the crises of the Middle East, of Southern and Central Africa, of Cyprus, of South East Asia, or the economic disparity between the rich North and the poor South and so on.

/3.

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

3. Britain has of course played a major part in this evolution. Between forty and fifty member states (nearly 30% of the total) are former British dependent territories while many more, including over half the Arab states were, in one way or another, under British tutelage until comparatively recently. Some of the knottiest problems which have confronted the United Nations over the years have been the products of our relatively few unsuccessful exercises in decolonisation - Palestine, Rhodesia (until 1980) and Cyprus spring to mind.

4. France is the only other European state in a comparable position. Between the two of us we share both the prominence of permanent membership of the Security Council, based on past not present economic and military power, and a unique intimacy of relationship, for better and for worse, with half the membership of the United Nations, based on long imperial connexions. No other states in the Western or Eastern camp are in a comparable position; not the Germans or Japanese for all their economic strength, nor the Nordics for all their currying of favour with the Third World and their high moral posturing, nor the Italians nor the smaller members of the Ten, nor even the Americans and the Russians for all their super-power status.

/5.

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

5. 'History is servitude, history is freedom', said TS Eliot. In the UN our 'servitude' is that we are still held responsible, at least in part, for many of the intractable and bloody crises which permeate the Organisation - for the catastrophe of the British Mandate over Palestine, its ignominious conclusion and terrible aftermath of recurrent wars, tension and crises; for the strength of the South African regime; for the bitter divisions of Cyprus; until latterly for the continuance of a white minority regime in Rhodesia; for our failure to develop self-sustaining economies in many of our dependent territories prior to independence. The French carry a similar but smaller burden, for the shambles in Indo-China, for the weakness and instability of certain former French African territories, for the war in Algeria and so on.

6. But our 'freedom' is a compensating asset. It derives from the respect and affection we acquired as an imperial power, even where we were unsuccessful, and from our general readiness to move with the tide of de-colonisation as it swelled into the post-war decades. It translates into an intimacy, a freedom of communication and a sense of deep mutual understanding between us and the many Third World countries which have known us so well, albeit in an unequal relationship, over the past century or so. The same is true of France. There is no doubt that our ability to negotiate and discuss with absolute frankness and openness, far beyond the confines of normal diplomatic intercourse, the most difficult matters with our former pupils is the envy of those delegations, from both East and West, who have to pick their way more carefully through the minefields of national and personal sensitivities. In a forum where the majority of the Third World delegations are

/only

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

only in the most tenuous contact with their governments, and where the individual personalities of delegates count for so much, this is a priceless advantage when it comes for example to telling home truths to the Africans about Namibia, to the Arabs when they are set on a collision course with the West in the Security Council over Palestine, to Asians over Afghanistan, to the non-Aligned group over the Falkland Islands, to the Committee of 24 over difficult problems relating to the handful of remaining dependent territories; in brief across the whole range of problems with which we are involved.

7. It is fair at this point to ask the question, what about the Americans and the Russians? Does not their power and influence in the United Nations dwarf that of the medium sized powers such as Britain, whatever our historical past may be? The answer, in United Nations terms, is no. The Russians have cleverly capitalised on support for de-colonisation and national liberation movements, and have tried hard to present themselves as the natural allies of the emergent Third World. But these pretensions are beginning to ring hollow. Where they have tried to take over part of the mantle of departed colonial powers they have been uncomfortable and unsuccessful as witness their experience in Egypt and in Somalia and their uneasy relationship with Mozambique and Angola. In terms of the North/South economic relationship, the Soviet Union is regarded as irrelevant. Their foray into Afghanistan and their support for Vietnamese aggression in Cambodia have further diminished their reputation, and exposed the hypocrisy of their claims to be the champions of the Third World against 'Western imperialism'. All Third World countries, moreover, realise that, although the Soviet Union can supply armaments and provide rhetorical and voting support in the UN for their causes, it is incapable of contributing towards peaceful solutions of the main United

/Nations

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

Nations problems - Arab/Israel; Namibia, apartheid and so forth.

8. The United States is regarded, particularly under the present Administration, with a mixture of exasperation, frustration and contempt. The Arabs and Africans for example believe that the Americans have the power to advance solutions to their problems if they only had the will and the diplomatic ability. Over the past 18 months, Third World delegations have become shocked, alarmed and outraged by the incompetence, amateurishness and paralysing lack of co-ordination of the United States Mission, State Department, and White House, by the subservience of a great country such as the United States to the pressures exerted by the Government of Israel, by the apparent determination of the Administration to inject the Cold War into all agenda items, by their lack of sympathy with Third World aspirations when they do not coincide exactly with American desiderata. Moderate Third World delegations do of course recognise the great power of the United States and there is obviously much in American values and achievements which they both admire and respect. It is essentially the failure of the United States to deliver the goods over regional problems which lies behind their low standing in the United Nations. One success - perhaps over Namibia, the only area so far where this Administration has displayed any diplomatic finesse - could produce a radical change for the better, particularly if it was accompanied by an improvement in the abysmal performance of the American representatives in New York.

/9.

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 6 -

9. Meanwhile, moderate Third World countries tend to look to us, the British, to help to deliver them from their evils. They have a perhaps exaggerated regard for our diplomatic skill and political wisdom and especially for our influence over United States policy, also for the part we have played in building up the European Community as (until the advent of Greece) the most coherent and well co-ordinated geographical sub-group within the UN system. In many of these senses, we excite higher expectations than do the French, particularly in regard to bringing influence to bear on the United States.

10. I would not wish to overstate our influence in the UN, but I think it is necessary to offer a corrective to the notion which is prevalent in many quarters that we are isolated and permanently on the defensive. We are not. Our success in delivering an independent Zimbabwe did a great deal to lay the ghost of Britain as an 'imperialist' country. Bringing Belize to independence and UN membership further enhanced our status. Our diplomatic exertions over the Falklands crisis prove that we can still mobilise non-aligned support (more readily than that of some of our friends and partners) in the Security Council. Thus in general I believe that Britain is well respected in the UN and that we are listened to as proponents of common-sense and of practical solutions to problems, a welcome relief from the moralising and rhetorical posturings of many European delegations. It is held to our credit, certainly

/not

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 7 -

not to our detriment, that in our down-to-earth way, we look askance on the one hand at the wordy, impractical and unnecessary 'initiatives' so beloved by Eastern Europeans and others, such as a 'World Treaty on the non-use of Force, a convention on the 'Strengthening of International Peace and Security' etc; and on the other that we vigorously pursue policies either to promote our national interest or within the general framework of European Political Co-operation, as opposed to acting as a chorus to the United States. Our Achilles heels are our closeness to the South African regime - although even this has not inhibited our relationship with African delegations here - and our economic weakness which has led to so sharp a decline in our voluntary contributions to the more effective United Nations donor agencies.

11. Next, it may well be asked - how much does all this matter? The United Nations is too clumsy, prejudiced and disparate an instrument to produce solutions to the many problems which beset the Third World; it is impotent to bring about the implementation even of mandatory resolutions of the Security Council; it can neither prevent wars from breaking out, nor can it stop them once it is too late; its peacekeeping forces

/are

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 8 -

are only too easily swept aside by determined adversaries; its central economic debate - the North/South dialogue - has degenerated into a sea of meaningless words; even its aid-giving agencies are top heavy and slow moving.

12. This indictment, although it contains much truth, is not of course the whole picture. The private diplomacy of the United Nations - the Secretary-General's good offices - can be and has been effective both in solving problems and in alleviating crises. UN peacekeeping has saved many lives and defused many dangerous confrontations. UN aid for all its failures has relieved much suffering, particularly in the care of refugees and other humanitarian areas. The record is not all black.

13. However, whatever the record of the UN may be in the performance of its functions as set out by the Charter, its principal importance, from the point of view of our national interest, is that it is the universal centre for public diplomacy. It might sometimes be more convenient not to have such an organisation in existence and it is not the purpose for which the UN was created. But there it is and that is what it has become. Sooner or later national policies and attitudes have
/to be

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 9 -

to be stated here in public, by means of speeches and votes. This has its impact not only on the degree of international support we can mobilise for our national policies: SGR 502 on the Falklands, for instance, was important not because Argentina would obey it but because it lined up international opinion on our side and give our policy international respectability. There is also an impact on our relations with our partners and allies and, above all, on Third World countries to which we attach importance in all the three continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The hard work is done behind the scenes, the ceaseless lobbying, persuading and playing with words. But eventually it all has to be done in the open, on the record and often before the TV cameras, and that is where we are judged: that is where the degree of support or lack of it for our policies becomes manifest. It is in the build-up to this eventual public exposure that the arts of diplomacy and negotiation have to be deployed to the full and where the intimacy of our relationship with so many other delegations, to which I have referred earlier, plays so important a role.

14. I leave here with the feeling that we are not doing too badly at the 'game' in New York, and that British interests in the public forum of the United Nations are in reasonably good shape. This is not an outburst of personal conceit.

/We

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 10 -

We here are responsible for the conduct, not the making of, our national policies, although we may contribute to some extent to this through our recommendations. With the exception of the reduction in our multilateral aid contributions, for which I regretfully recognise the necessity, I believe that our policies over the past three years in the various fields which are of prime importance to the UN majority have been clear, forthright and responsive to our national interest. I am thinking particularly of the Middle East in all its ramifications, Central and Southern Africa (particularly Rhodesia and Namibia), Afghanistan, South East Asia, the Falklands crisis and even Global Negotiations where I for one am glad that we have not succumbed to the temptation to compromise principle too far in order to please the G77.

15. UN diplomacy demands many things - resistance to stupefying boredom, endurance of endless frustration, meticulous attention to detail, unremitting concentration, the patience of Job, and the capacity to work very long hours punctuated by frenzied outbursts of activity. There are many days over the past three years which I will gladly forget, but there have also been days to remember. I select only two. First, the spontaneous outburst of applause when I took the floor in the General Assembly

/in

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 11 -

in December 1979 to announce the conclusion of the Lancaster House Agreements. Second the moment in the Security Council when, after two whirlwind days, ten hands were raised (including five out of the six Non-Aligned members) with no veto, to adopt SCR 502 following the Argentine invasion of the Falklands.

16. My last words go to my staff, no conventional tribute. It has always been the tradition to post first-class people to UKMIS New York and I have benefited to the full from this. From the outset, my whole team, past and present, have exhibited all the qualities I have mentioned as essential to an effective operation in this extraordinary place. I cannot find words adequate to express my gratitude to them and to the long-suffering wives whose husbands never get back home in time to do anything but sleep, even, in recent months, at weekends. I look forward with unalloyed pleasure to retirement but, of all my many posts, I shall never forget my last few months in New York. I shall always be grateful to you, Sir, and to the Prime Minister for your unfailing understanding and attention to the torrent of telegrams which I have unleashed on you over the unique and, to the United Nations, wholly unexpected and tempestuous crisis following the Argentine invasion of the Falklands.

I have the honour to be

Sir

Your obedient Servant


A D. Parsons

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