

## **UNA -UK Sir Brian Urquhart award to Clare Short October 2022**

I would like to thank UNA -UK for the honour they have done me in awarding to me their Sir Brian Urquhart award for services to the UN. Sir Brian was a great public servant of whom the UK can be very proud. I am also honoured to join the Galaxy of previous recipients of the award.

I am told that the award has been given to me - and I quote 'to mark my decades of work as a politician and activist. For my devotion to ODA and for ensuring it was a priority for the UK government agenda in my role as the first Minister - or Secretary of State - of the Independent Department for International Development; and for my role in energising the Millennium Development Goals.'

I am grateful for all that praise but I would like to underline that no great endeavour is achieved by any one individual alone, and that the effort we made in establishing the Department for International Development and in its subsequent achievements, was a collective

endeavour. I would like to share the award with the exceptionally dedicated and able officials of the Department who worked with me on these noble tasks.

I believe that our country should be proud that we helped to contribute to the building of a sustainable World Order. This work has been interrupted but we must get back to it. This is the most important task for all of us because humanity is now facing an existential challenge - an overused word but in this context appropriate - an existential challenge from the effects of climate change and ecological collapse. People talk of saving the planet but it is not the planet that is in danger. The planet will survive however modified by the effects of human induced climate change. It is homo sapiens itself that may not survive. The process of displacement, fire, flood and spreading hunger, is likely to create great conflict and misery which will affect the whole of humanity and massively reduce our numbers, if not our existence as a species. We are after all only 60 to 100,000 years old. The planet is very much older. It is not inevitable that we will survive.

The case I want to argue today, in the relatively short time that is available, is that the common view that international development is simply charity towards the poor of the world is to misunderstand its significance for all of our futures. I will also look briefly beyond the ending of the war in Ukraine - which must come, no matter how remote it appears at the moment, and conclude by emphasising the utter importance of the United Nations to a future sustainable world order.

People talk of Official Development Assistance or ODA and work on International Development as though it is a charitable endeavour helping to alleviate the suffering of the poor of the world, and see it as an optional extra when the important work of government and Foreign policy has been done. This is a major mistake. It is a tragedy that weakens the effectiveness of the UK in the international system that the Department of International Development has been closed down. The Foreign Office is an important department. Diplomats are needed to represent the UK abroad, to help to promote trade and arms sales and to represent

UK policy in multilateral institutions. But the need for a separate Development department is not just a mechanism to distribute aid effectively. Dfid existed to bring consideration of a sustainable future to all areas of policy - trade, environmental agreements, conflict prevention and conflict resolution, World Bank and IMF policy and so on.

This is underlined by the fact that in my day, the Secretary of State for International Development was the UK Governor of the World Bank, and Dfid and the Treasury ran a joint office in Washington representing our policy inputs to the World Bank and the IMF. I am not aware of existing arrangements but I doubt that development considerations have a similar influence now.

Similarly Dfid provided funding and advice to all the UN agencies and worked with them to improve collaboration and therefore effectiveness across the UN system. Dfid provided funding and advice to the Commonwealth development efforts in an attempt to improve their effectiveness. We helped establish institutional arrangements that improved developing country influence in the

World Trade Organisation. We worked hard to improve the European Union development efforts and over the years they did in my view improve significantly. We brought together the Ministry of Defence, Foreign office and Intelligence agencies to work collaboratively to help end and prevent conflict in Africa. And we were a crucial component of the UN international humanitarian system, which helped to ensure that it was capable of effective intervention wherever crisis arose.

Development considerations are medium to long term when the focus of government tends to be short-term. Sustainable development needs the authority of a separate department, headed by a Cabinet minister to constantly bring these considerations into the centre of government policy making. This is not confined to meetings of the cabinet but also crucial to the cross-departmental policy considerations that take place continually.

We hear much talk these days of " Global Britain " with an embarrassing yearning for past glories. This leads often to an unwillingness to face the reality of the history of empire, and indeed

attempts to close down such considerations. In reality the UK has been focused since the Second World War on the relationship with the US and kidding itself that it is playing Greece to the US Rome! But the one area in which the UK was a leading player in helping to mobilise a joint global effort for sustainable development, has been thrown away. I very much hope it will be reinstated in the future.

We are living through very disappointing and worrying times. Respect for the United Nations and the multilateral system has been undermined and weakened. The achievement of the MDGs in mobilising the whole international system to work together to reduce poverty and ill health and spread access to education, led to major achievements in poverty reduction and sustainable development. We should never forget that the single most effective intervention to promote sustainable development is girls' education. Girls who have been to school marry later, have fewer children who are more likely to survive, increase family income and secure education and health care for their own children. They thus improve the overall prospects of their countries. But despite the important promise of the Sustainable Development Goals, the momentum achieved by

the MDGs has been lost, and poverty with all its destructive consequences is growing again.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is of course creating terrible death and suffering, and economic damage worldwide. This is not the time to discuss whether this war could have been avoided if there had been more caution over the expansion of NATO. And even if that is true nothing excuses the Russian invasion. But it is certain that this terrible war will have to end and diplomats and the UN will have an important role in bringing that about - just as did the UN in brokering the agreement on food and fertiliser exports from Ukraine and Russia which has helped reduce some of the terrible hunger and suffering that is affecting people worldwide.

It is notable that despite the current lack of respect for the UN as an institution, all the NATO members insist that they are supporting Ukraine to uphold a rules-based international order. Those rules of course come from the UN Charter. It would be so much better if these rules were upheld consistently. For example it would mean we could have a two state solution on Palestine/ Israel which would

help to transform the terrible situation in the Middle East. But that is of course another discussion for another day.

My conclusion is simple. The enormous threat humanity faces flows from climate change and ecological collapse. The organisation that has brought the world's best climate scientists together to report authoritatively on this challenge is the UN convened International Panel. The organisation that has in turn convened all the countries in the world in the soon-to-be 27th Conference of the Parties to hammer out international agreement on what is to be done, is the UN. The UN isn't perfect. Like all human institutions it could be more effective and many member states create real obstacles to improved effectiveness. But it is the only UN we have. It is the only institution that can bring the whole world together to focus on poverty and sustainable development, a rules-based order and conflict resolution. It is crucial to humanity's future and I wish to conclude by saluting you at the UNA -UK for keeping this precious flame alive until such time as the UK gets back to honouring and supporting the UN as it did for so many years in the past.