

## **UNA-UK Annual General Meeting – 16 May 2015**

*Speech by Natalie Samarasinghe, Executive Director*

I am delighted to address you this afternoon after our invigorating Policy Conference discussions. It is a real privilege to lead an organisation that has such expertise, experience and enthusiasm within its ranks.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to acknowledge the hard work and support of people in this room. First, our Board of Trustees, chaired magnificently by Sir Jeremy Greenstock; second, our committees – Management & Finance, Audit and Procedure; third, my wonderful team at 3 Whitehall Court; and finally all of you, who contribute so much to UNA-UK at the local, regional and national levels.

This year, perhaps more than at any time since I joined UNA-UK nearly a decade ago, I have felt that we are working collectively to bring the UN to people in this country, through the actions you've taken on human rights, gender equality, international development, climate change, peacekeeping and UN reform – particularly the 1 for 7 Billion campaign, which calls for a fair, open and inclusive process to select the next UN Secretary-General.

Together, these activities have supported our overarching campaign for the year: urging the UK to become a global force for good.

Having launched our “foreign policy manifesto” at our UN Forum event last June, we have used this campaign to engage with a wider range of political parties. Ahead of the election, we attended party conferences, engaged with party leaders and their policy teams, and secured statements on the UN from five parties.

On 8 May, after the results of the General Election had been announced, we published a statement, expressing our commitment to work with all political parties on foreign policy. We reiterated our hope that investing in global solutions will be a priority for the UK, and emphasised the need for the Government to develop a clear strategy for Britain's role in the world and how best to use its privileged position at the UN. We are currently gathering signatures for a foreign policy petition, which I hope you will support.

The next five years may well be defined by “a tale of two unions”: Britain's relationship with the EU, and the future of the United Kingdom. The need for informed debate on the UK's global role has never been more clear or urgent, and we – as the UK's leading, and often only, organisation making the case for the UN – must be at the forefront of this debate.

Our mission has become more important, and we have worked hard to build links across government and Parliament. In those areas where UNA-UK adds real value, we are called on to input into policy planning. We have already seen progress on our manifesto priorities, such as international development and peacekeeping. Our 1 for 7 Billion campaign now has well over 100 NGO supporters and a grassroots base of nearly 45 million worldwide. Our proposals are supported by the majority of member states, including, we are pleased to report, the UK government, which made a positive statement on this topic at the UN last month.

This is an example of UNA-UK at its best – leading a global campaign that we hope will transform how the UN does business. We need to ensure that we operate at this level across the board.

How do we get there? Just as we want an end to business as usual at the UN, we too must change. We must take the opportunity provided by our 2016-18 strategic plan to ensure we are equipped to deliver our vital mission.

I am immensely proud of our history – the role we have played as the voice of “we the peoples” in the UK for the past seven decades. But we continue to face challenges from our history that need to be addressed, even it may feel more comfortable to let the boat drift on without rocking it. We have now reached a point where we must rock the boat, before it capsizes or sinks slowly. And before others rock it for us.

This is what happened a year ago, when we were faced with an extremely challenging situation arising from past decisions relating to our premises. The situation has now been resolved but it took 12 months of hard work and a considerable amount in legal fees to do so. The bulk of the costs fall into the 2014-15 financial year, so will be presented to the AGM in 2016. However, I was keen to raise this issue today, given the seriousness of the situation and the need to put in place processes to ensure that historical issues such as this one do not come back to bite us.

A more longstanding challenge is the ongoing need to find core funding. Our financial situation is another area where we must, and indeed have been, rocking the boat. As we used to be two separate entities – UNA-UK and the UNA Trust – the overall financial health of UNA-UK as a whole has not always been as clearly communicated as it could have been.

I have worked hard with colleagues to ensure that a clear financial picture is presented to the Board and to this AGM, showing the level of drawdown from our reserves. It is essential that we collectively have clarity on our financial situation, so that we all understand the time and effort that needs to be devoted to fundraising. Fundraising is a priority for the Board, and a task to which all staff need to contribute. This will inevitably mean less time is spent on other areas. But it is vital to secure our future as an organisation.

It is equally crucial that we spend sufficient time planning and refining our work to ensure that we are fulfilling our mission in a strategic manner. This are needs, perhaps, the most boat rocking.

As we celebrate our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I have spent a lot of time looking UNA materials from 1945. At that time, our objective was to enshrine the values of the UN Charter in the hearts and minds of people in this country, and to ensure strong UK support for the Organisation.

This remains our mission today. But like many organisations, we have been drifting away from it. For too long, we have not just tried to support the UN, but to *be* the UN. We have spent countless hours, days, weeks and years formulating policies on almost every aspect of the UN's agenda, but too little time on achieving them.

Discussing global issues is important, but it cannot be the endgame. We have a crucial mission and we are not fulfilling it as effectively as we should be. But I know that we can.

When we work on areas where we have real expertise, where we have a unique contribution to make, and where we have a chance of progress – we are successful. Keeping the UN in the curriculum. Changing the UK's position on cluster munitions. Greater UK support for peacekeeping. The 1 for 7 Billion campaign. When we focus on these areas, we achieve progress, we secure support, we raise our profile and we attract funding.

At present, we have more policy priorities than staff. We have policy areas that aren't funded. We must focus our efforts on the bigger picture, as we have done this year, namely making the case for the UN.

We also need to take a long, hard look at the local and national structures that were put in place in 1945, many of which grew out of the League of Nations Union. They have served us well, not least in bringing in the talent and commitment represented in this room. But I think we all know that these structures are not performing optimally.

From our initial peak of membership in the 1940s, we have experienced a severe decline. In the 80s and 90s, in particular, we lost thousands and thousands of members. Today, we have stemmed the rate of decline but it remains a decline nonetheless.

This issue is not unique to UNA-UK. Across the board, political parties, NGOs, trade unions and other organisations have seen their membership decline. People are finding new ways to engage with the issues they care about. Our supporters programme is flourishing. It has swelled to 12,000 in just three years.

I'm worried that our structures have become self-serving, that we seek members for the sake of it, rather than asking ourselves what it is we are trying to achieve: an engaged, supportive UK public that understands the need for the UN.

I will not dwell on this because we have an item on membership later on. But I hope that in our discussion today, and going forward, we will not keep repeating the mantras of bygone eras and not offer the same old solutions as we have done for the past 70 years: how do we achieve success? Membership. How can we become financially sustainable? Membership. How can we raise our profile? Membership. What's the best way to engage young people? Membership.

We have to accept that this is not going to be a solution for us in the short, medium and possibly even long term. We must change if we are to survive.

I hope that our next strategic plan will look at what it means to be a grassroots movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our membership may be smaller, but it is still an important base – a family of UN enthusiasts that give us legitimacy of representation. I would like us to explore how members can provide us with long-term qualitative support. I would like us to look into how local UNAs can reach out to their communities more effectively. And I would like us to develop our supporters programmes into a movement of tens of thousands.

So this is my challenge to everyone in this room. Let's rock the boat together – in fact, let's build a better one, so that we can do justice to our founders and to our mission.

I want to end on a positive – and exciting – note. Our plans to commemorate the UN's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary are now in full swing. We have launched the "It's our UN" engagement initiative. We are working on a special UN70 issue of *New World*, due out next month. We are producing a poster version of the Charter that I hope you will help us get into your communities. We are working with UNA Westminster on their proposal for a physical UN memorial in London, and with the School of Oriental and African Studies on a digital "memorial" featuring sites around the UK with a connection to the UN. And we hope to have confirmation within the next few weeks about a series of major events in October to mark UN70.

This is a year of enormous challenges, challenges that need a strong, credible and effective UN. Together, we can bring this message to policymakers, schools and communities, to NGOs and the wider public, in the UK and beyond.