

THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE FORMATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN 1945

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Abstract

The Labour Party came to power in July 1945. Attlee, the Prime Minister, well-known for his internationalist outlook within the Labour Party in the interwar years, considered that it was timely to make the United Nations more powerful in international politics if peace and security were to be preserved. He was committed to the internationalist view that the presence of world government was necessary in the management of the new international order between states in peacetime. Thus, he had no hesitation in committing Britain to this new direction in its foreign policy. To Attlee, all states, including the world power, were not only base their policy on the United Nations, but also to subordinate themselves to the United Nations as the world's highest authority. Nevertheless, his Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, shared none of these assumptions. He instead, shared the political view that Britain should pursue and uphold its standing as a Great Power. He continued to hold his nationalist and imperialist views in peacetime, even though it was in conflict with the internationalist view of his own Prime Minister.

Introduction

Historically, one of the most significant outcomes of the Yalta Conference in 1945 was the establishment of the World Organisation in order to promote world security and peace. The United Nations Organisation (UN) was established in October 1945 as a successor to the League of Nations. As a successor to the League of Nations, the

United Nations' primary task, in the aftermath of World War II, was to maintain international peace and security in order to prevent a third world war. In addition, the UN task was to promote international economic and social co-operation as well as to respect for human rights for all peoples. Its charter proclaimed equal freedom for all people; it therefore, exercised a particular attraction for newly independent states. Consequently, in October 1945, 51 nations became member of this new international organisation. The discussion in this article is divided into three main parts. The first part will explore the United Nations in 1945. The second part deals with Attlee's and Bevin's thoughts about the United Nations. The final part draws some conclusion.

The United Nations in 1945

As mentioned earlier, in 1945, the world's leaders set up the United Nations (UN) to foster international cooperation between nations and maintain international peace and security. The world powers played a substantial role in forming the United Nations. In fact, the fate and success of the United Nations in the following years was largely based on the goodwill of the world powers. Four points need to be stressed in relation to the formation of the UN.

First, its formation as a new international organisation in the aftermath of the Second World War had its origin in wartime. In August 1941, Great Britain and the United States signed the Atlantic Charter and agreed to establish '*a wider and permanent system of general security*'.¹ Then, in October 1943 during the Moscow Declaration, representatives from the United States, Great Britain, China and the Soviet Union recognised '*the necessity of establishing at the earliest practical date a general international organisation*' for the maintenance of international peace and security.² In June 1945, during the San Francisco Conference, the representatives of fifty countries drew up the United Nations Charter, and there was an agreement that the UN should have as wide a membership as possible. Finally, the Charter was signed on 26 June 1945 by the representatives of fifty countries. The United Nations officially came into existence on 24 October 1945 when the Charter had been ratified by five permanent members of the Security Council and by a majority of other signatories.

The second point is that Britain's role in drafting the Charter of the UN and forming the new international organisation was significant.³ This moderates the impression that the creation of the UN was exclusively and fundamentally the work of a particular world power such as the United States.⁴ In fact, Britain had experience in dealing with international organisations as it was a member of the League of Nations until that organisation was dissolved with the onset of the Second World War. In wartime, Gladwyn Jebb of the Economic and Reconstruction Department of the Foreign Office, and Professor Charles

Webster, an historian, played a significant part in drafting and bringing into existence a new international organisation. Gladwyn Jebb, for instance, in discussing the lack of interest in Britain concerning the formation of the United Nations, highlighted Britain's substantial role as one of the guardians and patrons of the UN in the post-war world. As he emphasised in his minute:

Yet it cannot be denied that, in the production of the great plan now brought to fruition at San Francisco, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom played a very great, perhaps even a preponderating part. The very basis of the scheme, namely continued co-operation between Great Powers, and notably between the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom, had its origin in this country and was imparted by devious means to our great Allies. The Military Staff Committee is a purely British invention, and the Economic and Social Council is modelled on the Bruce Report, which was in accordance with British ideas.⁵

In addition, Webster proudly claimed that the inclusion of the chapters concerning dependent territories was the first comprehensive statement of colonial policy to be included in an international instrument, and was due to Britain's initiative and lead in the drafting of these chapters.⁶ Moreover, the first meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations was held in London, and its temporary headquarters before moving to United States was in London.⁷ Despite Britain's substantial role in drafting and forming the United Nations, Gladwyn Jebb, explicitly recommended in his minute that it was a wise strategy at the time '*not to emphasise our achievements in public, but rather to allow the Americans to claim the principle credit for the production of the Charter as a whole*'.⁸ The motive of doing so, according to Gladwyn Jebb, was to persuade the American people that '*the new organisation is, so to speak, their property, thereby overcoming the forces of isolationism*'.⁹ Meanwhile, in 1945 the Foreign Office wished to make a success of the United Nations in the coming years. Gladwyn Jebb explicitly expressed his personal stand:

In the long run too, the prospects seem to be better, and not worse, than they were in 1919. An organisation has now been created which will include all the existing major Powers. Those Powers which recently bid for domination of the world have been, or shortly will be, smashed to pieces, and are not likely to recover for a very long period. It is essential that the major Powers should continue their co-operation for a long period to come, and it is not unreasonable to hope that they may do so.¹⁰

Moreover, concerning the Charter of the United Nations, the Foreign Office sent a minute suggesting a few points that the Prime Minister might wish to include in his speech in the House of Commons. The points suggested included the democratic manner in which the United Nations Charter was voted; that the world powers were obliged to obey the Charter on matters such as not using force except in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter and to ensure that international disputes should be settled in accordance with justice; and that the organisation was to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinctions of race, sex or religion.¹¹ Despite the fact that the Foreign Office realised the difficulties of forming the United Nations, it wished to help the United Nations become a successful international organisation in the field of international politics in the years to come. As one of the permanent members of the Security Council of the UN, Britain, under Attlee's government, had appointed Sir Alexander Cadogan, former Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, as the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom on the Security Council.¹²

Third, the United States, which was not a member of the LON and had been isolationist in the interwar years, joined the United Nations in 1945 as one of its permanent members. In fact, the United States' Senate was one of the earliest governments to ratify the Charter of the United Nations with 89 votes to 2 on 28th July 1945.¹³ In other words, the United States was one of the patrons and guardians of the United Nations. Gladwyn Jebb, who was a member of the United Kingdom Delegation at San Francisco, had the impression that the United States' representatives at the San Francisco Conference placed great interest in the new world organisation. According to Gladwyn Jebb:

There is no question of the interest which Americans take in the whole affair, and the general impression created is that they are willing and anxious to assume responsibilities and will not fall by the wayside if the United Nations does not work out in quite the way which is now expected.

On another occasion, the British Embassy in Washington reported that in the United States, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, while expressing doubts about the Soviet Union's intentions and motives in the United Nations, felt great enthusiasm for the United Nations' role in international politics in years to come. In fact, Senator Vandenberg wished '*to back it [the United Nations] to the limit*'.¹⁴ Webster, of the Reconstruction Department of the Foreign Office, suggested the reason for the United States' enthusiasm in joining the United Nations:

Inasmuch, moreover, as the name United Nations is universally attributed to President Roosevelt, and the birth of the United Nations Charter took place in San Francisco, Americans as a whole are bound to feel a certain proprietary pride in any United Nations success. This in itself is perhaps the best augury for sustained and effective United States participation in the objective of the World Organisation.¹⁵

In relation to the question of the United States' membership of the United Nations, the report by the Senate Committee shed some light on the United States' stand on the new international organisation. According to the report, the General Assembly of the United Nations would not be a super state.¹⁶ In addition, concerning the interwar practice of the balance of power politics, the report mentioned that the Monroe Doctrine remained completely unimpaired and that the purposes and objectives of the Charter strengthened rather than weakened the doctrine. Moreover, according to the report, the provisions of the Charter did not affect the exclusive power of Congress to declare war.¹⁷ Thus, it was suggested that while accepting the Charter of the United Nations and as one of the permanent members of the United Nations, the United States was sceptical about the implications and requirements that the United States needed to fulfil in the coming years.

Last, but not least, it should be noted that the formation of the UN was not without controversial issues, particularly among the world powers. Professor Webster of the Reconstruction Department of the Foreign Office, who was directly involved in drafting the United Nations Charter, admitted that the formation of the United Nations was not without disagreement, particularly between the world powers:

No doubt imperfections still remain. A few articles are obviously compromises between different points of view. No state represented at the Conference obtained all that it desired. The delegation of the United Kingdom would have changed several of the provisions had it been possible to do so with general agreement. Such compromises are inevitable in the making of a great international instrument like the Charter.¹⁸

One of the most debatable issues between the world powers was the power of veto. During the Yalta Conference of February 1945, the Soviet Union was unhappy with any restrictions at all on the use of veto. Then the United States introduced the idea of a veto vote. Nevertheless, the issue of veto was controversial from the earliest days of the formation of the UN¹⁹ in the sense that the world powers were divided over whether, as permanent members of the

Security Council, when party to a dispute they should use the power to veto or not. The United States and United Kingdom agreed that the world powers should not vote. The Soviet Union, however, disagreed. Furthermore, the veto was a controversial issue as it reflected inequality in formulating and making UN decisions. The grounds were that small states that were members of the UN but not permanent members of the Security Council did not have the power of veto. The significance of these facts is that only if the world powers were willing to compromise for the sake of peace and security would the UN be able to fulfil its task of maintaining international peace and security. Despite these difficulties, the world powers agreed to form the United Nations for the sake of international peace and security.

Attlee's and Bevin's Perspective on the United Nations in 1945

As Attlee was a keen supporter of the United Nations, and committed to a new foreign policy based on the United Nations' Charter, it is essential to understand how he saw the United Nations. The essence of Attlee's political framework was that the United Nations was the world's highest authority in deterring aggression as well as in running the international political system in peacetime.²⁰ As the United Nations was the hub of world affairs, all states were subordinate to it and their policy had to be fitted to, and parallel with, the Charter of the United Nations. In addition, for Attlee, the Security Council was to provide the method for the settlement of disputes, with multilateralism replacing bilateralism or unilateralism. Thus, one of the remarkable features of Attlee's internationalist attitude was his desire to use negotiation and discussion rather than force to resolve disputes arising between states in peacetime. He believed that the use of negotiation and the possibility of dialogue between states within the United Nations framework were essential to achieving world peace. In August 1945 for instance, he expressed explicitly his expectations of the role and function of the Security Council in international affairs:

We sought, and sought successfully, to make it a place where the policies of the states, and especially the greater states, could be discussed and reconsidered for the time, especially when they showed signs of such divergences as to threaten the harmony of international relations. ... What, I think is required is a continuous discussion of international affairs, not spasmodic action at times of crisis.²¹

Attlee's clarification of the Security Council's role and function in the international arena indicated at least two things. Firstly, he tried to promote the use of dialogue and diplomacy rather than force in ending or avoiding clashes of interest between the world's powers within the United Nations framework. Secondly, he insisted on greater United Nations' involvement in settling international conflicts in years to come for the sake of peace and security. In short, he strongly believed that the United Nations was to play a decisive role in world politics, and that it was capable of handling numerous international disputes in peacetime.

Historically, Attlee's interest in achieving greater United Nations participation in the international arena for the sake of world peace and security grew steadily as the Second World War approached its end in August 1945. An example of his high expectations of United Nations involvement in world politics was evident in his speech to the Labour Party conference in May 1945, two months before the general election took place in Britain. He told delegates that:

We believe and it has always been our policy that the problem of peace can only be solved by building up an international organisation for its maintenance. I have just come back from San Francisco, where the delegates of nearly fifty nations are seeking to get agreement on the Charter of a World Organisation. I hope that, despite all the difficulties, agreement will be reached. I believe that we must get a World Organisation.²²

Attlee added that if the Labour Party were in power after the general election of July 1945, the United Kingdom would put its best effort into ensuring that the United Nations worked smoothly and effectively in world politics. As he clearly expressed:

Let us remember that if we advocate a World Organisation, that if we advocate the rule of law in the world, if we advocate that there should be power to enforce the rule of law in the world, we ourselves must be prepared to make our contribution. This is inescapable.²³

Another indication of Attlee's interest in bringing active United Nations involvement into international politics in peacetime came during his speech to the United Nations Association in October 1945. In his speech, he declared that the United Kingdom would not only base its foreign policy on the Charter of the United Nations as soon as it came into effect; the United Kingdom would also be responsible for taking the lead in ensuring the success of the new international body in years to come. As he passionately declared:

As Prime Minister, I wish to say quite simply that it is the firm intention of His Majesty's Government to make the success of the United Nations the primary object of their foreign policy.²⁴

Later, the General Assembly of the United Nations was scheduled to meet in London for its first meeting in January 1946. In his speech to the opening session on 10 January in London, he forwarded two practical grounds as to why he was so convinced about basing British foreign policy on the Charter of the United Nations. The first was that the Charter of the United Nations dealt not only with governments, states, politics and war, but also with the simple elemental needs of human beings, regardless of race, colour, or creed. The second reason was that he regretted the attitude of states, including that of the United Kingdom in ignoring and limiting the role of the League of Nations in the international arena. In other words, the League of Nations was largely regarded as something outside the ordinary range of foreign policy during the inter-war years. Attlee believed that governments which continued to work along the old lines, pursuing individual aims or following the path of power politics in the aftermath of the Second World War, did not understand that the world had passed into a new epoch.²⁵ All these historical developments were a clear indication of Attlee's desire to promote active United Nations participation in the international arena towards achieving world peace and security.

On the other hand, as an influential and prominent political figure in British politics, the deterioration of Anglo-Soviet relations was very important to Attlee. Accordingly, his overriding concern at the time was to maintain harmony within the Anglo-Soviet relationship. A good relationship between these two countries was essential to ensure that the United Nations worked effectively for the sake of peace and security. Attlee believed that the only way to accelerate the process of cementing the relationship with the Soviet Union in peacetime was through the framework of the United Nations.

The deterioration of the relationship between these two countries was evident from July 1945 to early January 1946. The United Kingdom and the Soviet Union failed to compromise on numerous European issues such as the future administration of Germany, and the recognition of Rumanian and Bulgarian governments during the Potsdam Conference of July and August 1945.²⁶ Furthermore, there was a deadlock between these world powers concerning the disposal of the Italian colonies at the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in September 1945. The Moscow Conference of December 1945 did little to resolve these outstanding European issues. All these instances indicated that there was little progress in resolving the numerous unsettled questions resulting from the war. The continuation of cordial

Anglo-Soviet relations faced difficulties in peacetime as well as preventing future war.

In the meantime, Attlee was able to promote his wish to foster international collaboration, particularly between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union under the aegis of the United Nations on several occasions. In May 1945 for instance, he emphasised that the great powers must cooperate as equal partners and trust each other in the new world organisation. In particular, collaboration between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union was essential to ensure the United Nations success in playing a decisive role in preventing future war. Attlee was very hopeful that the wartime alliance could be preserved even though the war was over. Addressing Labour delegates in May 1945, he said;

I have heard speeches sometimes that suggested that all international problems could be solved if we could only get a few people sitting around the table and discussing them. ... I cannot over-stress the need, the utter vital importance, of these three great nations working together in harmony for the peace of the world. It is a condition precedent to any success.²⁷

As soon as the war was over in August 1945, Attlee in his capacity as British Prime Minister sent a letter to Stalin congratulating him on their mutual victory of the war. He took the opportunity to promote his desire to continue the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union in peacetime. In his letter to Stalin of August 1945, he wrote:

It is, therefore, my earnest hope that the friendship and understanding, which has grown up between the USSR and the United Kingdom during the war, may endure and expand still further in the years of reconstruction and that our Treaty of Alliance may be the basis of close and lasting collaboration between us.²⁸

Another signal of Attlee's desire to continue wartime collaboration with the Soviet Union was that he disagreed with the final report of Berlin Conference, sent to him by Marshall Smuts in August 1945, which portrayed the Soviet Union as a future enemy of the United Kingdom. Instead, Attlee suggested that tension between the Soviet Union and Britain should not be provoked as this would lead to disunity between the great powers, which would jeopardise the success of the United Nations. Attlee argued that:

We must at all costs avoid trying to seek a cure by forming blocs aimed at Russia. ...we believe that the only road to safety lies in the maintenance of trust and understanding between the great

powers, which will give some opportunity for the successful establishment and functioning of the World Organisation on which our hopes for the future are based.²⁹

Meanwhile, Bevin had his own thoughts about the League of Nations in the interwar years. It is argued that Bevin's perception that the League of Nations was only second to the British Empire in the field of international politics continued in the post war world. Nevertheless, as an influential and prominent political figure in British politics, Bevin, as a wise politician and pragmatic realist, gave the impression in public that in his capacity as Foreign Secretary to the Labour Government he intended to work closely and wished to make the United Nations a successful international organisation for maintaining international peace and security. In his letter to Molotov, the Soviet Union Foreign Minister, he insisted that he was hoping that the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom would collaborate in both the political and the economic field in years to come. Bevin emphasised that co-operation between these two countries was vital to ensure the success of the United Nations in the field of international politics.³⁰ In addition, in debating the Charter of the United Nations in the House of Commons, Bevin insisted on his wish to make the Security Council a place for solving international conflicts, and *we for our part, intend to do all we can to make it the very centre of the world's international affairs.*³¹ Bevin concluded his speech by saying that:

We as a Government intend to use this instrument to the full. We do not intend merely to adopt the Charter tonight and then forget it. We intend to proceed to work out our responsibilities and details under it, and to see to it in all our actions we shall square up to our responsibilities, if we enter it.³²

Conclusion

The above account the extent of the differences between Attlee and Bevin as far as the UN was concerned. The former regarded it as the highest international authority for solving disputes, and wished to adopt a multilateral approach to international crises; he also saw it as a forum for continuing the wartime alliance, where the Soviet Union would be a partner rather than a rival. In contrast, Bevin's ultimate aim from the very beginning of his career as Britain's first post war Foreign Secretary was to re-establish Britain's power and prestige in international politics. Bevin had no intention that Britain, as one of the world powers in the post-war world, should subordinate itself, nor surrender its sovereignty to the United Nations. In fact, the fate of the United Nations was in the hands of the United Kingdom, rather than the reverse.

Notes

- ¹ *United Nations Documents*, London and New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1946, p. 10.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ³ Adam Roberts, 'Britain and the Creation of the United Nations' in Wm Roger Louis (ed.), *Still More Adventures With Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain*, London: I. B. Tauris: 2003, p. 237.
- ⁴ See for example Ruth B. Russell, *A History of the United Nations Charter: The Role of the United States 1940-45*, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1958, Introduction, p. 1.
- ⁵ FO 371/50732/U5998/12/70 Foreign Office Minute, 'Reflection on San Francisco', 25 July 1945.
- ⁶ FO 371/50734/U6324/12/70 Foreign Office Minute, 'Commenting on the United Nations Charter by Professor Webster', 8 August 1945.
- ⁷ Adam Roberts, 'Britain and the Creation of the United Nations', p. 236.
- ⁸ FO 371/50732/U5998/12/70, Foreign Office Minute, 'Reflection on San Francisco', 25 July 1945.
- ⁹ FO 371/50732/U5998/12/70, Foreign Office Minute, 'Reflection on San Francisco', 25 July 1945.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*,
- ¹¹ FO 371/50736/U6549/12/70 Foreign Office Minute, 'Points for Prime Minister's speech on the United Nations Charter', 20 August 1945.
- ¹² FO 800/508/UN/46/7 Bevin to Attlee 30 January 1946. Sir Orme Sargent then replaced Alexander Cadogan as the Permanent Under Secretary of State.
- ¹³ FO 371/50732/U5794/12/70, from Washington To Foreign Office, 29 July 1945.
- ¹⁴ FO 371/50734/U6301/12/70, Washington to Foreign Office, 'Senator Vandenberg's off-the-record views on International Organisation', 18 August 1945.
- ¹⁵ FO 371/50736/U6649/12/70, from Washington to Foreign Office, 'Report of the growth of the movement in favour at World Organisation', 21 August 1945.
- ¹⁶ FO 371/50733/U6037/12/70, from Washington to Foreign Office, 'United Nations Charter: Report by the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs', 7 August 1945.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*,
- ¹⁸ FO 371/50734/U6324/12/70, Foreign Office Minute, 'Commentary on the United Nations Charter by Professor Webster', 8 August 1945.
- ¹⁹ See the discussion in Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, Vol. V, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, pp. 137-139.
- ²⁰ Raymond Smith and John Zametica, 'The Cold War Warrior: Clements Attlee Reconsidered 1945-47' *International Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 1985, p. 239.
- ²¹ *Hansard*, Vol. 413, 22 August 1945, col. 665.

- ²² LPACR, 21-25 May 1945, p. 107.
- ²³ LPACR, 21-25 May 1945, p. 107.
- ²⁴ R. Jenkins, (ed.), *Purpose and Policy: Selected Speeches By the Prime Minister The Rt. Hon. C. R. Attlee*, London: Hutchinson, 1946, p. 128
- ²⁵ R. Jenkins, (ed.), *Purpose and Policy*, p. 132.
- ²⁶ Graham Ross, *The Foreign Office and the Kremlin: British Documents on Anglo-Soviet Relations 1941-45*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 62.
- ²⁷ LPACR, 21-25 May 1945, p. 107.
- ²⁸ FO 800/501/SU/45/10 Foreign Office To Moscow, 17 August 1945.
- ²⁹ FO 800/443/COM/45/10 Attlee To Field Marshal Smuts, 31 August 1945.
- ³⁰ FO 800/461/FE/45/28 From Foreign Office to Moscow, 15 August 1945.
- ³¹ *Hansard*, Vol. 413, cols. 942-943, 23 August 1945.
- ³² *Ibid.*, col. 949.