

The Economic Club of New York

---

“What Lies Ahead for the United Nations?”

Frederick H. Boland  
Permanent Representative of  
Ireland to the United Nations

President of the XVth Session  
of the U.N General Assembly

---

November 15, 1960

Hotel Astor  
New York City

Frederick H. Boland

Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations

President of the XVth Session of the U.N General Assembly

Mr. Chairman, I should like, first of all, to thank you and the members of the Economic Club of New York very sincerely for the compliment you do me in having me as your guest at this distinguished gathering this evening. I regard it as an honor and a privilege to be with you and I am very grateful to you for your courtesy in inviting me.

It is frequently said that when an Irishman gets up at the annual St. Patrick's Day banquet to reply to the toast of "The Day We Celebrate", practically everyone in his audience has a pretty good idea beforehand as to what he is going to say—but only the Good Lord know how long it is going to take him to say it! I am in somewhat the same position as the St. Patrick's Day orator in the first respect. It is very hard to talk about the United Nations at any time without indulging in commonplaces and it is particularly difficult for me, at the moment, in the situation in which I am placed. I am afraid, therefore, that you are unlikely to find in what I have to say about the United Nations anything that is either very novel or very profound. But let me relieve you at once of any misgivings you may have about the length of my remarks. I shall keep to my allotted time. And there is every reason why I should. If recent experience hasn't taught me to respect the virtue of brevity in public utterance, nothing ever will!

Gentlemen, we are at the moment just about halfway through what is perhaps the most historic, the most critical session, which the General Assembly of the United Nations has held in the fifteen years of its existence. I do not wish to comment here tonight either on the great issues which the Assembly has been debating or on the manner or the atmosphere in which they have been discussed. Much less do I want to discuss the many anxious and serious problems with which the Assembly has still to deal before it comes to the end of its agenda. I would like, if I may, to take a somewhat broader view and to have a look at the position and prospects of the United Nations itself in the light of the great and mounting tensions and antagonisms and clashes of interest, which the recent proceedings in the Assembly have forced so dramatically on the attention of the world.

Some of you may have followed the recent proceedings of the Assembly on television and no doubt those of you who did will have formed your own conclusions with regard to them. Without wishing to appear to challenge anybody else's interpretation, I should merely like to say this. The Assembly of the United Nations mirrors the world as it is. That is one of its principal functions and, in my view, it is its chief value. It is in the Assembly of the United Nations, more than in any other forum in the world, that the intense political pressures and the great economic and social ferments which are slowly but inexorably molding the future destiny of mankind find their fullest, their clearest and their most authoritative expression. It is true that, at moments of great tension, that expression may become forceful and even vehement. That should not dismay us. It is something which happens in all-deliberative assemblies. It happens even in the oldest and

most traditionally minded national parliaments. I seem to remember one occasion, many years ago now, on which the Mother of Parliaments—the British House of Commons—had to be hastily adjourned to bring to any end a disorderly scene, in the course of which a member of the Opposition threw a book across the Chamber which struck a member of the Government on the head. The member of the Government happened to be the then Mr. Winston Churchill. The debate out of which the disorder arose happened to be about Ireland. The man who threw the book was an Irishman—from the North of Ireland—and the book itself happened to be a copy of the Rules of Procedure of the House of Commons!

By themselves, of course, such parliamentary interludes are of little more than passing importance. What are far more important, far more disturbing, are the sharpness of the antagonisms and the intensity of the conflicts of opinion and policy to which they point and the feelings of anxiety and resentment and anger and even desperation of which they are often the outward expression. It is these, rather than the actual episodes themselves, which should engage our attention and concern, and it is with this idea in mind, in my opinion, that we should view the proceedings of the current session of the United Nations assembly.

It would be difficult, I think, to pick out any previous period in history in which the world situation presented so many dangerous possibilities, so much instability, so many complexities, such a wide variety of problems clamoring so insistently for solution, as it does at the present moment. Many of the major political problems resulting from the last war still remain unresolved

today—fifteen years later. They hang over the world scene like a dark and threatening cloud, constantly exacerbating the relations between East and West, embittering the cold war and enhancing the dangers of the ever sharper and more determined competition in armaments.

Nor, when we turn our gaze from the European scene to the other regions of the earth, do we find more comfort. The Far East, ever inscrutable to Western eyes, is in a state of soothing unrest. The spirit of anti-imperialistic nationalism, having swept through Asia and the Middle East, is now marching through the continent of Africa with an impetus, which threatens to explode into violence wherever it encounters obstacles in its path. Tremendous social and economy discontents are creating an atmosphere throughout Latin America which revolutionary fervor may at any moment set aflame. In the meantime, as population pressures continue to increase, the gap between the standards of living and material wellbeing, in our more developed societies on the one hand and the less developed areas of the world on the other, grow ever wider and wider; and the measures of mutual cooperation necessary to correct it become increasingly difficult to devise and apply according as the antagonisms and resentments dating from subjection and exploitation in the past are constantly revived and sustained by a bitter sense of inequality and under-privilege in the present. And always, in the background, there is the grim prospect of the spread of the cold war into new areas of rivalry and conflict; because the possibility always exists, in this age of rising expectations that men and women in the less developed areas of the world, finding that national living standards for which they had hoped, may lose faith in the freedom they have won and passively surrender their personal liberties in

the belief that, by so doing, they may ensure a better material future for themselves and their children.

It is against this picture of a world in a state of rapid and revolutionary change and of great and growing tensions, that the present position and future prospects of the United Nations must be measured.

And we must begin by facing a basic reality. World society is still a community without a government. The United Nations is in no sense a world government and it was never intended to be. Within our respective national communities, we take the concept of government for granted. Anything else is unthinkable. We believe that the lack of an effective national government would spell chaos and anarchy and we have dramatic proof of the soundness of our belief in the present situation in the Congo. What we all deprecate and deplore in the case of the Congo, however, we all accept complacently in the case of world society. The fact is that the United Nations represents the furthest point to which the world community has so far shown itself prepared to go towards institutionalizing its common interest in the preservation of peace and establishing collective control of its common destiny; and if the United Nations is not a stronger and more effective organization than it is, it is because none of our governments have yet shown any disposition or desire to accept the sacrifices of sovereignty required to establish a really effective world government.

Obligated to take that fact as their starting point, the authors of the Charter had the rather unenviable task of trying to reconcile two somewhat conflicting political realities. One was the fact that all the members of the United Nations wished to retain their full national sovereignty and claimed, on that basis, to be treated on a footing of equality as sovereign states. The other was the fact that, however equal the members of the United Nations might be in theory, they were very unequal in military strength; and that, as a matter of common sense, the preservation of world peace, and the possibility of taking and enforcing effective decisions, was bound to depend in practice on agreement and common action not on the part of the membership of the United Nations as a whole but on the part of the four or five members of the organization possessing the greatest military power.

As you know, the constitutional structure of the United Nations aims at balancing these two realities. The idea of Great Power agreement and leadership is given expression in the eleven-member Security Council which, on matters involving the maintenance of world peace and security, has power to take decisions binding on all members of the United Nations. Such decisions must, however, be agreed to by all the five Great Powers who are permanent members of the Council. On the other hand, the principle of the sovereign equality of all the members of the organization is given expression in the General Assembly, in which all states, great and small, have an equal vote. The decisions of the Assembly are not legally binding on the members of the organization. They have merely the force of recommendations to member governments and then only if they are adopted by a two-thirds vote.

Of course, much has happened in the fifteen years since the Charter was framed. Agreement between the Great Powers have been increasingly difficult to achieve, with the result that, on many of the great and urgent issues which have come before it, the Security Council has been unable to act owing to the exercise of the veto. Mainly in consequence of this, the Assembly passed a resolution in 1950—the so-called “United for Peace” resolution—which enables the Assembly itself to take up urgent issues of peace and security if the Security Council fails to reach a decision in regard to them owing to the use of the veto power. Not everyone accepts the validity of this resolution. The Eastern European countries, in particular, claim that it is contrary to the Charter and therefore unconstitutional. The fact remains, however, that the procedure provided for in the resolution has been followed in a number of concrete cases—on which the cases of Suez and Hungary are conspicuous examples—so that the resolution itself constitutes an important link in a chain of developments which have had the effect, over the years, of gradually shifting the center of gravity of the United Nations from the Security Council, in which the framers of the Charter intended that it should reside, to the General Assembly. The result is that it is before the General Assembly rather than the Security Council that most of the major issues of world politics today are brought to trial.

In the meantime, of course, the General Assembly itself has been changing radically, both in composition and its outlook. For one thing, it is far more representative of the world at large today than it was fifteen years ago. Its membership today is almost twice what it was then. And this

increase in membership has inevitably been accompanied by marked changes in the relative voting strengths of the different geographical areas of the world. Of the original 51 members of the organization, 32—an absolute majority—were countries of Western Europe, North American, or Latin America. Of the present membership of ninety-nine, forty-one are countries of this area, but no less than fifty-four—a much larger proportion of the total—are countries, most neutralist or uncommitted countries, of Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. And an important consequence follows from this. It means that, if the countries of the West have exerted a preponderant influence on the decisions of the Assembly in the past, we must not be surprised if the Assembly speaks more often with an Afro-Asian than with a Western accent in the future.

And the difference is appreciable. People in the West, and especially we Europeans, tend to think of the world situation primarily in terms of the East-West conflict and of problems directly connected with it such as those of Berlin, German-reunification and European security in general. The countries of Asia and Africa, while they have no desire to become too closely involved in these problems, by no means minimize their importance; but they have problems of their own—problems such as those of racial discrimination, economic under-development and the ending of colonialism, for example—which in their eyes are of equal, if not of greater, importance. Developments over the past 15 years have made the General Assembly perhaps the most powerful medium in the world today for concentrating the otherwise scattered forces of public opinion on the great problems of our times and the critical issues of international policies.

It is only natural that the countries of Africa and Asia should seek to use the Assembly to focus world attention primarily on the problems, which are the most immediate concern to them.

The existence within the framework of the United Nations of a great deliberative body such as the General Assembly, in which almost every independent country in the world has a voice, has certain undoubted advantages. Being as it is a great forum of free debate, something quite unique in world diplomacy, the Assembly affords the freely expressed views and policies of others. Moreover, it does tend to exert a moderating influence and to discourage extremism, because delegations trying to capture votes for their proposals invariably find themselves obliged to tone them down in order to secure the support of delegations which are more objectively minded or less emotionally engaged than themselves. The Assembly also provides unrivalled opportunities for meetings and negotiations between leading statesmen in the difference countries as well as for that type of quiet diplomacy which, at more than one Assembly, has enabled the United Nations to work out ad hoc techniques and solutions and, by so doing, to rise to the level of great and dangerous challenges.

But it is important not to harbor illusions or lose sight of realities. Great international problems cannot be resolved simply by voting on them. No Assembly resolution can settle the issues involved in the absence of means of enforcing it. And no enforcement action by the United Nations is practically possible without agreement and cooperation between the major military powers. There is nothing to be gained by trying to ignore this basic reality. The fact that, in the

Assembly every country, great and small, has an equal vote means that there is not necessary correspondence in its decisions between voting strength on the one hand and military power on the other. It is essential for the future of the United Nations that the situation should not be exploited or abused. If it were, the result might well be to put an end to the utility of the United Nations as an instrument for bringing about that measure of agreement and cooperation between the major powers which is and will remain the vital condition of world peace and security.

The United Nations is a living reality; it is also, in a sense, unfinished business. Within the limits assigned to it, it has already managed to achieve much. But it embodies the hopes of men and women everywhere that, in course of time, it will manage to do more, until at long last the fear of war finally ceases to oppress mankind. To achieve that supreme objective, we need not only imagination, faith and dogged determination but wisdom, patience, charity, skill in the handling of men and, above all, common sense. The great French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand, was said to have been animated throughout his life by “the boldness of the dream tempered by the dictates of common sense.” We might do worse than make the same concept the inspiration of our continuing efforts in the United Nations.