

UNESCO:

BRITAIN RETURNS TO THE FOLD

Sagarika Dutt
backgrounds the British
decision to rejoin
UNESCO after an
absence of twelve years.

After twelve long years Britain has rejoined UNESCO. Soon after the British general election in May 1997 the new Labour government of the United Kingdom announced its decision to return to UNESCO on 1 July 1997. At UNESCO's 151st session of the Executive Board in May, Tony Bazeley of the new Department for International Development, made a brief statement on behalf of the British Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, declaring that rejoining the organisation 'underlines our strong commitment to the United Nations' system and to its work in development'. He reminded the delegates that UNESCO had been born in Britain and that a group of countries had met in London in 1945 to set up a 'genuinely international organisation for the promotion of peace through collaboration in education, science and culture'. The draft Constitution was signed by 37 states in London on 16 November 1945 and deposited with the Foreign Office, where it remains to this day. He also pointed out to them that, although Britain has been formally absent from the organisation for many years, 'we have nevertheless continued to take an interest in its activities and have participated in a number of its collaborative ventures and programmes'. However, for Britain, this is a new beginning. The British government looks forward to working closely with the Director-General and 'fellow member states, developed and developing alike' in order to 'maximise UNESCO's effectiveness and impact, particularly in the poorest countries and for the poorest people'.

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Tony Blair

The Director-General of UNESCO, Frederico Mayor, enthusiastically welcomed Britain's decision to rejoin the organisation, and said that 'UNESCO looks forward to the great contribution educators, scientists, intellectuals and artists from the United Kingdom can make in our world-wide partnership to build peace founded upon freedom and justice — through education, science, culture and communication'. He also added that the role of the United Kingdom is particularly important in 'promoting principles of democracy and universal ethical values'.¹

Frederico Mayor



Although the Labour Party had said that it would take the country back to UNESCO if it won the election, the United Nations Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UNA) and the Friends of UNESCO had left nothing to chance. A UNA working committee had been formed to lobby Parliament, and they had worked hard and relentlessly for years. The man to whom most credit is due is a retired civil servant, Rashid Kaleh. The UNA has this to say of him: 'Rashid Kaleh gave his life to the campaign . . . working all hours of the day — and of the night, too, when that was needed — in order to ensure that, especially in Parliament, the issue was never allowed to be swept under the carpet'.² Others who have worked hard to keep the spirit of UNESCO alive in Britain include Malcolm Harper, Maurice Goldsmith, David Wardrop, Dennis Chisman and Margaret Quass, all of the UNA or the Friends of UNESCO.

British objections

Britain left UNESCO in 1985, soon after the withdrawal of the United States from the organisation in protest against its politicisation. On 2 April 1984, the British Minister of Overseas Development, Timothy Raison, had advised the Director-General that, while the United Kingdom remained 'firmly committed to the ideals and

principles which are set forth in the UNESCO Constitution', they believed that a number of tendencies were developing inside the organisation which they did not think were in its longer term interests or compatible with its original spirit. These included the 'political aspects of certain programmes' and the way in which the 'UNESCO fora were being used by some to attack values and ideals set out in the constitution' and also the growing size of the budget. The British government also submitted proposals for reform of the organisation relating to programme issues, UNESCO's governing bodies, budgetary questions, general programme matters, evaluation, management issues and the third medium term plan.³

American and British proposals for reform were discussed at the 119th session of the Executive Board in May 1984. On the initiative of Britain and France, a special thirteen-member temporary committee was set up to examine all proposals and suggestions arising from the debate in the Executive Board. Reform efforts began in earnest at UNESCO. However these did not satisfy the British government and it withdrew from the organisation.

Ideological motivation

Both the British and the American withdrawals were ideologically and politically motivated. Both governments wanted UNESCO's programmes to be brought into line with Western ideological principles and priorities, and with their views regarding UNESCO's constitutional mandate and what was 'good value for money'. It is now an established fact that the British decision to withdraw was strongly influenced by Washington's decision. However, in spite of an active anti-UNESCO lobby in the United Kingdom during 1985, which was supported by the American conservative Heritage Foundation, the British

government's decision was not widely supported within the United Kingdom. The British National Commission voted against withdrawal, and there was also a nearly unanimous debate in the House of Commons in favour of remaining in UNESCO.

In 1985, many influential individuals and organisations in the United Kingdom started a campaign to 'keep the UK in UNESCO'. The same year, some of these organisations, principally the Council for Education in World Citizenship and UNA set up the Friends of UNESCO. The purpose was to maintain links with UNESCO, co-ordinate activities for schools, colleges and voluntary agencies in the United Kingdom, monitor the reform process and co-operate with the UNA in its efforts to persuade the British government to rejoin UNESCO. A UNA working committee was also set up to lobby for the early return of the United Kingdom to UNESCO.⁴

In February 1993, the Friends of UNESCO and UNA organised a symposium on UNESCO. Over 120 eminent members of the British intellectual community in the fields of education, science, culture and communication participated in the debate on the importance and future role of UNESCO for the United Kingdom. It was strongly felt by all participants that it was in the United Kingdom's interest to rejoin UNESCO.

Substantial contribution

However, it is also worth noting that although the United Kingdom had withdrawn from the organisation, it continued to be a member of a number of organisations linked to UNESCO — the International Oceanographic Commission, the Natural Environment Research Council (which supports projects under the Man and the Biosphere and the International Hydrological Programme), the Universal Copyright Convention, the World

Heritage Fund and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). The British government also made a substantial financial contribution to these organisations.

The first task the government has to undertake now is the formation of a new National Commission. On 30 June a meeting was held in the House of Commons at which Viviane Launay, UNESCO's Director of the Division of National Commissions and UNESCO Clubs, Centres and Associations, addressed representatives from various governments departments, agencies, institutions, professional organisations and individuals working for the advancement of education, science, culture and communications. The meeting was organised by the UNA's Working Committee on UNESCO and was chaired by member of Parliament Mike Gapes. Launay pointed out that right from the beginning UNESCO has had an ambitious programme, that is, founding peace upon the 'intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind'. This, she said, was as important but as difficult to achieve as, for example, feeding the world. She is currently advising the government on the structure and functions of the new National Commission which is in the process of being formed.

National commission

UNESCO is the only UN specialised agency which has a National Commission. The reason it was created was to compensate for the limitations of an intergovernmental organisation of which only governments can be members. Article VII of UNESCO's Constitution says that 'Each member State shall make such arrangements as suit its particular conditions for the purpose of associating its principal bodies interested in educational, scientific and cultural matters with the work of the Organisation, preferably by the formation of a National Commission broadly representative of the Government and such bodies'

National Commissions represent civil society and enable professionals like teachers, journalists and scientists to take part in deliberations and decision-making. The Charter for National Commissions for UNESCO, adopted by the General Conference at its 20th session, states that

it is incumbent upon the Director-General of UNESCO to take the measures that he deems most appropriate in order to involve National Commissions in the formulation, implementation and evalu-

After a twelve-year absence, Britain rejoined UNESCO on 1 July 1997. Its withdrawal in 1985 was a response to the perceived politicisation of the organisation, and the failure of attempts to institute reforms. The new British Labour government led by Tony Blair is determined to make a fresh start, not so much to appease non-governmental organisation supporters of UNESCO but because it is a firm supporter of international organisations generally. It is now in the process of appointing a new National Commission, which will represent civil society and enable professionals to take part in deliberations and decision-making.

ation of the Organisation's programme and activities and to ensure that close liaison is established between its various regional services, centres and offices and the National Commission.

Launay describes National Commissions as a conduit for UNESCO. It is necessary to marry national agendas with multilateral agendas and that is what National Commissions do. The Charter states that they are important sources of information for UNESCO on national requirements and priorities in regard to education, science, culture and information, thereby enabling the organisation to take member states' requirements more fully into account when preparing its programmes. They also contribute to the organisation's standard-setting work and to the orientation or execution of its programme by making their views known when surveys or inquiries are carried out and by replying to questionnaires.

Outside body

The executive committee of the Friends of UNESCO met on 1 July to discuss the matter. The committee was informed that the government wanted an outside body to liaise with and everyone agreed that the Friends of UNESCO was well placed to advise the government, among other matters, on the setting up of a new National Commission. Members of the committee felt that broad based consultations were necessary, and Launay said that the National Commission should have an independent secretariat and budget. The Friends of UNESCO has planned activities for 1997-98, which include a seminar on World Heritage, conferences on an independent and pluralistic press, the Convention on Human Rights and the Human Genome, and the Man and the Biosphere. David Wardrop, Vice Chairman of the Friends of UNESCO, emphasises that 'it is the task of the Friends of UNESCO to reawaken the UK community to what UNESCO can offer and to prevent our return to membership merely becoming a bureaucratic exercise'.⁵

As far as United Nations and foreign affairs are concerned, the Labour government's main opposition, offering constructive criticism, is not the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats but the UNA. In an open letter to the Labour government the UNA has said: 'We will be watching you closely, encouraging you to be bold' internationalists, commending what you do right but campaigning to oppose any

shortcomings which may emerge as a result of supposed realpolitik.'

However it would be a mistake to interpret the government's decision to rejoin UNESCO as the government giving in to non-governmental agencies like UNA and professional groups. Political ideologies determine government's policies both at home and abroad and the Labour Party is a stronger supporter of international organisations than are the Conservatives.

Original destruction

It is ironical that when the UN specialised agencies were set up, they were considered to be non-political or apolitical organisations. A distinction was made between functional questions, such as education and health, which were to be dealt with by the specialised agencies, and political questions, which were to be dealt with by the UN General Assembly and Security Council. However, this distinction is very difficult to maintain in an inter-governmental organisation. The overall dominance of government departments and bureaucrats over the determination of a member states' policies towards inter-governmental organisations and the comparatively weaker voice of professional and interest groups are well illustrated by the case of the American and British withdrawals from UNESCO.

This is partly explained by the fact that responsibility for UNESCO in the United Kingdom now lies with a government department which deals with international development rather than education. In the years following with-

drawal, Margaret Quass, of the Friends of UNESCO, pointed out that the funds for rejoining UNESCO should not have to come out of the overseas aid budget operated by the Overseas Development Administration, but that the cost should be shared by the Departments of Education, Science, Environment and National Heritage. However, Western countries believe that international organisations such as UNESCO now mainly benefit developing countries and perceive them to be little more than development agencies. It is difficult to ignore the North-South divide, that is, the vast difference between the developed and the developing world, which not only determines the priorities of these organisations and the nature of their work programmes but also member states' relations with and their policies with regard to these organisations.

NOTES

1. *UNESCOPRESSE*, 14 May 1997, p.1.
2. UNESCO — Back Where We Always Belonged', *New World*, UNA, Jul-Sep 1997, p.7.
3. S. Dutt, *The Politicization of the United Nations Specialized Agencies — A Case Study of UNESCO* (Lewiston and Lampeter, 1995), chapter 7.
4. S. Dutt, 'The UK and UNESCO', *Contemporary Review*, Feb 1995, pp.71-6.
5. David Wardrop, 'Return to UNESCO membership', *Friends of UNESCO Newsletter*, Jun 1997, pp.1-2. 