



United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

**HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
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STATEMENT

BY

MR IAN McCARTNEY MP

MINISTER OF STATE RESPONSIBLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

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(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first congratulate you on your election, Mr Chair. I wish you well as you guide our work in the weeks and months ahead. Few Chairs can have occupied the post at such a historically significant time. You have the UK's full support.

You, and we, are charged with carrying forward a vision first articulated nearly sixty years ago.

In its preamble, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

"THE ADVENT OF A WORLD, IN WHICH HUMAN BEINGS SHALL ENJOY FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND BELIEF, AND FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND WANT, HAS BEEN PROCLAIMED AS THE HIGHEST ASPIRATION OF THE COMMON PEOPLE".

That Declaration was written in the aftermath of a devastating war.

The world had witnessed human suffering on a previously unimagined scale.

Its people hoped that the institutions created from their misery would guard against such events ever occurring again.

But sixty years later, hundreds of thousands - perhaps even millions - are still denied their human rights.

While we listened to the Secretary-General's inspirational words yesterday, countless numbers remained imprisoned for expressing their own views. Countless others were still denied a fair chance to earn a decent minimum wage, and live a decent life.

The reasons for the creation of the Commission on Human Rights therefore remain equally valid today. In the next few days we will hear plenty more words about this Council. We owe it to all of those countless numbers to ensure that we do more here than just talk.

The rights of these people are the same as ours. Like each of us, they deserve a dignity and freedom that has nothing to do with where they live; but with the very humanity that they share with us.

The inability freely to exercise their human rights, however, has a great deal to do with where people live.

In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt:

"WHERE...DO UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS BEGIN? IN SMALL PLACES, CLOSE TO HOME – SO CLOSE AND SO SMALL THAT THEY CANNOT BE SEEN ON ANY MAP OF THE WORLD. YET THEY ARE THE WORLD OF THE INDIVIDUAL PERSON: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD HE LIVES IN; THE SCHOOL OR COLLEGE HE ATTENDS; THE FACTORY, FARM OR OFFICE WHERE HE WORKS. SUCH ARE THE PLACES WHERE EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD SEEKS EQUAL JUSTICE, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, EQUAL DIGNITY WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION.

UNLESS THESE RIGHTS HAVE MEANING THERE, THEY HAVE LITTLE MEANING ANYWHERE.”

We are here today to represent our governments and our states. It is our policies and laws that are felt in the neighbourhoods, factories, farms and offices of our citizens, cited by Eleanor Roosevelt. It is our laws, and our determination to see them implemented, which largely decide whether human rights violations occur; and whether they go unpunished.

Human rights are essentially political in their nature. They are the intrinsic business of every government, without exception. We all know that every government faces challenges in implementing their human rights obligations. Complex challenges, that vary widely across the world. Related to facts both within, and sometimes beyond, a government's own control: the national context, a state's history, the stability of its peace or the severity of its conflict, the level of its development – and so on.

So let us be honest in our work here. Let us not pretend that human rights are not about real human beings. Nor about the states in which they live. That human rights do not flourish or suffer depending on governments' policies. That they are not political; and that they are not difficult and at times, very difficult.

To pretend this would be to build our Council on the foundations of a fiction. It is a fiction that we cannot afford, either as politicians or as human beings.

Moreover, this fiction will not resolve the problems that arose in the Commission on Human Rights. These were often overstated. The Commission was powerfully instrumental in supporting democratic change throughout the world. It repeatedly brought to international attention pressing issues and situations of the day. And it developed the framework of standards that has guided our work for more than half a century.

These standards continue to direct our efforts today. The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture will enter into force later this week.

It is a fitting reminder of what we can achieve when we work together to enhance the international protection framework.

The Commission's problems lay elsewhere:

- in distrust grown out of all proportion;
- in the use, too often, of the same unimaginative tools to address all issues;
- in megaphone diplomacy between regions;
- and in an in-built fear of tackling, head-on and together, the common challenges that human rights raise.

What should we do differently in this new Council?

Most importantly, we need to step out of the trenches of Commission thinking. We should no longer assume that one region's concern must be another's taboo.

Or that repetition is progress. Or that the best way to resolve a problem is to simply broadcast it from the rooftops. We need to be more innovative than that.

- Firstly, we should recognise that it is legitimate to discuss challenges and concerns in a particular state. This need not be something to resist at all costs; rather, an opportunity to address those concerns together.
- Secondly, we need to work together to develop more sophisticated and varied tools. To support each other better in tackling real issues, and finding solutions that work.
- Thirdly, we need to foster trust and understanding. In particular, we must communicate better among countries, and above all across regional divides. This should be a matter of course, not exception.

Of course, successful dialogue requires a willing partner. This Council is charged with promoting and protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all people, everywhere. It has a unique and global responsibility.

If a state wilfully rejects cooperation; if it chooses instead to persist in grossly violating the human rights of its citizens; then this Council cannot sit silent. In such cases, it must act. But if we can build trust as I've suggested, surely such instances can become the exception not the rule.

The Universal Periodic Review Mechanism will be an important tool in achieving this.

It should be a balanced and transparent mechanism.

Crucially, it will ensure that all states are subject to the same scrutiny.

This does not mean that all must reach the same standards overnight.

Periodic Review should not seek to compare states' performance in absolute terms, defining who is better than whom.

This would not provide the basis for trust, which should be the norm in our work. Moreover, it would not be fair.

The key for Universal Periodic Review is to establish how a state is working to meet the obligations it has undertaken. Key questions to ask are:

- In which direction is the state travelling?
- What efforts is it making?
- Is it demonstrating the political will and commitment to do better?
- How is it using the resources that it has to meet its obligations?
- Is it willing to draw on the assistance offered by others to solve its problems?

We stand at a crucial juncture in the history of the UN's human rights work. As we consider the direction this Council's will take, it is worth recalling the words of Charles Malik. As the Lebanese representative and Rapporteur to the first CHR, and one of the pioneers of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, he wrote:

"IF YOUR INSTITUTIONS AND TRADITIONS ARE NOT ADAPTED FOR THE PRODUCTION OF A RINGING MESSAGE WHICH WILL APPEAL TO THE MIND AND HEARTS OF OTHERS, AND ON WHICH YOU CAN STAKE YOUR LIFE, THEN YOU CANNOT LEAD."

So let us talk about human trafficking. Let us discuss the protection of human rights while combating terrorism; discrimination in all its forms; racism – wherever it occurs. We should talk about the right to development for all; the abolition of the death penalty, torture, violence against women. The right to education, the rights of the child; and those many others so demanding of our attention.

But we should talk about them in real terms. Our debate should not be abstract. We must focus on how best to improve the lives of real people. Let us view human rights issues, not as the preserve of one region or state, but as what they are: a concern for human kind. In short, let us show the leadership, and send the ringing message, which Charles Malik called for sixty years ago.

Maybe this sounds idealistic. But, my country and I are up for the challenge. Together, all of us here have a realistic chance of success. And I suggest that there is no better moment for idealism than now.

Thank you.