

12 January 2016

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft,
President of the 70th Session of the General Assembly,
At the Informal Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly to
commemorate the 70th anniversary of the first meeting of the General
Assembly**

Mr Secretary General, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, you are all very welcome to this commemoration of the first meeting of the UN General Assembly.

On 10 January 1946, 51 nations came together at Westminster Central Hall in London, England.

Building on the success in San Francisco the previous June, Dr. Eduardo Zuleta Angel of Colombia called to order the first meeting of the General Assembly.

Among the many people who participated in that meeting was Sir Brian Urquhart, a British government official who went on to serve the United Nations over four decades. I am delighted that Sir Urquhart has been able to join us here today.

That first meeting had a number of interesting features.

It lasted, for instance, just over one hour!

During that time, only one decision – the election of the President – was taken.

That decision, however, went to a vote.

The drama of the time was that, Mr Trygve Halvdan Lie of Norway, lost out in the vote to Mr Paul-Henri Spaak of Belgium.

Mr Lie of course need not have worried too much for he went on to become the first Secretary-General a mere three weeks later.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, not one of the Permanent Representatives that day were female – a matter which remains a concern today where only 18% of PRs are female.

These features and imbalances aside, Excellencies, the first meeting of the General Assembly was without any doubt the beginning of something special. It was a major step forward by what is now commonly referred to as the international community.

Following a horrific period of war, destruction, genocide and nuclear bombings, nations of the world deliberately decided to come together.

They decided to choose the only genuine path to achieve global peace, security, justice, human rights and social advancement.

And in the General Assembly, they created the one true space in which ‘We the peoples’ – voices both big and small – would be heard.

At the time of this first meeting, however, vast areas of the world, especially in Africa, remained under colonial domination.

Today, with 193 members representing 99.5 % of the world’s population, the General Assembly has become the single most representative, deliberative body in the world.

Speaking eloquently about his hopes for the Assembly, Dr Angel stated, and I quote:

‘An inner voice tells us that, animated by a broad and sincere feeling for humanity, we can lift up our hearts and bring to bear on the problems of peace the spirit of cooperation, the tenacity of purpose, the self-sacrifice and the technical effort, which, when applied to the dramatic problems of war, led to the splendid triumph of the democracies that has enabled us to meet here to-day.’

During the past 70 years, this Assembly has succeeded in raising hearts and demonstrating a spirit of cooperation on many occasions.

Within a month of its first meeting, it had already established the goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons and other weapons “adaptable to mass destruction”.

By year end, some 106 further resolutions had been passed.

Those resolutions established the World Health Organization and what would later become UNICEF.

They addressed issues such as the political rights of women, the plight of refugees, the right to self-determination, genocide and civil society participation.

And they took decisions on a series of issues pertaining to the functioning of the United Nations – including one that will be high on our agenda this year: the appointment of the Secretary-General.

In this anniversary session, we too can be proud of the results we have achieved so far, building on the excellent work of previous sessions.

Most notably, in 2015, by agreeing the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement, multilateralism has reasserted itself – and rightfully so.

These agreements provide us with the strongest evidence yet that when we put our minds to it and accept our interdependencies, this diverse Assembly of nations can lay the foundations for great progress in our world.

During the rest of this session, we must continue in this vein.

Now, we must bring forward specific actions, engage all people, young and old, and build alliances with other actors so as to drive implementation of these agreements.

We must also expand the spirit of cooperation of 2015 into every area of work of the General Assembly in 2016.

Prior to the holidays, we saw this spirit in each of the six Main Committees, including the Fifth Committee, which concluded its work on 23rd December – a remarkable feat in itself, even if it really should not be!

Now, we must apply even greater conviction to addressing, amongst others, extreme poverty, the ongoing global humanitarian and refugee crisis, the ever-increasing number of deadly conflicts in our world and the rise of violent extremism.

This will not be easy.

We will not solve all problems.

But we can and we must continue do all we can to lift as many hearts as possible.

Excellencies, on Saturday, in a peculiar twist of fate, I too celebrated my seventieth birthday.

Like this Assembly, I have had my share of successes and disappointments.

Like this Assembly, on certain occasions, I too might have done better.

Ultimately, however, our energies are best placed in taking action in the present and for the future.

70 years since its first meeting, this Assembly continues to embody the hopes of billions of people across the world.

We, the current custodians of this Assembly, have a duty to both protect, preserve and increase its legitimacy.

And we, the peoples, must do all we can to move ever closer to the world of peace, justice, human rights and prosperity envisaged 70 years ago.

Thank you.