



United Nations Sixtieth Anniversary (Proof)

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Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Thursday 30 October 2008 (Proof).

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Page: 54

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE (Parliamentary Secretary) [5.17 p.m.]: Last Friday 24 October marked the sixtieth anniversary of United Nations Day. Although the United Nations effectively began when the United Nations Charter came into force on 24 October 1945, 24 October has been celebrated as United Nations Day since 1948. The League of Nations had failed to prevent the horrors of World War II. As World War II drew to a close the world needed a new organisation dedicated to finding a way to deal collectively with international issues—an organisation that would work cooperatively to avoid conflict. In 1945, at a meeting of 46 nations in San Francisco, the United Nations was born. Over the past 60 years the United Nations has made important contributions not only to peace and security but also to enshrining in international law principles of equality to which all States should aspire.

The United Nations is not without its problems but it remains an essential part of tackling the issues confronting our societies, nations, regions and, indeed, our planet. The birth of the United Nations was shaped by many characters. In celebrating United Nations Day, I shall reflect on the contribution made by two Australians. Dr Herbert Vere Evatt needs no introduction to this Chamber. He was a lawyer, a High Court judge, an Attorney General and a Federal Minister for External Affairs. One of Doc Evatt's most important contributions was his leadership of the Australian delegation to the San Francisco conference in 1945.

It is useful to understand what Doc Evatt and the Australians confronted when they attended the San Francisco conference. The great powers dominated the San Francisco conference. For example, the United States of America was represented by 175 delegates, compared to just three delegates for some small countries. Australia was represented by a delegation of 25. Evatt and the Australians became champions of the smaller nations, convincing them that they had diplomatic muscle if they voted in a block and supporting their rights to peaceful development and equality. But to truly appreciate Evatt's contribution to the founding of the United Nations, it is important to understand his belief:

that real stability in the post-war world [could] be achieved only by carefully building an organisation that will do its utmost to assure the peoples of the world a full opportunity of living in freedom from want, as well as in freedom from external aggression.

To Evatt, economic justice was an essential precondition for security. The Australian delegation of 25 had only one woman. Jessie Street was among a small group of women at the San Francisco conference who joined together to ensure that the rights of women were not lost in the United Nations Charter. They fought to have the equal rights of men and women recognised in the preamble to the United Nations Charter. They also succeeded in securing a permanent body to deal with women's rights in the Commission for the Status of Women—contributions that remain important to this day.

The 10 December this year will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, a process that was overseen by Doc Evatt, who by 1948 had been elected President of the General Assembly. This document is the foundation of international human rights law that is practised today—the first formal recognition of the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. In the 60 years since proclamation the global human family has come a long way towards achieving respect for, and observance of, human rights. Now after a 10-year hiatus Australia is once again becoming a country that takes human rights seriously and engages with the United Nations.

Since coming to office the Rudd Government has: ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities; commenced the process towards accession to the optional protocol to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; and issued a standing invitation for human rights inspectors to visit Australia. Labor has seen the end of mandatory detention and legislation to remove discrimination against same-sex couples in Commonwealth laws. At the same time the Federal Government has committed itself to the principle of creative middle-power diplomacy. The Prime Minister has said:

Australia can be a greater force for good in the world Australia's voice has been too quiet for too long across the various councils of the world. That is why during the course of the next three years, the world will see an increasingly activist Australian international policy in areas where we believe we may be able to make a positive difference.

I also want to see Australia become a greater force for good in the world. I also want to see Australia enshrine commitments to equality and human rights in our domestic laws. The sixtieth anniversaries of United Nations Day and the Declaration of Human Rights provide perfect timing to begin the debate about Australia's own charter of rights. I note that the Rudd Government is committed to begin this discussion. I look forward to it and encourage everyone to get behind a charter of human rights for Australia.