

Earth Trends by Martin Khor
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The South Loses a Friend and Fighter

THE South has lost a great and courageous friend in the death, last week, of Erskine Childers at the age of 67.

A former senior official of the United Nations, Childers in recent years has been one of the world's most active campaigners for the reform of the UN in favour of the developing countries.

With greater vigour, he had been speaking up against the double standards applied by the major powers in international affairs; about the way the United Nations has been manipulated by the rich nations; and on the need for the South countries to fight back against the inequities of the world system.

At a conference on human rights organised by Just World Trust in Kuala Lumpur in 1994, Childers had made a major impact.

Here was a man from the North (Ireland, to be exact), with many years' experience in the high echelons of the establishment, speaking so eloquently against his own part of the world for its role in causing the poverty and conflicts in the South.

Childers then called on citizens and governments of the South to unite and get their act together. It was possible, he said, to change the UN and the international system for the better, if only people of the developing world had the will to do something about it.

Childers' most recent public position was that of Secretary-General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), to which he had been appointed five months ago.

He had hoped to direct the energies of this organisation to get citizens around the world to defend the UN from the recent wave of attacks by some quarters in the North, particularly the conservatives in the US Congress, and to reaffirm the need for international partnership to tackle the roots of poverty and conflict.

Childers had invited me to speak at the 50th anniversary congress of WFUNA at Luxembourg, a meeting he had hoped to use to reawaken the United Nations Associations of many countries to meet the needs of the next century.

We met on the night of 23 August when he briefly confided his hopes and plans.

The next morning, Childers gave a stimulating speech as Secretary General, plotting out what he felt should be WFUNA's future strategy.

A few minutes after he finished, still at the speakers' table, Childers suffered a heart attack. The congress adjourned whilst he was rushed to hospital, his wife at his side. That night he passed away. At a brief memorial session, the next day, many of his old friends and colleagues paid tribute. Perhaps the most fitting was that he died as he lived, fighting for world and UN reform, to the very last.

Childers came from a highly respected family of Irish campaigners for freedom and liberty. His grandfather was executed at the time of the struggle for independence. His father was President of Ireland.

After a distinguished academic career, he joined the UN, where he rose to the position of Senior Advisor to the Administrator of Director General for Development and to the UNDP.

After he retired from the UN in 1989, Childers remained very active in international affairs. He wrote several papers and reports proposing basic reforms in UN structures and operations, including the books *Renewing the United Nations System* and *A World In Need Of Leadership*, which he co-authored with Sir Brian Urquhart.

In recent years he had become even more outspoken as he reacted with outrage to the way the big powers manipulated the international system, including the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions, to their own advantage.

Even or especially after the end of the Cold War, he perceived that the South countries were at an even weaker situation, with deteriorating economic and social conditions and a less caring North, obsessed with narrow commercial interests, to contend with.

In his last speech just minutes before his heart attack, Childers attacked the propaganda promoted in the US establishment and media that the UN is Third World dominated.

"Seventy percent of UN posts since 1946 have been held by West Europeans and North Americans," he said. "This year, 62 percent of all posts are held by West Europeans and North Americans, although they have only 25 percent of seats in the UN. Where is the Third World domination?"

Childers warned that the UN had become the "target of some of the most vicious political propaganda and disinformation witnessed since the heyday of fascism."

He proposed the setting up of a "Disinformation Watch" to counter the wrong information being put out on the UN.

He called for the UN to return to its mission of tackling the root causes of conflict and upheaval by solving economic and social problems of the South.

"Since this would have meant implementing the UN Charter's economic and social mandates and enabling the UN to become the democratic steward of the commanding heights of the global economy, the major Western powers soon set out to cripple this entire side of the organisation," Childers said.

"Their success, and the consequences, are vividly illustrated in that today there are over 60 active armed conflicts on the planet; the Security Council, meets in continuous session; and the Economic and Social Council, has been cut back and back until it meets for scarcely five weeks in the year."

Childers concluded by proposing a campaign for democratising the UN.

He saw the need "to distinguish between fake reform by those who in reality wish to weaken the UN, and genuine proposals to improve the quality and capability of the UN system."

He proposed a "Blackmail Watch" be set up at the UN with the help of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to expose attempts by major powers to intimidate smaller countries.

"In a United Nations whose every member is bound by international law to respect the 'equal rights of nations large and small' and 'the sovereign equality of all its Members', several major powers have steadily intensified their use of direct economic extortion of the votes of other, economically weak members in the Security Council and the General Assembly.

"The targeted country is threatened with aid cuts, no debt relief, no emergency IMF credit and the like unless it votes as the powerful wish.

"This extortion deprives other member states of that independence and freedom of voting on which the entire UN edifice rests. It is a specific and flagrant violation of the Charter and, in the countries that practice it at the UN, it is a criminal felony. It strikes at the heart of the very concepts of democracy which the same powers preach incessantly to all other members."

Childers also proposed greater participation of citizen groups and NGOs in the UN to give meaning to the phrase "We the peoples of the United Nations" that begins the UN Charter.

In another paper for the WFUNA congress which, alas, he was destined never to deliver, Childers reserved his sharpest attack on the non-payment of UN dues by the United States and other countries, which had led to the financial crisis and crippling of the UN.

His paper detailed how countries owed the UN a total of US\$2.7 billion. Of this, the United States owed \$1.8 billion (\$685 million in regular budget and \$1,087 million in peacekeeping budget).

Childers was against any country holding back its dues, or holding the UN to ransom, as a means to force it to change according to its dictates.

According to him, although the UN Charter does not say so explicitly, it is clear that "in the UN no member state is allowed to withhold its assessment because it does not like some aspect of the way the UN is run or the policies it is following. To do so is against the international law of the Charter."

This is similar, Childers said, to the principle that citizens are not allowed to withhold taxes because they do not like some aspect of the way government is run or the policies it is following.

Besides the above sampling, there are many, many more gems of wisdom and valuable proposals in the recent and past papers and books of Erskine Childers.

It is a great tragedy that he is no longer with us, just as he is needed by the South, and the people of the North too, to fight the great battles ahead in the reform of the UN and the international system as a whole.

But his ideas will be looked into and continue to inspire those who continue those battles.