

On 10 January 1946, exactly where we are standing now, large crowds watched as diplomats from around the world arrived at Methodist Central Hall for the first session of the United Nations General Assembly. It was a historic moment. For the first time as united nations, they could demonstrate their commitment to the UN charter; to show a determination to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war; to reaffirm their faith in fundamental human rights; to declare equal rights for men and women

Equal rights

We are not here today to judge how far short we still are from their noble ambitions. But surely their most noteworthy and far-reaching achievement was, after countless meetings, in managing to agree on the framing of a Universal Bill of Rights. Their efforts to reach agreement on a binding convention failed; **but** there was concord, by overwhelming majority, on a non-binding Declaration. This became *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The magnitude of their achievement cannot be overestimated as already in 1948, they could foresee how the Cold War would soon paralyse international relations.

They knew the final document was not perfect. In fact, it would take eighteen years before agreement was reached on two binding covenants to the Declaration, on *Civil and Political Rights* and on *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

But the Declaration had by then gathered its own momentum. It opened the way to binding conventions on *Discrimination against Women*, *the Rights of the Child*, *Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, on *Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment*. It also opened the way to *Declarations on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, and *the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. And many more.

The Declaration itself has been translated into more than 500 languages, the majority of these considered to be endangered. And there lies a catch. The peoples who dare speak those languages too often do so against the will of their governments. Yes, they are endangered also.

But if there is a lasting legacy of that first meeting here in Westminster, one of which all of us here should be proud, then this is it. It shows that humanity, with all its faults, can come together, reaffirming our faith in fundamental human rights,

We are here also to mark another seventy fifth anniversary. By the time the Universal Declaration was agreed in Paris in December 1948, the United Nations was already facing challenges in Palestine. Count Folke Bernadotte, its appointed mediator there, had been assassinated four months earlier. He was not the first. Now, as we digest Friday's failure by members of the UN Security Council to agree on a course of action that might halt the loss of even more innocent human lives in Gaza and through Palestine and Israel, we mourn the more than one hundred and forty members of staff working for the UN Relief & Works Agency (UNWRA) in Gaza who have died there since the Hamas atrocities on 7 October.

Each year we mark the sacrifice of those who have died while serving as UN peacekeepers, men and women often facing danger in a distant country with which their own has no dispute. But today, we mark the loss in Gaza of those who have died while working for the benefit of their neighbours, their communities, those in their street. They rank alongside their colleagues working with the UN and its agencies in Sudan, Ukraine, and elsewhere, bringing together fractured communities, fighting child labour, advancing climate action - in all, contributing to progress and development in many different ways.

But they are more than locally employed workers. They worked in the name of the United Nations. They worked in our name, the name of people here in Westminster, in Manchester, in Birmingham, and in your country too, wherever you have come from. In such moments, when we are together, we are the peoples, the peoples of the United Nations.

Today, in our small ceremony, we are united: in our grief; and in our determination to reaffirm our faith in fundamental human rights.