

Graduation ceremony at the International School of Geneva (Ecolint): 20 June 2003

Madame la Présidente, Classes terminales de 2003

Mesdames et Messieurs :

C'est un grand plaisir pour moi d'être de retour à Ecolint et de me retrouver dans l'ambiance du Théâtre Grec. J'ai en tête toutes les personnalités qui m'ont précédées à cette place et en particulier j'ai le souvenir de Son Altesse le Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, qui nous a quittés il y a de cela quelques semaines. C'était un ami de cette école et il m'avait beaucoup encouragé lorsque j'étais directeur général; sa vie nous a tous inspirés. La plupart des remarques qui vont suivre sont un hommage à sa mémoire et à son soutien aux Nations Unies.

Je vais être bref – 10 minutes – et bien que l'Ecolint soit une école bilingue, je crois que c'est plus facile pour nous tous si j'utilise uniquement une langue. J'ai donc choisi de parler en Anglais.

I am not going to talk about the IB, you will be very relieved to hear! Let's draw a veil over that until the beginning of July when I hope you all achieve your hard-earned success and ambitions. Instead, let me start in New York because when I was Director General here at Ecolint, I used to visit our sister school in New York, the United Nations International School (UNIS), quite regularly. I hope that contact remains alive and well because both schools are from the same foundation and have a lot of valuable experience to share. On my second visit—it must have been around 1993—I was invited to lunch by the chairman of the governing board of UNIS. The lunch was held in the United Nations headquarters where the chairman was a very senior official—in fact he was in charge of the UN's peace keeping operations—and after lunch he showed me around the building allowing me to stand, I remember, on the podium of the General Assembly, on the very spot from which so many famous people have addressed the world. He also insisted on showing me the lounge outside the General Assembly where, he said, the real work of quiet and careful diplomacy took place over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine.

He was a kind, gentle and clearly very astute man, a Ghanaian, and I expect by now you have guessed that his name was Kofi Annan. A few years later he became the UN's Secretary General and he is now in his second term of office and generally reckoned to be the most successful person ever to hold that challenging post.

It is particularly sad, then, that it should be under Kofi Annan's leadership that the UN has been so abused, to the point where its future is seriously at risk. It is right to criticize the politicians—the combination of Bush, Blair, Chirac, Putin and Schröder has proved more than the UN can handle—but I am also going to suggest that the diplomats must take some of the blame for the fiasco of the Security Council's handling of the Iraq crisis.

However, despite the serious failure of diplomacy during those crucial weeks and months before the war in Iraq, not a single diplomat has, to my knowledge, either resigned or been sacked. Not one ambassador of France, Britain, Spain, Germany, United States or any other member of the Security Council has gone. And that suggests to me that no one really cares any more about diplomacy; it has become a dying art. We no longer take very seriously the possibility of achieving a peacefully negotiated solution.

I mentioned a moment ago Prince Sadruddin, who had been UN High Commissioner for Refugees. I have many memories of that great man, but my lasting memory will be of him sitting on the floor in the middle of a classroom at Pregny, surrounded by young people from the age of about ten upwards, telling them about the challenges of understanding different cultures and how you decide where you must finally draw a line. He was first and last a diplomat who was completely committed to the ideals of the United Nations.

Let me make my own position clear. I believe that if you, the graduating class of 2003, are going to enjoy the same richness of life that I have enjoyed: its length, its intellectual stimulus, its family enrichment, its variety, and much of the time its sheer enjoyment, then the United Nations, or something very much like it, will not be just an interesting option, it will be an essential institution in your daily lives. In the absence of the UN, can you imagine the world under the domination of one country: the whole world run by, let us say Australia...or Argentina...or Japan...or France...or Indonesia...or by the United States? I do not believe anyone here today would find that acceptable.

I am reminded that the 50th anniversary of one of Ecolint's greatest contributions to the world takes place in December: the Students' League of Nations in the Palais des Nations. This is where students learn about multilateral diplomacy and the IBO is looking forward to collaboration with the school in marking the golden jubilee. There are now dozens of model United Nations all around the world and they all started here in 1953 when Bob Leach, a remarkable history teacher, launched the first one.

Diplomacy over Iraq has been a disaster since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991. It was obvious that sanctions would not only fail to achieve their objective, but would be seriously counterproductive by isolating the country and driving the population into Saddam's protective arms. When I came back from my second visit to Baghdad in 1996, I asked for a meeting with the United States ambassador here in Geneva to express my concern about the effect of sanctions on the health of the Iraqi population. I was received with courtesy and told that I did not understand the issues and, in any case, I should not have gone to Iraq because it was a dangerous place.

Economic sanctions do not work. They did not work in 1935 when Mussolini declared war against Abyssinia; they did not work in 1965 when Ian Smith declared UDI in Rhodesia; they did not work in South Africa during the 1980s and they have not worked in Iraq. I hope this is one lesson that will come from this diplomatic mess.

The other failure is a failure of intelligence, which is an essential part of diplomacy. We are now told that weapons of mass destruction may not exist.

Let me just pause for a moment and ask whether that really matters. Perhaps if the original justification for war turns out to be a lie (I stress **if**, because it is early days yet in the search) but another justification turns up after the war, namely evidence of appalling acts of atrocity, perhaps that is OK. Let me remind you of those lines in T S Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* spoken by one of the knights who is reflecting on the justification of the murder of Thomas à Becket:

*This last temptation is the foulest treason
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*

Let me suggest that if any student graduating today **does** believe it is OK then you have betrayed every value the IB stands for, you have probably never attended a Theory of Knowledge class and you have wasted your time in this particular school.

I was talking about intelligence and I remember after another visit to Baghdad, I had dinner with British diplomats in Amman, who were interested to know what was going on across the border in Iraq. They clearly had no idea what was going on across the border; no idea what was being sold in the shops or even if there were any shops left to sell anything. I find it unbelievable that intelligence had not provided accurate information about all those mass graves now being uncovered, but that is another effect of trying to isolate a whole country. You simply do not know what has been going on.

We visited Iraq four times between 1995 and 1999. It was not easy because the only access was by 1000 km of rather dangerous road across the desert linking Amman and Baghdad. We went there to work with the teachers at Baghdad International School, which Ecolint had helped to create in 1984, thanks to the efforts of Joe Blaney and Phil Thomas. But we did other things as well, taking in medicine, supporting a teacher studying an MBA with a British University, helping their teachers obtain visas so they could attend professional conferences in Europe and looking after them in Geneva. We had no contact at all with the Iraqi regime once we had obtained our visas and were never interfered with.

There were plenty of rewards: visiting the ancient site of Babylon, or shopping in the copper market in Baghdad. And I will never forget my first sight of the spectacular Kadhimain Shrine with its blue and gold domes and minarets seeming to float in space above the city. Our efforts were a drop in the ocean but Ecolint did something to maintain a link and to offer a few people in Iraq a happier prospect of life.

Baghdad International School does not exist anymore. It was slightly damaged in the bombing, not surprisingly since it was very close to one of Saddam's palace complexes. However, when the fighting stopped, the school was looted and burned down. I have told the current Principal that the IBO will help somehow in the process of rebuilding it and I have written to Kofi Annan to ask for the UN's support. I hope Ecolint will want to join us in this task.

It is time to sum up:

- Ecolint was founded for the League of Nations. Its spiritual home today is the United Nations. I hope you students graduating today will do everything possible in your lives to support and strengthen the United Nations .
- However much you dislike a person or a group, never drive them into isolation because it will be innocent people who suffer and you will never resolve your differences peacefully .
- However large the problem, individual people can make a contribution that makes a difference. The sum of those contributions can be overwhelming.

Let me give you a final quote: *Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, that person sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*

We began in America and we end in America where those words are inscribed on someone's grave. Whose grave? In the best traditions of Ecolint and of the IB, I will ask you to go and find out for yourself! I'll give you a clue: you have probably guessed the right family, but chosen the wrong brother.

Let me wish you good luck for those IB exam results in July (you can always blame me) and every happiness and success for what follows. And I hope that each one of you will become an Ecolint "ripple of hope"!

George Walker
Director general
IBO
20 June 2003