

PEACEMAKERS FOR OVER 100 YEARS: THE INTERNATIONAL PEACE BUREAU

Colin Archer, Secretary-General

FLORENCE, 23 OCTOBER 2010

On the occasion of the centenary of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to IPB in 1910.

Scientists tell us that light can be understood as both waves and particles. In some similar way the world's peace movements can be studied from the point of view of historical **waves**, rising and falling according to the strength of public feeling against war, which is affected by the great events and ideological fashions of history. And if we consider the people who make up these movements as the **particles**, then the parallel is perhaps not totally misplaced. Together these waves and individuals make up what we could call the **currents** within the great river of the peace movement.

The decision to create the International Peace Bureau was taken -- here in Italy! -- in 1891, at the 3rd Universal Peace Congress in Rome; and the Secretariat was formally opened on 1st Dec. 1891 in Berne. This means that we have an (almost) uninterrupted history going back 119 years. It is too long a story to tell in the time we have available today. So I have chosen to describe to you some of the developments within the movement and to focus the human side of the story on 3 outstanding individuals: 3 extraordinary personalities, one from each of the main stages of IPB's evolution: Bertha von Suttner, Nobel Peace Prize 1905; Henri La Fontaine, Nobel 1913 ; and Sean MacBride, Nobel 1974.

Through it all is a theme I have detected in learning about the lives of these persons and others connected with the IPB: the flowering of idealism, followed by the loss of innocence.

The modern peace movement had its origins in the years following the Napoleonic Wars, especially in Britain and France, the dominant powers of the day. The peace societies that were founded were part of a liberal movement for political reform, social improvement, and free trade. In Britain a powerful wave of public opinion had been built up, already in the 18th century, against the slave trade, based mainly on religious and humanitarian values. This ethical pacifism was then supplemented by ideas from France, promoting international law as a way to solve disputes without resort to war.

The London Peace Society was formed at the initiative of the Quakers in 1816. In 1830, Jean-Jacques de Sellon set up the first peace society in continental Europe, based in Geneva. In 1843 the first international peace congress was held in London. These congresses, held on an annual basis and later organised by the IPB Secretariat, helped to create an international community of peacemakers. They carried out an intense correspondence, travelled by rail and boat all over the continent, drew in famous names like Victor Hugo and Garibaldi, and gradually began to have an impact on public awareness and politics. Meanwhile Henry Dunant and others had set up the Red Cross to

give help to wounded soldiers. But the peace societies were much more radical – they wanted to prevent wars altogether.

In 1867 we see the first split in the movement with the creation of two organisations with similar names, one League (based in Paris) keeping its neutrality in matters of politics and religion, the other League (based in Geneva) advocating republican government and democracy, and opposing ‘popery’. Thus we see the beginning of a tension that exists to this day, between – on the one hand – those who see peace as part of a radical transformation of society whose purpose is to tackle the sources of injustice and violence; and – on the other hand – a more moderate ‘realist’ movement that seeks to build wider support for gradual policy reforms that bring about peaceful changes on a step by step basis. Interestingly, in the end both of the Leagues joined the IPB as members.

The second half of the 19th century was – apart from the Franco-Prussian war – a relatively peaceful time, at least in Western Europe, and certainly a period of prosperity and optimism among the dominant classes. The rise, and the consolidation, of the international peace movement was one example of the ‘can-do’ spirit of the times which I would characterise as ‘activist idealism’.

During these early years the IPB was more or less the only international peace structure. It took positions, not only in favour of disarmament, but also on the various international conflicts of the day. Its basic ideological approach has been described as bourgeois pacifism, i.e. a heavy emphasis on the development of international law, disarmament and the peaceful settlement of conflicts. IPB was active in promoting the idea of the establishment of a League of Nations and an International Court, although some individuals had doubts about the kind of peace that would result from what were basically inter-state institutions.

Bertha von Suttner was a colourful Austrian countess, who at a young age became a friend of Alfred Nobel and in fact was the person who encouraged him to establish the Peace Prize. She became widely known right across Europe through her book, *Lay Down Your Arms!* published in 1889, and she enjoyed an active and influential career, lecturing often, editing peace journals and maintaining correspondence with many prominent politicians. In addition, she was an effective catalyst in establishing peace societies in Central Europe during the 1890s.

Essentially she was a rebel who turned against her aristocratic and military background and found ways to support herself at a time when it was unusual for a woman of her class to have an independent career. She and her husband Arthur believed that, following Darwin, the laws of evolution would lead Europe to a new level of civilization, in which wars would altogether cease. Bertha von Suttner became an icon of the peace movement and was able to practice what her friends described as “unofficial diplomacy”. Bertha did her best to convince Tsar Nicholas II that a peace conference of States should take place. She sent him a copy of her book and Nicholas II, who already admired the monumental analysis of war written by Polish author Jan Bloch, was encouraged to write a ‘Manifest of Peace’, which did indeed lead to the Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907. During the 1899 conference the von Suttners hosted many meetings with diplomats and leading members of the peace movement and in their salon befriended politically influential people of the their time.

The idealism of the early IPB pioneers and the Hague initiatives was rudely shattered by the sudden outbreak of war in 1914, just after von Suttner's death. While their predictions had been correct, the peace advocates' remedies had proven insufficient.

The IPB Secretariat was unable to function during the war, apart from assisting refugees, but it moved to Geneva in 1924 to be close to the new League of Nations. Although IPB had encouraged the creation of the League, the result proved disappointing. The League was not fully supported by its member states, and national egos proved too strong. IPB insisted on disarmament and reducing military expenditures, and put emphasis on public education for peace. But in the inter-war period, overshadowed by the League and its supporters, and by the creation of other peace organisations representing new anti-militarist currents such the women's peace movement and the more radical War Resisters' International, IPB was unable to do much more than organise congresses, and publish newsletters and appeals. It struggled to get its voice heard but was gradually drowned out in the rising tide of nationalism.

It was the darkest time of the century, and also in IPB's life. The President from 1907 to his death in 1943 was **Henri La Fontaine**, a Belgian senator, and socialist. Over this extraordinarily long and difficult period, Lafontaine developed a strong partnership with his faithful Secretary-General Henri Golay, and together they kept the Bureau going until 1939.

Henri La Fontaine was born in 1854 and as a young man studied law. He was admitted to the bar in 1877 and in 1893 became professor of international law at the Free University of Brussels. Two years later was elected to the Belgian Senate as a member of the Socialist Party. He served as vice chairman of the Senate from 1919 to 1932.

La Fontaine took an early interest in the International Peace Bureau, and was influential in the IPB's efforts to bring about the Hague Peace Conferences. He was a highly respected figure and did much to resolve conflicts between the different branches of the peace movement. But he was also a visionary: he believed in universal access to knowledge as a way of linking peoples together and overcoming prejudices. In a sense his dream was a forerunner of today's Internet. He shared this passion with his friend Paul Otlet, with whom he founded the Mundaneum, now in Mons, Belgium. La Fontaine also established the Institut International de Bibliographie and proposed such organizations as a world school and university, a world parliament, and an international court of justice. He was far ahead of his time. Like several other IPB leaders in the early period, Henri La Fontaine was a freemason, and a member of the lodge *Les Amis Philanthropes* in Brussels.

Thus we can say that the second loss of innocence came with the rise of fascism and the carnage of the Second World War. Peace activity more or less came to an end, and it took some time for the movement to find its feet again. In the post war years it took two main forms: support for the new international peace-making structure, the United Nations; and opposition to the new and terrible threat to humanity: nuclear war.

Henri Golay's death in 1950 marked the end of the old IPB, but a new one was in the process of being born. After many organisational complications, the International Liaison Committee of Organisations for Peace (ILCOP), which had inherited the assets of the old IPB, was renamed IPB in 1964 and ILCOP became a small private foundation. IPB opened

a new office at the current address, and began to rebuild a new membership base. In the 1960s IPB launched a project on UN peace-keeping operations; it joined the worldwide opposition to the Vietnam War; and prepared a report to the UN on conscientious objection. While IPB did not embrace the mass movements and street demonstrations of the Cold War period, it was engaged at a more official level in the challenges of the time: nuclear disarmament, East-West dialogue, and UN negotiations.

In 1984 IPB merged with the International Confederation for Disarmament and Peace, which helped to further expand the membership and brought the centre of gravity closer to the more radical movements. Nowadays we have 320 membership organisations in 70 countries.

The most influential of IPB's leading figures in the second half of the century was the Irish statesman **Sean MacBride**. He had an extraordinary life, starting out as a youthful rebel and becoming chief of intelligence in the IRA. This led on to a career as politician, journalist, and lawyer. Towards the end of the 1920s, he and other members of the IRA started promoting a left-wing agenda, which led eventually to the creation in 1946 of the republican/socialist party *Clann na Poblachta*. The party was his springboard for a position at cabinet level as Minister of External Affairs. This in turn eventually took him to a number of high-level positions on the international scene: including UN Commissioner for Namibia, and Secretary General of the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva.

On the civil society side, MacBride was a central figure in the creation of Amnesty International, and was involved in the IPB for many years before becoming President in 1974, a position he held until 1985. With the Nobel prize money he distributed a million copies of the *Bradford Proposals*, a document which essentially set the agenda for the 1978 UN First Special Session on Disarmament. Sean navigated very astutely the Cold War waters of the peace movement. His most notable contribution was to launch the celebrated *Appeal from Lawyers Against Nuclear Weapons*. From 1987 IPB collected the signatures of top lawyers from all continents, and in 1992 we presented all 11,000 of them to the Director-General of the United Nations in Geneva. This effort paved the way for the World Court Project, which sought, and in 1996 achieved, the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice condemning nuclear weapons. As a way of perpetuating his memory, IPB established the annual Sean MacBride Peace Prize in 1992.

From the 1960s onwards, the IPB's primary concerns largely reflected those of the movement as a whole in Western countries. This very wide agenda includes the struggle against the Vietnam war, the right to conscientious objection, the UN Special Sessions on Disarmament, the Freeze and Euromissile campaigns and the European Nuclear Disarmament movement, opposition to foreign military bases, the illegality (and abolition) of nuclear weapons, the Gulf War, the arms trade, militarism and the environment, women and peace, and the prevention and resolution of armed conflicts.

The end of the Cold War promised much: a New World Order based on a UN freed of its paralysis; and a 'peace dividend' to be generated by the savings from disarmed weaponry. Both dreams proved short-lived. Peace movements, including IPB, had to reposition themselves in the new context and over the last 20 years we have also been confronted with the rise of globalisation and the War on Terrorism. The movements have responded in diverse ways to many, mostly regional, wars -- notably in the Middle East, the Balkans,

Asia and Africa. In the disarmament field, new and sometimes successful campaigns have arisen, such as those against landmines, cluster munitions, small arms, conventional arms trade, and other weapons systems. At the same time, civil society has struggled to respond to the rise in military spending, once again at Cold War levels, the expansion of NATO and a seemingly endless war in Afghanistan. Finally, the information revolution has drastically transformed both war-making and its civil society opponents.

From 1996 to 2005, IPB worked on a series of more comprehensive peace programmes: the Hague Appeal for Peace conference which gathered 10,000 participants on the centenary of the original 1899 Hague peace conference; the Global Campaign for Peace Education; and the Barcelona Forum 2004.

In late 2005, the organisation made a major shift away from its historical role as a generalist organisation, by launching a long-term, more specific programme on **Disarmament for Development**, which tackles issues of military versus social spending, as well as the effects of weapons on poor communities.

Nuclear weapons remain a major threat to world security, and they have been at the centre of IPB's work for the last decades. Our programmes have included the World Court Project, the international Test Ban campaign, the founding of the Abolition 2000 network, and support for the movements of mayors, parliamentarians and other professionals, largely focussed on achieving a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

Two other important moments illustrate the theme of collective hope and loss of illusion: the enormous but ultimately ineffectual mobilisations against the threatened war on Iraq in February 2003 (which brought 10 million onto the streets of the world's capitals); and the election of Barack Obama in November 2008, with the period of crisis and grass roots backlash (Tea Parties and more) in which we still find ourselves.

Nevertheless, despite these repeated disappointments, it can be seen throughout this story that there is an accompanying theme: that of hope that is constantly reborn, taking new forms at every turn, and inspired by remarkable men and women who have made extraordinary sacrifices for peace. For war is too terrible a price for humanity to pay, and peacemaking too noble a cause, for the human spirit to be restrained for long.
