

The Last Press Release:
Why the Political Media Contribute Little to Securing a State of Peace
by
Peter M. Southwood

Abstract

The intention behind this short review of the author's experience of media relations is to illustrate how their focus on public interest is mostly short term and backward looking, in relation to international peace or war, while public benefit is long term and forward looking. The background is the flawed peace settlement in 1919, after the end of the Great War, and in 1990, after the end of the Cold War. Both show how the creation of a climate for war, breeds war, and how even peaceful means of conflict resolution can undermine a climate for peace as happened in the 1990s. The legal concept of public benefit in relation to an 'irenical perspective', as defined in an English charity case on 9 October 1998, is crucial to education and superior to public interest because it must be capable of proof, if not self-evident. It has nothing to do with public opinion. The powerlessness of the media over the long term in matters of securing peace has not changed, in this author's assessment, in a hundred years.

Background

The prosecution of Soldier F, which was announced by the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland on 14 March 2019,¹ raises similar issues of public interest versus public benefit to those that arose from the advancement of international peace at the end of the Cold War. While the former must await consideration in Communique No. 1 to be published on Good Friday 2019, in the author's role as *de facto* Law Officer for Public Benefit in England and Wales, the latter has been at the heart of his work, educational and legal, since 1990. This article is not concerned with Soldier F's part in Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972, rather how a climate for war breeds war and how even peaceful methods of conflict resolution can undermine a climate for peace as – we can now demonstrate – happened in the 1990s.

As previous letters and articles in the Paris Peace Conference 1919 Remembered series have shown, the public were warned in a series of Briefings of the Project on Demilitarisation (Prodem), which he authored, that Western policies at the end of the Cold War were creating a climate for war. So, acting through the English civil courts, the author as prosecutor caused a legal framework to be brought into being to enable genuine education to play its primary role in foreseeing the prospects for peace or war in any region of international conflict.²

1. Two Flawed Peace Settlements: 1919 and 1990

Public interest in the sense of what editors of newspapers consider will, or should, interest the public is at the heart of news reporting. The Paris Peace Conference in 1919 was of intense international importance so the press descended in droves but were excluded from day to day discussions of the Supreme Council of Allied leaders.³ Nevertheless negotiations were conducted under public scrutiny because public opinion had entered into the equation, as Professor MacMillan puts it, which governments dared not ignore even if they did not much like it.⁴ Moreover, as she observes in relation to the setting up of the League of Nations, the way States behaved towards each other had undergone a transformation over the previous century before the Paris Peace Conference:

War increasingly was seen as an aberration, and an expensive one at that. In the eighteenth century someone's gain was always someone's loss and the overall ledger remained balanced. Now war was a cost to all players, as the Great War had proved. National interests were furthered better by peace, which allowed trade and industry to flourish. And the nation itself was something different, no longer embodied by the monarch or a small elite but increasingly constituted by the people themselves.⁵

This is a statement which embodies an 'irenical perspective' without using the term. This perspective was evident in a United States charity law case in 1917, again without using the term, and it was only on 9 October 1998, in a case concerning Prodem, that it was incorporated into English charity law.⁶ Twenty years later, successive English Attorneys General have not ceased to oppose it; in the centenary year of the ending of the Great War they succeeded in having a claim for judicial review, based on an 'irenical perspective' certified as '**totally without merit**'; a view endorsed by the same Court of Appeal that had also emphatically endorsed the concept on 28 June 2000.⁷ [Emphasis in the original]

The ultimate failure of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which MacMillan denies, was demonstrated by the outbreak of the Second World War which the League of Nations could not stop. Yet that peace was made by the victorious democratic States who may have sought to be even-handed in their peace settlement, especially the Treaty of Versailles, but were not.

That is why the legal concept of public benefit is crucial and superior to public interest. The distinction between the two is that the former must be capable of proof, if not self-evident, while the latter is a political judgement whose public benefit cannot be predetermined.⁸

When applied to the peace settlement at the end of the Cold War, as it was by this author using an 'irenical perspective', the creation of a climate for war could be predicted even if it was not possible to say for certain where such a war would break out. Although, in the subsequent Prodem legal proceedings, all three tribunals insisted that this educational body was promoting a particular political policy none arrived at their decision by exclusively lawful and objective means.⁹ For once it is accepted, as the Courts did, that educating the public to an acceptance that peace is preferable to war, then the balance between competing States' peaceful methods of resolving an international dispute can be objectively analysed to show whether, across each dimension of security, they are in balance or not. If so, a climate for peace is being created; if not, a climate for war. It has nothing to do with public opinion.

2. A Short History of Media Interest in Legally Defined Education for Peace, 1990 – 2018

The purpose of this short review of the author's experience of media relations is to illustrate how public interest is mostly short term and backward looking, in relation to international peace or war, while public benefit is focused on the long term and thus forward looking. The more detached the latter becomes from the former the less newsworthy it is. Even though it is the application of the principle of public benefit and not public interest that creates the news stories of future years or decades. The study of peace is only boring to those who cannot see beyond the blood and guts of war. Yet humanity can only avoid or minimise the latter if it is educated to look beyond the boring appearance of a state of peace to its inner essence which is a living vindication of the Golden Rule: '... do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.'¹⁰ Surprisingly, it applies to States as to individuals.

This summary highlights what attracted media attention and what was missed:

Early 1990s

The author's doctoral thesis on 'Arms Conversion and the United Kingdom Defence Industry' submitted in 1987 and his book out of the thesis, together with various research reports published either independently or with others, was well timed with the end of the Cold War.¹¹

Media attention: Numerous interviews with the author were conducted by mostly local radio and regional television stations, as well as occasionally national television, on the impact of defence cuts and scope for diversification and conversion of military industries.

Mid-1990s

The establishment of Prodem and the publication of six Briefings between 1992 and 1995 included a comprehensive critique of Western triumphalism at the end of the Cold War in the four Briefings this author edited and which he largely wrote himself. In particular, this critique led to the creation of a framework for conflict prevention and resolution to forestall the prospects for a major regional or global war, which his earlier Briefings had warned of. This would involve contrasting analyses of strategic conflicts from common security, and realist military security, perspectives thereby evaluating their explanatory and predictive powers in relation to future peace or war.¹² His colleague's Briefings proposed alternative policies to achieve disarmament and a conversion of resources from military to civilian purposes.

Media attention: The Prodem Briefing No. 1 and Series A, which this author edited, was not covered but one of his colleague's Briefings, comparing arms conversion in the West and in the Soviet Union, did receive some press interest.¹³

Late 1990s to 2000

As the trial of the case concerning Prodem was about to begin on 27 July 1998, a journalist came into the courtroom and asked the plaintiffs what the case was about? 'Charitable/non-charitable – that sort of thing?' he asked, as he backed away from them towards the exit. There was, though, one person in the public gallery during the two-day trial who to this author's knowledge was not a journalist, a politician or a Charity Commission lawyer.

However, on appeal to the Court of Appeal, there was a law reporter present during the one-day hearing on 10 March 2000 and two persons in the public gallery whom the second appellant surmised were from the Charity Commission – correctly, as this author found out a decade later. There were also media representatives present on 28 June 2000, when the Appeal Court judgment was handed down, including one from the Press Association.¹⁴

Media attention: There was no comment in the political media of which the author is aware.¹⁵

Early 2000s

At this time the government began a review of the charity and wider not-for-profit sector (actually two distinct sectors, since only the former must be for the public benefit). The Strategy Unit project team included a representative from the Financial Times, and the Chief Charity Commissioner was a member of the Advisory Group. One of its briefing papers explicitly addressed the subject of the promotion of peace yet made no reference to the Prodem case.¹⁶ While this was underway the author was establishing the International Peace Project²⁰⁰⁰ (IPP) as an educational charity, based on the Prodem court judgments and with a background paper differing in little or no material respect from the Prodem one, except that the legal position had now been clarified on the public benefit of an ‘irenical perspective’.¹⁷

In 2003 a ‘Control Arms’ campaign was started by a wide range of charitable and other voluntary bodies, attracting media interest, despite the public benefit being indeterminable.¹⁸

In May 2004, after IPP had finally been registered as a charity on 6 February that year, a letter was sent by this author, authorised by the Trustees, to the Director of BBC News entitled ‘A Tale of Two Dossiers’ drawing attention to how it was the Strategy Unit dossier of 25 September 2002, rather than the Iraq dossier the previous day, which had been ‘sexed up’. It was widely circulated to the media and also sent to Lord Hutton, who made no objection.¹⁹

Media attention: It was matters of public interest not public benefit that were captured.

Mid-2000s

IPP published its Briefing No. 1 on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in January 2006 offering a Palestinian, an Israeli and an Irenical perspective on the prospects for peace, side-by-side in an easily comparable format including criteria by which to judge the soundness of the analysis against the subsequent course of events in that area of conflict. This author’s irenical perspective, following the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in mid-2005, foresaw ‘**periodic war**’ to follow.²⁰ Wars between Israel and Hamas in Gaza occurred in: June to November 2006 (overshadowed by the larger but shorter war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon); in December 2008 to January 2009; November 2012; and July to August 2014.²¹

On 1 July 2016, over a decade later, the Middle East Quartet consisting of the United Nations, European Union, Russia and the United States published their report which the BBC News website highlighted in terms of the urgent need to prevent entrenchment of a one-state reality of ‘perpetual occupation and conflict’ between Israelis and Palestinians.²²

Media attention: The IPP Briefing foresaw what the Quartet only warned of with the benefit of hindsight. Yet the BBC ignored the public benefit of the first and highlighted the second.

Late 2000s to mid-2010s

Unable to progress the 'Peace Games', as IPP's contrasting analyses of strategic conflicts were called, the Trustees agreed to seek the removal from the register of charities of one body whose ostensibly political objects had been drawn to the attention of the Court of Appeal in the Prodem case. That Court had stated 'Nor... could the court recognise as charitable a trust to educate the public to an acceptance that war is best avoided by collective security through membership of a military alliance – say, NATO.'²³ The story of the attempt to remove The Atlantic Council of the United Kingdom from the register of charities has already been told in this Paris Peace Conference 1919 Remembered series where the *ratio* of the Court of Appeal was undermined by the new Charity Commission and a party-political judge of the Administrative Court.²⁴ In short, the attempt was blocked by misconduct.

Thereafter IPP sought to draw public attention to how political interests were undermining charity in England and Wales and the public benefit of an 'irenical perspective', through:

- Satire; taking the concept of 'Yes Minister' applied to the legal profession in 'My Lord, no'.²⁵
- An offer of forgiveness to various legal bodies and persons concerned.²⁶

Then, in 2012, this author discovered the offence of 'misconduct in public office' and wrote:

- A complaint to the Metropolitan Police against certain Charity Commission officials and their legal representatives as well as the party-political judge (who had immunity from prosecution). The Met accepted that a criminal offence may have been committed by Commission officials, if not their legal representatives, but considered that the task of prosecuting the case faced too great a set of obstacles to be worth attempting.²⁷

Consequently, the author wrote:

- A 40-page open letter to the Attorney General dated 28 June 2012, copied to various named state officials who he publicly accused of misconduct in public office, or aiding and abetting the same, including the party-political judge. He invited the Law Officer to prosecute him for 'scandalising the court', or any of the parties to prosecute him for publishing a defamatory libel.²⁸ None did. The letter was copied to media organisations.

Finally, in May 2014, he wrote:

- A letter to the party-political judge, following the conviction of a former judicial colleague of his on three counts of intending to pervert the course of public justice, calling for his removal under the Senior Courts Act 1981, s. 11(3). It was copied to every active member of both Houses of Parliament but, deliberately, not to the media to avoid applying political pressure.²⁹ At the end of the year he retired as a judge and now sits as a Crossbencher.

Media attention: None.

2014-2018

During the centenary of the Great War the opportunity for a third legal case arose out of the Report of the Iraq Inquiry (6 July 2016), as already described in this Paris Peace Conference 1919 Remembered series.³⁰ The result has been given at page 2 above.

Media attention: That the Court of Appeal has abandoned without explanation, on All Saints' Day almost 100 years after the Great War ended, the very principle it emphatically endorsed on 28 June 2000, the anniversary of the assassination that precipitated that cataclysm, has not so far led to any media attention. However, sooner or later, the consequences for public benefit of abandoning an 'irenical perspective' must work its way through to public interest.

Let us hope it is not then too late for any remedial action.

3. The Future: International Peace or a Great Power War?

The traditional political media in England – press, radio and television – report from a public interest and balance of power perspective, which constantly emphasises the weight of external pressure in producing specific outcomes. Thus, the supposed 'defeat' of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War is attributed to greater Western power and strength of purpose. Even editorial requirements for public sector broadcasting to be politically impartial, or for newspapers to separate factual reporting from editorial comment, do not prevent a 'bias' arising from underplaying the power of cooperation, and over-rating coercion, in international relations because the adoption of peaceful means of conflict resolution is often assumed to be the result of 'weakness'. The thought that weakness might be the basis for securing a state of peace is alien despite the evidence throughout history that the exploitation of weaker powers by stronger ones sows the seeds of future conflict. How much more so, when peaceful means of conflict resolution are not reciprocated or only partially so.

The author's final Prodem Briefing in October 1995 put such dangers arising from the post-Cold War peace settlement like this:

Tragically, after a brief hiatus, the trends in Great Power rivalry are set to continue. The unprecedented opportunity to break with the past, presented by the Gorbachev 'peace offensive', was used by the West to gain political and military advantage. Now, revived by Western triumphalist policies, militarism in the former Soviet Union is once again showing its teeth. The doctrine of power politics rejected, paradoxically, by the 'Evil Empire' (as Reagan dubbed it) had precluded the possibility of that Empire's ideological transformation from militarism to peace. When it came about anyway that same dogma helped ensure that Western policy makers focused not on the elimination of imperialism and war but on increasing Western power. This then served to recreate that very power politics which, historically, has led to war. Never in modern history were policy makers so trapped by their own sense of realism. Never did a doctrine prove to be so self-fulfilling a prophesy. Then, in a final twist of irony, the realists of the West used the renewed militarism in the East to justify the 'wisdom' of those policies which had done so much to renew that militarism in the first place!³¹

Just as the Paris Peace Conference 1919 and the Treaty of Versailles failed and – contra MacMillan and others – created the climate for war that led to World War II, not inevitably but because of the failure to apply an ‘irenical perspective’ even-handedly, so now the post-Cold War peace settlement, which was also made by democracies or democratising states, threatens humanity with the abyss of another Great Power war. If this is to be avoided, then the primary role of education and the public benefit of an irenical perspective must be expressed through the ‘Peace Games’ – as IPP describes competing analyses of conflict areas – to foresee the prospects for peace or war. Its practical value was shown in Briefing No. 1.

The contrast with the well-known Times editorial praising Neville Chamberlain’s Munich agreement with Hitler in 1938 is instructive.³² Public interest (and relief) was intense and that editorial expressed and rode the wave of public opinion. Winston Churchill’s achievement was in both facing down the wave of disapproval in Parliament at his scathing critique of the Munich agreement and, more importantly, his recognition that an objective analysis of the facts could never be overwhelmed by the sheer force of public opinion. Had the editor of The Times simply kept a record of all the instances that Hitler had accepted the peaceful overtures of his opponents but failed to reciprocate, let alone match them, he could never have written that editorial. In Churchill’s biography of his great ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, he had noted several years before Munich, in the context of an earlier European war:

Nearly always Governments which seek peace flag in their war efforts, and Governments which make the most vigorous war preparations take little interest in peace. The two opposite moods consort with difficulty in the human mind yet it is only by the double and, as it might seem, contradictory exertion that a good result can usually be procured.³³

Churchill, the MP, was writing as an historian. This author would claim that it is to education, rather than politics, that the public and their governments must turn for sound advice. Churchill’s advice was only heeded when it was probably too late to prevent World War II.

The powerlessness of the media over the long term in matters of securing peace has not changed, if this author’s assessment of it is anything to go by, in a hundred years. Doubtless their lack of concern, arising from their public interest motivation, has slowed our progress, but it is through the public benefit of an irenical perspective that humanity’s hope of salvation, in a secular sense, must lie. There will be no need for any further press releases, should that fail. If political institutions could not create a state of peace out of such favourable circumstances as existed in 1919 and 1990 there is no reason to believe they can, on their own, prevent another Great Power war...

Peter M. Southwood (Dr) is a part-time Parish Bursar in London. He is also a consultant on the direction of conflicts towards peace or war in the short and long term. In the latter role, much of his work is currently done on a voluntary basis for the International Peace Project, the educational charity (reg. no. 1101966) which he helped to establish. However, there is no formal link between his consultancy role and IPP. He is solely responsible for this article and the website at www.directionofconflict.org

He can be contacted by email at consultant@directionofconflict.org

Copyright

The author believes that quotations from other works in this article are within the limits of fair dealing for the purposes of criticism, review or quotation.

If publishers have any concerns to raise, they are requested to contact this author with the details so that the matter can receive early attention.

The Scripture quotation contained herein is from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and is used by permission. All rights reserved.

References

- ¹ . See Public Prosecution Service, 'Bloody Sunday Prosecution Decisions', News Release (14 March 2019); PPS, Bloody Sunday – Summary of Decisions Not to Prosecute (14 March 2019).
- ² . See, especially, Peter M. Southwood, 'A Bleak House Today: How English Charity Regulators Missed the Mark in 2000 and Beyond', Article no. 2 (6 March 2019) at <https://www.directionofconflict.org/what-we-do>
- ³ . Margaret MacMillan, Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War (John Murray Publishers, 2002), pp. 65-66.
- ⁴ . *Ibid*, pp. 93-94.
- ⁵ . *Ibid*, p. 93.
- ⁶ . Article 2, p. 7.
- ⁷ . Article 2, pp. 18-20.
- ⁸ . For the meaning of public benefit see Slade J. in McGovern v Attorney General [1982] Ch 321 at 333G-334B.
- ⁹ . Article 2, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ . Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Matthew 7:12.
- ¹¹ . See, in particular, Peter Southwood, Disarming Military Industries: Turning an Outbreak of Peace into an Enduring Legacy (Macmillan Press, 1991).
- ¹² . Details of the history of the Project on Demilitarisation (Prodem) and the publication of these Briefings will be found on the main International Peace Project (IPP) website at: <http://www.ipp2000.org/ipphistory.html> See, especially, Peter Southwood (ed.), Military Adventurism: Learning from the Past - Looking to the Future, Briefing No. A/3 (Project on Demilitarisation, University of Leeds, October 1995), Appendix E, pp. 74-79.
- ¹³ . The author was not present at that meeting with the press, due to illness. See Steven Schofield (ed), Western Hypocrisy on Arms Conversion: Helping Military Industries Disarm in the East... But Not in the West, Briefing C/1 (Prodem, University of Leeds, March 1994).
- ¹⁴ . The author's testimony is based solely on memory, rather than any written record.
- ¹⁵ . The Times did, though, provide a summary report on the Prodem case in the High Court in 1998.
- ¹⁶ . Private Action, Public Benefit: A Review of Charities and the Wider Not-For-Profit Sector, Strategy Unit Report (Cabinet Office, September 2002). The testimony about the briefing paper on peace is from the author's memory but a copy of the paper may be available in his archive.
- ¹⁷ . International Peace Project²⁰⁰⁰, Background paper (28 December 2002), 4pp available from the author.
- ¹⁸ . The author wrote a letter of complaint to the Charity Commission dated 11 October 2003 about this matter.
- ¹⁹ . Letter from Peter Southwood, IPP Promoter to Richard Sambrook, BBC Director, News dated 15 May 2004; Lord Hutton, Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly C.M.G (The Stationery Office, 28 January 2004).

-
- ²⁰ . The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Briefings on the Prospects for Peace, Briefing no. 1 (International Peace Project, January 2006) p. viii. Emphasis in the original. Available at <http://www.ipp2000.org/index.html> (bottom of home page).
- ²¹ . Taken from Peter M. Southwood, 'Death of a Peace Settlement – Birth of a Principle', Article no. 1 (18 January 2019), p. 11, footnote 19 at <https://www.directionofconflict.org/what-we-do>
- ²² . The part in quotations marks is from the BBC report 'Israel and Palestinians: Powers warn of "perpetual conflict"', 1 July 2016 at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36682056> Paraphrasing is from the Report of the Middle East Quartet (undated).
- ²³ . Southwood & Parsons v H M Attorney General, Court of Appeal No: CHANF 98/1405/CMS3 [28 June 2000], para. 29. For copies of the judgment, see: <http://www.ipp2000.org/ipplaw.html>
- ²⁴ . See Article 2, pp. 13-18.
- ²⁵ . IPP Press Release on 10th Anniversary of Court of Appeal Judgment which allowed the establishment of IPP, 'A Sequel to "Yes Minister" proposed:- "My Lord, no"' (28 June 2010).
- ²⁶ . IPP Public Notice, 'An Offer of Forgiveness on 9/11 Anniversary' (11 September 2010).
- ²⁷ . Letter from Peter Southwood to Central Operations and Specialist Crime Directorate, Metropolitan Police Service dated 7 March 2012 enclosing a complaint file and subsequent communications.
- ²⁸ . Open letter from Peter Southwood to Rt Hon Dominic Grieve QC, MP, Attorney General dated 28 June 2012.
- ²⁹ . Letter from Peter Southwood to a deputy judge of the Administrative Court dated 9 May 2014 copied.
- ³⁰ . Article 1, pp. 5-7; and Article 2, pp. 18-20.
- ³¹ . Southwood (ed), Military Adventurism, p. 28.
- ³² . Cited by William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (Pan Books, 1976), p. 513.
- ³³ . Marlborough: His Life and Times, Volume 4 (Sphere Books, 1967), p.42. First published in 1933 by George H. Harrap and Co. Ltd.