

I. Historical Review

Even in the depths of World War II, some nations and people were already considering how to build a durable peace and a stronger international organization after the War. There was widespread agreement that the international civil service, introduced with the League of Nations, needed to be retained and strengthened. Lamenting that states had always sounded the alarm too late, in 1943 Lord Viscount Cranborne of Great Britain proposed that this vital job be given to the "chief permanent official" of the new organization.

[He] should be empowered to bring before members on his own initiative, any potentially dangerous development at an early stage before an aggressor has time to gird himself for war ... If the Earl, Lord Perth [Sir Eric Drummond, the League's first Secretary-General], had enjoyed this power as Secretary-General of the League, the history of the League might have been a very different one.¹

He reasoned that

it is always embarrassing...for a nation, and especially a small nation, to attribute aggressive intentions to a neighbouring country with whom it is ostensibly in friendly relations. Consequently the tendency ... was for Member States of the League to raise a question of this kind when the situation was already so acute that there was no way of averting armed conflict ... [T]he chief permanent official... will be an international official and therefore not open to the same embarrassment as Ministers of individual states.

In fact, the need to give a warning role to the League Secretary-General had been recognized by the League Assembly in its earliest days, but the notion was never enshrined in the League's Covenant, nor actively implemented.²

In June 1945, the fifty nations which gathered in San Francisco to prepare and sign UN Charter decided to include a novel provision which gave the UN Secretary-General, who was accountable to no nation in particular but to the organization as a whole, a right that heretofore had only been conferred upon states: the ability to convoke a meeting of the Security Council on his own initiative in order to issue a warning on a matter that was not yet on the Council's agenda. In Article 99, the Charter states:

The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.

Sir Eric Drummond, the first Secretary-General of the League, commented on this new provision: