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The appointment of Trygve Lie as the first UN Secretary-General

One World Trust background briefs for the 1 for 7 billion campaign

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Political context

The appointment of Trygve Lie as the UN's first Secretary-General in January 1946 set a number of precedents for the appointment of his successors in that post, but in other respects his appointment and tenure were unique in UN history.

The political context for the UN in 1946 was radically different from the situation of today. The United Nations was a brand new organisation and no-one knew quite how this experiment would play out. Coming out of the devastating Second World War, peoples and governments alike dreamed of a better future, and pinned their hopes on the UN organisation. Within the UN the five victorious great powers – the P5 – would work out their own differences while jointly policing the world to prevent new wars. But the balance between them was fragile and tensions of the Cold War were already beginning to show. Suspicion and fear between the Soviet Union and 'the West' would leave its mark on the new organisation, and also influenced the selection of its first secretary-general.

Important considerations and issues at stake As the UN secretary-general was a brand new position, within a brand new organisation, the member states did not fully know what they were looking for in the office. Should the Secretary-General play a primarily administrative role (be a 'secretary'), or was the office political (a 'general')? Article 97 of the UN Charter describes the Secretary-General as "the chief administrative officer of the Organization," yet even in discussions from 1945/1946 member states and other observers recognised that the Secretary-General would be more than an administrative secretary. The UN Preparatory Commission in its report from December 1945 noted the important political role given to the Secretary-General through Article 99. This article gave the Secretary-General shared responsibility for the UN's primary purpose – to maintain international peace and security – and also assigned the role considerable autonomy. The committee concluded that the responsibilities article 99 conferred on the secretary-general would "require the exercise of the highest qualities of political judgment, tact and integrity."¹ The General Assembly too recognised the importance of the role as it decided to offer the secretary-general a generous annual salary (\$20,000) and representation allowance (a further \$20,000), plus a furnished house, to "enable a man of eminence and high

1. Report of the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations, UN Doc. PC/20, 23 December 1945, 87.

attainment to accept and maintain the position.”²

Beyond this little guidance existed. There was no official search process, no job criteria, and no short-list of candidates. Indeed, the process of 1946 reflected different values and norms than those dominant in 2016 discussions. In 1946 the General Assembly explicitly asked the Security Council to recommend only one candidate and expressed its preference that there should be no public debate or voting on the issue.³ This reflected the belief that a Secretary-General would be less legitimate and effective if his election had been preceded by a public debate where his opponents made their objections against him known.⁴ Consensus and unity were the most important considerations in 1946. The UN was a young and fragile organisation, and it was therefore important to present a united front and to seek to solve differences behind-the-scenes rather than in public debates so as not to undermine the public’s faith in the new creation.

Candidates

Unlike today there was no official short-list of candidates. Aspiring secretaries-general did not announce their candidacy or mount a campaign, public or private, to secure the post. Of course, the media still speculated about possible candidates, and delegates to the General Assembly discussed the question among themselves. The favourites in public discussions (in the Western media) were Antony Eden, war-time foreign minister of the United Kingdom, and General Dwight Eisenhower, supreme commander of the allied forces in Europe and later US president. Both were famous and respected for their roles during the Second World War. Neither appeared on the list of candidates being considered by the P5. The closest we get to a short-list of the actual candidates are six names discussed at a meeting of the P5 on 23 January. On this list we find Lester Pearson, Canada’s ambassador to Washington DC, Stanoje Simic, Yugoslavia’s ambassador to Washington DC, Wincenty Rzymowski, foreign minister of Poland, Henri Bonnet, France’s ambassador to Washington DC, Trygve Lie, foreign minister of Norway, and Eelco van Kleffens, foreign minister of the Netherlands.⁵ These were all men, all from Europe or the Dominions, and they had all served either as foreign minister of their country or as ambassador in the capital of one of the P5.

Why did Trygve Lie win?

Why did the P5 in the end decide to recommend Trygve Lie for the post? Lie was no-one’s first choice. The United States and the United Kingdom argued for Pearson of Canada. The Soviet Union wished to see an Eastern European national in the post. Lie was chosen as a compromise of geographical and political considerations. The main criteria for choosing the first Secretary-General was his nationality. The P5 sought to balance the national representation across the organisation, and viewed the election of the Secretary-General in relation to allocation of other important positions in the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as the location of the UN headquarters.

Most importantly, the emerging Cold War left a very limited number of acceptable countries for the post of Secretary-General. The United States (and its allies) did not wish to see a national of a state in the Soviet sphere in the post, while the Soviet Union was unwilling to let a national of a Western state assume the post. In early 1946 Norway had not fully joined the Western camp. Lie had been its foreign minister during the war and had visited Moscow on several occasions. Some have speculated that the Soviet Union viewed Lie as a ‘socialist’ who could do their bidding at the UN,⁶ and the manner of his selection helped create the impression that he was

2. General Assembly resolution 11(I), 24 January 1946.

3. General Assembly resolution 11(I), 24 January 1946.

4. Arthur W. Rovine, *The first fifty years: The Secretary-General in World Politics 1920-1970* (Leyden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1970), 206.

5. “Minutes by the United States Delegation of the Five-Power Informal Meeting,” 23 January 1946, FRUS 1946, I, 166-169.

6. James Barros, *Trygve Lie and the Cold War: The UN Secretary-General Pursues Peace, 1946-1953* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 27-37.

'Moscow's man.'⁷ But as a long-time social democrat and trade unionist Lie had developed strong anti-communist sentiments, which would grow as the Cold War progressed.⁸ There is no reason to believe that the Soviet Union thought otherwise. Lie himself believed the Soviet Union had accepted him because "without being committed to the East, [he] was not hostile to it."⁹ The election of Lie thus represented an early Cold War compromise, and Lie was elected primarily because no one raised any strong objections against him.

Why was Trygve Lie re-elected?

The manner of Lie's 're-election' and his 'second term' in office presents a further difference between Lie's tenure and later Secretaries-General. Lie was not actually re-elected to a second term. In 1950 in the context of the Korean War the Soviet Union strongly opposed Lie's re-election, because the Secretary-General had been a vocal and active supporter of the US-led intervention to aid South Korea. The United States, on the other hand, stated that it would veto any other candidate. The Security Council was therefore unable to reach agreement, and the General Assembly took matters into its own hands and decided to extend Lie's original term by three years. The Soviet Union and its allies protested that the procedure was illegal, yet the United States at this time commanded a large enough majority in the Assembly to override the Soviet concern. This irregular re-appointment did not bode well for Lie's continued tenure, and can serve as a warning against bypassing the Security Council in appointing a secretary-general. Boycotted by the Soviet Union and having lost the support of the UN Secretariat over his handling (or lack thereof) of the McCarthyism process, Lie resigned from office in November 1952.

The appointment of Lie as the UN's first Secretary-General set precedents for the future. In a brand new organisation in the context of Cold War tensions it made sense to focus on unity and consensus, and therefore to allow the P5 to choose a Secretary-General they felt comfortable with behind closed doors. The consequences of this decision has had long term consequences, influencing subsequent appointment processes including the preparation to appoint its ninth Secretary-General.

The One World Trust promotes education, training and research into the changes required within global organisations in order to make them answerable to the people they affect and ensure that international laws are strengthened and applied equally to all. Its guiding vision is a world where all peoples live in peace and security and have equal access to opportunity and participation.

ACUNS is a global professional association of educational and research institutions, individual scholars, and practitioners active in the work and study of the United Nations, multilateral relations, global governance, and international cooperation. We promote teaching on these topics, as well as dialogue and mutual understanding across and between academics, practitioners, civil society and students.

7. Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace: Seven Years with the United Nations* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 9-10.

8. James P. Muldoon, "The House That Trygve Lie Built: Ethical Challenges as the First UN Secretary-General," in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 67-109.

9. Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, 18.