



ADDRESS BY

**THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

H.E. MR. JULIAN R. HUNTE

TO THE

**COUNCIL OF PRESIDENTS OF THE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY**

**VALLETTA, MALTA
4 -5 February 2004**

Please check against delivery

My dear colleagues:

It is my pleasure to join you at this extraordinary meeting of the Council of Presidents of the General Assembly here in Valletta, Malta. President De Marco, the arrangements for this meeting are excellent, and your generous hospitality and that of the Government and people of Malta is sincerely appreciated.

When we met in New York only a few months ago we had the benefit of the company and counsel of our friend and colleague, Ambassador Jaime de Piñes, President of the Fortieth Session of the General Assembly. I was saddened by his passing, as we all were. Today, I join in commending him for his contribution to the work of the United Nations, and particularly the General Assembly, and to his country, Spain. The work this Council undertook to carry out at its inaugural meeting in 1997 goes on inspired, I believe, by the memory of Ambassador de Piñes.

I speak in this Council ever conscious that, as the current President of the General Assembly and ex-officio member, I am “the new kid on the block” – waiting in the wings to become a full member while going through the fiery trial of the Presidency, the initiation for membership. I know that there will be a place waiting for me when I become eligible for full membership on 13 September 2004. For the time being, I consider myself to be an apprentice among seasoned veterans, and thank you for the privilege of having a seat at the table and the right to speak.

I regard the establishment of this Council as one of the positive developments that has occurred in recent years in our efforts to facilitate the work of the United Nations and enhance its role and standing in the world. This Council is a common platform from which those who have held the Presidency of the General Assembly - the only universal organ in the world’s premier international organization - can put their combined experience and expertise at the service of the Assembly and the organization, nationally, regionally and internationally.

The multifaceted role we assume when we take up the Presidency has, I believe, prepared us to be at the forefront of efforts to support and promote the United Nations General Assembly and to enhance its capacity to address the myriad issues on the global agenda.

From the special vantage point of the Presidency, we have endeavoured to provide effective leadership; consulted with Heads of State and Government and other high level officials; provided direction for the work we do with the Secretary-General and his staff, conducted consultations and negotiations, spearheaded initiatives on a broad range of issues, sought to bring long-standing issues to conclusion, and to enhance recognition of the role and function of the General Assembly, including by appropriately representing the membership. Depending on the issues and the matters at stake, it could be the best of times or the worse of times for the President.

It always helps, however, when the President, Prime Minister or Minister with whom the President of the General Assembly is consulting is a previous office holder as you are, President de Marco, and others of my colleagues around the table. The understanding and pragmatism you bring no doubt stems from your firsthand knowledge of the rigours of the Presidency, and what is required to assist the President to advance the work of the Assembly. This, in my view, is the logic that underpins the Council of Presidents of the General Assembly - it is evident from the Articles of Association of the Council.

Article I, in particular, speaks to the continuing supportive involvement of the Council of Presidents in the work and objectives of the General Assembly and the establishment of links with the activities of the Assembly. The Article also commits the Council to promote consultation and cooperation with the principal organs of the United Nations system, and to take action that would help promote the ideals of the United Nations in respect of peace, security and development – important ideals of the Charter.

My own interaction with the Council leads me to conclude that it is taking action in the areas defined in the Articles of Association. But I ask myself as a soon to be full member of the Council, “Are there additional courses of action we might take to facilitate and enhance the work of the President in Office, to promote international consciousness of the principles and purposes of the United Nations and to otherwise achieve our goals?”

I know you will all agree with me when I say that the General Assembly, in particular, needs all the support it can get. In recent years, and particularly in the last three years, many critical issues are radically altering the boundaries of international relations.

Technological advances, particularly in communications and transportation have introduced new dimensions in global issues and problems that could not have been contemplated when the United Nations was established some fifty-nine years ago. Ensuring that the General Assembly keeps in steps with global developments requires constant creative thinking and action and a proactive approach that takes into account the sensitivities involved in relations among nations and groups and the need to build partnership with civil society, outside the customary diplomatic processes.

I am sure that my colleague and friend Jan Kavan would agree that the United Nations was in a troubled mood in the wake of the military action in Iraq. In respect of the General Assembly, many voiced serious concern that the disproportionate attention being given to the Security Council by the media was sapping the authority and energy of the General Assembly. I know Mr. Kavan will also agree that notwithstanding the troubled mood, there was a distinctly hopeful, if cautious view that this trend could be reversed and that the General Assembly could reassert itself as the principal policy making and coordination body of the United Nations.

There was somewhat of a sense of urgency to get the General Assembly back on track to address the myriad complex and troubling issues on the global agenda. Indeed, critical global problems - poverty, medical pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, the international trafficking in drugs and small arms and light weapons, terrorism, conflict and war - challenge all member states. More, the need to urgently address these problems, constituted a persuasive argument for greater cooperation and collaboration.

There was an undercurrent permeating most of the consultations and discussion I undertook as well as those that were taking place among Member States of the General Assembly. The message was that the Assembly needed to revitalize itself, to better carry out its obligations under the Charter and enhance its role and authority. I made this matter one of my priorities, in response to what Member States were saying to me.

True to their word, Member States endorsed a far-reaching revitalization package in a President's resolution adopted on 19 December 2003. Among its various provisions, the resolution provides for a transitional office for the President-elect and the strengthening of the Office of the President in respect of human resources. It addresses the matter of coordination between the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, providing scope for closer cooperation on matters of development and of peace and security.

Some say the resolution is radical. I say it is rational and pragmatic, and, an important step on the road of revitalization, on which the Assembly must remain. Importantly, this revitalization package represented continuity of the work of the colleagues around this table, for which as current President, I thank you.

At the same time, the General Assembly made good strides in the area of development. The High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development provided the context in which important decisions were taken in respect of the implementation of the United Nations development agenda on issues including commodities and tax cooperation, and for a critical dialogue with civil society. It also addressed some very thorny problems, from the United Nations budget to cloning.

I have recounted the developments above to underscore my viewpoint that this is an important juncture for the General Assembly and the United Nations, and that the Council of Presidents can make a particular impact at this juncture. The members of the Council, when they speak as former Presidents of the General Assembly, have independence of position that puts them outside any national or other grouping. This leaves Council members free to help build consensus, to take impartial stances and to garner support for the General Assembly and the United Nations.

I believe that in the current international environment, the Council cannot play its role according to a script. The high-level standing and respect that Council members can command, however, gives this Council authority to write its own script, and there is good scope for doing so.

I believe that the Council might consider preparing and submitting to the President elect of the General Assembly each year its viewpoints on the work of the Assembly and generally, on global issues likely to come up during the course of the session, to assist the President in consultations.

I believe that members of the Council might consider offering their assistance and practical suggestions to a sitting President on matters before the Assembly on which the Council member took a particular initiative in his/her capacity as President of the General Assembly. Revitalization of the General Assembly and Reform of the Security Council, in particular, are issues that come to mind.

I believe that members of the Council might consider making pronouncements in the name of the Council on the occasion of selected special commemorations and events of the United Nations. The Assembly is currently negotiating in respect of a special event to take place in 2005, for example. The Council might consider issuing a statement on that occasion.

I believe that members of the Council might consider preparing papers setting out their opinion on important issues on the global agenda that have, or are likely to have an impact on the work of the General Assembly. These papers might take the form of press releases or as offers of advice to a sitting President.

I believe that Council members might consider strategies for enhancing the image of the General Assembly by publicizing this work and their support for the Assembly and the United Nations in the Media in their countries, regionally and internationally. Meetings of the Council provide invaluable opportunities, in that regard.

I believe that Council members should continue to give their strong support to United Nations Associations and other civil society organizations having as their objective support for the ideals and work of the United Nations. I believe that members of the Council might continue to advise the sitting President of their availability to participate in interactive events under the auspices of the General Assembly. It should be noted that the reform exercise addresses the issue of interactive debates such as Panel and other discussions.

My own view is that this Council constitutes its own group of wise men who are familiar with the work of the General Assembly and committed to it. It is, I believe, a bridge of continuity between the current President of the General Assembly and his/her predecessors and a much-needed source of strength and support for the Assembly and the United Nations. Count on me to play my part.

4 February 2004