

# Great Britain and the UN Committee of 24

By [Helene von Bismarck](#) | Published: May 16, 2012  
© The British Scholar Society

Citation advice: Helene von Bismarck, 'Great Britain and the UN Committee of 24'. Essay for The British Scholar Society, May 2012,  
<http://britishscholar.org/publications/2012/05/16/great-britain-and-the-un-committee-of-24/>



**Helene von Bismarck**

On 14 December 1960, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed its famous “Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples”.<sup>[i]</sup> This document, also known as UN Resolution 1514, declared that the domination of peoples by alien powers constituted a violation of human rights and thereby a breach of the UN Charter. It reaffirmed the right of self-determination for all peoples and called for the immediate and unconditional end to colonialism all over the world. Less than a year later, a special committee was established by the General Assembly to monitor and report the progress of decolonisation. One of the founding members of this Committee of 24, which was until 1962 called the Committee of 17, was Great Britain.

From the very beginning, the British position in the Committee was an extremely difficult one. The Committee of 24 soon became very well known for the violent attacks by the majority of its members against the Western colonial powers. Great Britain was the prime target of this anti-imperialist rhetoric. As the 1960s progressed, the criticism became so aggressive that the British Government at several points considered leaving the Committee of 24. This was only prevented, because Lord Caradon, the British Ambassador to the United Nations, convinced his government of the necessity to avoid the impression that Great Britain refused to cooperate with the United Nations. In the end, Great Britain remained a member of the Committee of 24 until 1971, when large parts of the British Empire had already been decolonized.<sup>[ii]</sup>

The impact which the Committee of 24 had on the dissolution of the British Empire should receive more attention by historians. The relevance of the Committee resulted, in part, from the great concern the British Government had for Great Britain’s international image during the 1960s. The determination to present Great Britain’s relationship with its colonies and other dependent territories in a favourable light was not only a question of honour and principle, but based on the firm conviction that too much international attention could have a significantly disruptive effect on the remaining parts of the British Empire and thereby endanger important British interests. The Committee of 24 was much more than just an international forum where Great Britain had to publicly defend its imperial record. The mere existence of the Committee influenced the policies of the British Government in at least some

of its dependent territories. The impact of the Committee of 24 was therefore not limited to the many non-self-governing territories it actually discussed, but extended also to those countries the Committee might have put on its agenda.

The consequences of the British Government's fear of interference by the Committee of 24 were seen with the case of the nine Protected States of the Persian Gulf. In December 1963, Sir Patrick Dean, Lord Caradon's predecessor at the United Nations in New York, warned the Foreign Office that the Committee of 24 was very likely to turn its attention to Bahrain, Qatar and the seven Trucial States within the next year. Dean feared that the Arab member states of the United Nations, under the leadership of either Egypt or Iraq, would use the Committee of 24 to launch a concerted attack against the British position in the Persian Gulf. If that happened, the British Government would have very little chance of convincing the committee that there was no reason to classify Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States as non-self-governing territories. While the nine shaikhdoms were no colonies, their sovereignty was clearly limited. The British Government was not only responsible for their defence against foreign aggression and the conduct of their external relations, but it also reserved certain privileges in regard to their internal affairs. These British privileges included extra-territorial jurisdiction over all non-Muslims residing in Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States and a veto-right to the granting of oil concessions to foreign companies by the local rulers.

During the next few years, the British Government remained very alert to the possibility that the Committee of 24 might put the nine Protected States on its agenda. Sir Patrick Dean's warnings led to an intense discussion on how Great Britain's position in the Persian Gulf could be made less susceptible to international criticism. In 1965, the British Government decided to very slowly modernise its relationship with Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States, without, however, having any intention of giving up Great Britain's presence in the Persian Gulf in the immediate future. In the meantime, it remained the policy of the British Government to draw as little international attention to the area as possible. The Foreign Office was very anxious to avoid the impression that Great Britain exercised more power in the Protected States than it had been granted by treaty. The most significant consequence of this principle was the British policy towards the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al Nahyan. At least from 1963 onwards, the possibility of replacing Shaikh Shakhbut, who was considered an unfit ruler for his shaikhdom, with his brother Shaikh Zayed was discussed in the Foreign Office. However, these plans were not acted upon until 1966, when the British Government was presented with a written request by the leading members of Abu Dhabi's ruling family to depose Shaikh Shakhbut. Since the British Government had no constitutional right to replace a ruler, the initiative for the deposition had to come – or at least appear to have come – from the Al Nahyan family. In 1964, Sir William Luce, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, had suggested to go ahead without the prior consent of the family. The Foreign Office refused, because this move would have opened the door to the Committee of 24, with possible detrimental consequences for Great Britain's entire position in the Persian Gulf.

In the end, Sir Patrick Dean's concern about possible interference by the Committee of 24 in the Protected States proved to be unfounded. However, the impact that the concern about Great Britain's international image had on British Persian Gulf policy shows the need to further investigate the role that the Committee of 24 played in the process of decolonisation.

---

[1] [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/1514%28XV%29](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/1514%28XV%29)

[\[ii\]](#) See Wm. Roger Louis, “Public Enemy Number One: The British Empire in the Dock at the United Nations, 1957-71”, in Martin Lynn (ed.), *The British Empire in the 1950s. Retreat or Revival?*, Basingstoke/ New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 186-213.

This entry was posted in [News](#), [Op-Ed](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Both comments and trackbacks are currently closed.