

Derek Smith and the United Nations Association

The United Nations Association was a very important part of Derek's life for 68 years. I feel honoured to be asked to speak about this and I only hope I can do Derek justice.

I first met Derek about 30 years ago – around 1991 or 92. If Derek were here with his amazing memory, he would quite likely be able to give the exact year and possibly the month because it was at a public meeting organised by Twickenham United Nations Association which I'd turned up at, and which Derek was chairing. The speaker was Bruce Kent who asked members of the audience to raise their hands if they had read the Charter of the United Nations and, in particular, the stirring and inspirational words of the Preamble to the Charter. I'm ashamed to say that I barely knew of its existence – let alone what it said. At the end of the meeting, Derek came and spoke to me and I asked where I could see a copy of this document which had been so highly recommended (this was of course in those far-off pre-internet days!) He asked where I lived and the very next morning arrived on my doorstep and presented me with a copy. I joined the United Nations Association shortly afterwards and some months later Derek invited me to join the committee of the local Twickenham branch (even though my ignorance meant that I had very little to contribute, apart perhaps from making cakes for special occasions). But it brought me into close contact with Derek and Estelle, and over the years I got to know them better and better, and my admiration and fondness for them both, grew and grew.

Derek was 18 years old when the second world war ended, and so was all too aware of the terrible consequences of war. He saw the newly established United Nations as a beacon of light and hope for a better, fairer, more peaceful future based on international understanding and co-operation.

Soon after the UN came into being, the United Nations Association (UNA) was founded to enable ordinary citizens to support and promote the ideals of the UN and act when necessary as a critical friend. Derek joined the UNA in 1953 and maintained a deep and steadfast commitment to it for the rest of his life, first as a member of the Wandsworth branch, then, when he got married in 1960 and moved to Twickenham, the Twickenham branch (now Twickenham and Richmond). Estelle joined UNA when she married Derek and became just as deeply committed. From then on theirs was a wonderfully efficient and effective partnership – promoting the ideals of the UN using their different but complementary skills. I contacted the UNA-UK office in central London just over a year ago to ask whether Derek might be the longest serving member in the country. Sadly, they don't have the records to answer that question, but they thought it entirely possible.

But whether or not he was the longest serving member, I think over the years he must have ranked pretty high amongst the most active, effective and devoted members, particularly at the local level. For many many years he filled the roles of Chair or Secretary of the local branch, and whichever of those posts he was in, he worked with outstanding dedication, enthusiasm and efficiency, leading branch campaigning on a variety of UN issues ranging from peacekeeping to humanitarian relief. Like so many of his generation, Derek didn't have the opportunities available today for higher education but he once told me he thought

the legal profession might have suited him, and certainly he was always clear sighted, meticulous in his preparation and organisation and always made sure he was very well-informed on the causes he took up.

His output was phenomenal. With the backing of the branch, he organised regular public meetings, as well as exhibitions and fundraising events, he maintained contact with the local MP, wrote articles for the local press, he organised model UN general assemblies to enable young people locally to gain some insight into the workings of the UN, organised an annual UN Day Civic Service every October, reminded the local council to fly the UN flag from the civic flagpole on UN Day, and recruited new members – in the 1970s I believe the branch had door to door recruitment campaigns! One of Derek's recruits was Sir Vince Cable. Just before Vince was first elected MP for Twickenham, he happened to knock on Derek's door canvassing support ... and left having been persuaded by Derek that he should join UNA! Actually of course Vince was already firmly convinced of the value of the UN but true to his promise to Derek, he joined UNA, becoming a good friend to the local branch and, eventually, President of the London & South East Region for a spell.

In the 1990s, Derek heard a speaker at a UNA meeting in Richmond [Patricia Rogers] comment that teaching about the UN should be included in the national curriculum for schools. This sparked what was arguably Derek's finest campaign. If he were here he would tell you it was a branch campaign but there is no doubt that it was his initiative, drive and enthusiasm which led to its successful conclusion.

In 1997, at Derek's suggestion, the UNA-UK national conference carried a resolution proposing that every effort be made to ensure that the UN was included in the new national curriculum.

However, when the government issued its preliminary proposals for the new curriculum, it was disappointing to find that they contained no requirement to teach about the UN. Undeterred, (and we've just heard from Mark about his persistence) Derek redoubled his efforts and corresponded at considerable length with David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education. Vince Cable agreed to ask a question in the House of Commons and national UNA agreed to ask members throughout the country to send an Urgent Action Network Letter to the appropriate government Minister. When the final version of the curriculum came out in 1999 – success! – after all that hard work, the UN was included as part of the new GCSE subject of Citizenship!

It is entirely fitting that in 2002 Derek was awarded an MBE for his services to the United Nations Association, an honour which he accepted with his usual modesty only on the grounds that it was really an award to the branch. In 2020, UNA London and South East Region presented him with their Distinguished Service Award.

Derek's was truly a life well lived and purposeful. Estelle once told me that he couldn't bear the phrase 'killing time' - for Derek time was a valuable resource to be put to good use, and he certainly did that. His concern for humanity and his integrity inspired his tremendous commitment to the things he considered important. In addition to his UNA work, he had in the past campaigned vigorously against apartheid and for nuclear disarmament and at a

personal level, he was always a concerned friend to anyone who needed his time, help and support. Derek really epitomised Gandhi's oft-quoted words "Be the change you wish to see in the world"

When I last spoke to Derek just before his death, he was remarkably calm and accepting of his situation, clearly strengthened by his faith, and counted himself fortunate to have had such a long and healthy life. He also expressed huge appreciation, as he often did, for all the loving care and kindness and support he received from Liz, Howard, Malcolm, Jacob and Tabitha.

What an inspiration to us all! What a life to celebrate! It was a privilege and pleasure to have known Derek, and the example he has set us will long be remembered.

Hilary Evans