

WILLIAM SAY 1952-2022

Journalist, and lifelong advocate for the United Nations.

William “Bill” Say has died unexpectedly after a tragic accident in his home a few days short of his 70th birthday.

An enduring figure in the UK United Nations Association, he had held offices in the non-governmental organisation at national, regional and local level for 45 years and was the unofficial custodian of its collective memory and heritage.

The son of the Rt Rev Dr David Say, and his wife Irene, he grew up in Hatfield, Herts and later in Rochester, Kent. He was a boarder at Ardingly College in East Sussex.

After school, he took the bold step of travelling to Canada to take his first degree, relying on personal savings and a variety of jobs to fund his studies and explore that vast country. As a contemporary recalled, “he had spent some time in the far northwest of Canada in the early 1970s. He was the only person I knew in Britain who had been to Inuvik, and the Mackenzie River delta – where that great river meets the Arctic Ocean”.

He undertook his post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics and the School of Oriental and African Studies. During term breaks, he secured a volunteer internship at UN Headquarters in New York and at the Palais de Nations, its European Headquarters in Geneva. His ambition was to work for the United Nations but found himself thwarted by the strict country quota system in operation at the time. Instead, William devoted his energies and talents to supporting the work of the United Nations through the UN Association, a membership organisation that works to raise public awareness of the UN and its work, and promotes its general goals.

In 1977 William joined the UNA Youth Council and the Westminster UNA branch. UNA-UK was at the forefront of a global disarmament campaign. A Disarmament and Development Network was set up to highlight the links between massive levels of military spending and much smaller levels of development expenditure. Around this time, he travelled to Moscow as part of a UNA delegation to promote mutual understanding and to ease political tensions.

He became Hon Secretary of UNA-UK’s Economic and Social Affairs Advisory Committee (ECOSA), a post he held for over a decade. It was chaired by Harold Wilson’s former Minister of Overseas Development, Dame Judith Hart and its membership comprised some of the UK’s leading development experts. William’s great skill was in his ability to interpret and tap this deep pool of knowledge and to translate it into sound and coherent policy advice for UNA-UK to use in its influencing work with Government and Parliamentarians.

After working as a freelance journalist, he worked as a Government Communications Officer attached to the Ministry of Defence where he co-edited its newsletter, a journal that was widely read by civilian and military personnel in the UK and overseas. As a journalist William was noted for his light touch but probing interview technique. His copy was always readable and never dull.

He was very much in his element at the MoD, visiting a number of military bases including Ascension Island and the Falkland Islands and made a parachute jump.

He interviewed some of the country's most senior military and political figures including a number of Secretaries of State and the Heads of each of the Armed forces.

During the UN's 50th Anniversary celebrations in 1995, he organised a special anniversary feature on the work of the United Nations, which included an interview with former UNA-UK Chair Lord David Ennals. This was William's initiative which he had to fight for. It provided a welcome platform to reach a potentially sceptical audience with his vision of a stronger and more effective United Nations.

William also served as Vice-Chair of the UNA London and South East Region and served for several years as a member of the UNA-UK Board. He saw it as his role to speak up for the interests of the ordinary membership. He never hesitated, when the occasion required it, to use his position to hold the executive to account.

A member of Chatham House, he had always been interested in policy development, co-authoring many UNA branch resolutions, and was a familiar figure at the UNA Annual policy making Conference.

One of the most important influences in his life was Gordon Evans, a former chair of UNA Westminster branch and founder of the UN Parliamentary Group. Gordon had given up a lucrative city career to devote his life to working for the UN. Gordon thought the world of Bill. His favourite Gordon Evans quote was, "how infinitesimal is anything we can achieve, how infinitely important it is that we should do it."

A key landmark in William's life took place in 1999 when he married his wife Kirsteen, nee Buchanan - a teacher specialising in food hygiene and infection control - one beautifully sunny day in Ayrshire in Scotland. His father presided over the ceremony. Their union brought him nothing but happiness.

The new millennium was not always kind to William. He fell ill and had to take early retirement. His commitment to promoting the work of the United Nations was undiminished and he continued to be actively involved in two branches of UNA, Harpenden and Westminster.

He was appointed to a mental health board of his local NHS Trust, and undertook a number of duties including participation in recruitment and retention of nurses and providing a layperson's voice on the Trust to ensure that mental health issues were not treated as a low medical priority by the NHS.

William was deeply disappointed by the decision by UNA-UK to become a charity. William was at the forefront of the campaign to prevent it which he regarded as a betrayal of UNA historical roots as a membership organisation. After various attempts to broker a compromise failed he observed, "I feel very sad about what is happening - especially the proposed lack of democratic accountability - but, to be frank, the process has been underway for several years. UNA-HQ is much more elitist and has started the process of becoming a think tank/ research institute. When they refer to 'we' they mean the Trustees - not we the members".

In his remaining years, Bill continued to contribute to draft policy resolutions whenever the opportunity arose. To mark the Anniversary of the Balfour declaration he drafted a thoughtful resolution urging a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians on fair and equal terms.

He was increasingly concerned about the rise in global tensions, both in the behaviour of Russia and the political direction of China. "The Chinese have been blatantly ignoring international law in the South China Sea and supporting a corrupt and cruel regime in North Korea which is developing nuclear weapons. The hydrogen bomb North Korea tested was six times more than Hiroshima. Who is selling/ giving Kim Jong Un the technology? Very worrying." Following in the footsteps of one of his aunts, he and his wife had been on a fact finding trip to North Korea, one of their last trips before the Covid pandemic brought international travel to a halt.

A gentle and considerate person, who did not always secure the breaks that his talents and ability had merited, William was very much his own man, he was particularly effective at countering displays of hubris, arrogance, pomposity or rudeness. A person's rank or status cut no ice with him, only the quality of their arguments and the personal sincerity of their convictions would impress him. William was great fun to be with and an intensely loyal personal friend. He loved his leisure time and every trip or outing was meticulously planned. He enjoyed country walks, and visits to the coast, especially to Brighton which he had visited since childhood. He took much pleasure in meeting and socialising with friends and family. He was a natural people person.

His enthusiasm for the UN included a number of fact finding trips to UN centres on behalf of UNA. I had the pleasure of Bill's company and support on a number of UN Study tours. Anniversaries were significant to him, as he once wrote, "Today is International Holocaust Day which brings back memories of visiting Auschwitz with you on one of your study tours. It was an extraordinary experience which was profoundly shocking and moving. Thank you for making it possible".

A regular churchgoer, he was guided by his strong Christian faith and played an active role in the affairs of the Harpenden Parish. Like his father, Bill believed very strongly in encouraging closer ecumenical and inter faith relations at all levels.

The last time I spoke with Bill was on the day he and Kirsteen had come to London to lay flowers at Buckingham Palace in memory of the late Queen. A sincere patriot, he made the impromptu decision to queue with his wife for several hours in order to walk past her coffin lying in state. Her long reign had extended almost the entire length of his life.

William Say is survived by his beloved wife Kirsteen, his two sisters Mary and Anne, and his nieces and nephews. He will be sorely missed by everybody who knew him. UNA Westminster is currently looking at how best we can honour William's memory. Please check our website for further details in due course.

Paul Mrazek

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