

Edward Mortimer, 1943–2021

By now most of you will have heard of the tragically early death (by today's standards), at the age of 77, of our much loved and respected former President Edward Mortimer.

There are excellent obituaries in [*The Times*](#) and [*Financial Times*](#), and I do not intend to repeat them. Suffice it to say that Edward came from a gifted family. The son of an Anglican bishop and brother of the brilliant Kate Mortimer (a star of the Think Tank, the intellectual hothouse established by Prime Minister Ted Heath to shake up government and think the unthinkable), Edward won a scholarship to Eton and then attended Balliol College, Oxford, from which he graduated with the exceptionally rare honour of a congratulatory first. Were that not distinction enough, Edward then became a Prize Fellow of All Souls, Oxford.

For 30 years Edward was a journalist, first at *The Times*, then at the *Financial Times*, where he became chief foreign commentator. I only met him once in that capacity. Edward called on me in Ankara when I was ambassador to Turkey. I don't remember much about the meeting. As for Edward, when I reminded him that we had met in Ankara he told me that he had no recollection at all of our having met. Brief encounter indeed!

Fairly early in Kofi Annan's first term as UN Secretary-General, he decided that he needed a new chief speechwriter. Applicants on the shortlist were asked to provide a specimen draft speech. I was among those invited to pass judgement on the results. I didn't think that any of the drafts were compelling, as a speech, but Edward's stood out in terms of its intellectual quality. He himself was the first to grasp that speechwriting requires a very different approach than drafting an academic article, op-ed or leader in a newspaper. Shorter words, shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, ideas expressed with maximum simplicity. Edward adapted very quickly and rapidly became an outstanding speechwriter.

One of the more bizarre features of Edward's early encounters with the UN bureaucracy arose from the requirement that staff members in the professional grades possess a post-graduate degree. Apparently, having been a Prize Fellow of All Souls – the outcome of one of the most competitive examination processes in the British academic system – did not count. Accordingly, HR proposed putting Edward on the very lowest rung of the D1 salary scale. I do not know the eventual outcome, but it speaks volumes for Edward's good sense and commitment that he was willing to tolerate this sort of nonsense.

Edward's arrival on the 38th floor of the UN building in New York has been well described by one of his fellow speechwriters, Richard Amdur:

“I vividly recall Edward's arrival – a jumble of gangly limbs, a tangle of unruly hair and most of all a torrent of words. He was part of a crew of lively minds surrounding the Secretary-General, given licence to think and experiment at a time when, still in the early years of the post-Cold War period, the future of the United Nations was being written anew and was still full of hope.

He was warm, funny, incisive and loyal. He embraced the United Nations, jostled with the talking heads on television to defend us, and was utterly loyal to Kofi. To have his voice now silenced is a terrible loss, but his words set a standard then and will long endure.”

A fitting tribute. Edward led a team of gifted writers and thinkers. They produced all the key speeches of Kofi Annan's 10 years in office, and Edward was lead pen on most of them. He was also, from 2001 to 2006, Director of Communications, which meant a much broader and more public interface with the wider world outside the UN Secretariat.

Some of the speeches will long be remembered. An immense amount of work went into Kofi's speech on humanitarian intervention at the opening of the UN General Assembly in 1999: an attempt to reconcile the imperative of humanitarian intervention (in unacceptable situations where the government concerned was unwilling or unable to act) with the limitations of the UN Charter, the requirement of Security Council involvement and the resistance of much of the UN membership to interference in internal affairs. The speech went down very badly with the Non Aligned and the G77, who promptly rejected the very concept of a right of intervention, but from it emerged the other side of that coin, namely a Responsibility to Protect, or R2P as it is widely known today.

I also recall the Secretary-General's speech at the corresponding event in 2002, when war clouds were gathering over Iraq. Speaking shortly before President Bush, Kofi Annan set out the case for multilateralism and a rules-based international order in the clearest of terms:

"I stand before you as a multilateralist – by precedent, by principle, by Charter and by duty.

I also believe that every government that is committed to the rule of law at home, must be committed to the rule of law abroad. And all States have a clear interest, as well as a clear responsibility, to uphold international law and maintain international order."

The third speech that I especially remember followed shortly on the Iraq war. At the opening of the General Assembly in September 2003, Kofi argued that we had come to a fork in the road: were the existing rules adequate to deal with developing threats to peace and security, or were pre-emptive measures justified as some States argued? The High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change set up by the Secretary-General to consider these issues stemmed directly from this speech.

Edward Mortimer left an enduring legacy to the United Nations. His influence, visible and below the radar, will be lasting. His loss is keenly felt, including by BAFUNCS, of which he was such a loyal and dutiful member. May he rest in peace.

Sir Kieran Prendergast
President, BAFUNCS

Edward Mortimer as BAFUNCS President

Edward was our President from 2012 until 2017, presiding over six annual meetings, with apparently effortless style and his characteristic self-deprecating humour. His term of office was much appreciated by our members.

He took a particular interest in the UN Career Records Project (UNCRP), playing a leading role in the three witness seminars in 2015–2016, to reflect on *The UN at 70*. In addition to attending WS1 on the *UN and the UK in development cooperation* at the Institute of Development Studies, he played an active role in preparatory meetings and the chairing of WS2

on the *UN and the UK in humanitarian affairs* at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, including hosting a lunch for participants at All Souls College. He was especially influential in the design and conduct of the third such seminar *The UN and the UK in peace and security*, held at Church House, Westminster in January 2016. Reports on all three events, as well as much more, can be found on the BAFUNCS website.

Warmly welcome is the fact that Edward had shared with the UNCRP the early drafts of several items on which he was working, thus indicating that he intended that in their final form they should be donated to the Project. These were, first, a synopsis of his planned memoirs entitled *Are you having fun?*, based on “what Kofi Annan used to say when appearing unannounced in my office”; secondly, an amplified version of the memoirs, delivered in 2008 in All Souls, in the form of eight lectures on the theme of *The Kofi Annan years, 1998–2006: a personal perspective*. Third, an unedited volume of *Transcripts of the UN diaries of Edward Mortimer CMG, January 1999 – September 2001*, being the dictated recollections of his experiences on the 38th floor during those years of Annan’s tenure as Secretary-General. A fourth, completed item, is the transcript of an interview given in July 2009 to PhD student Marc Pollentine from the University of Cardiff, for the latter’s thesis on *Constructing the responsibility to protect* (2012). Arrangements for editing and publishing the drafts have yet to be decided.

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With input from Michael Askwith and Bill Jackson