

Michael Priestley, CMG (1927-1918)

Mike Priestley, who died recently, had an international career which spanned three distinct phases: the endgame of British colonialism in Zambia, the height of the UN's development cooperation in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the burgeoning of its humanitarian operations, in Ethiopia and Sudan. At each stage he was the embodiment of a British colonial, and then international, civil servant.

In 1964 he was Aide de Camp to the British Governor in the then Northern Rhodesia, which gained its independence from Britain in that year and became Zambia. He continued for several years to provide advice and support to that country's first President, Kenneth Kaunda. Prior to independence, from 1953, Priestley had served in the British Colonial Service in that country, notably as a District Commissioner.



Born in Axminster and educated at Radley College, Mike Priestley served in the Welsh Guards 1945-48. He was fortunate to avoid any major conflict while helping to manage a POW camp of German prisoners in Cyprus and chasing down "terrorists" in Palestine. On returning to the UK, he studied Geography at Pembroke College, Oxford and Colonial Administration at Cambridge. By 1953, the Colonial Service was a natural progression and, immediately assigned to Northern Rhodesia, he advanced steadily in his chosen career.



While serving in the town of Sesheke, on the Zambezi river, he was very fortunate to meet Irene Peltenburg, a Dutch American who at the time had left her job in New York to hitch hike from Cape Town to Cairo with one other girlfriend. This was 1961 and a very bold and adventurous trip. They had a short courtship, fell in love and agreed to meet on a specific date in Paris, once Irene had finished her trip to Cairo. They managed to meet up as planned and decided to get married with a brief ceremony at the St. Pancras registry office in London. They returned to Northern Rhodesia to start what was a very happy marriage and successful partnership that lasted 54 years. Irene, who died two years before her husband, played an invaluable role in Mike's career, managing their perpetually peripatetic household, including bringing up two sons; hosting a wide variety of official functions in each posting; and over the decades, building an impressive global network of friends inside and beyond the UN family. Mike and Irene were the epitome of a UN "Two-fer" - two for the price of one.

Priestley's move to the United Nations was a natural progression from the Colonial Service, as it (the UN) picked up some of the development responsibilities around the world in the aftermath of decolonisation; many such former colonial servants migrated to the UN during this period. Starting with the World Food Programme (WFP) in Nepal, Priestley himself soon gravitated to his natural UN home, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), which he was to serve for the rest of his career, some

26 years. This agency's diplomatic, managerial and administrative role within the UN System played to all of Mike's considerable skills.

During these years he served the UN in Samoa, before becoming its representative successively in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Ethiopia and finally Sudan. In the way of things, of course, his actual title evolved over the years, from UNDP Resident Representative to UNDP RR and UN Resident Coordinator, and finally added Humanitarian Coordinator to his name plate. The job too evolved over these years, as the UN's mandates expanded and diversified, while its institutional structures became increasing complex. Mike Priestley excelled at leading this disparate system at a country level, being both liked and respected by all his many collaborators.

Mike was known for his punctilious approach to whatever he did: organised, disciplined and scrupulously conscientious. In this he was a role model to his colleagues as well as mentor to the young guns he led; he had several longstanding professional partnerships, most especially with a charismatic Irishman, Gerry King, who provided much needed administrative support and leadership in several of his assignments, firstly in India and then again critically during the Ethiopia famine relief efforts. Their two families became very close, with Gerry King's daughter, Alexandra, attending the recent memorial for Mike.

He always connected to the nationals of the countries in which he worked, developing a sympathetic understanding of the host country while forming long term friendships in the process. If this sounds a little bit "goody two shoes", Mike was more than capable of letting his hair down when the opportunity arose, often provoked into doing so by Irene.

His four Asian and Pacific assignments spanned the heyday of the UN's development work, when advisory services and the transfer of technology were at the core of its work. For most of this time UNDP played the role of the UN's Ministry of Planning and Finance, negotiating projects with governments and allocating central resources through the UN Specialised Agencies. Over time, these kinds of programmes were progressively overtaken by loans - and increasingly grants - from the World Bank Group, as well as the regional development banks.



The UN's own priorities - and funding - also began to shift towards humanitarian support in crisis situations, whether man-made or the result of natural disasters. Mike Priestley confronted this in Ethiopia where, in the mid-1980s, he helped co-ordinate an enormous humanitarian mobilisation effort, including with Band Aid and others, to help the Government of Ethiopia avert a massive famine. He was one of the pioneers for improving co-ordination within the UN family for more efficient and better co-ordinated delivery of UN assistance in fragile states, while facilitating a shift from humanitarian aid to sustainable development. In the process he rose to the rank of Assistant Secretary-General.

Fittingly, in 1990 Mike Priestley's country-level work came to an end when he, together with the US Ambassador, was declared persona non grata (PNG) by General Bashir for his work in Sudan and his objections to the Government's policies towards the Dafur crisis. Fittingly, because Mike was a man of principle and a lifelong advocate for UN values. He stood up for them at all times and, when the clash with exploitative national policies became too much, he knew which side he was on.

Mike and Irene leave behind two sons, Mark and Stephen, and five grandchildren.