

# The Telegraph

**SE** NEWS  
**HD** Lord McAlpine of West Green; The Lord McAlpine of West Green was an early supporter of Margaret Thatcher and raised millions for the Conservative Party as treasurer in the 1980s  
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The Lord McAlpine of West Green, who has died aged 71, was an early supporter and confidant of Margaret Thatcher and as Conservative Party treasurer in the 1980s was probably the most successful fundraiser the party ever had; late in his life he was wrongly accused of paedophilia, in a scandal that ultimately led to the resignation of the BBC Director General, George Entwistle.

The false allegations of child abuse began to swirl around McAlpine in 2012, following an edition of Newsnight which claimed to expose "a senior Tory". Lord McAlpine was swiftly "identified" on social media as the Tory in question, only for the whole story to be equally swiftly debunked.

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Among those who mistakenly linked him to the scandal was Sally Bercow, the wife of the Speaker of the Commons, John Bercow, who wrote on her Twitter account: "Why is Lord McAlpine trending? \*Innocent face"

McAlpine received significant damages, including from Mrs Bercow - which he gave to charity - though the self-inflicted damage at the BBC was far greater.

The affair had threatened to wreck the career of one of the great Conservative figures of the last generation. Yet this was a career in the world of politics rather a career as a politician. For, despite his undoubted influence and absolute loyalty to Mrs Thatcher, McAlpine - by nature a dilettante - did not become a significant political figure.

Indeed, the columnist Alan Watkins once described him as being "fundamentally anti-Conservative". This seemed an eccentric judgment in the 1980s, when McAlpine placed his liver and waistline (and eventually his heart, which underwent two rounds of multiple bypass surgery) at the service of the party in a ceaseless round of lunches and champagne receptions designed to persuade corporate plutocrats to part with their cash. During the Thatcher years an invitation to his lavish parties at the annual Conservative Party conference was a sign of high political favour.

Yet though he served as deputy chairman of the Conservative Party from 1979 to 1983 and treasurer from 1975 to 1990, McAlpine was never really "into" politics. At heart he was an 18th-century amateur, a collector of art and of garden implements, of wooden statues, stuffed birds, old cushions, Turkish carpets, gossip — and people.

He enjoyed fund-raising for the Conservative party, and his personal devotion to the woman he called "the most magnificent" Margaret Thatcher was absolute. But politics per se never really engaged his attention. His personal credo, expressed in such works as Letters to a Young Politician from his Uncle (1995), seemed to be a mish-mash of ideas derived from the Right (the destruction of the EU), the Left (huge public subsidies for motor manufacturers to develop the electric engine), and soggy liberalism (the decriminalisation of all drugs).

He was mischievously fascinated by the mechanisms of power (among other things he penned a tongue-in-cheek updating of Machiavelli's The Prince), and relished the gossip and intrigue of high politics. But he was impatient with the democratic arts of negotiation and compromise and a low boredom threshold coupled with a subversive streak made him disdainful of the sort of party loyalist on whom all political leaders must rely. One of his damning judgments was simply: "He causes no trouble."

When Mrs Thatcher fell he remained loyal, continuing to address her as "Prime Minister" and scorning her assassins as a bunch of pygmies and worse. There was never any doubt that whoever succeeded her would fail to match up and he made no attempt to make the transition to John Major — whom he once described as "hanging around like a pair of curtains" — or to disguise his contempt for the new consensual political style. He once compared the Major cabinet to pig farmers on an Irish ferry: "One moves to the right-hand side of the boat, they all move, then fearing the ferry will capsize, they all move back again with much the same result."

His animus against those who had "betrayed" his leader led him in the 1990s to turn on his old party and to campaign for its defeat, lobbing journalistic salvos at Major and anyone else suspected of playing a part in his heroine's downfall. The party, he declared, could do with a "good scrub with a hard brush" (a term in opposition). So there was no surprise when in 1996, six months before the Labour landslide of 1997, McAlpine announced his defection to Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party.

A third child and second of three sons of Lord McAlpine of Moffat, and a great-grandson of "Concrete Bob" McAlpine, who built the West Highland Railway and founded the family construction **company**, Robert Alistair McAlpine was born by caesarean section on May 14 1942 at the Dorchester **Hotel**, which his family built and owned; as a baby he received his first bottle via room service. His mother Molly was a powerful woman who smoked cigars and believed that the only real education was to be had in travel. This was just as well since, being dyslexic (a condition only diagnosed when he was in his twenties), young Alistair did badly at school, leaving Stowe aged 16 with just three O-levels.

Following family tradition he started work as a timekeeper on McAlpine's South Bank **site** in London. Working long hours and being covered in dust meant that he was never invited to Society balls, but in any case he preferred the **company** of Irish navvies and the Bohemian friends he met in Soho pubs.

McAlpine started making serious money on his own account at 22 when he learned that the government of Western Australia was about to privatise road-building. He flew out immediately, concluded that road-building prospects were poor, but decided to go into hotels instead. After building various properties in Perth, he moved up to Broome, an old pearl-fishing station on the north-west coast, and started developing it as a holiday resort, complete with zoo, cinema and international airport.

As a child McAlpine had a cupboard of curiosities including a snake in a bottle, a wartime lemon and a piece of Zeppelin. In adulthood he indulged his collecting obsession by developing a taste in modern art and sculpture. Encouraged by a friend, the art dealer Leslie Waddington, he acquired a knack for spotting talented artists — for instance the abstract expressionist Mark Rothko — well before they became famous. He therefore was able to **buy** their works before they became prohibitively expensive. Apart from fine art, the objects of his desires included police truncheons, snowdrops, rare breeds of chicken, Renaissance tapestries, curiosities such as five-legged lambs in formaldehyde, shells and ties. In the 1980s staff at Central Office would recall one of his secretaries telephoning customs trying to get one of his acquisitions released: "No, it's not Lord McAlpine's penis. It's a dinosaur penis."

As a collector McAlpine seemed to **buy** more for the pleasure of having things pass through his hands than of owning them permanently. When his interests changed he gave things away or **sold** them; the Tate and other galleries were among the beneficiaries. In the late 1980s he had a shop in Cork Street where he **sold** everything from busts of Roman emperors to prehistoric artifacts.

In the 1970s McAlpine was a fervent believer in the Common Market and was treasurer of the "Britain in Europe" campaign for the 1975 referendum. But he was not then active politically and at one stage members of Harold Wilson's kitchen cabinet even thought of offering him a job as a Labour Party fund-raiser.

Everything changed in 1975 after he met Margaret Thatcher, who had recently supplanted Ted Heath as leader of the Conservative Party, over dinner. They hit it off immediately. He admired her forceful radicalism; she appreciated his garrulous charm and air of business efficiency. "I told him he would have to give up his German Mercedes for a British Jaguar," she wrote in her memoirs, "and he immediately complied." He complied also with her request that he become the party's (unpaid) treasurer.

The appointment of a 32-year old millionaire with unconventional tastes did not go down well with some of the more dignified members of the party's treasurers' department, who were soon shunted aside. Yet McAlpine did not spend much time at Central Office itself, being much more effective outside it. "I used to lurk," he explained. "I lurked all over London where rich people went."

At his office in London journalists were regaled with gossip and generous lashings of Chateau Latour, and he became a favourite of even such papers as the Independent and the Guardian. Rotund in loud but well-cut Savile Row suits and bilious pink and green Garrick Club ties, he would lunch prospective donors (and journalists) at the Club. Money was never discussed directly but the follow-up letters left

recipients in little doubt about what was expected - and the funds poured in. In 1975, the year before McAlpine arrived, the Conservatives raised about £1.5m. By the time of the 1979 election, it was £4m, and by 1990 at least £9m. In between McAlpine was thought to have raised about £100m.

During the 1980s McAlpine's country home, West Green, a handsome 18th-century house near Basingstoke, Hampshire, became the venue for lavish dinners (often cooked by the host himself) at which prominent Tories would rub shoulders with artists, dealers, writers, Bohemians and even stalwart socialists.

He was sometimes criticised for the secrecy of Conservative finances and his willingness to accept donations from rich foreign businessmen such as the **Hong Kong** millionaire Li Ka Shing, Mohamed Fayed and Asil Nadir. But there was never a serious whiff of scandal. In 1993, after Nadir had fled to northern Cyprus to escape prosecution for fraud, he claimed he would reveal favours promised by McAlpine in return for his cash. McAlpine challenged him to do so; he never did.

McAlpine was deputy chairman of the party from 1979 to 1983. His raffish, anarchic streak meant that he liked Cecil Parkinson but loathed Parkinson's successor John Gummer, whom he considered sanctimonious and dull. Such was his influence with Margaret Thatcher that he was said to have engineered Gummer's rapid replacement by Norman Tebbit.

In 1984, on Margaret Thatcher's recommendation, he was created a life peer. That year, when the IRA blew up the Grand **Hotel**, Brighton, during the Conservative conference, McAlpine was staying in the suite above the Prime Minister's. Woken by the explosion but otherwise unhurt, he immediately set to work to address the practicalities of the situation and, as stunned survivors wandered around in their nightclothes, he called the top brass of Marks & Spencer and got them to open their Brighton store early so that people could be properly dressed for the conference that day. His Hampshire home became a refuge for several shell-shocked survivors.

In 1987 McAlpine had to have a major coronary bypass operation and in 1990 he gave up the treasurer's job. His name was on IRA lists and, ostensibly for reasons of safety and tax, he decided to move to Monte Carlo and Venice. He took almost nothing with him from Britain, having put all his English possessions up for **sale** at Sotheby's so as to start afresh.

Although McAlpine ascribed his decision to leave Britain as a matter of personal whim, there were also financial considerations. In 1989, after an Australian pilot's strike lasting six months, his Australian tourism venture, in which he had invested £250 million, collapsed, costing him much of his personal fortune. In June 1990, shortly after he and his family had moved out, West Green was blown up by the IRA.

When Margaret Thatcher was challenged at the end of that year, he watched with horror as her leadership campaign unravelled. After her defeat he lent her a house on College Green where the atmosphere of Downing Street was for a while religiously preserved.

In the 1990s he turned to writing and was the author of some dozen books ranging from two volumes of memoirs to a guide to the world's museums and a guide to happiness to mischievous political parodies. He also wrote a regular column in *The World of Interiors* and contributed widely to national newspapers.

Having defected to James Goldsmith's Referendum Party in 1996, following Goldsmith's death in 1997 McAlpine became its leader. He sat as an Independent Conservative for some time in the House of Lords before rejoining the Conservatives.

McAlpine's love for the arts was not limited to collecting: he was a member of the Arts Council, chairman of the Theatre Investment Fund, trustee of the Royal Opera House and a director of the Institute for Contemporary Arts.

Yet he himself admitted that there was truth in the accusation of dilettantism that was often levelled against him. This applied not only to possessions but to his relationships, as major changes in his life sometimes entailed equally dramatic changes in his domestic arrangements.

When his first marriage, to Sarah Baron, collapsed shortly after he became treasurer of the Conservative Party, his disabled mother hit him over the head with her walking stick. For years, his two daughters from the marriage never spoke to him.

In 1980 he married, secondly, his political secretary Romilly Hobbs, who became a glamorous and popular hostess during the Thatcher years, bore him another daughter and nursed him through two triple bypass operations.

The second of these, in 1999, nearly killed McAlpine and he spent a month in a coma on a life-support machine. He experienced a deathbed conversion to Roman Catholicism, emerged declaring that he felt "more casual about life" and, months later, left the family home. After an acrimonious divorce from Romilly on the grounds of his adultery, in 2002 he married Athena Malpas, a glamorous brunette three decades his junior.

McAlpine's account of his marital inconstancy was chillingly casual: "I keep changing my life, houses and relationships. I reinvent myself every few years. My first marriage lasted 15 years and this one [to Romilly] 20. It's hardly into bed and out the other side. There was a great deal of love. But there comes a point when life is just a habit, and I'm rather against habits. I just didn't want to carry on." To his credit, though, he never tried to square his behaviour with his new-found faith.

Lord McAlpine is survived by his third wife and by the three daughters of his earlier marriages.

\* Lord McAlpine, born May 14 1942, died January 17 2014

**NS** gpol : Domestic Politics | csImc : Senior Level Management | gchlab : Child Abuse | grape : Sexual Assault/Rape | c41 : Management Issues | ccat : Corporate/Industrial News | gcat : Political/General News | gcom : Society/Community/Work | gcrim : Crime/Courts | gpir : Politics/International Relations | gsoc : Social Issues | ncat : Content Types | nfact : Factiva Filters | nfcPin : FC&E Industry News Filter

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